



I Don't Believe in Evolution

Now that my title has gotten your attention, let me tell you what I mean. I don't "believe" in evolution, I just think it is the best explanation available to us about the development of life on our planet. To be sure, since I am not myself an evolutionary biologist, I have to accept this on the basis of the work of others, but certainly not on faith. I can read secondary scientific literature, and I discover that what it tells me about evolutionary theory, as that continues to develop in the years since Charles Darwin, makes sense. The alternatives do not.

In critiquing the alternatives, especially creationism and intelligent design, I am a little more at home—at least, to the degree that they attempt to develop what they understand to be science in accord with their reading of the creation accounts in Genesis—since I read Genesis pretty much every day. And to make the point sharply: the creationists seem to want to correct what they understand to be bad science by perpetrating bad theology, namely, to make an article of faith that God created the world in six twenty-four-hour days, because Genesis says so.

That argument from Genesis gets pretty much everything wrong. For example: it absolutizes Gen 1, isolating it from the many other creation accounts in the Bible, which often speak quite differently about the process (thus, breaking all the standard rules of reading in context and interpreting Scripture with Scripture); it promulgates a flawed doctrine of creation, by failing to understand that, even in the Bible, God's ongoing work of creation is at least as theologically important as the work of creation "in the beginning"; it fails to appreciate that, even in Gen 1, God's creative work is a process that involves the creation itself in its fulfillment; and, of course, it misreads Gen 1 by assuming that its genre is that of science and history—both understood in ways defined since the Enlightenment—rather than what it is seen to be by those who try simply to read it for what it actually is, using all the literary tools at their disposal, terming it something like poetry or liturgy or hymn or archetypal narrative or myth. Those designations vary, to be sure, which is precisely what should be expected, since the understanding of ancient texts is itself a form of science, and science (like evolutionary theory) is always in flux, always open to new discoveries and new insights.

Properly understood, then, neither one's view of the genre of Gen 1 nor one's understanding of Earth's biology should be a matter of ideology, but simply subjects for informed conversation directed at better understanding. Intelligent design advocate Michael Behe is said to see evolution as a "blind belief, a sort of godless re-

ligion”;^{*} but the response of at least many of his supporters is to read Genesis in the same way, that is, blind to its plain sense (which includes a proper assessment of its genre), and in thrall to a particular doctrine of God and Scripture that requires the Bible to be “true” in only one way (and that way defined by an age altogether different from that in which it was written) rather than a rich collection of different types of literature, each in its own way helping us understand ourselves, the world, and God.

Fact is, in their readings of Genesis, literalists and historical critics are all doing biblical studies—a form of science. And it is important to remember that even those who regard the Bible to be in some way or another divinely inspired do not or should not have the same view of biblical studies. The claim that Gen 1 is to be read literalistically is as much a product of rationalist biblical studies (perhaps, even more so) as the observation that it is ancient myth. The question is not which of these positions is “inspired” or more “faithful,” but which is a better reading of the material.

We shouldn’t “believe” in any of this—not evolution, not a particular reading of Gen 1. We work at it. And my own work and that of those whom I respect will occasion my own critique of a literalist/creationist reading of Genesis. It’s not a tenable reading.

Few readers of *Word & World* read Genesis or other parts of the Bible from a literalist perspective (precisely because of their passion to understand the Bible as clearly as possible), so why all this fuss? One answer to that is a recognition of the degree to which understandings of the Bible and science have been drawn into the formation of public policy in recent U.S. history. People of faith are, therefore, drawn into the debate and must be prepared for it. Should public schools teach intelligent design alongside evolution? Is global warming real? Is the environment to be preserved and protected, or exploited and used up? These questions are drawn into the culture wars precisely because they are viewed ideologically, and the outcome will inevitably be bad—bad science, bad theology, bad public policy.

Genesis begins with an altogether hopeful understanding of creation, cosmos, the world, and humanity. Those who appreciate Gen 1 and 2 as word of God will want to contribute to keeping things that way, even in the face of the destructive human realities that turn up in the following chapters. Ideological readings will not get us there, but hard-nosed realism, good science, and a decent doctrine of creation might help.

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^{*}So Edward Hume, in *Monkey Girl: Evolution, Education, Religion, and the Battle for America’s Soul* (New York: HarperCollins, 2007) 130.