



Reading the Bible after Darwin

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Though Darwin's relevance for biblical studies might seem remote, the revolution wrought by the new scientific theory of evolution was considerable, reaching many areas of culture and society including religion.¹ Darwin did not create the notion of evolution. Such ideas were in the air in the nineteenth century, and scholars in philosophy, history, astronomy, geology, and biology were already using the concept before *On the Origin of Species* was published in 1859. The problem with these ideas was their wide variety and a sometimes weak connection to scientific evidence. What Darwin brought forth was something new in the field of biology: not the idea of evolution itself, but a natural, biological mechanism for the organic development of whole species. He gave a convincing argument based on careful scientific evidence. Many naturalists and natural philosophers in his day had scientific objections to his theory, but over time Darwin's view has become more than a mere theory: it is a functional presupposition that is widely accepted as

¹For an introduction to Darwinian theory with a discussion of its impact upon religious thought, see Francisco José Ayala, *Darwin's Gift to Science and Religion* (Washington D.C.: Joseph Henry Press, 2007), and *Darwin and Intelligent Design* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2006). For an historical approach focusing on 1870–1900, see James R. Moore, *The Post-Darwinian Controversies: A Study of the Protestant Struggle to Come to Terms with Darwin in Great Britain and America, 1870–1900* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1979).

The historical and scientific accuracy of the biblical witness has become increasingly difficult to maintain in light of the Darwinian revolution. A positive result has been a return to a proper theological reading of Scripture, not as our primary source of technical information but of insight into God's means of dealing with us and God's creation.

fact. While there may be variations in the details of evolutionary theory today, biology in the twenty-first century is broadly Darwinian. Challenges to biological evolution in our day, like the intelligent design movement, have not been found cogent by most observers; over time, alternative theories have simply not been convincing on scientific grounds.²

THE CHALLENGE OF DARWINISM

But what is Darwinism? Why is it so challenging to many religious world-views, even today? For one thing, the essential elements of biological evolution in broadly Darwinian terms reject the fixity of species. Earlier theories had accepted the evolution of some organisms, but species themselves were thought to be fixed. This allowed for the view that the human species could be a special creation by God. Darwinian evolutionary biology makes such a view naïve at best, and modern science, from geology to anthropology, knows that the human species has evolved along with all the others over a vast period of time. Human bodies are not a special creation by God, but part of a larger system that has increased in organic complexity on our planet over billions of years. Secondly, Darwinian evolution removes the

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idea of final causes or predetermined ends as part of scientific theory. By adding chance or mutation to the natural, causal mechanism of evolution, and allowing the environment and competition to generate variations in organisms that are neither predetermined nor predictable, Darwin did away with the idea that life on our planet has a purpose that biology can detect. This element of Darwinian theory is what bothered the American theologian Charles Hodge, along with a large number of thoughtful religious people in his day. In his 1874 book *What is Darwinism?* Hodge reviewed the various theories of organic evolution alive at that time. He specifically rejected Darwin's theory because he found it to be "atheistic."³ He did not claim that Darwin himself was an atheist, only that his theory was atheistic because it rejected final causes. In theological terms this did away with the idea that divine providence could be read off the world of living things. The eye was not specially created by a divine intellect, for example, but evolved through gradual varia-

²Among many works that discuss the gradual acceptance of Darwinism, see Carl Zimmer, *Evolution: The Triumph of an Idea* (New York: Harper, 2006).

³Charles Hodge, *What is Darwinism?* (New York: Scribner, Armstrong, 1874) 175, 177; online at <http://books.google.com> (accessed 1 July 2008). See also the modern reprint with introduction: Charles Hodge, *What is Darwinism: and other Writings on Science and Religion*, ed. Mark Noll and David Livingstone (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1994).

tions over time, and worked itself out differently in different species (for example, the fly as opposed to the cat). Not all eyes come from the same original design. Final causes are not part of contemporary biological science, even when scientists speak of apparent design.

THE BIBLE AND SCIENCE

Darwinian science was revolutionary in its own day. It challenged many popular conceptions of the origin of life and raised problems for religious intellectuals, both scientists and theologians. But why should modern science be a problem for biblical interpretation?

Modern science and contemporary biblical interpretation are involved in different enterprises based upon different sets of assumptions. At the risk of oversimplifying a complex situation, science, in general, is concerned with accurate description and explanation: What is this? How did it happen? What are its constitutive parts? These descriptions and theories are verified through the processing of observable, empirical data. Very little of the Bible is susceptible to this kind of investigation. Contemporary biblical interpretation, in general, is concerned with answering a different set of questions that seek to describe the relationship between biblical entities, for example: God and humanity, or faith and the Christian.

Broadly speaking, science seeks answers to questions of *what* and *how*, while biblical interpretation seeks answers to questions of *who* and *why*. Of course there is overlap. Science can ask, “Who discovered the human genome?” or “Why does milk sour?” just as theology can ask “What is God’s will for my life?” or “How does one live responsibly as a Christian?”⁴ Nevertheless, the character of the questions is different in the two approaches, with theology more interested in the purposeful aspects of “why” and science more interested in the functional aspects and natural or social explanations.

In other words, the Bible is not answering—indeed, is not even aware of—the type of questions raised by modern science and should not be read as if it were. But this distinction between the appropriate uses of science and the Bible as aids to understanding different kinds of questions has not always been recognized. Belief in the Bible as a cosmic Ouija board capable of answering any question put to it is a hallmark of what we will call “biblicism.” A similar confidence in the ability of science we will call “scientism.”⁵ As is true of all “isms,” both of these overly zealous approaches have generated much more heat than light.

Much of evangelical biblical scholarship, in Darwin’s time, was concerned with reading the biblical text in this way. During the Enlightenment, with its modern definitions of science and history, many applied these also to the Bible, seeing it

⁴Over the last twenty years, our colleague Terence Fretheim has worked tirelessly to point out the hazards of theological oversimplification. See, for example, his discussion of Gen 1–3 in “The Book of Genesis: Introduction, Commentary, and Reflections,” in *The New Interpreter’s Bible*, ed. Leander E. Keck, vol. 1 (Nashville: Abingdon, 1994).

⁵For a definition and critique of scientism, see Alan G. Padgett, *Science and the Study of God: A Mutuality Model for Theology and Science* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2003) 67–75.

as “literally” true and “inerrant,” that is, totally free from any error, whether historical, theological, or scientific.⁶ Darwin’s investigations and other scientific developments (including “scientific” biblical criticism) called this assertion into question. Both the historical and scientific accuracy of the biblical witness became increasingly difficult to maintain in light of the ramifications of the Darwinian revolution. Biblicists, convinced of the inerrant truth of their Bible, felt threatened and devised increasingly complex explanations to salvage the Bible’s differing depiction of reality. Such explanations included blaming the biblical flood for wiping away the empirical evidence that would support the biblical witness and asserting that God had created the world/universe “as is,” with dinosaur bones already entrenched in alluvial layers, and the light from Alpha Centauri and other stars already reaching the earth. But we cannot take the Bible’s answers to its own questions and force them into responses to our questions. Pitting the Bible against science or science against the Bible is a tragic misunderstanding of both.

Darwin’s challenge to biblical interpretation, along with the rise of scientific biblical criticism at about the same time, has resulted in two significant developments:

1. The recognition that the Bible consists of a variety of disparate forms and genres and that the understanding of its message depends upon their proper discernment. For example, we read the front page of our newspaper with different expectations and criteria than we read the latest volume of *Harry Potter*. Traditional source, form, and redaction criticism are now joined by more contemporary canonical, social, narrative, and a host of similar approaches to the text precisely to help us in this regard.
2. By challenging the questionable readings of the nineteenth century, Darwin has placed us back on the path of a proper reading of Scripture, not as a repository of “history” or a textbook in biology, geology, or physics, not as our primary source of information about our world, but as God’s means of dealing with us and God’s creation, for example, in terms of law and gospel: putting us to death that we might be raised again.

TWO EXAMPLES

The following brief discussions of the so-called creation account in Gen 1:1–2:3, and Paul’s discussion of the first Adam in Rom 5:12–21 will illustrate how we read the Bible in the wake of the *Beagle*.

Genesis 1:1–2:24

Ironically, the most significant effect Darwin’s *Origin* has had on the introductory chapters of Genesis is to redirect our interest in creation away from origins (a concern of science) to relationships (a concern of theology). In Darwin’s day the

⁶This approach has not gone away but still exists in contemporary fundamentalist texts. See, for example, Paul Enns, *The Moody Handbook of Theology* (Chicago: Moody Press, 2008).

prevalent view likened God to a divine watchmaker who put all the pieces of the universe together like a gigantic clock, wound it up, and left. Among several problems with this view of God, the most troubling may be the assumption that God is no longer involved with us or our world. Nothing could be further from the truth. God did not cobble together the universe, push “start,” and then abandon it. Rather, God began a relationship with the world that owes its very existence to God’s continuing care. This is why Gen 1 is less concerned with *how* the world was created. Rather, it tells us *who* created it, *what* creation is, and most importantly *why* it was created.

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The answer to *who* created is easy: God.⁷ Determining *what* creation is, however, is more difficult. We think of creation as “making things.” Genesis, however, suggests that creation has more to do with bringing order out of chaos. Before God began to create, the earth is described as “a formless void,” that is, a chaos lacking order, direction, or purpose. God brought order by dealing separately with two aspects of chaos. On each of the first three days God established a place, separating it from something else. In this way God dealt with the aspect of *formlessness*. On each of the second three days, God dealt with the *void*—the emptiness of the world. God did this by filling the empty places that had just been formed. Thus, the lights created on Day 4 fill the arena of light separated from the darkness on Day 1. The birds and fish created on Day 5 fill the sky and water separated on Day 2. And the animals and people created on Day 6 fill the dry land separated from the water on Day 3. The omission of the seventh day from this structure reminds us that the Sabbath has been set aside as a day of rest.

A further indication that Genesis is less concerned with giving an account of the origins of the world lies in the presence of a second creation account (Gen 2:4–24) in which plants not only appear later than humanity (2:19–20) and woman is created separately from man (2:22), but the creation, itself, is depicted as God’s bringing water to an arid wasteland rather than God’s containment of the primeval waters. This last detail again points to the biblical interest in purpose over origins. The arid conditions of Gen 2 resemble the conditions in Canaan in the tenth century, when and where this passage was probably written. God creates by providing water. In Gen 1, however, the conditions resemble the watery chaos that occurs in Mesopotamia (“between the rivers”) during the annual floods. In this account, God creates by restoring order: just what the exiles in sixth-century Babylon

⁷Notice, however, that the earth and the waters bring forth life and participate with God in the creative process (Gen 1:11, 20, 24). See Fretheim, “The Book of Genesis,” 337.

needed to hear after losing their temple, being deported, and wondering if their God was still in control.

This leaves the all-important question of *why* God created. Once again, the text has been structured in a way that suggests an answer. Each of the first six days displays the following pattern:

First, an introductory word: “God said.”

Second, a command: “Let there be.”

Third, fulfillment of the command: “It was so.”

Fourth, an evaluation: “It was good.”

And finally, a statement of the time frame: “There was evening and morning, the Xth day.”

This continues the emphasis on the orderliness of creation, but several small alterations on the second half of the sixth day break the pattern established in the first five and point to the purpose of creation: “Let there be” becomes “Let us make.” “It was so” adds a blessing in poetry. “It was good” becomes “it was *very* good.” And finally—according to the Hebrew text—although the first five days had been designated “*a* first day,” “*a* second day,” and so on, it is “*the* sixth day.” These small but significant breaks in the pattern draw our attention to the sixth day.

Why did God create? Because God wanted to form a relationship with us—we who were created on that sixth day.

But why emphasize the sixth day? We tend to stress the first day and get lost in endless arguments about origins. But whether the “big bang” or the methods proposed by creation science best explain the origin of the universe, this text rushes from “God said” to “and it was so” with nary a peep about *how* God did it. This text wants to deal with much more important questions:

Who created? God.

What is this creation? The ordering of chaos.

Why did God create? Because God wanted to form a relationship with us—we who were created on that sixth day. And this relationship we enjoy owes its existence totally to the creative activity of God.

Romans 5:12–21

This paragraph comparing Adam and Christ in the midst of Paul’s great epistle draws upon the whole of his argument back to the first chapter. It also sets up what Paul wants to say about sin and death, leading up to a final resolution in Rom 8, where Paul asserts that God “sent his son in the likeness of sinful flesh and as a sin offering,” or “on account of sin” (8:3). The problem of sin and death shows up all the way back in Rom 1:18–32, which is part of Paul’s long argument that all have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God, both Jew and Gentile. We are all “under

the power of sin” (Rom 3:9). In Rom 5 Paul makes the parallel claim that “death reigns” over humanity because of Adam’s sin (v. 17). This is the reason Paul cries out, “Who will rescue me from this body of death?” (7:24). The wonderful answer is God’s own Son, “sent in the likeness of sinful flesh and as a sin offering” (8:3).

We see this later argument anticipated in the paragraph we are interested in here (5:12–23). While Paul wants to set up a typological parallel between Adam and the Christ (5:14), the grace and eternal life that come to us in Jesus are “much more” than the sin and death that come to us from Adam. Jesus is greater than Adam, and has triumphed in cross and resurrection over the power of sin and death (compare 1 Cor 15:20–22).

If we are thinking about reading the Bible after Darwin, however, modern scientific understanding does leave us with some questions concerning Rom 5:12 in particular. Paul begins this pericope by stating that “sin entered the world through one man,” that is, Adam. Like the Jews and Christians of his own day, Paul no doubt did believe in a literal first pair of human beings named Adam and Eve. But this is an assumption of his argument, not something actually taught in this verse. Even in the light of modern paleoanthropology, which accepts without question the evolution of the human species, the reality of sin no doubt evolved with moral consciousness itself. As N. T. Wright justly remarks:

What “sin” would have meant in the early dawn of the human race it is impossible to say; but the turning away from open and obedient relationship with the loving creator, and the turning instead toward that which, though beautiful and enticing, is not God, is such a many-sided phenomenon that it is not hard to envisage it at any stage of anthropoid development.⁸

If we pay attention to what Paul actually says about the origin of sin (instead of the long tradition of a big fall from sinless perfection, as in Milton’s *Paradise Lost*), there is no conflict between what he says about Adam understood typologically as the source of original sin and the teachings of modern science. Paul tells us that his interpretation is not literal but typological or figurative (5:14), that is, neither literal nor historical. “Adam,” that is, our earliest ancestors, were originally morally innocent, but then became transgressors by their own power of free will acting in defiance of whatever moral “law” they may have known.

A larger problem for the Bible and science seems to come from the next phrase, that “death [entered the world] through sin, and in this way death came to all people” (5:12). Darwin has taught us that death existed long before humans evolved, and indeed modern biology and ecology insist that death is an important part of organic life on our planet. So how can it be that death entered the world through the sin of Adam? Is not biological death here a kind of divine punishment for sin rather than a natural result of our biological nature?⁹

⁸N. T. Wright, “Romans,” in *The New Interpreter’s Bible*, 10:526.

⁹Once again Charles Hodge can represent the older viewpoint that interpreted this verse (following Augustine) in exactly this way; see his *Commentary on the Epistle to the Romans* (Philadelphia: Martien, 1864) 229.

When we look more closely at what Paul is saying about death, it soon becomes clear that what biologists call death is only loosely related to what Paul calls “death” in Romans. Both death and sin are personified by Paul into spiritual powers, under which humanity is now enthralled. Death is not merely biological in Romans, any more than the life that is given us in Jesus is merely biological. The typological parallel between Adam and Christ makes it clear that mere organic death is not the point. Rather, with many commentators today, we should understand death as both spiritual and biological, a powerful force under which humanity is enslaved, body and soul.¹⁰ If we insist on reading Rom 5 in the Augustinian tradition, we will have trouble with Darwin. Yet the gift of Darwin to biblical theology, once again, is to get us to pay attention to what the text is saying theologically rather than force it into a literal or “scientific” sense. Rightly understood there is no conflict between Paul’s teaching in Romans and Darwinian evolution.

The burden of our brief examination of biblical studies in the wake of the *Beagle* is to play “myth busters” with the common cultural assumption that Darwin is the enemy of biblical religion. Darwin can be the friend of biblical faith. We believe that Christians are called by God to approach both biblical studies and scientific investigation with the spirit of open, rigorous, and rational inquiry that is based on evidence but especially grounded in faith. The humility with which Darwin first presented his theory to the philosophical world and the careful marshaling of evidence from many quarters to develop a cumulative case for his hypothesis are intellectual virtues any thoughtful Christian should emulate. Darwin can also be a friend to biblical Christianity because he helps us look at the text itself through specifically theological eyes, helping to liberate the Scriptures from a narrow biblicism or a fixed dogmatic tradition. Pitting Darwin against Scripture à la Richard Dawkins or Henry Morris is a simplified urban legend that we pray the wisdom of Christ will help us all overcome.¹¹ ⊕

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¹⁰For a careful exegetical analysis of this paragraph, see C. E. B. Cranfield, *Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Epistle to the Romans*, 2 vols. (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1975) 1:269–295, and J. D. G. Dunn, *Romans*, ed. Bruce Metzger (Dallas: Word, 1988) 269–300. See also Wright, “Romans,” 526.

¹¹It is fascinating to note that enemies of Christianity like Richard Dawkins and advocates of creation science like Henry Morris both read the Bible with the same literalist, simplified hermeneutic. See Richard Dawkins, *The God Delusion* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 2006), and the classic work of our time on creation science, Henry Morris and J. C. Whitcomb, *The Genesis Flood: The Biblical Record and Its Scientific Implications* (Philadelphia: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1961).