

Theology on the Web.org.uk

Making Biblical Scholarship Accessible

This document was supplied for free educational purposes. Unless it is in the public domain, it may not be sold for profit or hosted on a webserver without the permission of the copyright holder.

If you find it of help to you and would like to support the ministry of Theology on the Web, please consider using the links below:



Buy me a coffee

<https://www.buymeacoffee.com/theology>



PATREON

<https://patreon.com/theologyontheweb>

[PayPal](#)

<https://paypal.me/robbradshaw>

A table of contents for *The Churchman* can be found here:

https://biblicalstudies.org.uk/articles_churchman_os.php

Clearing Away Conceptual Fog: Genesis, Creation and Evolution

Melvin Tinker

Introduction

There are two books in the Bible which are most likely to be the cause of heated debate amongst Christians and they top and tail the Scriptures—the book of Genesis and the book of Revelation. The dissension occurs not necessarily because doubt is being cast over whether these books are inspired by God’s Spirit or whether they are of dubious authority or even whether they are ‘history’ (in that they relate to events pertaining to this world). The main bone of contention is how they are to be interpreted.

With the book of Genesis there is an additional complicating factor, namely, how the early chapters are to be ‘squared’, if at all, with the findings of modern science in terms of cosmology (the origins of the universe) and biology, and more specifically with the theory of evolution.

It appears that the present debate regarding evolution and the interpretation of the early chapters of Genesis is bedevilled by a fair degree of conceptual fog which clouds clarity of thought, dimming what is already the small amount of light shining in comparison to the immense amount of heat generated. Much of this needs to be cleared away by making certain distinctions to help take the debate forward. It is hoped this paper will make some contribution to fog dispersal!

Creationism

An approach which is gaining an increasingly high profile is that which is often referred to as ‘Creationism’. Of course from one point of view all professing Christians are ‘Creationists’ in that they believe that the One Triune God is Maker and Sustainer of all things. Accordingly, the ‘Nicene’ Creed begins: ‘I believe in one God, the Father Almighty, maker of heaven and earth, and of all things visible and invisible.’ That God is the Maker of all things is not in doubt, but such a profession of faith still leaves open the question as to how he made (and makes) all things. A more accurate description therefore, of this viewpoint

would be, ‘Young Earth Creationism’ as its central tenants of belief include that God created *ex-nihilo* the universe in six literal twenty four hour days; the genealogies indicate an earth which is around 6000-10,000 years old; that man was a special act of creation by God not being derived in any way from earlier animal forms and the Flood was universal. These core beliefs, it is argued, flow from a strict ‘literal’ reading of Genesis 1-11.

Names associated with this movement include J.C Whitcomb,¹ H.M. Morris,² E.H. Andrews,³ and Ken Ham.⁴ An extensive defence of this position has recently been published under the title, ‘Coming to grips with Genesis.’⁵ The way in which the debate is often framed is captured by the following introduction to a recent young earth publication: ‘In the debate about origins, Christianity is pitted against science....now that the new Darwinism treats Charles Darwin as a messiah, this tension has broken out into “war”’.⁶ As is evident from this passage there is a tendency to polarise the issue in terms of ‘creation’ or ‘evolution’ with the former being described as the biblical worldview and the latter being not only the result of atheism but a sure slippery slope towards it.

A phantom battle?

Others are not so convinced that such an ‘either/or’ position is one which either the Bible or rational reflection necessitates. Whilst recognising the Bible’s authority to be ultimate as it expresses God’s authority (and there is no higher authority than that) a more cautious approach is encouraged along with a more positive interaction with science.

The starting point for this group of Christians is captured by the words of the late Professor Donald Mackay, ‘It is impossible for a scientific discovery given by God to contradict a Word given by God. If therefore a scientific discovery, as distinct from scientific speculation, contradicts what we have believed by the Bible, it is not a question of error in God’s Word, but of error in our way of interpreting it. Far from ‘defending’ the Bible against scientific discovery, the Christian has a duty to welcome thankfully, as from the same Giver, whatever light each may throw upon the other. This is the ‘freedom’ of a fully Christian devotion to the God of Truth.’⁷ To attempt to downgrade Evolution as ‘nothing but a theory’ achieves very little, after all, we have Einstein’s ‘Theory’ of Relativity, but very few Christians question its scientific status as a result of it being ‘only’ a theory! This position argues that evolution, as distinct from

Evolutionism (which is an ideological parasite presently gaining notoriety through the writings of Richard Dawkins) is as religiously neutral as Dirac's unified field theory. If the theory is true (and the cumulative weight of evidence and the fruitfulness of the model are not to be dismissed lightly), then we would expect it to be compatible with biblical, evangelical belief. Many think this to be the case.⁸ If God is the God of Truth, then the truth he has revealed in Scripture would not be at odds with the truth of science. If there appears to be a conflict, it may be a case that we have adopted the wrong 'viewing distance' when considering a text. In some measure this happened with the medieval interpretation of Psalm 96 'proving' from the Bible that the earth did not move. Perhaps something like this is happening amongst some evangelicals today, with the equivalent approach to Psalm 96 and Copernican theory being adopted *viz a viz* Genesis 1–3 and evolution. If so, then it might be argued that extreme caution needs to be taken in dismissing evolutionary science as not being 'true science' bearing in mind the following censure made by Augustine in the 5th century against some of his well meaning Christian colleagues: 'Usually, even a non-Christian knows something about the earth, the heavens, and the other elements of this world, about the motion and orbits of the stars and even their size and relative positions, about the predictable eclipses of the sun and moon, the cycles of the years and the seasons, about the kinds of animals, shrubs, stones, and so forth, and this knowledge he holds to as being certain from reason and experience. Now, it is a disgraceful and dangerous thing for an infidel to hear a Christian, presumably giving the meaning of Holy Scripture, talking nonsense on these topics, and we should take all means to prevent such an embarrassing situation, in which people show up vast ignorance in a Christian and laugh it to scorn. The shame is not so much that an ignorant individual is derided, but that people outside the household of faith think our sacred writers held such opinions, and, to the great loss of those for whom salvation we toil, the writers of our Scripture are criticized and rejected as unlearned men. If they find a Christian mistaken in a field which they themselves know well and hear him maintaining his foolish opinions about our books, how are they to believe these books in matters concerning the resurrection of the dead, the hope of eternal life, and the kingdom of heaven, when they think their pages are full of falsehoods on facts which they themselves have learnt from experience and the light of reason? Reckless and incompetent expounders of Holy Scripture bring untold trouble and sorrow on their wiser brethren when they are caught in one of their mischievous false opinions and are taken to task by those who

are not bound by the authority of our sacred books. For then, to defend their utterly foolish and obviously untrue statements, they will try to call upon Holy Scripture for proof and even recite from memory many passages which they think support their position, although they understand neither what they say nor the things about which they make assertion.¹⁰

Selling the pass?

The impression is sometimes given by young earth creationists that it is nigh impossible to be an evangelical and hold to the theory of evolution. Historically this has not always been the case, nor is it necessary so theologically. G.F. Wright (one of the original ‘Fundamentalists’) wrote: ‘If only the evolutionists would incorporate into their system the sweetness of the Calvinistic doctrine of Divine Sovereignty, the church would make no objection to their speculations.’¹¹ Similarly his fellow contributor, R.A. Torrey, said that it was possible “to believe thoroughly in the infallibility of the Bible and still be an evolutionist of a certain type.”¹² More recently Dr. Tim Keller has written, ‘For the record I think God guided some kind of process of natural selection, and yet reject the concept of evolution as All-encompassing Theory.’¹³ That is, as an alternative worldview, i.e. Evolutionism. The men just mentioned can hardly be considered to be weak minded liberal evangelicals selling the pass!

We might also include in support of a more measured approach to interpreting Genesis Bible commentators of earlier generations. Here is Origen in the third century, ‘What person of intelligence, I ask, will consider as a reasonable statement that the first and the second and the third day, in which there are said to be both morning and evening, existed without sun and moon and stars, while the first day was even without heaven?...I do not think anyone will doubt that these are figurative expressions which indicate certain mysteries through a semblance of history.’¹⁴ Again we hear Augustine, ‘Perhaps Sacred Scripture in its customary style is speaking within the limitations of human language in addressing men of limited understanding.’¹⁵ Elsewhere he comments, ‘The narrative of the inspired writer brings the matter down to the capacity of children.’¹⁶ Here are some thoughts of John Calvin on Genesis 1:6-8, ‘For, to my mind, this is a certain principle, that nothing is here treated of but the visible form of the world. He who would learn astronomy and other recondite arts, let him go elsewhere. Here the Spirit of God would teach all men without exception and therefore...the history of creation...is the book of the unlearned.’¹⁷

When must we say ‘no’ to the theory of evolution?

There are two grounds on which evolution might have to be rejected by a believer in the biblical view of God as Creator:¹⁸ 1. Evolution might be necessarily incompatible with divine creation and 2. Evolution might be contradictory to creation if the biblical texts unequivocally deny such a process.

In and of itself the mechanism of evolution leaves open the question as to whether there is a God who initiates or sustains such a process. That information has to be obtained elsewhere.¹⁹ Logically the process of evolution is distinct from the act of creation; they belong to different categories. For example, the fact that a complete and sufficient description can be given (within purely scientific categories) for the way wheat is produced—utilising the process of photosynthesis, enzyme action and the like, does not mean that the petition in the Lord’s Prayer, ‘Give us this day our daily bread’ becomes redundant. God is the author of the whole show of creation, responsible for the action of everything in his gracious sovereignty. Creation is not just a past act, it is a present one.²⁰ We thus begin with the biblical view of the faithful, sovereign God, which enables science to proceed on the basis of observational experience. What we don’t do is to speculate what God must have done from a set of a priori beliefs (“My reading of Genesis says Evolution can’t be so....”). It may be, as with an earlier reading of Psalm 95 that the findings of science provide a corrective so we at least pause and evaluate whether we are reading our Bible’s aright. This is not bad faith, it is expressing humble faith, trust in the faithful God who is Truth and would not hoodwink us.

It is widely agreed that Christianity gave rise to modern science. It was the view of reality given in the first few chapters of Genesis that there is a rational God who has created a rational world. What is more, he is a reliable God who is not capricious and so it is reasonable to expect his world to be reliable too. Thus if water boils at 100 degree centigrade under set conditions one day you can expect the same another day. If that is the case then, unlike the claims of Greek philosophers like Aristotle which tended to look down upon empirical observation and believed that you could simply philosophise what should be the case from basic principles, this view said, ‘No, we cannot say beforehand what God could or should do, you have to go out and look.’ In fact they went further and said it was our duty to examine how God’s world works and harness its fruits for God’s glory and people’s benefits.²¹ One of the early pioneers of what

came to be known as the scientific method, was Francis Bacon and in 1605 in his ‘Advancement of Learning’ he spoke of God giving us two books to read, the Book of God’s Word—the Bible and the book of God’s Works±Nature. Both, he said, are to be studied with diligence as both are given by God. Here are the words of one leading historian of science Stanley Jaki, ‘The scientific quest found fertile soil only when faith in a personal, rational Creator had truly permeated a whole culture, beginning with the centuries of the High Middle Ages. It was that faith which provided, in sufficient measure, confidence in the rationality of the universe, trust in progress, and an appreciation of the qualitative method, all indispensable ingredients of the scientific quest.’²² Back in 1925 in his Lowell lectures, the non-Christian (Process thinker) and co-author with the atheist Bertrand Russell of *Principia Mathematica* (1910–1913), A.N. Whitehead, made the same point. He argued that you had to have a sufficient basis for believing that the scientific enterprise would be worthwhile and mediaeval Christianity supplied it. He pointed out that the images of gods found in other religions, especially Asia are too impersonal or too irrational to have sustained science. Obviously, if you believed that there were gods who are fickle and kept changing their minds, then you could never do science because that is dependent upon things being stable and not being changed at whim. The God of the Bible, however, provides such stability. Christianity is the root and science the fruit. Professor Rodney Stark makes the same point: ‘The rise of science was not an extension of classical learning. It was the natural outgrowth of Christian doctrine. Nature exists because it was created by God. To love and honour God, one must fully appreciate the wonders of his handiwork. Moreover, because God is perfect, his handiwork functions in accord with immutable principles. By the full use of our God-given powers of reason and observation, we ought to be able to discover these principles.’²³

Perhaps we might think of another area of study which is less contentious but which might suggest a possible parallel. Christians believe in the God who is Lord over all history.²⁴ This does not mean that we cannot accept an historical account of events from someone who is not a Christian. Certainly there may be particular interpretations of history (e.g. a Marxist reading) which we would take issue with, but it is perfectly reasonable for a historian qua historian to present a historical account of events which is scrutinised by his peers within the academy and for this to be acceptable and valid without any reference to God’s working at all. For example, Andrew Roberts²⁵ has written a fascinating

account of the relationships between Churchill, Roosevelt, Brooke and Marshall in securing victory in the West during World War Two and God is not mentioned once! We need not be perturbed by that fact. Whether Andrew Roberts is a Christian or not is not particularly relevant since we don't expect theological categories of thought or religious language to intrude into such an historical account. Perhaps if Roberts were a Christian we might ask: 'Do you believe that God was at work in and through these men?' Which in many ways is a banal question demanding the answer: 'Of course! What else would a sovereign God be doing?' But we would not think that such a historian is lacking integrity or buying into an 'atheist' view of history because God does not figure in his account. The point being made is that if we allow for God's concursive work in human history, with God, 'working out everything in conformity with the purpose of his will'²⁶ then why not make a similar allowance in the realm of natural history, or at least consider it as a possibility?

It could be argued that in principle strong biblical beliefs in a God who is intimately involved in his world actually causes us to expect a thoroughly sufficient scientific explanation of the origin and development of life, as we would expect, in principle, for a complete scientific explanation to be given of every part of his creation. This does not mean we become reductionistic (e.g. man is 'nothing but' a naked ape), but complementarian, such that the scientific description is conceived to be of a lower order of explanation but complementary to the higher order theological description and explanation. Man may well be something like a naked ape in certain respects, but he is much more—one who bears the image of the invisible God. Here the 'lower' scientific description is taken up into and accommodated by the 'higher' theological description.

Do the texts demand the answer 'no'?

However, let us not lose sight of the second basis for the rejection of evolution, namely, it might be contradictory to creation if the biblical texts unequivocally deny such a process. The key word is unequivocally. This raises wider issues of hermeneutical method, but if we take as axiomatic the belief that the Bible was not written to us but was written for us and that in order to ascertain what God is saying to us today (significance) we must pay close attention to what God was saying to the original readership in the past (meaning), then an approach which promises to be particularly fruitful is the 'literary/culture' approach. To the forefront of this method are questions such as these:

1. What kind of language is being used?
2. What kind of literature is it?
3. What is the expected audience?
4. What is the purpose of the text?
5. What relevant extra-textual knowledge is there?²⁷

This approach does not mean that the early chapters of Genesis can simply be categorised as ‘myth’ or ‘allegory’, for neither literary categories do full justice to the material which constitutes the early chapters of Genesis. Whilst treating the texts primarily as theological texts (rather than strict historical prose, as there are literary indicators which suggest they do not fall neatly into this category either) there is no downgrading of the historicity or ‘happenedness’ of the events recorded. Perhaps a different literary category needs to be conceived which would shed light on the nature of the material—something like ‘figurative narrative’?

More recently John H. Walton has made the intriguing suggestion that the early chapters of Genesis are not concerned with questions of material origins at all but rather can be considered as ‘temple texts’ whose main focus is on matters of function.²⁸ Walton draws heavily on the fifth question in order to provide a ‘window’ onto the Genesis texts, noting that the ancient Israelites would have shared the ancient ‘scientific’ world view of the time and that through this God communicates his truths (many of which challenged the beliefs of the surrounding nations and so having embedded within them an apologetic). Nonetheless, unless God revealed a different cosmology to that of the surrounding nations it is a default position that the Israelites shared the plausibility structures of the surrounding nations in large measure. One such fundamental structure was that function was a consequence of purpose (whereas we post-Enlightenment types consider function to be a consequence of structure). From what we can gather from other ancient ‘creation texts’ such as the Mesopotamian ‘Gudea’ texts which date around 2100 BC, and the *Enuma Elish* texts, circa 1200 BC—the ancients were not that concerned about the material origins of the world, but about functions. It was the role of the god’s to assign purpose to the elements in the cosmos. In fact something was not considered to ‘exist’ until it had a function. This is an idea which is not totally alien to us today. We may ask when a university is said to exist. Is it when all the buildings are in place, i.e. it exists materially? This would be a rather impoverished understanding of existence.

In most people's mind it would properly be said to exist when it is functioning as a university; when the staff are in place, the syllabi have been drawn up; the students have arrived and are going about their studies. That is, we think of existence functionally.

This helps shed light on the early chapters of Genesis

In the first few verses we have God not so much bringing material things into being, but bringing about order; functionality out of non-functionality. Thus in chapter 1, verse 2 'the world was formless and empty'—(*tohu/bohu*) and God sets about rectifying that. The first day he provides the basis for time, (the period of light is called day); the second day provides the basis for weather and the third day the basis for vegetation (we see the same concerns in *Enuma Elish*). God is presented as being concerned with the fabric of the cosmos. The next three days, however, are concerned with providing functionaries and their destinies- the two great lights; animals to reproduce and the crown of creation human kind who is described in priestly terms- to work and to serve in the garden (such gardens were often associated with temples). However, what God is doing is putting things in place for the benefit of human beings made in his image. And so we have the anthropic principle operating in Genesis; the universe is ordered with man very much in mind. On the seventh day there is the Sabbath—the day of cessation when God enters his rest (*menuah*), which is not inactivity but control, everything is now set up in a way that it is functioning properly—this is what is 'good'. As such the whole Universe is conceived as sacred space—a cosmic temple or to use Calvin's term, 'the theatre of God's glory'.

With this framework in mind, a more natural reading of the early passages of Genesis is of God bringing about functionality in his cosmos in terms of purpose rather than bringing about the material universe *per se*. If this is so, then questions of material origins are properly seen as belonging to the domain of science as it deals with the 'how' questions, whereas Genesis addresses the more fundamental 'why' questions. Walton is simply taking seriously Calvin's contention that in order to communicate to us God 'accommodates' himself to our infirmities, using the language and thought forms of the recipients of revelation even though technically some of those thought forms might be inaccurate (e.g. the Israelites believing that we really did think with our bowels).

Looking for parallels

We may draw a parallel with the last book in the Bible, the Book of Revelation. The language used here is the recognised genre ‘apocalyptic’. In chapter 12 we read: ‘A great and wondrous sign appeared in heaven: a woman clothed with the sun, with the moon under her feet and a crown of twelve stars on her head. She was pregnant and cried out in pain as she was about to give birth. Then another sign appeared in heaven: an enormous red dragon with seven heads and ten horns and seven crowns on his heads. His tail swept a third of the stars out of the sky and flung them to the earth. The dragon stood in front of the woman who was about to give birth, so that he might devour her child the moment it was born. She gave birth to a son, a male child, who will rule all the nations with an iron sceptre. And her child was snatched up to God and to his throne. The woman fled into the desert to a place prepared for her by God, where she might be taken care of for 1,260 days.’ Here historical events are being described, the birth of the messiah (references are made to Psalm 2) who soon after his birth has his life threatened (think of King Herod), but who is ultimately rescued and vindicated (the snatching to heaven perhaps referring to the ascension). If these verses are referring in miniature to the birth, life, death, resurrection of Jesus Christ, then they are referring to actual historical events. But those events are not being conveyed as historical narrative as we have them for example in the four gospels. The fact that apocalyptic language is being used in no way detracts for the historicity of the events. The events are cast in this literary form for particular reasons known to God. We in our modern scientific way of thinking may prefer them to be otherwise, but this is the form in which they have come to us and God expects us to pay him the respect of reading them accordingly. Could it not be the case that he expects us to read the early chapters of Genesis in a similar way too? To insist on a certain ‘literal’ way of reading the texts as being the ‘faithful’ way may be just as misguided as insisting that the only ‘faithful’ way of reading the Book of Revelation is a ‘literal’ one.

Another parallel may be found in terms of the sixteenth century debate between the Reformers over the understanding of the nature of the Lord’s Supper. Similar arguments to those used by young earthists were being used by Lutherans for a more ‘literal’ interpretation of Jesus words, ‘This is my body’ to refer to the bread used in the service. John Calvin argued that such words should be understood not literally but ‘sacramentally’. With a sigh he uttered against his opponents, “I wish they were as literary as they long to be literal.”²⁹ To

interpret Jesus words sacramentally does not result in mere ‘memorialism’ or the denial of Christ’s presence with his people spiritually, but it is recognising that language has many different forms and key to a proper understanding is identifying which form one is dealing with at any particular moment. To make a literary category mistake, for example by taking figurative language in the Bible for ‘scientific’ language, is to misshape the text and do that which no Christian wishes to do, dishonour God by effectively making him say something he never intended to say.

Conclusion

There is no objection in principle to accept evolution as being a legitimate scientific account of the way life developed which is not in contradiction to the biblical text. Creation, as understood as the bringing-into-being and sustaining-in-being by the Triune God is something which is made known by revelation, as is God’s working in history. Evolution (as distinct from Evolutionism) is ideologically neutral and its legitimacy as a theory is to be decided on scientific grounds. A literary/cultural approach to the early chapters of Genesis has the advantage of taking the text seriously as a text as well as appreciating its ‘historical particularity’. Hopefully some of the fog has now been cleared which allows for a more charitable and critical approach to this debate.

Rev’d MELVIN TINKER is Vicar of St. John Newland, Hull.

ENDNOTES

1. J.C. Whitcomb, *The Early Earth*, Evangelical Press, 1972.
2. H.M. Morris, *The Twilight of Evolution*, Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1963.
3. E.H. Andrews, *God, Science and Evolution*, Evangelical Press, 1980.
4. Ken Ham, *The Lie: Evolution*, Master Books, 2006.
5. Terry Mortenson and Thane H. Ury, (eds), *Coming to Grips with Genesis*, Master Books, 2008.
6. Ian McNaughton and Paul Taylor, *Darwin and Darwinism 150 years later*, Day One publications, 2009, p. 5.
7. D.M. Mackay, “Science and the Bible,” in *The Open Mind and other essays*, ed. Melvin Tinker, (IVP, 1988) p. 150.
8. E.g. R.J. Berry, *God and the Biologist: Personal Exploration of Science and Faith* (Apollos 1996); Ernest Lucas, *Can we Believe Genesis Today?* (IVP, 2001); Michael Poole and Gordon Wenham, *Creation or Evolution: a false antithesis?* (Latimer

- House, 1987) and more recently, D. R. Alexander, *Creation or Evolution: Do we have to choose?* (Monarch, 2008).
9. MacKay, *op. cit.*, p. 153.
 10. *Augustine: The Literal meaning of Genesis*, Newman Press, 1962, Bk. 1, chs. 19, 39.
 11. See C.A. Russell, *Cross Currents* (IVP, 1985), p. 163.
 12. See Mark Noll, *Evangelical American Christianity: An Introduction* (Blackwells, 2001), p. 171.
 13. Timothy Keller, *The Reason for God* (Dutton press, 2008), p. 94.
 14. Origen, *First Principles*, SPCK, 1936, Bk. 4, ch. 3.
 15. *Op. cit.*, 1.14.28.
 16. *Ibid.*, 2.6.13.
 17. John Calvin, *A Commentary on Genesis*, J. King (trans.), Banner of Truth, 1967.
 18. As argued by M.W. Poole in *Creation or Evolution: a false antithesis?* p. 15.
 19. Hebrews 1: 1-3; Colossians 1:15-17, etc.
 20. John 5:17.
 21. See R. Hooykas, *The Christian Approach in the Teaching of Science*, Tyndale Press, 1966.
 22. Stanley L. Jaki, *Science and Creation*, University Press of America, 1990.
 23. Rodney Stark, *For the Glory of God*, Princeton press, 2003, p. 157.
 24. Isaiah 10: 5-11; 40:23; 41:2 etc
 25. Andrew Roberts, *Masters and Commanders: How Roosevelt, Churchill, Marshall and Alanbrooke Won the War in the West* (Allen Lane, 2008).
 26. Eph. 1:11.
 27. See Ernest Lucas, "Interpreting Genesis in the 21st Century," *Faraday Paper No 11*; Gordon Wenham, *Genesis 1-15* (Word, 1987); E. Lucas, *Can we believe Genesis Today?* (IVP, 2001); David Atkinson, *The Message of Genesis 1-11* (IVP, 1990); Melvin Tinker, *Reclaiming Genesis* (Monarch, 2010).
 28. John H Walton, *The Lost World of Genesis 1* (IVP, 2009).
 29. Quoted in Calvin's *Doctrine of Word and Sacrament*, R.S. Wallace, Scottish Academic Press, 1995, p. 197.