

I WISH GOD WOULD BELIEVE IN EVOLUTION

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I wish God and evolutionary science could just kiss, make up, and be good friends forever! Wouldn't it be wonderful if all the heated debate, name-calling, and suspicion on both sides would stop and we could all join hearts and minds in awe of the Book of God's Words (the Bible) and the Book of God's works (the cosmos)?

Sadly however, this seems a forlorn wish because the divide between the God of the Bible (at least as presented by many Christians) on the one hand, and evolutionary science (as presented by the majority of scientists on the other hand), seems more gaping than ever. Like charging rams, horns have been locked in widely publicised debates, as champions on both sides have taken to their podiums, websites, and twitter accounts.

Meanwhile, the Church of Christ continues to lose the best of her youth to unbelief because they can't reconcile what they are taught the Bible [apparently] says about the Genesis creation, and what they hear at school and university. Multitudes of young people who have grown up in Bible-believing homes have graduated from university feeling massive tension between Christianity and modern science. Even within the ranks of the Church, Bible-believing Christians are terribly divided over how to interpret the Genesis account and Darwinian evolution.

I sense deeply God's sadness at what I now consider an unnecessary state of affairs. The more I ponder this, the more I become convinced that there is a way forward. In my own case --- and with a growing number of Christian theologians and scientists --- this is happening, though it is rarely acknowledged. Some of the world's eminent scientists who are also committed Christians believe it's possible to have sensible Bible and sound science. There is Professor William Phillips (Physics Nobel Prizewinner 1998), Professor John Polkinghorne FRS (Quantum Physicist, Cambridge), Sir Brian Heap FRS, former Vice-President of the Royal Society, Sir John Houghton FRS, former Director of the British Meteorological Office, co-Chair of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change, Professor of Mathematics, MA, PhD, DPhil, DSc, John D. Lennox, and the former Director of the Human Genome Project, Dr Francis Collins. This is not to mention other Bible believers such as the many Jewish scientists like the MIT trained Nuclear Physicist and Oceanographer Gerald Schroeder (recently deceased). Evidently, being a Christian does not mean checking one's brains out at the door, when that one enters the halls of scientific academia!

LESSONS FROM THE GALILEO DEBATE

The old Galileo debate about whether the earth is fixed or moving should have taught us two things. First, there can be a difference between our interpretation and what the Bible really is saying. For instance, when the Bible talked about the earth being founded on pillars it was not talking scientifically, but the Church officially interpreted it that way and got egg all over its face. Martin Luther was typical of the day in his rejection of our heliocentric world. He wrote in strong terms in his *Table Talk* in 1539:

“There is talk of a new astrologer who wants to prove that the earth moves and goes around instead of the sky, the sun, the moon, just as if somebody were moving in a carriage or ship might hold that he was sitting still and at rest while the earth and the trees walked and moved. But that is how things are nowadays: when a man wishes to be clever he must ... invent something special, and the way he does it must needs be the best! The fool wants to turn the whole art of astronomy upside-down. However, as Holy Scripture tells us, so did Joshua bid the sun to stand still and not the earth.”¹

Needless to say, the Church had to change its official interpretation in the face of the sheer facts of science. Biblical expositors eventually had to admit the language of the Bible when it talked about “the pillars of the earth” was phenomenological (that is, it was using the language of appearance) and not literal. Thus, when talking about the earth standing on pillars the message the Bible really conveyed to its original audience was that this planet's

¹ As quoted by John C. Lennox in *Seven Days That Divide the World*. Zondervan, Grand Rapids, Michigan, 2011. p 17

stability and continuity is guaranteed because God has founded it and has a purpose for it. So the first lesson is that the Bible is Divinely inspired; our interpretations necessarily are not! This calls for humility surely?

Mind you, this lesson in humility is one that scientists have also had to learn. For example, the Big Bang theory initially met huge resistance from the scientific community, because (God forbid!) the Bible got it right ... the universe had not always been here and there was a beginning as the first verse in Genesis makes clear. Sir John Maddox, editor of *Nature* responded negatively to the new evidence of the Big Bang Beginning by saying it was,

“‘Thoroughly unacceptable’ because it implied an ‘ultimate origin of our world’ and gave those who believed in the biblical doctrine of creation ‘ample justification’ for their beliefs.”²

So, neither the theologian nor the scientist are infallible nor unbiased. The second lesson the Galileo debate should have taught us is that it can be dangerous (yes, even for Christians) to ignore science! The apostle Paul wrote that, “since the creation of the world God’s invisible attributes, His eternal power and divine nature, have been clearly seen, being understood through what has been made ... (Rom. 1:20). According to the Bible true scientific observation of the universe should lead us to the knowledge and worship of God. Thus, I am more and more convinced that whenever we find things in science or in the Bible that don’t square, we should be humble enough to accept the apparent conflict comes from either an imperfect reading of the Biblical text, or from an imperfect scientific paradigm.

RESPECT

Finally, by way of introduction, if there is anybody reading this who is a committed evolutionary atheist or agnostic who thinks my presuppositions betray a mind already unhinged from reality, all I ask is that you give me a fair hearing and that you read on, please. On my part, I promise I have paid your side the respect of reading much of your material, and I have spent countless hours listening to and engaging in discussions with a genuine view to properly understand. My desire is that we can respect and learn from each other, perhaps even kiss and make-up!

CHARLES DARWIN

It will come as a surprise to many on both sides of the discussion to learn that Charles Darwin himself believed in God and the scientific method. At the beginning of Darwin’s *On The Origin of Species* he placed the famous quote from Francis Bacon’s *Advancement of Learning* (1605):

“Let no man ... think or maintain that he can be too well studied in the book of God’s words or in the book of God’s works; rather let all men endeavour an endless proficiencie in both.”

Most of us have never read his *On The Origin of Species*, and contrary to popular misconception Darwin was not an atheist. In fact, he declared his belief in a Creator who made living organisms through the process of evolution. He reasoned,

“To my mind it accords better with what we know of the laws impressed on matter by the Creator, that the production and extinction of the past and present inhabitants of the world should have been due to secondary causes like those determining the birth and death of the individual.”³

A few years before his death, Darwin wrote about his religious convictions to John Fordyce in 1879, “It seems to me absurd to doubt that a man may be an ardent theist and an evolutionist.”⁴ Commenting on this admission, Denis O. Lamoureux insightfully writes,

“In just one short sentence, Charles Darwin completely destroys both the science versus religion dichotomy and the creation versus evolution dichotomy. I can’t help but ask, ‘Have atheists like Richard

² As quoted in *Gunning For God: Why The New Atheists Are Missing The Target*, by John C. Lennox, Lion, Oxford, 2011. P 30

³ Darwin refers to a Creator seven times in his *On The Origin of Species*, and always in a positive way. See *On the Origin of Species*, Harvard University Press (1859), 1964, pp 186,188,189, 413 (twice), 435,488.

⁴ Darwin to Fordyce, 7 May 1879, Online at: <http://www.darwinproject.ac.uk/letter/entry-12041>. Also in Francis Darwin (ed), *The Life and Letters of Charles Darwin*, 3 vols., London: John Murray, 1887), I, p.304

Dawkins ever read the Darwin literature?’ To embrace either dichotomy is ‘absurd’! In addition, Darwin reveals in this letter, ‘I have never been an Atheist in the sense of denying the existence of God.’ So the question must be asked, ‘Did Darwin actually embrace Darwinism?’ No! The so-called ‘Darwinism’ of Dawkins and his atheistic minions is not the Darwin of history, but was created in the image of religious hate-mongering.”⁵

So, contrary to popular misconceptions, Darwin was not opposed to the idea that God used “laws impressed on matter by the Creator” to explain what we see in the natural world. Could it just be possible that the Bible --- without any tortured explanations ... supports this idea too? More specifically, could the biological diversity that science observes be the result of ‘natural’ laws God Himself embedded in the universe?

METEOROLOGY

Before directly addressing the question of whether God could have used mediate evolutionary processes in the creation of our bio-diverse world, let’s take the analogy of what the Bible says about our weather. There can be no doubt the Bible says God “sends” the sunshine and the rain upon our world:

“I shall give you the rains in their season, so that the land will yield its produce and the trees of the field will bear their fruit” (Lev.26:4).

The prophet Elijah announced, “... the LORD sends rain upon the earth” (1 Kings 17:14). This is repeated often in the Old Testament (eg. Job 5:10; Ps. 147:8) and again in the New Testament. Jesus himself stated, “your Father in heaven ...causes His sun to rise on the evil and the good, and sends rain on the righteous and the unrighteous” (Matt. 5:45), and Paul told the pagans on Mars Hill that God “gave you rains from heaven and fruitful seasons ...” (Acts 17:14). Thus the Bible directly attributes to God events which we observe to be the result of predictable and natural processes.

The meteorologist announces, “Tomorrow, the high pressure system indicates we will be receiving strong onshore winds with the high probability of intermittent showers.” Or, “Our computer models indicate this tropical low is going to develop into a category 3 cyclone in the next 48 hours and will cross the coast just north of Brisbane, with winds exceeding 120 kilometers per hour.” I know of no Christian who takes the Bible seriously, but who objects to looking at weather forecasts!

The mechanisms of wind and rain, the cycles of summer and winter etc., are all naturally observed by us and the science of meteorology. When we observe these weather patterns and ‘natural’ phenomena we are not denying that God is the ultimate creator of them. On the same analogy, why do Bible-believing Christians not concede at least the possibility that the biological diversity on our planet could similarly be the result of ‘natural’ processes which He initially brought into existence? As one Christian scientist observes,

“We are content to let natural processes account for precipitation, but firm Bible believers that we are, remain adamant that no natural processes could --- or ever would --- be found to account for biological diversity, something else that the Bible attributes to the actions of God ... I know of no court battles over demands by ‘Biblical Meteorologists’ for equal time in science classes to teach that God alone sends the rain. Why should we take exception to attempts to discover and describe the natural processes by which God creates organisms, but not object to the study of natural processes whereby He sends rain? ... Evolution ... wasn’t devised specifically to deny the existence of God, any more than the science of meteorology was ... Put another way, the question of origins is only as theological as the origin of rain.”⁶

EMBRYOLOGY

⁵ Quoted in *Christians and Evolution*, Professor R.J. Berry (ed), Monarch Books: Lion, Hudson, Oxford, England, 2014. Pp 308-309.

⁶ Ibid, pp 101-103. Stephen J. Godfrey, PhD in palaeontology and Curator of Palaeontology at Calvert Marine Museum near Washington as quoted in *Christians and Evolution*.

Let's take another analogy that suggests God used and still uses [to His glory] 'natural' processes in our bio-diverse world. Recall what Charles Darwin said about his belief in a Creator Who made living organisms through the medium of evolution:

"To my mind it accords better with what we know of the laws impressed on matter by the Creator, that the production and extinction of the past and present inhabitants of the world should have been due to secondary causes like those determining the birth and death of the individual."⁷

As he wrestled with the question of origins from the Genesis account and what he was observing in the natural sciences, Denis Lamoureux (who has debated Richard Dawkins) commented on this statement by Darwin:

"I found this passage to be an absolutely amazing insight! Every Christian today believes that we were created in our mother's womb through natural embryological and developmental processes. I have yet to meet a Christian who thinks God intervenes dramatically to attach a leg or an arm to their developing foetus. Rather, we believe that the Lord 'knit[s us] together ... fearfully and wonderfully made' (Psalm 139:13-14, NIV). So too with biological evolution. It is the Lord's ordained and sustained natural 'knitting process' to create all the God-glorifying forms of life on earth."⁸

Who among us has not marvelled at the development of the human being from fertilised ovum, through embryo, foetus, newborn, infant, toddler, child, and teenager into adulthood? We observe this 'natural' development. As Darwin correctly stated, this development is according to "the laws impressed on matter by the Creator" and is due to "secondary causes like those determining the birth and death of the individual."

You may object, "But Greg, that is more an argument from science than from clear Bible exegesis." Oh really? I know of no Christian couple expecting a baby who think, 'Hmm. This is a miraculous virginal conception just like Mary the mother of Jesus had!' Of course not. Their baby is the result of normal and 'natural' relations, even though they are convinced their baby, "wonderfully made", is a gift from God Himself. (And just by the way, what's wrong with an argument from science if it meets the criteria of objective verifiability, trustworthy reporting, etc.?)

Let me supply what I consider to be clear Bible teaching that God is perfectly comfortable with creating biological diversity through "secondary causes" [natural laws] that He originally "impressed on matter" at the beginning.

"Then God said, 'Let the earth sprout vegetation, plants yielding seed after their kind, and trees bearing fruit, with seed in them, on the earth'; and it was so. And the earth brought forth vegetation ... after their kind ..." (Gen. 1:11-12).

Here the Bible indicates that the forces of life were embedded in matter at the beginning. The earth was able to "bring forth" plant life after God commanded it to be so. And the same holds for the start of animal life,

"Then God said, 'Let the waters teem with swarms of living creatures ...' (Gen. 1:20).

"Then God said, 'Let the earth bring forth living creatures after their kind: cattle and creeping things and beasts of the earth after their kind'; and it was so. And God made the beasts of the earth ..." (Gen. 1:24-25).

Commenting on the innate powers of land and sea to "bring forth" life, John H. Walton rightly observes,

"... day six begins with God commissioning the land to produce living creatures. Since this introduces this day, it is logical to infer that this is a description of the intermediate mechanism by which God *made* (Heb. *asa*, Gen. 1:25) the various classes of animals."⁹

⁷ Op Cit. *On The Origin of Species*, p.488

⁸ Denis O. Lamoureux as quoted in *Christians and Evolution*, Op. Cit. p308

⁹ Walton, John H., *The Lost World of Adam and Eve: Genesis 2-3 and the Human Origins Debate*. Inter Varsity Press, USA, 2015. P41 (Italic emphases original, underlining my emphasis.)

Thus, Walton would agree with Darwin that “secondary causes” are now at work through ‘natural processes’ endowed in the world by the Creator.

It appears that the waters and the earth were (and are) invested (Walton says “commissioned”) by God with the inherent potential to produce life. The earth and the land are empowered to be “the intermediate mechanism” for biodiversity in the world. God embedded within our cosmos the necessary properties for life to appear and to flourish. The text is very comfortable with both direct and indirect creation ... “Let the sea bring forth ... and God created” and again, “Let the earth bring forth ... and God made”. Here are equivalent phrases that show secondary causes able to orchestrate life are considered as no less God’s work.

Two observations are thus in order. First, Genesis is comfortable with the idea that the Creator is able to directly and without intermediate means speak into existence things which did not previously exist (*ex nihilo*). This is what God did by bringing the entire Universe into being and without any pre-existing materials. We might call this absolute creation and it is taught, for instance, in John 1:3, Hebrews 11:3 and Revelation 4:11. The universe is ultimately contingent upon its Creator. God is the absolute and First Cause of all things. By His will and word all things exist.

Second, Genesis is also comfortable with the idea that God imparted secondary laws and processes into His cosmos in a mediate sense. That is, materials that exist as a result of His direct and absolute creation may now be used in the progression and outworking of His creation (*de novo*). It is these ‘natural’ processes that are the fit subject for scientific investigation. Underlying our cosmos then, is both the ability to rely upon and to predict scientific laws embedded in the cosmos, and over which God is still Sovereign.

HISTORY

Take another example where events in world history appear natural but which the Bible directly attributes to the will and work of God. On the human side, the fall of Babylon by the invading armies of the Medes and the Persians appeared to be just another battle where one army triumphed by stealth and surprise. But we know that behind the scenes God had determined to remove the profligate king Belshazzar. God sent his angel to write Babylon’s doom on the wall (Daniel chapter 5). Thus, the Bible assures us that behind the scenes God was working out His eternal plans. If you were living in Babylon at the time, looking at the cold steel of the enemy, it would not have seemed like God was working, I am sure.

I know of no genuine Bible believer who denies that the history of the nations and empires, kings and queens of the world, is not under God’s direction. The Bible teaches God “made all the nations to inhabit the whole earth and He determined their appointed times, and the boundaries of the places where they would live” (Acts 17:26). True, many kings and dictators have been cruel defiers of the goodness of God. In his vision of the flow of history Daniel the prophet described the nations as wild animals, lions, leopards, bears, eagles and similar beasts of prey. But these rampaging beast-empires can only go as far as God determines.

Thus, when secular historians study the rise and fall of empires, the machinations of kings and generals, the human emotions and actions of dictators and presidents, they see only the human story. But when we study this story as Christians we are not denying that history is ultimately His story. When the Bible says, “The king’s heart is like channels of water in the hand of the LORD, and He turns it wherever He wishes”, we are not denying human free will or ‘natural’ day to day happenings are not under God’s eye or hand (Prov. 21:1).

PHARAOH DROWNS IN THE REED SEA

Take another classic Bible story; the story of Moses and the exodus from Egypt. The Israelites followed a pillar of cloud by day and a pillar of fire by night (Ex. 13:21). But God was leading them directly towards the Sea of Reeds (Ex. 13:17-18). Pharaoh and his troops were hot on their heels. On the face of it, they were walking into a trap. But when the Israelites cried to God at the shore of the sea, a strong east wind sprang up and blew all night (Ex.14: 21). That wind dried the sea bed. But why a strong east wind all night long? Why not a mighty and miraculous tornado-type twister that could have funnelled the water straight up and away like a big straw sucking the sea dry? That way the Israelites would have known a miracle was in the making. That way Moses and the

people would not have needed to exercise any faith in their crossing. And that way Pharaoh and his army would have known something miraculous was brewing and balked.

The natural appearance of that east wind was exactly the intent. Choices needed to be made: For the Israelites, to trust God or surrender to the Egyptians? For the Egyptians, to follow the Israelites into the sea or to obey the word of God and let the people go? If that wind had obviously been seen to be supernatural, paranormal, their decisions would have been predictable. Free will would have been compromised.

So, that wind had a normal feel about it, even though it was “strong”. The Egyptians suspected nothing unusual. They had experienced plenty of wind before! That’s why they marched straight into the dry sea bed without hesitating (Ex. 14:23). But behind that natural-looking wind was God’s Hand, for “the LORD swept the sea back by a strong east wind all night...” (Ex. 14:21). Only after it was too late did the Egyptians recognize they were trapped and that this was the Hand of God: “And He caused their chariot wheels to swerve, and He made them drive with difficulty; so the Egyptians said, ‘Let us flee from Israel, for the LORD is fighting for them against the Egyptians’” (Ex. 14:25).

The Bible helps us to read between the lines. Events in this history which looked like the normal flow of cause and effect revealed a deeper purpose. Unaided by the Bible’s message, the study of history looks haphazard. The point is that no Bible-believer objects to historians studying the natural causes and effects of history; human causes such as intrigue, greed, murder, lies, or lust. These are secondary and natural events that do not rule out the working of God through such agents of change. Without the Bible, no student of history would imagine there is an underlying plan behind the apparent natural flow of the nations --- the coming Kingdom of God on earth.

FULL CIRCLE

The Bible thus teaches that our cosmos is contingent upon the Creator, and secondarily upon the laws He has set into our world. All such natural processes are His agents, fulfilling His purposes. Thus, the predictability of these natural laws does not deny God’s Presence or involvement in the ‘natural sciences’ such as meteorology or embryology, or even in the study of history.

On the same logical basis then, why do we think that God couldn’t use these very same scientifically observed processes to use ‘natural’ selection according to the theory of Darwinian evolution?¹⁰ It cannot be beyond the realms of possibility that what looks like ‘natural selection’ to the scientist is really the way God chose to work out His purposes for our world.

Perhaps my wish that God might believe in evolution is not as forlorn as I first imagined? But the big question remains: Were Adam and Eve the product of secondary evolutionary forces, or were they the result of a special creation? We shall examine this hot potato in the next installment.

¹⁰ Since completing this article, I have come across the exact same arguments in John Walton’s *The Lost World of Genesis One: Ancient Cosmology and the Origins Debate*, IVP, USA, 2009. I had read this a good while ago, and had forgotten about it. It shows my mind must hold more than I give it credit for! See p 135