

EVANGELICAL REVIEW OF THEOLOGY

VOLUME 8

Volume 8 • Number 2 • October 1984

**Evangelical
Review of
Theology**

David C. C. Watson, a missionary to university students in India for 18 years, has written extensively on science and religion. He now resides in Wheaton, Illinois, U.S.A. p. 176

Genesis and Evolution

Nigel M. de S. Cameron

Reprinted from Themelios April 1982 with permission

THE BACKGROUND

A recent issue of *The Times* newspaper of London carried lengthy letters from two well-known evangelical scientists on the question of evolution. One wrote disparagingly of the creationists as believing in 'Paley's divine Watchmaker who retired above the bright blue sky after a week of frenzied activity in 4004 BC'. The other, who happens to be the President of the Biblical Creation Society,¹ suggested that the creationist view had much to commend it, particularly in the light of recent doubt expressed by the scientific community in its traditional belief in evolution.²

What are we to make of this debate? In the USA for many years now creationism has been gathering in strength, and recently mounting disquiet in scientific circles the world over as to the adequacy of neo-Darwinism in purely scientific terms has lent new credence to traditional creationist positions. For example, Stephen Jan Gould of Harvard has developed a theory of 'punctuated equilibrium' which, although thoroughly evolutionary (and Gould is a vigorous opponent of creationism), accepts that the traditional reading of the fossil record as indicating gradual evolutionary change may no longer be sustained. Gould's answer, which has gained increasing acceptance among his professional colleagues, is to suggest an evolution that proceeds by relatively sudden 'jumps' rather than the slow processes of (neo-) Darwinian orthodoxy. Creationists, of course, have maintained all along that the fossil record does not support gradual change.³ In Britain considerable controversy has been generated within the scientific community by an exhibition mounted at the British Museum (Natural History) in London which suggested that evolution was only *one way* of explaining the biological order. It has been motivated by 'cladism', which is a new and complex way of categorizing organisms, and whose supporters are prepared to be agnostic about the origins of living things since they do not believe the theory of evolution to be any help to them in their work of taxonomy. A

¹ The Biblical Creation Society is one of the British groupings of Christians opposed to the theology of evolution. It publishes *Biblical Creation* (a journal for students and others) and *Rainbow* (a popular broadsheet), as well as monograph series and various pamphlets. Information may be obtained from the Secretary, 51 Cloan Crescent, Bishopbriggs, Glasgow G64 2HN Scotland.

² *The Times*, London, 16 December 1981. The correspondents cited are, respectively, Prof. R. J. Berry and Prof. E. H. Andrews.

³ See, e.g., Duane Gish, *Evolution: the Fossils say No!* (San Diego, 1974).

vigorous controversy has [p. 177](#) raged in scientific journals in Britain during 1981 on account of this exhibition, and it has naturally brought creationists to the fore.⁴ One further factor may be mentioned, again by way of illustration. Sir Fred Hoyle and Professor Chandra Wickramasinghe, the British astronomers, have published a remarkable book entitled *Evolution from Space*⁵ which concludes that there must be an intelligence behind evolution, as it *could* not (in mathematical terms) have happened on its own. Wickramasinghe was criticized for testifying at the Arkansas case in the USA, in which judgment was given in January of this year, where a state law insisting on the teaching of both theories (creation and evolution) in schools was struck down as violating the church-state separation principle of the US Constitution.

Of course, in all this it must be said that the great majority of scientists remain convinced of evolution. But their confidence in the traditional understanding of *how it happened* has been shaken. Some of the old creationist contentions (on matters like reading of the fossil record) have been vindicated, to a significant degree, in the new theories vying to succeed neo-Darwinism. For better or for worse, creationism has found itself on the agenda of public debate.

THE DIFFERING CHRISTIAN POSITIONS

There are problems in the very definition of terms. 'Creationists' are so called because they believe in creation rather than evolution. But it may be very properly objected that Christians who believe in evolution believe in creation as well. 'Theistic evolution' is an option taken by many evangelicals who believe that creation was brought about, in part at least, by means of organic evolution. They maintain that the debate is not 'Creation v. Evolution', but between believers in creation working through evolution, and believers in creation who for some reason reject evolution as the *modus operandi*. Christians are all, necessarily, 'creationists'.

In fact at this point a whole spectrum of possible options is opened up, and most possible positions find actual proponents within the camp of evangelical belief. On the 'creationist' side, since the publication twenty years ago of Whitcomb and Morris' *The Genesis Flood* there has been an increasingly strong tide of 'young earth' opinion, [p. 178](#) holding to a date of somewhere in the region of 10 or 20,000 BC for the creation of the world. Whitcomb and Morris sought to re-establish what had been known as flood geology, a revised version of the 'catastrophism' which reigned in historical geology prior to the work of Lyell in the 1830s.⁶ Not all, however, go along with their stress on the Noahic flood as a primary geology agent, responsible for most of the fossil strata. Another position, fathered in the early days of geological controversy well before Darwin, is that of the 'gap theory'. A lengthy time-gap is posited between [Genesis 1:1](#) and [1:2](#), long enough for the depositing of the fossils and much else besides, such that what follows is in effect an account not of creation but of *re-creation*. This theory had a wide following in an earlier generation, but today is in decline. Its classic expression was in G. H. Pember's *Earth's*

⁴ For a useful summary of this debate which one of the chief evolutionists involved acknowledged to be fair, see D. Tyler, 'Establishment Science and the British Museum', in *Biblical Creation* 3: 10, pp.68-75. The journal *Nature*, Tyler notes, carried three editorials and over thirty letters on the subject, beginning on 20 November 1980.

⁵ London, 1981.

⁶ C. C. Gillispie's *Genesis and Geology* (Cambridge, Mass., 1951) charts the course of the early nineteenth-century debates.

Earliest Ages (New York, 1876). Others wish to preserve man as a special creation without at the same time overthrowing historical geology. One such is Davis Young's *Creation and the Flood* (Grand Rapids, 1977).

A typical exposition of 'theistic evolution' is that of Victor Pearce in his *Who was Adam?* Pearce accepts both the long age of the earth and the evolutionary origin of man, seeking a place for 'Adam' as New Stone Age man. He reads the six days of [Genesis 1](#) as ages in the history of the earth, and remarks that thus understood they broadly follow the ages of historical geology. He understands the Genesis narrative therefore to be compatible with the consensus of modern scientific thought. Another writer in the same school makes the 'suggestion' that 'when God made man in His own image, what He did was to stamp His own likeness or one of the many "hominids" which appear to have been living at the time'.⁷ That is to say, something happened to transform a 'hominid' (who was not human, in the sense of not possessing the divine image) into a 'man'; and that something was the creative act of God.

Two different fundamental positions lie behind these particular attempts to harmonize Scripture and science, and for that reason although one could wish for a more precise vocabulary the terms 'creation' and 'evolution' do have definite *loci* despite the variety of opinion which they encompass. Evangelical evolutionists accept the infallible authority of Scripture, as do creationists. But they also believe that there is no contradiction between such an acceptance and belief in the theories that are the consensus of modern scientific thinking [p. 179](#) about the origin of man and the world. They consider that it is not necessary to interpret Scripture in a manner which would call evolution in question. They believe that Genesis does not teach 'science' but rather focuses on the Creator and the fact of his having created; the 'how' questions which scientists are trained to ask are left undiscussed in the narrative. Creationists, by contrast, find themselves Compelled by the statements in the early chapters of Genesis radically to disagree with the modern scientific consensus. On the one hand, Genesis teaches that human death had its origin in human sin (and [Romans 5](#), for instance, supports such a reading), that God made a first couple directly and without intermediate agency, that the original world was perfect and without the results of sin which have since overrun it; and, on the other, evolution is a necessary element in secular man's self-understanding, bound up with his refusal to acknowledge God as his Creator. We must, they conclude, strike out afresh and seek an understanding of the data of science which is faithful to this biblical view of things. And they point to the number of very distinguished men of science who stand with them.

Creationists are keen to argue that, though they may end up taking 'literal' positions on matters like the 'days' of [Genesis 1](#), their rejection of evolution does not *require* such readings. Further, they maintain that they are faithful to the intentions of the original authors of Scripture, whereas modern evangelical evolutionists have tended to override original intentions and to treat the Genesis narratives as mythical, i.e. as not referring to real events in this world of time and space. On the other hand it is contended that we must be wary of imposing 'literal' or any other categories of interpretation upon Scripture, since all kinds of literature are contained within the canon and used there by the Spirit of God.⁸

⁷ John Stott, cited in C. Chapman, *Christianity on Trial*, 2 (Berkhamsted, 1974), p.115.

⁸ Both sides of the argument featured in *Themelios* 4:1 (September 1978) where Noel Weekes, 'The Hermeneutical Problem of [Genesis 1–11](#)' and Paul Helm, 'Arguing about Origins', are both worth consulting for concise statements.

ISSUES ARISING

A number of issues arise out of this debate. First, *what is the status of Holy Scripture?* This is, of course, itself hotly debated. Those who admit there to be actual *errors* in the Bible presumably find no difficulty in rejecting elements in Genesis with which they may disagree. The question is whether, given a belief in a fully *infallible* Scripture, Genesis can be shown to be in harmony with evolution and consensus historical geology. Those who believe in infallibility must in principle **P. 180** admit that Scripture *might* disagree with what most scientists think, and that if that were the case they would be bound by its teaching. That much must be common ground among orthodox Christians.

Secondly we face the distinct question, *what is the teaching of Holy Scripture?* It is, presumably, common ground that the principle focus of the teaching of the Bible lies in what we may ascertain of the intentions of the original (human) author of any given book. What he meant to say, using whatever literary form he chose, is what the Bible says and therefore what God says. We need to use all possible literary and linguistic tools to obtain as near an understanding as possible of what the writer(s) of Genesis wished to purvey. We must avoid the twin dangers of permitting scientific orthodoxy or a certain theological tradition to determine our reading of Holy Scripture. How Genesis is understood elsewhere in Scripture will weigh heavily with us in our reading of it, but we must be wary, in turn, of reading back traditional understandings into these other texts. The Christian is of course committed to the integrity of scientific and theological endeavour. We must expect both these fields of study to yield true results and results that can be harmonized with each other. We must never turn our backs upon facts, biblical or scientific. The essential principle is that we must distinguish what are facts and what are impositions upon them that they do not *require*. There can ultimately be no difference between God's revelation in Scripture and the facts of his creation.

Thirdly we must ask ourselves about the status and *significance of the contending theories today*. For example, are the scientific credentials of evolution as valid as most of us have been led to believe?⁹ Is evolution integral to secular man's understanding of himself and his world? If that is true, it does not make it wrong, but it raises a questionmark against the Christian acceptance of it. By the same token, it has been asked, what is the connection between creationism in the USA and right-wing politics? What is its connection with the anti-science movement of our times which is tied up with a general anti-intellectualism? We must face these questions, whatever their answers may be. Not that any such connection would make either theory wrong. It would, however, suggest that the 'objectivity' so often claimed for scientific theories needs to be understood alongside the subjective **p. 181** experience of the scientists who hold these theories. Man is an irreducibly religious being, and all his thoughts and actions have religious implications.

The interpretation of Scripture in an area of historical and contemporary disagreement is no easy task. We must strip away both our own pre-suppositions and those of our culture, and endeavour to listen to the words of revelation afresh, if we are to be ruled by the Scripture and not to impose ourselves and our preferences upon it. The danger of hearing only what we wish to hear, or what is convenient and acceptable, is ever real. At the same time, it is needful for Christians who differ about controversial questions

⁹ There has been much discussion of the philosopher of science Karl Popper's suggestion that because evolution deals with something we cannot repeat, it cannot properly be called a 'theory' at all. K. A. Kerkut's *Implications of Evolution* (London, 1961) questions many of the assumptions evolutionists tend to make (from a non-Christian perspective). E. H. Andrews' booklet *Is Evolution Scientific?* sets out a more popular (and creationist) assessment of the question (Welwyn, 1979).

to do so in a spirit of brotherhood and mutual tolerance; but these matters will not be decided by their being ignored, and their implications are such that we can hardly leave them unresolved. Some reading for those who would pursue them further is suggested below.

FURTHER READING

For a general and informative survey of many of the issues in this and related debates, see Bernard Ramm, *The Christian View of Science and Scripture* (Exeter, 1955), though especially in his discussion of Creationist geology Ramm is now badly dated.

J. C. Whitcomb and H. M. Morris' *The Genesis Flood* (Philadelphia, 1961) has been referred to above; it is the most significant creationist work of the present generation, though it too is now somewhat dated. Many scientific works have come from creationist pens, including Evan Shute's *Flaws in the Theory of Evolution* (Nutley, N. J., 1961) and a number of books by A. E. Wilder-Smith, especially *Man's Origin, Man's Destiny* (Stuttgart, 1974), *The Basis for a New Biology* (Stuttgart, 1976), and most recently *The Natural Sciences Know Nothing of Evolution* (San Diego, 1981). For a startling attack on evolution from a non-Christian source, Fred Hoyle and C. Wickramasinghe's *Evolution from Space* (London, 1981) is the most recent in a line of questionings from outside of creationism.

On biblical questions, two useful papers are to be found in *In the Beginning ...*, edited by the present writer (Glasgow, 1980), by D. A. Carson ('Adam in the Epistles of Paul') and J. G. McConville ('Interpreting Genesis 1-11'). The *Themelios* article on 'The Hermeneutical Problem of Genesis 1-11' referred to above (in [4:1](#)) briefly sets out the more 'literal' interpretative case. E. H. Andrews usefully discusses exegetical/philosophical issues in his *God, Science and Evolution* (Welwyn, 1980). [p. 182](#)

Theistic evolutionists have been less productive. Commentaries suggest harmonistic readings, e.g. Derek Kidner's *Genesis* in the Tyndale series (London, 1967), pp.26ff. Various volumes on science and faith advert to this debate, e.g. M. A. Jeeves, *The Scientific Enterprise and Christian Faith* (London, 1969), pp.98ff. E. K. Victor Pearce's *Who was Adam?* (Exeter, 1969) gives a fuller discussion. Paul Helm's *Themelios* article referred to above ([4:1](#)) raises some of the methodological and exegetical issues. See also F. Schaeffer's *Genesis in Space and Time* (Illinois, 1972; London, 1973). Books by non-evangelicals are of course legion, with several volumes by I. G. Barbour touching on these questions, the speculative works of Teilhard de Chardin endeavouring to think out the implications of evolution for theology, and studies like John Hick's *Evil and the God of Love* (London, 1966) taking account of evolution in their discussion of related theological issues.

Finally, we may draw attention to two major historical works which set the modern discussion in its context. Reference has already been made to C. C. Gillispie's *Genesis and Geology*, dealing with the pre-Darwinian debates which in some ways were more important than those which Darwin himself initiated; and James R. Moore's *The Post-Darwinian Controversies* (Cambridge, 1979) is a major assessment of the theological response to Darwin (though it is largely uninterested in the vital exegetical questions).

Rev. Nigel Cameron is warden of Rutherford House, Edinburgh in Scotland, and author of *Evolution and the Bible*. [p. 183](#)