

Rescuing Darwin or Wrecking The Faith?

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Introduction

I was weaned from Darwinian evolution completely by surprise. Converted my first weekend at university back in 1956, I found I had an immediate love of the Bible and a thirst to read more. At the same time, I remained sceptical about origins. ‘Yes’, I said to my friend, ‘I do believe the Bible to be true, but don’t think I’m going to accept the Genesis myths uncritically!’ Like practically everyone today I had been raised to think that evolution was unquestionable — hence my problems about Adam and Eve.

Imagine my surprise some months later, while browsing in a library, to find an eminent scientist, W. R. Thompson, taking issue with Darwinism — root and branch. He had been invited to write the introduction for the 1956 ‘Everyman’ edition of the *Origin of Species*. I took it off the shelf and began reading. There, within the inner sanctum of the *Origin*, a Fellow of the Royal Society was saying that evolution theory had been bad for science and for society. Astonishing! Later I came across K. A. Kerkut’s *Implications of Evolution* (Pergamon, 1960) in which the author gently lampoons his new undergraduates for accepting Darwin on authority, ‘by faith’, ‘much as Christians do the Bible’.¹ Clearly there was more to all this than met the eye.

After 50 years — admittedly as a non-scientist and therefore less qualified for such a discussion than others — my layman’s conclusion is that evolution needs a radical rethink. By evolution, I mean only macro-evolution not micro-evolution — *micro* being the small changes within species, as in dog or horse breeding, which are evident to all. With respect to *macro*-evolution the picture is different. The argument from *morphology*, for example, remains as much a *non sequitur* today as it was 150 years ago. Certainly, human beings look like chimpanzees and have similar bone, blood and nerve structures; but in the absence of other compelling evidence, this proves nothing. Similar structures indicate common creation as readily as they do a process of slow evolution. Again, the concept of ‘vestigial organs’ (‘left over organs’ from earlier stages of evolution) has been discredited since they do not exist: all organs, it is clearly recognised now, serve important though not necessarily vital functions. Similarly, the idea that the developing human embryo passes through the stages of evolution, at one time looking like a fish with gill slits etc. (technically referred to as ‘ontogeny recapitulates phylogeny’) is a fiction invented by the German biologist, Ernst Haeckel, to try to make evolution look better. Finally the ‘fossil record’ itself, far from getting

¹ An open discussion between Koestler, Polanyi and Lakatos at the London School of Economics in 1967 revealed the widespread dissatisfaction with the evolutionary paradigm, even at the highest levels of science. Koestler’s 1970’s Alpbach discussions were intriguing for the same reason.

clearer since Darwin's day seems increasingly problematic. Fossils exist and have a story to tell and may in fact be very ancient, as is claimed, but just what that story is remains uncertain. The cladistics' controversy at the Natural History Museum in London 30 years ago is a case in point.

For a scientific theory to have this sort of track record after 150 years of research is serious. But for the 'grand narrative' of evolution, which impinges so directly on human origins and therefore on the Bible (not to mention the history of ideas), the failures are especially noteworthy. Why on the basis of a questionable scientific paradigm should an extensive revamp of traditional Christian doctrines be considered necessary, especially by anyone with a high view of Scripture?² Admittedly, the most recent 'evidence' about evolution — that the 1953 discoveries leading to the Genome Project have settled the matter once and for all — needs careful consideration. The genetic evidence, it is claimed, puts evolution 'beyond doubt' because it traces how DNA came to be shared across the species. But evolution's poor track record briefly outlined above surely advises caution about this new step. Many, for example, already argue that the alleged evidence is simply a restatement of the morphology principle, shared structures in the animal kingdom, which by themselves prove nothing. But euphoria and dogmatism prevail: 'Vive l'evolution!', writes one;³ 'Darwin must be rescued from the obscurantists of both left and right', cries another.⁴

With this background in mind, I was intrigued to find myself included in a list of UK 'creationists'⁵ for a sociological survey related to Charles Darwin's anniversary next year. The research would be impartial, of course, so I laid aside my concerns out of respect for the commissioning agent, Theos (the new evangelical think-tank headed by Paul Woolley), and was duly interviewed. Subsequently, I realised that my earlier concerns were not without foundation. It emerged, for example, that the Faraday Institute in Cambridge, whose hostility to 'creationism' is no secret, was more closely involved than had been thought. A subsequent article in *The Times* by Libby Purves prompted further unease.⁶ In quite rightly rebuking Richard Dawkins for his atheistic histrionics, she made passing reference to the Theos survey and quoted its director as follows:

Basically the idea [of the research] is to 'Rescue Darwin' from the crossfire of a battle [between the creationists and public atheists]...the main objective [of which] will be a kind of 'plague on both your houses',

² For example, see Denis Alexander, *Creation or Evolution: Do We Have to Choose?* (London: Monarch Books, 2008).

³ Denis Alexander in his article in *Third Way* magazine (July, 2008).

⁴ See quotation below – Paul Woolley.

⁵ The expression 'creationist' is, of course, unfortunate, because all Christians believe that the universe and everything in it had a beginning. But it is now common parlance and serves its purpose. It also helps to distinguish between those who accept evolution and those who do not.

⁶ *The Times*, 8th August, 2008.

arguing that both the creationists/IDers and the militant atheists are wrong, that Darwinian evolution is compatible with Christianity...etc.

To what degree impartiality can survive such an approach remains to be seen; particularly, when the research report will be written jointly by Nick Spencer (Theos) and Denis Alexander (Faraday), who share the above view.

All of which may seem rather remote from our title, which asks how Darwin and evolution theory *can* be ‘rescued’ without causing irreparable damage to 2000 years of historic Christian teaching? But the background is important for two reasons. First, it shows that evangelical Christians holding the traditional views of Genesis have little reason to feel intellectually cowed by the opposition.⁷ Evolution is under fierce and increasing attack by Christian and non-Christian scientists alike. Second, it shows that the defence of the older view of origins is hotly opposed and not infrequently derided by secular and evangelical opinion alike. The former comes as no surprise but the latter does. Surely evangelical scientists more than anyone would want to support an unhindered Darwinian critique. For one thing, as scientists they are committed to the investigation of empirical truth. More importantly, with the growing threat to freedom of expression today — as the recent resignation of the Royal Society’s education officer indicates all too clearly — they should be insisting upon open and rational dialogue. But perhaps this is what Theos and the Faraday Institute intend, media reports notwithstanding. One certainly hopes so. The stakes are high, as we shall see.

Christian Doctrine

Considerable vagueness has been a feature of theistic evolution since 1859. Eminent evangelical leaders and scholars have accepted Darwinism and then interpreted the Genesis account in a variety of ways, but none very exactly *vis-à-vis* evolution theory, until Denis Alexander’s book that is. Previously, I took the view that the whole theistic evolutionary approach is neither advisable nor necessary, but that its interpretations could be considered consistent with wider evangelical teaching if they fell within three carefully defined doctrinal boundaries.

First, creation must have been *ex nihilo*. That is to say, nothing existed apart from the triune God when God decided to bring contingent reality into existence. Second, by whatever means it was effected, God created two sinless human beings, Adam and Eve, who were the ‘image of God’. On the finite level, their experience uniquely resembled that of the members of the Trinity. Unlike any other creatures in heaven (angels) or on earth (animals and plants), they were unique expressions of God’s love and goodness. In short, they were made ‘in [his] likeness’ (Gen 1: 26), and all human

⁷ Space precludes a more detailed outline of evangelical interpretations regarding Genesis 1–3. Some have accepted the ‘old earth’ view that Genesis allows considerable freedom in terms of chronology; others have taken the ‘young earth’ view and see God’s creation as comparatively recent. Before Darwin, however, neither view involved the radically new interpretations considered in this article.

beings are their physical descendants. Third, Adam and Eve were without sin and knew no evil of any kind. Yet their relationship with God included, to their added glory, the reality of significant choice. When in due course, therefore, they succumbed to temptation and rejected God's command, the disaster of human alienation followed. They were alienated both vertically from God and horizontally from man and nature and they died physically as a result of sin.

The latest version of origins now breaches these boundaries. Largely the product of two closely related UK organisations — Christians in Science and the Faraday Institute — it tries to work out more explicitly what previously had been left rather vague. And because it is sincerely and ably stated, it deserves our respect. In all other ways, sadly, it is a recipe for confusion because it challenges the historic Christian view of the Fall. Human death, it says, is *not* a result of the Fall, but simply a part of the natural process of evolution.

A plausible scenario?

Behind all this lies an allegedly plausible scenario, which it is important to understand. By means of natural selection, it is suggested, God's sovereign oversight produced, around 200,000 years ago, the first individuals whom we now call '*homo sapiens*'. In all external ways they resembled contemporary human beings. Language, art, religious ritual, music, social order, agriculture etc. became a part of their experience — but they did not yet 'know God'; they did not yet have a personal relationship with God. A further (presumably?) miraculous step was needed. So ... 'God in his grace chose a couple of Neolithic farmers in the Near East, or maybe a community of farmers, to whom he chose to reveal himself in a special way...'⁸ As *homo sapiens*, along with the 1 to 10 million members of the species reckoned to be alive at the time, they had already, from the start of the new species, been God's image (though what this means is unclear as we shall see). Certainly, however, when this new step occurred, it was the first time they realised what it *meant* to be 'the image of God'. They are therefore designated a new type of image, namely '*homo divinus*'. Emerging from a context of social and individual conflict, in which, presumably, they experienced varieties of pain, upheaval and suffering and, very particularly in relation to our present discussion, both deliberate and natural physical death, it remains unclear to what extent the first couple or community of *homo divinus* 'knew God'. Were they, for example, both the image of God and at the same time 'sinful', i.e., immoral by comparison with the nature of the perfect and loving Creator, defined supremely for us now in the person of 'the second Adam', Jesus Christ? Did they continue to be sinful in much the same way that they continued to experience physical death? To which the answer appears to be 'Yes', for we are specifically cautioned not to 'imagine Adam and Eve as superhuman, living in an environment that sounds a bit like heaven on earth...an envisaged paradise [sic]'.⁹ Either way, when in due course 'Adam and Eve' rebelled against God (or the 'community of Neolithic farmers now called '*homo*

⁸ Denis Alexander, *Creation or Evolution?*, p. 236.

⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 275.



divinus' — for both the number of those involved and the actual manner of the 'Fall' remains unclear in this interpretation, since legend is interspersed with fact), they lost their special divine relationship and introduced 'sin' into the world. *Physical death, however, was not a new experience.*

Critique

A host of doctrinal questions spring immediately to mind, only three of which can be treated here and far too briefly of course.

First is the issue of 'image-ness'. Are human beings of value simply because they are human beings, or do they have value only because they have a relationship with God? Take for example the status of those *homo sapiens* already in existence when the *homo divinus* development took place. Could it be that descendants from these creatures are still alive today, like the Australian aborigines who are specifically admitted to precede 'Adam' by many thousands of years.¹⁰ If so, what is their relation to the descendants of *homo divinus*? Could they be considered lesser 'human beings', perhaps equal to animals since they too had no personal relationship with God and no conception of 'sin'?

Alexander's response to this is both speculative and dubious. What he suggests, though the degree of speculation makes it somewhat unclear and therefore open to misrepresentation, is that at some point all *homo sapiens* were included in the 'federal headship' of the first '*homo divinus*'. In other words when this switch came, when '[this] bright light appeared in the [Neolithic] Near East thousands of years ago [the one introducing 'Adam and Eve' into the picture], it shed its light around the world...' ¹¹ Whereupon, those *homo sapiens* living at the time started to have a divine relationship along with their federal head, 'Adam'.

That this reading of federal headship bears little relation to the biblical teaching and to historical theology is troubling to say the least. Adam's federal headship in Scripture turns on the fact that it is *physical* not 'spiritual'. Paul argues carefully in 1 Corinthians 15 that the physical comes first, by which he clearly means that all human beings are derived through procreation from a single couple. Only after Adam's disobedience does God provide his 'spiritual', i.e. his miraculous, and literally, heaven-sent solution. Jesus is a federal head for all who believe because he is 'the second man *from heaven*'. He becomes a spiritual rather than a physical head because he is divine. Adam's headship, by comparison, is what it is because it is physical. He is literally the 'father' of the human race. Christ's headship operates spiritually because he has come from above — a distinction ignored by the new interpretation which makes no sense in the context of 1 Corinthians 15.

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ Ibid.



Second, because all human beings descend from Adam and Eve, they share in the Genesis 3 disaster: increased pain in childbirth, arduous work and the disruption of all relationships, human and non-human. Physical death, however, is the principal indicator of how terrible a disaster it really is.¹² Paul insists that physical death remains the last *enemy*. Death is not a friend. It is not a part of God's design for human life. It devastates his good creation and needs to be overthrown and conquered. Hence Paul's repeated use of the expression 'the law of sin *and death*' and his shout of triumph as a result of Christ's resurrection, 'Where, O *Death*, is your victory? Where, O *Death*, is your sting?' (1 Cor. 15:55) His argument forces home the message that Christ's *physical* resurrection resolves the problem of *physical* death in man. The new exegesis, by contrast, argues that God's original threat of death was of a broken relationship only. Clearly it is forced and unnatural.

Overarching all other concerns, finally, stands the problem of the atonement and the nature of suffering generally. For if physical death is not part of the original fall of man, how is it part of Christ's atonement? Sin breaks our relationship with God and only Christ's substitutionary death can make atonement for that sin. But if physical death is not part of the judgement, that is, of the Genesis 3 curse, how is it included in Jesus' work on the cross? Did he *have* to die physically? Could he not have reconciled us to the Father some other way, possibly through a break in the divine relationship other than physical death? Added to which, if physical suffering and death are simply part of the natural order, our perspective of physical suffering changes completely. The agony disappears. Evolutionary processes work this way and human beings, like everything else in nature, suffer as a result. Why complain? Conceivably resistance to the natural order is even counter-productive! The logic of evolution moves inexorably on until, as Baudelaire insists, we find ourselves confronted not with an entirely good God but with someone looking pretty like the Devil. In Scripture, by contrast, Christ's work of atonement deals precisely with this dilemma, *for death is an enemy*. When confronted by Lazarus' tomb, Jesus is angry. When he agonises on the cross, it is to end agony. By his death, he conquers death. Because tears and sadness ought not to be there in the first place, he wipes them away in the end. Jesus is separated from the Father on the cross and brought cruelly to the grave — he *dies!* But in so doing, he destroys not only the power of sin, *but the power of death*. His is a *physical* resurrection, because *physical* curse was a part of the Fall. But if suffering and death are 'normal' for human beings, what do we say now to suffering, and why did Jesus have to *die*?

Conclusion

Why rescue Darwin? Is it because the evidence is overwhelmingly clear? Hardly! Surely the defining evangelical principle of *sola scriptura* encourages, at the very least, a healthy scepticism about 'the assured results of science'. But it goes further and warns each generation of God's people to be ultra cautious the further they move from

¹² See Genesis 5, where the genealogies emphasise the reality of death by the oft-repeated refrain 'and then he died'.



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the Bible's explicit teaching, especially when enshrined in the didactic portions of Scripture, such as Romans 5 and 1 Corinthians 15. With respect to origins, the New Testament's frame of reference could not be clearer: mankind (*homo sapiens* 'male and female') was created to be the image of God; the act of Adam and Eve's rebellion introduced sin into human experience; in due course sin led to human death. The doctrines of Christ's divinity, justification by faith and the resurrection of the body are held inviolable by evangelicals simply because Scripture demands them, regardless of whether or not they fit with current theories. By the same token, surely, the framework surrounding human creation and the Fall is equally inviolable. Not that we have to pretend that intellectual puzzles in the Bible are then easily resolved or that science cannot be useful in understanding Scripture — far from it. But if I take only my personal experience and look back to those early days as a young believer in 1956, I realise the dangers facing us now. The assured results of scientific criticism so called would have cut swathes through my evangelical convictions, not only with respect to Genesis but to a host of other things. Now they have been silenced simply because the past is more clearly understood — many times, ironically, through better scientific investigation! Is it not unwise, then, to invent novel interpretations about Adam and Eve on the grounds of current scientific theory when the New Testament speaks so unequivocally about human death, and when an almost palpable unease about Darwinism seems to be spreading through the scientific community today (thus occasioning the need for 'a rescue'!). The temptation to elevate scientific theory above Scripture accounts in no small measure for Christianity's decline in recent centuries. Well before the rise of modern science, however, the 'assured results' of countless other human speculations endangered faith, as both the New Testament and church history testify. Were they ever presented as anything but plausible and benign because, like evolution since 1859, they were so 'obvious' and 'normal' and 'necessary'? From the perspective of God's revealed Word, they were simply foolish and destructive.

An insistent choice seems almost daily to grow in intensity: Do we wreck the church in order to rescue Darwin, or vice versa?