

# Introduction

**W**hy write a book that specifically examines ‘theistic evolution’, a point of view held by many sincere Christians? Is it not an unnecessarily divisive thing to do? I am fully persuaded that it is indeed warranted. Christians who believe that the Bible is the Word of God increasingly confess to having significant doubts about its teaching concerning origins. Not a few have abandoned their former position, of the traditional, historical reading of Genesis 1–11, because of the influence of scholarly science writers or theologians who argued persuasively for an alternative. As Christians we must be absolutely sure of what we believe and certain that it conforms to Holy Scripture. But, with so many different opinions in our scientific age, how dogmatic should we really be about the doctrine of creation?

Even some pastors and missionaries privately admit to having had a change of heart on these matters. For many, it is no longer credible to view the Bible’s early chapters, what we might call its divine prologue, as history. Rather, they prefer to understand it as allegory or poetry, a mythical story perhaps, its primary aim being to teach us spiritual lessons. But are there any knock-on effects of these modified views of Genesis for the Christian faith? Does theistic evolution (or ‘evolutionary creation’) enhance our understanding of origins and related doctrines? Or does it hinder it as some maintain? Our purpose is to explore these questions. It is in the light of Scripture that we must make our assessment.

My main target readership is professing evangelical Christians, those for whom the Bible is the Word of God. While others may benefit from this book (and I hope some will), I assume that my readers will want to affirm that Scripture is without error, or at least that they strongly lean in that direction. I assume that the reader accepts the Bible as a revelation from God himself. We know that Christians do not always agree on details and that in order to maintain Christian unity, we must agree to disagree on matters that are not of primary importance. However, there are other

issues which are surely fundamental. On these things, we are compelled to enter the debate, as respectfully and calmly as we know how! If you believe that a correct understanding of origins is important, this book is for you.

You will not find arguments from science here, even though my own background is in the natural sciences and scientific research. A wealth of excellent material already exists on the scientific questions surrounding the creation/evolution debate (and a few suggested resources will be given in chapter 1). Instead, this book sets out to assess theistic evolution scripturally. Also, since my target readers are believers in God, I make no attempt to refute atheism or to defend theism. That is a noble cause but, again, it is not my purpose here.

Finally, I have written with the layperson in mind. My intended readership is not primarily academic theologians (although I hope some may read it). Consequently, I avoid theological jargon and technical language as far as possible. Whatever view you currently hold, I appeal to you to (re)assess your position in the light of the theological and biblical arguments in these pages. My prayer is that God may be pleased to use this book (whatever flaws remain) to stimulate serious and sober reflection on the part of many Christian readers—even to the changing of hearts and minds.

**Philip Bell**

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# 1. Creation's unauthorised biography?

The opening chapters of the Bible are a biography of Creation, the origin and earliest ages of life on Earth. We might even think of Genesis as an *authorised* biography since the author is ultimately God the Holy Spirit. How, then, should we read this account? How much liberty should we exercise as we do so? Turning that last question around, just how dogmatic should Christians be when interpreting the meaning of such an ancient text? After all, there are several different views about origins. Surely it makes sense to adapt our understanding of Creation in light of all that modern science has revealed to us? If so, is it not absurd still to be insisting on a literal, historical understanding of Genesis these days?

“You have got to be kidding me—this entire universe in six days? Every single human being related back to Adam and Eve? I suppose you’re going to tell me that you also believe in a talking snake in the garden of Eden; and an actual world-destroying flood, with all the animals going into a big boat two by two! Don’t you believe in science? I mean, come on: you’re using a computer after all, the result of science. Yet here you are denying science; evolution is a fact. Are you people for real? How can you seriously believe that these stories recorded by ignorant goat-herders centuries ago are to be taken seriously today? And you actually teach this stuff to children—Dawkins is right, it’s tantamount to child-abuse.”

This sort of ridicule and criticism does not come solely from unbelievers. Christians who reject ‘young earth creationism’ will sometimes engage in it too.<sup>2</sup> They argue that a ‘scientific view’ of creation is more sensible, progressive and contemporary. Is such disapproval and contempt

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2 I have witnessed it myself. Every one of the statements in the aforementioned fictional outburst I have heard personally, most of them on multiple occasions.

## Chapter 1

warranted? Are the views which creationists hold so ridiculous in this enlightened, modern age, that they rightfully invite scorn?

Nowadays it is easy to find parodies of those who hold to a creationist position. One such cartoon is titled, “Creationist when given ‘just one proof’ of evolution” and shows three pictures which depict: 1) a person with his hands over his eyes—“See no evidence”; 2) a person with his hands over his ears—“Hear no evidence”; and 3) someone quoting Scripture—“Spout Bible verses ’till the proof goes away”.<sup>3</sup> Similarly, a picture doing the rounds shows a young man with his fingers in his ears and his eyes tightly shut. Entitled “Creationists”, the caption reads: “I’m right, you’re wrong. La-la-la-la-la-la-la I can’t hear you!”<sup>4</sup> One more example parodies the creationist position as follows: “The Scientific Method: Here are the facts. What conclusions can we draw from them?” versus “The Creationist Method: Here’s the conclusion. What facts can we find to support it?”<sup>5</sup> Again, we ask if there can be any credibility for Christians who deny evolution in this age of reason and science.

On a personal note, it was part way through my university studies of zoology and geology that I realised the need to investigate this crucial subject. Although as a child I had accepted Genesis as simple history, at seventeen I embraced the idea that God had used evolution. Two years later, I reached a crisis point in my faith. I had to wrestle with many questions. Was the evolutionary view of things wrong? If not, did this mean that the Genesis record was wrong, or perhaps it meant something very different from what it appeared to say?<sup>6</sup> In other words, I was confronted by the possibility that the Creation and subsequent events in Genesis 1–11 had not been historical events as a plain reading of Genesis seemed to indicate. But if Genesis could not be trusted as historically reliable, I thought to myself, how could Christianity itself be defended

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3 Source: [me.me/i/creationists-when-given-the-just-one-proof-of-evolution-hear-5109961](http://me.me/i/creationists-when-given-the-just-one-proof-of-evolution-hear-5109961).

4 Source: [godlessliberals.com/index.php/religion/creationists-im-right-youre-wrong-la-la-la-la-la-la-i-cant-hear-you](http://godlessliberals.com/index.php/religion/creationists-im-right-youre-wrong-la-la-la-la-la-la-i-cant-hear-you).

5 Source: [edwardtabinski.us/creationism/intelligent-design-to-natural-selection.html](http://edwardtabinski.us/creationism/intelligent-design-to-natural-selection.html).

6 Or perhaps both evolution and Genesis were wrong; at that time, I came to the view that both could not be right at the same time.

logically? Through God's grace, my own story did not end in spiritual shipwreck, but I have never forgotten the uncertainty and anxiety of that time of wrestling about origins.

### Keeping faith in an age of tolerance

Ours is an age in which people put a high premium on tolerance. Ironically, the demand that people be tolerant is fast becoming a sort of a secular commandment. Failure to tolerate another person's opinion, behaviour or lifestyle choice is a cardinal sin in today's world. It seems that our obligation to tolerate those things is fast becoming a demand that we show our approval of those who practise them (Romans 1:32), or else keep silent. Woe betide those who violate this 'law' by disagreeing on any point, regardless of whether they do so on grounds of conscience or religious conviction. Those in breach of the new standards are deemed to be backward, bigoted, divisive, prejudiced, and probably all of the above.

Of course, if we wish to experience harmony in society it is vital that there be tolerance among human beings. In practice, however, passionate advocates of this 'new tolerance' are wholly intolerant of any Christian believers who dare affirm their belief in absolute truth. An anti-Christian double-standard is all too common in this secular age, and such fuzzy thinking about tolerance is very clearly observed in discussions about moral matters. But it is not just in society at large where this 'live and let live' cry goes up. We encounter it in the Christian Church too.

Nowhere, perhaps, is the plea for tolerance more often heard than in debates about origins.<sup>7</sup> Ever since evolutionary ideas started to be imbibed by the masses in the nineteenth century, a variety of attempts have been made to marry them with Genesis. The most persistent and dominant of these views has been 'theistic evolution' (TE); that is, 'planned evolution' or 'evolutionary creation'. Belief in TE involves a wholesale acceptance of the evolutionary worldview of origins—simply put, God used evolution.

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<sup>7</sup> A recent example is: John James, The age of the earth: a plea for geo-chronological non-dogmatism, *Foundations* 71:39–51, Autumn 2016. *Foundations* is a publication of the UK organisation *Affinity* (gospel churches in partnership).

## 2. Clearly seen?

### ***Evolution and the attributes of God***

If you spent a couple of hours in a town or city, asking passers-by, ‘How did the Earth come into being?’ and ‘Where did life come from?’ you would receive a variety of responses, no doubt. Among those prepared to give a serious answer, many would confidently claim that it was through some sort of evolutionary process. If you pressed them further, though, most would be very hazy on the details. Sadly, few would be prepared to profess unashamedly, “In the beginning, God created...” (Genesis 1:1).

At a glance, the difference between these two views would seem to revolve around a Person. Either, everything exists (you and me included) through *a wholly unknown process*—cosmic, geologic, chemical and biological evolution—or else, everything exists by virtue of *a holy unknown process*—the acts of God during six literal days of Creation.<sup>3</sup> Of course, the point of theistic evolution (TE) is that it purports to be a sensible middle way between these two very different views. Instead of evolution being impersonal, God was behind the scenes. Either he set up the universe in such a way that evolution would take place on its own, or he was actually guiding evolution. Either way, the question we must ask is whether or not this ‘happy medium’ can be defended in the light of Scripture.

In this chapter we will be asking whether our understanding of origins does justice to the character of God. The Bible has a great deal to say about God’s attributes, most of them a reflection of his Creatorship. Scripture teaches that these things are revealed in what has been made. If so, is the doctrine of TE in harmony with these facts?

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3 Words in italics courtesy of Arthur Francis Green, personal communication, April 2013.

### The Bible begins with God

For Christians who are serious about the teaching of Scripture, evading the role of the Creator in our consideration of creation is to be guilty of missing the main point. To read Genesis 1 is to be confronted with God, before anything else. It is critical that we avoid fudging the plain meaning of those words in order to harmonise them with our chosen origins scheme. Otherwise we are in grave danger of distancing God the Creator from what he has made, however sincere our intentions might be.

No amount of ducking and weaving can avoid the knock-out punch of the Bible's divine introduction, "In the beginning, God." The doctrine of creation begins with God. His name (*'ē-lō-hîm*) is actually the third word in the Hebrew text of Genesis 1. It follows, then, that Christians who desire to glorify God and to love him heart and soul (Deuteronomy 6:5) will be eager to highlight God's precedence—his priority and superiority above and beyond his created works. In advocating this fervent love for God, Scripture is not endorsing emotionalism, something that bypasses the intellect. Absolutely not, for Jesus emphasised that this love should involve "all your mind" (Mark 12:30).

God's qualities, his various attributes and characteristics, are "clearly perceived" through the things he has made; so says the Apostle Paul (Romans 1:20). From a consideration of the world around us, we can learn what God is like. We can reach certain inescapable conclusions about the One responsible for this universe. Without doubt, he is a being of immense power, unfathomable knowledge and amazing benevolence—he is a great God and a good God. Therefore, according to Paul, to deny the blatant fact of God's existence is inexcusable. According to Scripture, there is no fundamental problem with professing atheists' ability to see this, for God's attributes are clearly perceived. Not only does their wilful denial of God mean that they are "without excuse", Scripture unapologetically describes them as foolish and corrupt (Psalm 14:1, 53:1).

If the Creator God is so conspicuous and the whole creation reveals him so clearly, we Christians must take great care not to obscure people's view of him through our speculations. We must not violate any of his

attributes by a wrong approach to explaining “the things that have been made” (Romans 1:20).

## Attributes of the Creator God

What kind of God does Scripture reveal to us? What characteristics of the Creator do we *clearly* discern from contemplating the world around us? The Bible teaches that God is perfect in goodness, that nothing is too difficult for him and that he possesses infinite knowledge—that is, he is ‘omnibenevolent’, ‘omnipotent’ and ‘omniscient’ respectively. It is attributes such as these which, according to Paul, have been manifest for all to see, “ever since the creation of the world” (Romans 1:20). But does the doctrine of TE properly reveal those attributes?

Quite obviously, to do justice to this hugely important subject would require a book-length answer and there are excellent resources available for those who wish to pursue just that.<sup>4,5</sup> For our purposes, we must limit ourselves to rehearsing a checklist of just some of God’s attributes, those which ought to be obvious from a contemplation of his creaturely works.<sup>6</sup> In each case, we will cite a few pertinent verses from the treasure trove of such references in the Bible. Doing so, we will be in a position to compare the relative merits of TE and historic special creation.

### HIS GOODNESS

Firstly, we will make mention of the goodness of God. His benevolence is one of the grand themes of Scripture and is established in numerous places; for instance, “Oh give thanks to the LORD, for he is good; for his steadfast love endures forever!” (1 Chronicles 16:34, Psalm 106:1). Such is the superlative quality of God’s goodness that he invites people to sample

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4 James I. Packer, *Knowing God* (London, UK: Intervarsity Press, 1973); this classic on the subject of God’s attributes continues to be reprinted to the present day.

5 R. C. Sproul, *Discovering the God Who Is: His character and being, His power and personality* (Ventura, CA: Regal, 2007). Originally published in 1977 as *One Holy Passion* (Thomas Nelson Publishers), then in 1995 under the title, *The Character of God* (Servant Publications).

6 Not all important attributes of God are discussed in what follows because, arguably, they are not obviously discernible in what he has made; for example, his eternal nature.