

Reading the Bible after Darwin

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Creation and Evolution are two serious concepts for addressing the key issues of how the world came to be. At the simplest level this is a matter of mechanics, the ways in which material substances develop into planet earth. At a deeper level, however, it is an ontological issue, the question of how Being itself comes into existence; for the bottom line is not matter as such but how inert materials acquire energy to grow and change and make new forms. In this area of enquiry, which is foundational for the human condition, religion and science act as parallel explanatory tools and, most recently, have been set up as opposing and mutually exclusive approaches – creationism versus evolutionary theory.

Basic Issues

In this debate the creationist perspective stresses a literal reading of the biblical text, a form of theological anthropology, a theocratic worldview. The universe is within the authoritative control of a divine being; human beings are the agents of the divine and forge a bridgehead between nature and God. This approach shapes the way in which biblical material is read and used. The text of Genesis, for example, is said to show the possible age of the planet – a claim based on the way in which the Old Testament text uses numbers to structure its own literary universe. In Genesis, chapter 5, for instance, the stages of early human existence are put into an orderly progression using numbers of years of life to create a chain of genealogical referents. Such numerical calculations have sometimes been taken literally and thus the overall life-span of the world has been measured. However, it should be noted that the biblical world used numbers both in a literal sense of the chronological movement of time and, at the same time, as a symbolic element. The seven days of creation in Genesis 1 give rise to a sense of a perfect or heavenly number and thus to created matter as capable of perfection since it has an ultimate goal which can be attained. When the

deity 'rests' in Genesis 2:2 it is because all is now complete and harmonious rather than that a total of seven has been reached.

The evolutionary approach, meanwhile, can also take a literal reading of the text, but in order to deny that the biblical material makes sense. Empirical, scientific work shows that life came about differently from the ordered and contained event described at the start of Genesis; there was no one-off creative event which produced the fullness of species, rather an 'organic' process of development of life forms occurred. As environments changed through successive heating up and cooling down of the earth's surface so also original species changed form to survive in new conditions. Rather than an absolutist answer to how life came to be this viewpoint offers a relativist approach in which life evolved according to temporal and spatial constraints. There is no one point in time when everything can be said to be complete and having the fullness of all life forms. Human beings are part of this gradual development of life and in fact come along late in the history of the planet. In this setting humanity is no more than part of a 'chain of being' and has no inevitable ascendancy over other life forms.

A major resource for the evolutionary thesis is found in the work of Charles Darwin, both in his exploratory voyages and in his writing on "The Origin of Species". Darwin's theories contrasted with key Christian teaching of his time, both with regard to the possible age of the planet and to the place of homo sapiens within it – viewpoints which were said to be in line with biblical material. Darwin himself had an ambivalent attitude to the institutional religion of his day and was not a churchgoer in any real sense, even though he had at first been supported in his researches by those who were practitioners of religion. Yet Darwin himself never stated that religion was incompatible with his biological theories, only that he himself could not equate what he took to be biblical religious views with his own exploratory observations.

It is easy enough to make a simple transition from Darwin's own time to the 21st century and to claim that the same division between religion and science is found in both eras but caution should be taken here. Darwin's life and work was carried out within the religious and social culture of Victorian Britain and the frame which gave it its particular shape is not directly transferable to another time period. When the public acrimony between Darwin and his critics is moved across to the opposition between Bible and Science today it cannot be an exact copy of the time of Darwin. Even on the

surface level it is easy to see that the impact of research at a time when the material is completely fresh must be different, in detail, from a time when the original theories have been in use for some time and have been refined and adjusted by many generations of scientific investigation. Equally, the nature of religious belief and praxis today is different precisely because it is not the 19th century any more. The development of historical criticism, for instance, has shown the great age and gradual development of biblical books. Such cultural approaches to biblical commentary rest fairly satisfactorily alongside a scientific notion of evolution both of life and of human knowledge and understanding about it. Both religion and science have moved on since then. The Punch cartoons, for instance, which caricature the idea that humans are connected with the ‘great apes’ are no longer exactly apposite since life sciences have shown homo sapiens to be a separate species, even if it is one which shares great similarities with some of the primate species.

Current Perspectives

So what of the 21st century, in the period of Darwin’s anniversary? What is the general context of current debates? We are much more aware of the complexity of planet earth as a star within a galaxy, on the one hand. On the other, religion is now viewed by writers such as Richard Dawkins as a form of primitive culture which is unhelpful and oppressive. Belief can be viewed as a poor substitute for the active search of human reason for understanding. The ‘God of the gaps’, a convenient figure for explaining what appears irrational until a proper explanation is achieved, is a weak character, a cipher of human language. At the same time, the image of the deity in the Christian Bible has come under attack as over-human. The concept of a personal God, whose actions are those of a single male person, raises issues about inclusivity and the endorsement of human male dominance. In European history the alignment of Christian systems and hierarchies with political regimes has been a matter for criticism – the most obvious being the period of the Enlightenment and the French Revolution.

It can be argued that, since God is by definition not human and beyond human knowledge, all religious language is ‘only’ metaphorical. But, equally, metaphors are powerful tools to convey meaning and more can be transferred than the inner symbolism. If God is father, for instance, and Christ is son, and the link between them is ‘begetting’ and not making, does not that result in an intensely masculine transcendent? It is in such a

framework that modern debates have their origins. It is within these borders that modern debates find their meaning.

The Language Issue

It is important to remember that all discussions are shaped by the linguistic tools used in them. Language is not a neutral category but is a value-laden reality. The background to modern examinations of religion and science is one which stresses the higher significance of scientific prose as against the imprecision of poetic metaphors such as is found in biblical narratives. The first linguistic style, it might be thought, is an approximation to external reality, aiming to describe exactly what is, and thus a measure of material Truth. Poetic metaphor seeks to express one reality in the terms of a completely different other, leaving the reader to guess at the writer's meaning and so adding in extra meaning. This process can easily lead the reader astray from Truth, when this term is understood to mean a single ultimate verifiable statement.

Yet Stephen Prickett has shown that all narratives share the fact of being shaped by the bias of their writers.¹ Scientific genres are no different in this aspect from those of other literary forms. Observation may indicate both similarities and differences between individual examples of a common life form and it may be possible to link this with the fact that a common ancestry leads to variants in progeny when regional settings are taken into account. It is a further step, though, to move on to suggest an over-arching theory as to how and why this phenomenon can be accounted for. This is not to say that such a move is necessarily false but only that it is a process which shares with other literary styles the fact that it is shaped according to the imprint of the human mind which has conceived it. Both creation and evolution texts are instances of the meta-narrative perspective on human affairs and world existence in that both suggest, though differently, that the world can validly be viewed as an organic whole in which all life forms share underlying dependence on material conditions such as the presence of water and dry land.

The Genesis Account

The essential function of both narratives, of science and religion, is to examine the fact of existence, since that is the state that humans clearly experience. What is speculative is how and why life came to be and took the

¹ S. Prickett, *Narrative, Science and Religion* (Cambridge: CUP, 2002).

forms we now see around us. If we turn to Genesis 1—2:4 we can see some similar interests at work as are found in evolutionary theory. There is an ordering approach being pursued, in which creation occurs through a logical progression from original chaos to nested environments. Each major type of species has its own sphere of operation. There is inter-activity between the parts and the whole; the movements of stars and planets create seasonal patterns within which life develops. The sun and the moon ‘rule’ over night and day, for example. The narrative voice is a human one which implies it can access divine speech. Human beings are the climax of the chain of life and have an over-arching role, making them one with divine authority (Gen. 1:26-28). The biblical text, like evolutionary theory, wants to explore the purpose of life as it emerges and to understand its ultimate goal.

How far, though, is the biblical material in fact in synchrony with evolutionary narratives? A key player in both accounts is the importance of seeing that life forms are ordered; evolutionary accounts cover this aspect in great detail, recounting taxonomies of species and giving names to each group and sub-group. The biblical world is less detailed but naming is a central part of humanity’s role in Genesis chapter 2. In both perspectives creatures emerge to occupy particular spaces and sites within the cosmos and there is a general parallelism between birds of the air, fish of the sea and beasts of the land in both. The recent programme on BBC, ‘Life’, indeed used these categories to shape its sessions, expanding them to include reptiles (not absent from the Bible) and insects, as well as other species such as deep sea invertebrates and the earth’s vegetation. In both religion and science inter-activity within the cosmos, the cycles of the planets, the cycles of clouds and rain, are viewed as vitally important to the maintenance of life.

The position of the narrative voice, which both in film and literature describes the planet to us, must also be examined. This is not directly a divine voice in Genesis, but is mediated through a human writer; equally, in nature films it is a fellow human being who directs the viewer’s gaze. Evolutionary material may emphasise the continuity between humans and other mammals but the account is inevitably still a human debate, reflecting a human knowledge and vantage point: how we relate to the planet and its species, how they react to us. Contemporary investigation is only too aware of the impact of humanity on resources and environments and stresses the responsibility which human beings have for the fate to the world and its inhabitants of all kinds. Meanwhile Psalm 72, for example, links the concept of a just social leader with the exuberant fertility of the countryside.

This approach, which stresses human responsibility, can be contrasted with a traditional Christian commentary on Genesis in which human beings are seen as the only species to have contact with the divine in any self-conscious manner, with ‘man’ as the centre of the universe. The key term here is that of ‘dominion’; the text states that the deity is understood to have created humans to have this role at the apex of creation – a view which may permit humans to grasp at shared resources and prioritise human control of plants and animals. Yet the text does not say that humans should make other species subordinate to them. Rather the picture of original creation is one in which all life forms are valuable. All are blessed and made fruitful, an image of peace and mutuality which can be seen, for instance, in Isaiah 11, where the holy mountain garden involves a shared respect among all creatures for each other’s right to life. Dominion could as easily be translated ‘steward’ according to Luise Schotroff.² Moreover, it is violence which is the flawed behaviour commented on in Genesis 4-6. Scholars such as Schotroff are engaged in the investigation of the biblical material, using a hermeneutics of ecology.

The Human Impact

The concept which evolutionary thought leaves out is, of course, that of humanity as made in a divine image. If this is linked to a diffidence regarding the way in which humans have acted in modern industrial society and which could be viewed as mutilation of the living world, seen in the current fierce debates over global warming and the disappearance of habitats and species, it is still relevant to address the God issue since some generic, positive guidelines may in fact be derived from the biblical text. If the divine creative act is profiled as positive, with God brooding joyfully over the coming to birth of latent energies, then surely any human copying of the transcendent should echo that careful nurturing care. It is, perhaps, not the presence of God which brings about aggression and permits human seizure of nature for its own ends but that part of human nature which is left free to find its own meaning.

Human acts must always carry the risk of danger since we are finite, temporally- bound creatures who cannot foresee all the outcomes of our choices before we enact them. Both positive and negative energies are fed by

² L. Schotroff, ‘The Creation Narrative: Genesis 1:1-2:4,’ in *A Feminist Companion to Genesis* ed. A. Brenner (Sheffield Academic Press, 1997).

human decisions. But we cannot in each case be sure which action will lead to the strengthening of which energy. Which leads to the final question asked by both creation and evolution narratives, why are we here, why is the cosmos and its atoms and molecules here? Neither religion nor science can fully answer that question; both can only point to the mystery at the heart of the universe, its energy exploding outwards and invoke a human word – ‘infinity’. To us the universe is infinite since all our scientific research has not yet found closure to the life forces, to energy itself. Nor can we travel very far within what we have discovered in space since such journeying exceeds a human life span by many light years.

Scientific infinity is a term for what we do not fully understand but may yet come to know better. Religious infinity is a term which describes life in its fullest form, present and powerful, beyond participation in terms of materialism while yet accessible to intellect and encounters outside of physical properties. Some contemporary popular science speaks of Gaia and her renewable energy; mother earth off-setting human damage. The Bible addresses itself to a nurturing, creative earth, in Genesis 1:11 but, beyond that, to an ultimate transcendent sphere of existence. At the same time the biblical approach has humanity at its heart; it does assume the ongoing presence of ‘us’. Scientific reflection, however, can point out that the planet could perhaps have a future beyond human affairs, after we have perished as a result of our own ways of engaging the earth and its resources.

Conclusions

Is reading the Bible after Darwin a positive exercise, then? If one effect of Darwinian thought is to cause wonder and humility among human beings at the immense complexity and finely-tuned nature of planet earth then that can certainly be paralleled from biblical responses to nature. Job 38—42, for example, asserts that humans can only touch the surface of natural knowledge and should be less quick to suggest better ways of managing cosmic affairs. God is the one who can rejoice in all created energy, even that of a fierce and violent creature such as Leviathan. Meanwhile the great creation Psalm 103(4) catalogues the whole creative process and its separate parts, with their own logical order, before turning to the heart of the matter. It is the life force from the deity which keeps all in being. ‘Breathe forth your spirit’ and all live; ‘withdraw that spirit’ and all die; breathe forth again and the ‘face of the earth is renewed’.

Such perspectives endorse the need for human responsibility for our cosmic 'footprint' and stress that we should take what we need and not whatever can be grasped, from planetary resources. It can be argued that the biblical word *Tob* is the bottom line here. It is what the deity sees in the created world and carries a much stronger layer of meaning than that of the English word 'good'. The concept of *Tob* undergirds all the insights of Genesis 1 with regard to creation. It emphasises the holistic profile of life and implies the eternal stability which keeps energy flowing. It reflects the essential suitability of life itself to be and offers order as the ultimate face of space and time, even when that order is not visible to human intellect. In this term, it can be argued, human beings find the key to the biblical image of humanity and of the wider world as 'in the image of God'.