

Evolution notes for Matters of Life and Death podcast

These are highly contested and controversial issues amongst Bible-believing, faithful and committed Christians. They have also become highly polarised and toxic areas of dispute and recrimination.

Christians on different sides of the debate have accused their brothers and sisters of betrayal, of disobedience to the teaching of the Scriptures, of cowardly acquiescence in the atheistic spirit of the age, or of intellectual dishonesty, of simplistic biblical interpretation, of scientific ignorance, of failure to grapple with overwhelming scientific evidence and so on.

Therefore we first need to recognise the pain, and broken relationships that these divisions have caused in the past and second, we need to have a fresh commitment to discuss these issue in an authentically Christ-like way. This means:

- a) Look for areas of common agreement
- b) Treat those who differ with us with respect and courtesy
- c) Listen carefully to what others say – do not caricature or demean other’s views
- d) Humbly consider how our own opinions and convictions may be less than fully accurate or balanced
- e) Be prepared to admit where there are areas of uncertainty or doubt in our own understanding
- f) Express our own beliefs graciously and gently - ‘gentleness and respect’

What we can all agree on:

1. God is the creator of the cosmos. He holds it in existence in every moment and in his providential care he is intimately involved in every aspect of the cosmos, every atom of the planet and every organism in the biological world.
2. Human beings are created by God and are unique within the entire biological world as created in his image and specially formed to reflect God’s character and being. We are all uniquely valuable and have unique meaning, purpose and dignity.
3. Human beings are made of out the dust like all other organisms and we share a close biological likeness with other organisms, whilst at the same time being unique amongst all other species on the planet.
4. All human beings are fallen and contaminated by evil and we all need the supernatural grace and forgiveness of God to be restored and made into a ‘new creation’ fit for the presence of God and for participation in the new heaven and new earth.
5. The Bible is the inspired Word of God which reveals the truth about God, about humanity and about the world. Yet our human interpretations of the Biblical text are not infallible and we need to study the Bible with humility, together with other faithful Christians, prepared to open our minds to new truths that the Holy Spirit may reveal to us.
6. Scientific enquiry carried out with honesty, integrity, transparency and humility is capable of uncovering true and reliable information about the natural world, but genuine scientific theories are inherently provisional and open to falsification through accumulation of new data and development of new hypotheses.

We will look in turn at 5 fundamental issues on the origins of humanity that have divided Christians:

1. The age of the earth and universe

Young earth and universe – The earth and entire universe are a few thousand years old. This view is based almost entirely on a literalistic interpretation of the dates in Genesis, the days of creation and the possible impact of a worldwide Flood.

Problems: Some Biblical scholars argue that the literalistic interpretation of Genesis dating, such as each 'day' representing a literal 24 hour period, only emerged in the early modern period, and was a reflection of a new emerging mechanistic understanding of reality. (Archbishop Ussher in the 17th Century calculated that the world was created on a Sunday in October 4004 BC). Young earth dating implies catastrophic errors in the essentials of astronomy, physics, geology, material sciences, geography, technology etc etc. If this dating is correct then almost all modern scientific and technological developments must be catastrophically inaccurate, misleading and unreliable.

Old earth and universe – overwhelming converging scientific evidence from many different sources are in favour. Old earth dating is consistent with the extraordinary success of modern science and technology. Some ancient theologians, such as Augustine, did not accept a literalistic interpretation of the days of creation.

Problems: Young earth creationists argue that the constancy of physical variables cannot be assumed over time and claim that there are many anomalous findings in geology and paleontology which don't fit within old earth dating.

2. The origin of species - common descent versus divine 'special creation' of multiple separate species

Common descent – supported by geological and genetic evidence for common descent, including a common genetic code for all life on earth and common body plans.

Problems: Lack of direct evidence of intermediate forms. Problem of the origin of life, the origin of the genetic code, the origin of complex biological information, cell biology, multicellular organisms etc. Common descent requires an interpretation of Genesis and other scriptures which encompasses the gradual evolution of species and the presence of non-human hominid populations.

Divine 'special creation' of multiple separate species – provides explanation for origin of multiple species, including origin of life, genetic code, cell biology, multicellular organisms etc.

Problems: Why are 99.9% of all species currently extinct? Why might God choose to individually create millions of different species of beetles, for example? Does God create each new species *ex nihilo*, or out of an existing species? Problem of 'God of the gaps'.

3. The mechanism of selection and speciation – natural selection, divine intervention or other unknown mechanisms

Natural selection – dominant widely accepted scientific theory at present. Described by Monod as 'chance and necessity'. From a theological perspective, natural selection can be understood as undergirded by God's providential ordering of individual environmental, genetic and 'coincidental' selection pressures within the framework of ordered regularities or 'natural laws' which reflect God's 'normal' activities in the cosmos.

Problems: Many current evolutionary scientists recognise problems with neo-Darwinian natural selection and look for other mechanisms which may underlie selection. Problem of an infinite number of ‘just so’ stories that can be invented to explain any one historical evolutionary event. How can natural selection explain unique human characteristics such as rationality, morality, creativity, the origins of language, extreme mathematical and scientific abilities, quest for meaning, awareness of God, ability to be redeemed etc? Problem of human and animal suffering resulting from genetic mutations. Difficulty of aligning natural selection with biblical creation passages.

Divine intervention – explains speciation as the result of multiple, scientifically inexplicable, supernatural interventions into the natural order. Provides an explanation for the origin of life, for the genetic code, biological information, for the complexities of cell biology, multicellular organisms etc.

Problems: As above. Why are 99.9% of all species currently extinct? Why might God choose to individually create millions of different species of beetles, for example? Why is there such a high degree of genetic homology between related species? Problem of ‘God of the gaps’.

4. The origin of Homo Sapiens – original couple or population of hominids

Original couple: Some genetic evidence is claimed in support, such as ‘mitochondrial Eve’. Fits with traditional understanding of Genesis 1-3 and related biblical passages.

Problems: It is argued that current genetic evidence from human beings around the world is incompatible with origin from a single couple and suggests a population of hominids from which Homo Sapiens emerged gradually and which was never less than 1000 individuals. However population genetics and evolutionary biology continues to develop and change rapidly so new evidence and theories are likely to continue to emerge.

Population of hominids: Fits with current genetic evidence obtained from human individuals around the world.

Problems: Fossil evidence about hominids is very limited and has undergone frequent reinterpretation and re-analysis as new scientific discoveries are made.

5. Space-time historical Fall – Yes or No

Space-time historical Fall: Explains the origin of human and ‘natural evil’ as the result of a single event. Explains human suffering as a result of disease and genetic mutations. Fits with orthodox biblical interpretation over 2000 years.

Problems: Lack of genetic evidence to support a historical Adam and Eve (as above). Evidence of animal predation, injury, illness and death occurring for millions of years prior to the emergence of humanity.

No space-time historical Fall: Fits with conventional neo-Darwinian thinking and much secular philosophy.

Problems: Why are human beings fallen, contaminated and capable of horrendous evil? Why is there the apparent reality of ‘natural evil’ and human suffering as a result of genetic mutations? Requires new interpretations of Genesis and other biblical passages which seem to imply that there was a space-time historical Fall, and that it had cosmic consequences.

God’s providential rule of his creation

A fundamental Biblical teaching is that God’s providential and loving rule over his creation extends to the most minute details. But there are different understandings about how that rule is carried out. Is God’s primary rule exerted through ‘secondary causes’ – for example through regularities of the natural order combined with extremely unlikely and improbable ‘natural’ events which achieve his special purposes? Or

does God continually intervene to rearrange details of the creation in ways which are completely out-with any natural explanation, and intended to provide persuasive evidence of his supernatural existence to unbelievers? There are many examples of both phenomena in the biblical text. So the question is whether the way that God chose to create human beings was principally using the first process or using the second process, or both? And how certain can we be about our conclusions?

My personal conclusions are:

1. There are profound and unavoidable limitations in our scientific abilities to reconstruct the unique history of life on earth, and it seems likely that we will never be able to explain precisely why particular species came into existence at particular times and geographic places, including precisely how Homo Sapiens emerged on the planet. Every historical evolutionary event is non-reproducible. Evolutionary theories cannot be directly tested, and they are non-falsifiable. Therefore they come into a different category from most scientific theories which can be tested repeatedly by different scientists using different experiments, and hence are open in principle to falsification.

2. There are inevitable and unavoidable limitations in our biblical and theological understanding of the precise mechanisms by which God exerts his providential rule over creation, in the divine act of creation, and in the origin and nature of evil. *“What modern physics has taught us is that not only is reality stranger than we used to think, it is stranger than we can think...”* (John Polkinghorne). If this is true of physics, what about theology? It may well be that we are not intended to understand the precise details concerning these realities. *“The secret things belong to the LORD our God, but the things that are revealed belong to us and to our children forever, that we may do all the words of this law.”* Deuteronomy 29:29

3. I personally am drawn to an old earth compared to a young earth, and to common descent compared to separate supernatural intervention in the creation *ex nihilo* of hundreds of millions of now extinct species. However I find neo-Darwinian selection mechanisms to be both scientifically and theologically implausible and I do not wish to jettison a historical Adam and Eve and a space-time historical Fall, which have been the consistent teaching of orthodox biblical Christians for 2000 years, on the basis of rapidly shifting and developing scientific understandings. I have deep respect for the wisdom and knowledge of many of my Christian brothers and sisters who have come to alternative conclusions on these problematic issues. I personally recommend a stance of “intelligent uncertainty”, a focus on the central doctrines of creation, including the wonder and uniqueness of humanity made in God’s image, the reality of the profound fallenness of humanity, and continuing humble enquiry.

Augustine writing in 5th Century AD on *The Literal Meaning of Genesis*: “In matters that are so obscure and far beyond our vision, we find in Holy Scripture passages which can be interpreted in very different ways without prejudice to the faith we have received. In such cases, we should not rush in headlong and so firmly take our stand on one side that, if further progress in the search of truth justly undermines this position, we too fall with it. That would be to battle not for the teaching of Holy Scripture but for our own, wishing its teaching to conform to ours, whereas we ought to wish ours to conform to that of Sacred Scripture.”

Further reading

Four views on Creation, Evolution and Intelligent Design, Ham, Ross, Haarsma, Meyer, Zondervan
Theistic Evolution: a scientific, philosophical and theological critique Ed Moreland, Meyer et al, Crossway
Creation or Evolution: Do we have to choose? Denis Alexander, Lion Hudson
Adam and the Genome: Reading scripture after genetic science, Venema and McKnight, Baker
Uncommon Descent: Intellectuals who find Darwinism unconvincing, William Dembski, Wilmington

More resources at bethinking.org and johnwyatt.com

John Wyatt, August 2022