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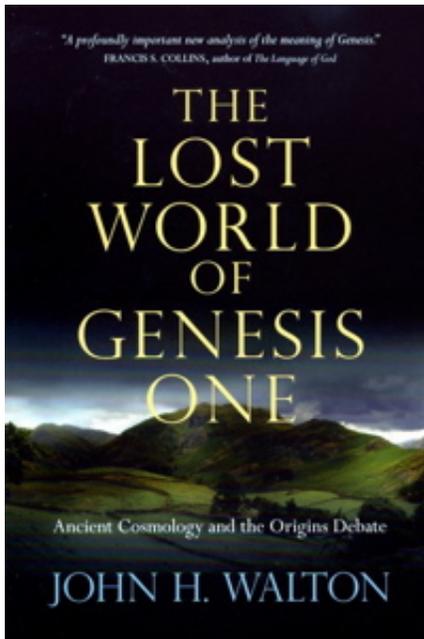
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January 30, 2011

The “Found” World of Genesis 1: Is Theistic Evolution a Meaningful Option for Seventh-day Adventists?

By Nicholas Miller (Department of Church History, SDA Theological Seminary, Andrews University)



Last weekend a scholar from Wheaton College, [Prof. John Walton](#), came to [Andrews University](#) to share his thoughts on the question of how [Genesis 1](#) (ESV) should be read and understood. The crux of his argument was a historical one, and thus worth discussing on this history blog. Walton is viewed in the larger evangelical community as a relatively conservative scholar who believes in the authority of Scripture in spiritual and moral matters, as well as in its claims of miracles and the supernatural. For those not at the event, a brief summary of his presentations and claims follows.

Prof. Walton’s Presentations and Ideas

On Friday night, Walton spoke to students and faculty in a lecture sponsored by the University and the Science Department. He dealt with the question of the general interpretive approach to the Old Testament. He argued that we can only understand the meaning of the stories in the Bible if we understand the worldview of its immediate intended audience. It was written to their worldview, not to that of the 21st century.

While its spiritual and moral messages were also intended for today, we should recognize, Walton argued, that its authority does not lie in its claims about the physical world and material reality. He claimed that the Bible makes no scientific claims, i.e., that its observations on the natural and physical world were no different than the existing worldview(s) of the surrounding cultures.

On Sabbath afternoon, Walton spoke to the Adventist Forum group, and applied this model to the issues of Genesis 1. He observed that on day one, God did not actually create light, but rather put it to the use or function of marking off periods of light and dark. From this insight, he posited that the Hebrew mind was actually concerned about the function of things, and not their material origins. He argued that this was the model of all the days of creation, and that while he could accept that they were seven literal days of time, as we know them today, that nothing was necessarily materially created on those days. Rather, the functions of all these items—the earth, the sea, the sky, plants, animals, and humans—were instituted, and the whole was inaugurated as a temple, or sanctuary for God.

What was Walton’s view on when plants, and animals, and humans were actually, materially created? He did not say in his presentations. He suggested that one cannot answer these questions from Genesis, as it was not written for that purpose. In the Q & A sessions that followed both presentations, and from his writings on the topic, it appears that Walton is very open to accepting most of the current scientific evolutionary story. He is not a classic theistic evolutionist, in that he believes that God intervened directly in the evolutionary process, certainly at the development of life, and probably at other critical steps. But

his model is essentially a modified version of theistic evolution, and very different from a traditional Adventist understanding of the creation account. Has he presented a package that should cause Adventists to reconsider their opposition to theistic evolution, or a meaningful modification of their seven-day, material creation model? I think not, for the following reasons.

Theology, Science, or Philosophy?

What can a historian contribute to this apparently theological/scientific account and discussion? Well, first, it is worth noting that the vast majority of the presentation on Friday night was neither theological or scientific, but philosophical and historical. Walton presented himself as an expert in Old Testament languages and literature, and as having a biochemist wife who helped guide him on matters of science. But he spent most of his time in neither Old Testament texts nor on scientific matters. Rather, he made claims about the nature of reality, the division between the natural and supernatural, and the implications of communication “word/act” theory—none of which appeared to be based on Old Testament texts nor on scientific studies or research.

He then took these “findings” from what appeared to be contemporary popular philosophy and communication theory, and applied them back to the Bible. He asserted that there were no “scientific claims” in the Bible and that “metaphysical claims” were outside the realm of science and nature because he appeared to rely on widely accepted modern definitions of these words and concepts, without asking whether they were accurate or not. Those familiar with the history of the philosophy of science know that the definition of science is highly contested. You will get a much different answer as to whether the Bible makes scientific claims, depending on which definition you use.

But Prof. Walton made no attempt to meaningfully define his technical terms. When he did provide a diagram of his philosophical view of the nature of reality and the relation between the natural and supernatural, it was a remarkably contemporary diagram. He rejected the notion that reality was like a pie, cut into pieces of natural and supernatural. Under this model—essentially a “God of the gaps” view—the more we discover about nature, the smaller the slivers of supernatural become.

Walton rather proposed that reality was like a layer cake, with a layer of “natural” world on bottom, and a layer of “supernatural” on top. We can explore all of the natural world, he proposed, and make all the discoveries we wish, and will never threaten the top layer, the supernatural, which is over all, and guides all. We are merely discovering the mechanisms and materials that the Creator uses to develop and guide his creation.

As Adventists, we would agree that scientific discoveries do not threaten God. Rather, it is the philosophy that is used to interpret the nature of these studies that is the problem. But what Walton overlooks is that the layer-cake model he proposes is essentially a version of German Philosopher Immanuel Kant’s divide between the *noumena* (supernatural world) and the *phenomena* (natural world). This divide provides part of the explanation of what has driven the sharp break we have in our world today between the disciplines of science, philosophy and theology.

It is this post-kantian model—that says there is no meaningful connection or bridge or integration between the natural and the supernatural—that lies at the base of many of the 20th century isms that have led to a devaluation of Scripture, including liberalism, scientism, materialism, and the formation of higher critical methods of Bible study. It is a model which certainly does not flow from the Bible, which envisions a much closer connection and overlap between the two realms. God, his existence, power, and eternal nature, can be seen in the creation argues Paul. (Rom. 1 & 2, ESV). The heavens declare the glory of God, the Psalmist tells us. (Ps. 19, ESV). Both Testaments paint the physical world as a place where angels walk with men, walking staffs break out into bloom, and burning bushes beckon us to remove our shoes and reflect upon the holy that surrounds us.

Their “lost” world or our modern world?

Walton seeks to uncover the “lost world of Genesis 1” (the title of Walton’s recent book). But it is remarkable how much the world that Walton “found” in Genesis reflects modern philosophical thought. He appears to have run afoul of the old historical pitfall of peering down the well of history and describing his own reflection at the bottom, or at least the reflection of the preferred worldview of our time.

Walton’s layer cake model bears striking resemblance to the NOMA model described by Stephen Jay Gould, the late Harvard University agnostic and evolutionary zealot. NOMA stands for “non-overlapping magisteria,” and is short hand for the idea that science and religion rule over two separate domains. The findings of one should not be allowed to shape, intrude, or define the other. Gould gave science rule over the physical, material world, and religion over the world of values, morals, and spiritual beliefs.

The problem with NOMA is, essentially, that it leaves no room for truly historical religions like Judaism and Christianity. These religions say that the supernatural has invaded, and will invade, the natural world from time to time. Indeed, Walton himself would not be willing to accept NOMA, because it would exclude all the miracles of the Bible, including Christ’s incarnation, miracles, and resurrection. Neither Walton nor his church is willing or wanting to go that far. Walton would seem to reserve his “layer-cake” model particularly for the early chapters of Genesis. In the New Testament, he would want to treat it much more like a “marble-cake,” (which he referred to in his talk) with the supernatural more obviously intruding into the natural world.

On the face of it, this approach to the different sections of the Bible appears inconsistent. But could Adventism afford to take Walton’s approach, even if they could swallow the inconsistency? I believe the answer is an unequivocal no. It is an answer based in part on the profound theological differences between Walton’s reformed tradition and the Adventist theological heritage, and it revolves around a core pillar of Adventist theology—the Great Controversy framework of history.

Theological Frameworks: Reformed versus Adventism/Arminianism

In nothing I write here do I wish to imply that I accept Prof. Walton as anything less than a sincere and believing Christian. But he comes from a different theological heritage than Adventism. In seeking to resolve the tensions and apparent conflicts between the Bible and science, the Reformed (Calvinistic) and Adventist heritages work with very different concerns about God.

The Reformed thinkers are most concerned with God’s sovereignty, and secondarily with his character of love. The Adventist/Arminian heritage is most concerned with God’s love and character, and secondarily with his sovereignty. This means that when faced with the dilemma between God’s sovereignty and human free will, the Calvinist will choose God’s sovereignty—even allowing God to be the author of evil and the damner of those with no choice but to sin. (Whether this is Walton’s personal position, I don’t know, but it is that of the majority of the community that he works within.)

Adventism, on the other hand, allows God’s sovereignty to be voluntarily limited by his respect for our free choice, because this is a clear manifestation of His character of love. Indeed, the whole Great Controversy theme is about God being willing to put His government on trial so that all beings will see that he acts justly, fairly, and most importantly, with love towards all.

How does this divide work out in approaches to Genesis 1? Well, the Calvinist who believes that God created most of humanity to damn them to everlasting torment in hell, will have no qualms with God creating through a process that requires death, i.e., evolution with its main mechanism of survival of the fittest. If Adventists, on the other hand, were to accept some form of theistic evolution, they would see their whole, defining theological framework of the Great Controversy basically splinter apart.

A God who would create through the use of sin and suffering is one who would not fair well even under imperfect human standards of fairness and kindness. The Bible goes out of its way to affirm that death came into the world through man's sin ([Rom. 5:12](#), ESV), and that even suffering and death in nature and the animal world is connected with the attempt to bring back fallen humanity. ([Rom. 8:18-21](#), ESV). The "good" that God saw throughout creation ([Gen. 1:4, 10, 12, 18, 21, 25, 31](#), ESV) teaches that death was not a part of it. Adventism cannot accept theistic evolution, or any variant of it that allows death on earth before Adam's sin, because it has staked its theological framework to the revelation of God's character of love in the Great Controversy history of the world.

One may be able to be a good Christian and fine Calvinist, and hold some version of theistic evolution. But that option is simply not open for Adventists. I'm not saying that all Adventists that believe in theistic evolution are not sincere Christians. Rather, I would say that they hold belief systems that are inherently in conflict, and they need to re-examine more closely the coherency of their beliefs about origins and the character of God. Is Walton's exclusive functionality view of Genesis a mess of pottage that would cause us to trade our birthright of the Great Controversy story of God's loving engagement with His created beings? I sincerely pray not.

Conclusion – Fairer Forums

In closing, I would express my concern about the nature and timing of these lectures. As a Christian university, we should be open to hearing and considering ideas that we may not agree with. I have no trouble with having Prof. Walton being on our campus and lecturing. But I do have concerns about the format that was put into place for the presentations. They were basically two, one hour lectures, with a period of half an hour or so for Q & A. No single questioner had the time or opportunity to seriously engage with or respond to Prof. Walton's claims, and his argument was thus not seriously or meaningfully challenged in systematic way.

When the University sponsors a Friday night lecture, for students, with one main speaker, it creates the appearance that the University is endorsing that speaker in some way. It would have been much better had one or two persons been given the opportunity to respond at some time and length to Prof. Walton's views. Some may object to having our guests subjected to critique, and yet this is the nature of a university after all. We should listen to opposing views, but those that bring them, should be willing to listen in return. There are a number of persons who could have provided thoughtful, polite, respectful, but meaningful critiques.

The decision to privilege Dr. Walton's presentation on a special, Friday evening program was, I believe, short-sighted, especially in light of other controversies on other Adventist campuses concerning this very topic. I believe that our scientists at Andrews are generally faithful supporters of Biblical creation, but programs like this can raise the appearance that this is not the case. I have expressed my hope to the leadership of the Science Department, and now do so more broadly, that we can develop a greater dialogue on campus between our departments of science and theology. This hopefully will cause future programs on science and religion—and I hope that many will occur—to have greater balance and a more meaningful exchange on these important ideas.

Posted by [Nicholas Miller](#) on January 30, 2011 in [Archaeology](#), [Biblical Backgrounds](#), [Book Review](#), [Philosophy of History](#), [Science and Theology](#) | [Permalink](#)

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I'm glad you took the time to put together this response. I agree that some more balance would have been nice -- I'd liked to have seen

15+ minutes for Dr. Gane to give a prepared response, separate from the Q&A.

Two short points and one long-winded one:

- 1) I'm not sure I find the delineation between philosophy and theology as salient as you do. Theology is nothing until hermeneutic/epistemological concerns of all flavors are taken into account.
- 2) Be careful not to oversimplify NOMA. I haven't read Gould on the matter, but I've heard that his view is much closer to the "marble cake" than the oft-repeated/quoted version that has become so popular.
- 3) On a more personal note, I want to try and share what this whole discussion looks like through the eyes of a young scientist.

I cannot ask you to modify your interpretation of scripture -- I am an out-group critic, and can't even touch the question of what God said and what He meant competently. Needless to say I prefer Walton's model, though -- not because of his overwhelming historical arguments (which I cannot judge the quality of beyond feeling that he tells a very nice "just so" story) but because I know that science cannot bend on this issue without a VERY good reason to do so.

So I want to offer a word of caution, a heuristic that can help communication: Always, ALWAYS remember that every time you say theistic evolution (or, worse, the big bang - which I realize you did not mention) is incompatible with true Adventism, you are telling students who have faith in the scientific community that they should not be Adventist or even consider it. If our parents are divorced, we'll choose the one we trust most. And, frankly, science almost by definition takes epistemological difficulties more seriously than any other discipline, *especially* religion (to generalize beyond Biblical scholarship).

Many of us, no matter how Kuhnian or postmodern or otherwise glass-darkly-emphasizing we become, trust the hermeneutics of science an order of magnitude more than that of theology. It's not that theology can't inform science in principle -- but it needs a LOT of weight if it's going to disprove the proven, or make an otherwise unlikely alternate hypothesis the more plausible option (and no young-life creationist hypothesis succeeds in explaining even a moderate amount of the data, so to use the Bible to bolster it one's hermeneutics must be nearly *incontrovertible*, with very strong consensus).

So usually, when science finally speaks with confidence, we expect religion to say "oh, I guess I read that wrong. God must have meant something else," just like they did with heliocentrism. Yes, then we expect the hermeneutic context to become "contemporary," if only on certain issues, because theology does not operate in a vacuum. When religion does not respond to science with humility, we must choose: the wide-spread consensus of science, or the bickerings of the humanities over ancient myths that are at least half (if not fully) the product of human culture and imagination. For many, it's a no brainer.

This choice of phrasing does not do conservative theologians or their discipline justice, of course. But it is the mindset you face, amongst many students here at Andrews, not to even mention non-Adventist academia. Tread carefully. **Anti-evolutionism is a much bigger stumbling block among young scientists than evolution itself.**

Again I'm not so much asking that you change your mind, as pointing out that all this should be kept in mind while communicating with the Other.

Posted by: [Eric "Siggy" Scott](#) | [January 31, 2011 at 10:12 PM](#)

Dear Eric,

Thank you for your thoughtful and articulate response. This is the kind of dialogue I was hoping to generate, and I appreciate your sharing your perspectives very much. Just to address your three main points:

- 1) I agree that theology and epistemology are tightly connected. I was not taking Prof. Walton to task for dealing with epistemology, but rather for dealing with it indirectly and implicitly and thus, in my opinion, not adequately. What we had was a lecture primarily on epistemology and the philosophy of science and religion, but where much of the real work such a lecture should involved, e.g., defining the basic terms "science" and "metaphysics" was not done. I feel we had pressed on us a particular philosophical construct based on modernist assumptions and perspectives, but it was presented as though this framework somehow flowed from the worldview that was found in the Old Testament. But Friday night's presentation was almost devoid of reference to actual Old Testament texts. Prof. Walton certainly did not make the case that his interpretive framework flowed, either explicitly or implicitly from the OT. Perhaps he can make that case, but he simply did not do it in his presentations to us.
- 2) I think I have Gould right, as I have read him on NOMA. His book "Rock of Ages" clearly sets out his position, and those interested can check there to see that I accurately reflect his position. I have published a critique of Gould's book that is part of a larger article on creation and intelligent design should anyone be interested in further reading on the topic.
- 3) Your final point is your most profound, and probably what we (not just you and I, but the theology and science departments) would

find most productive in discussing. What is the scientific enterprise? Does it contain the same authority in dealing with presently observable, repeatable claims about the physical world, as it does when it makes grand claims about historical events, especially those of the distant past? Science as technology has been remarkably effective at manipulating physical reality in a way that benefits (for the most part!) mankind in the form of creations and inventions that make our lives more comfortable and productive. Science as some grand quest for larger truths about the universe, including its formation, the creation of life and humanity, has shown itself, in the estimation of many, to be just as metaphysical a system as traditional religion. Indeed, many of us would suggest that it has been less good as a metaphysical system because many scientists are generally unreflective, and sometimes unaware of, the profound metaphysical assumptions and presuppositions that undergird the modern scientific establishment.

As theologians and scientists, we need to meet on the neutral ground that is neither truly science, nor Biblical theology, and talk about the epistemology and metaphysics that underlie both our disciplines. Here is an area where we can all be humble, because typically none of us are experts in it. But it is precisely here that 19th and 20th century philosophical currents have created some of the divisions that plague us. Divisions that I believe are not ultimately about "the facts," but about the frameworks we bring, often unconsciously and implicitly, to those facts, whether they be scientific or scriptural.

Thanks for your thoughts.

Posted by: Nicholas Miller | [February 01, 2011 at 10:14 AM](#)

Prof. Miller,

Thanks for dialoguing.

1) I think we understand each other fairly well. I too am skeptical of the pie/cake, NOMA, etc, which will show below.

2) I'll cede to you on Gould since I haven't actually read him directly.

3) If I'm not careful this discussion could diverge into an interminable off-topic banter, but I think it'd still be fruitful to continue for now since it's just the two of us, so forgive my verbosity :-P...

"What is the scientific enterprise? Does it contain the same authority in dealing with presently observable, repeatable claims about the physical world, as it does when it makes grand claims about historical events, especially those of the distant past?"

All very important questions. And certainly the claims of science must be evaluated with care, as some models are certainly better verified than others, and peer review is far from a perfect way to catch errors in reasoning.

"Science as some grand quest for larger truths about the universe, including its formation, the creation of life and humanity, has shown itself, in the estimation of many, to be just as metaphysical a system as traditional religion."

There is the point upon which we disagree, at least in part. When it comes to things like the multiverse and anthropic principle -- the question of why we live in a universe capable of supporting life -- I would agree strongly. When it comes to inferring events from history, I think scientific thinking does fine, even if the divine is involved. I will strongly resist the notion, for example, that the inference of common descent depends heavily on metaphysical assumptions.

"Indeed, many of us would suggest that it has been less good as a metaphysical system because many scientists are generally unreflective, and sometimes unaware of, the profound metaphysical assumptions and presuppositions that undergird the modern scientific establishment."

It's certainly true that most scientists prefer to "shut-up and calculate." We don't tend to -- and in fact try not to -- think too much about what quantum mechanics implies about reality & counterfactuality. And we certainly avoid touching words like "consciousness" -- it's academic suicide to discuss something about which we know so incredibly little. Most of this is honorable and honest -- but scientists can certainly be block-headed when it comes to the broader awareness philosophers demand of them, and science sure -- has its share of arrogance (not without merit). And their image of religion and creationism does tend to be somewhat naive in my experience.

The standard reposts to your comment are to the effect of "mine works, and yours doesn't, so ha!" or an appeal to "methodological naturalism."

I find both unsatisfying. Many scientists will readily accept that methodological naturalism does not rule-out super-powerful alien agents, so I see no reason why it should rule out God. God, his nature, and his actions are a hypothesis to be tested, like any other. Many philosophers and scientists seem to think miracles and/or their sources are by definition untestable obfuscations to scientific inquiry. I think their concern is rooted in reality, but hyperbolic.

My own opinion is that, if God's presence were more visible, scientists wouldn't hide behind "methodological naturalism," they'd be in the thick of it (no different than if it was clear that aliens built the pyramids). So I don't take their supposed metaphysical assumptions - even the ones they explicitly claim/deny -- very seriously. Data is data, models are models. Theology is science.

The only possible complication I see is if God only reveals himself on an individual level. Then science, which is inherently public, can't apply to the evidence.

But to that individual, the scientific process can still be used sans peer review: If I have a personal encounter with God that convicts me that He is omnipotent, trustworthy, and claims to be involved in guiding the evolution of life, then Intelligent Design may suddenly obtain a great deal of plausibility. Not because of a change in my assumptions, but because of a change in the data I have at my disposal.

The only core principle of science that is thus violated is its parsimonious commitment to human fallibility: one person's experience is considered wholly unreliable. But if you are that person, and if you believe your experience is exceptional to the point that your own fallibility is a non-issue, then there is nothing necessarily invalid or (quite) unscientific in believing in a model that combines the natural with the supernatural.

Posted by: [Eric "Siggy" Scott](#) | [February 01, 2011 at 02:55 PM](#)

Thanks, Eric, your continuing comments cause me to believe that we actually hold much in common. I too think the commitment to "methodological naturalism" is a kind of ruse to keep the divine foot out of the door, and that God could be a hypothesis, much as a super-powerful extra-terrestrial could be a testable hypothesis. This is why I think the intelligent design critique of the scientific "method" deserves to be taken seriously.

I also agree that scientific inferences from historical evidence can be a valid part of the scientific inquiry. My point would merely be that the longer and longer the chains of inference become, either through time, space, or both, the more one must rely on underlying philosophical commitments to guide ones interpretation of the facts. A simple example would be that examining the destructive effects of Mt. St. Helens will be a lot simpler to figure out cause and effect that it will be to understand the mechanism behind the formation of the Grand Canyon. We were simply much closer to the events of St. Helens, and can make much stronger claims about it. How the Grand Canyon was formed is going to take a lot more inference, and how we view the evidence may be guided a great deal about our understanding of the larger historical context of southwest America and even of ancient history. It is a mistake to attribute the same kind of certainty about our scientific understanding of the Grand Canyon as to either how a car engine operates or how Mt. St. Helens was affected by its recent explosion. These kinds of distinctions in authority and certainty would be very fertile grounds to explore for both scientists and theologians, I believe.

I also like your point about the validity of individual experience in testing reality or experiencing God. Scientists like to write individual experiences off as "anecdotal," and therefore meaningless on their own. I get the problem, but I think that the label often overlooks that all results are made up of aggregates of otherwise "anecdotal" events. Thus, if you are certain enough about the individual experience, it may well be safe to generalize to larger truths, of either religion or science. (Although this requires some kind of metaphysical presumption in the reliability of one's senses and reasoning, and thus we recur to theology!)

btw, I take it from your comments that you are a scientist, a young one. Where and what do you do?

Posted by: [Nicholas Miller](#) | [February 02, 2011 at 04:02 PM](#)

"I too think the commitment to "methodological naturalism" is a kind of ruse to keep the divine foot out of the door, and that God could be a hypothesis, much as a super-powerful extra-terrestrial could be a testable hypothesis. This is why I think the intelligent design critique of the scientific "method" deserves to be taken seriously."

I might hesitantly call it a "ruse" too, but I see it merely as a poor post-facto explanation for why God is out the door, rather than the (primary) cause for His absence.

I too think ID should be taken seriously -- as a hypothesis. I do not believe it has substantiated itself scientifically, and its most famous proponents are often sub-par on scholarship. The problem it observes in irreducible complexity is a big one, however, and my research is actually focused on the Darwinian explanations for it. As a computer scientist, I give irreducible complexity a lot more attention than most, because the level of understanding we require to say "something of some sort kind of like this happened to create what we see," i.e. to establish natural cause, is insufficient to let us use it for our own telos *in silico* (i.e. in machine learning applications). The difference between showing that weather is natural and predicting it. It is hypothetically possible that such research could show all known natural causes to be insufficient, thus bolstering the design hypothesis. That would surprise me, of course, but can't be ruled out.

"My point would merely be that the longer and longer the chains of inference become, either through time, space, or both, the more one

must rely on underlying philosophical commitments to guide ones interpretation of the facts."

Fair enough. Laplace acknowledged such things centuries ago in his Philosophical Essay on Probabilities.

Clearly we disagree over the *level* of authority science maintains on the issues relevant to Genesis, but I certainly agree with you that caution is needed and that the matters are difficult.

"btw, I take it from your comments that you are a scientist, a young one. Where and what do you do?"

I'm a computer science and math senior here at AU, have done research at the Santa Fe Institute in New Mexico, and am starting grad school in the fall (waiting on acceptance letters to decide where :-p). So I'm technically on the blurry border between student and scientist :-).

Thanks for engaging in a positive dialogue. It's not every day one gets to argue so directly, and yet so politely. This is much the tone I prefer :-). I hope I haven't been too much on the offense for you.

I think we've reached an adequate synthesis, and can agree to disagree at this point, unless you have something to add.

Posted by: Eric "Siggy" Scott | February 03, 2011 at 12:25 PM

I have enjoyed reading the thoughts of two brilliant minds. I would humbly like to ask a few questions. Is the purpose of science and theology to define the nature of the cosmos? Are we using our human minds to design a methodology or a hermeneutic that would map, account for, define and predict not only the cosmos but God Himself? What are the results of such an enterprise? What does God provide that reveals the cosmos to the individual and to the collective?

Posted by: David de la Vega | February 05, 2011 at 10:57 PM

Nicholas, thanks for your comments. I see things very differently for several reasons. These reasons in fact have much to do with concerns I have for God's character as a just and loving Creator, which I think Adventists have not thought very carefully about where questions of animal suffering are concerned.

You are right that theistic evolutionary accounts raise difficult theodicy questions. What you have not wrestled with is the fact that the problem of animal suffering may be far greater for strict literalists. It certainly appears so to me at this point in my reflecting on the issues. All around us we observe a world that is perfectly "designed" for animal predation. Many creatures are, we might say, irreducibly predatory. Theistic evolutionary models can at least entertain the possibility that this is the result of natural processes and principles of freedom in the animal world no less than the human. God, in this way of thinking, creates in a way that opens space for freedom at every step.

Whether or not this is the best or only way of thinking about the creation, it is more "Arminian" than the ideas of many strict literalists who instead invoke God's inscrutable sovereignty and deterministic control to explain animal suffering in the present. God (at least according to the recent statement on creation put out by the Seminary) is said to have supernaturally "cursed" the natural world to punish Adam. How this language of cursing makes God more loving and just than he would be in theistic evolutionary or process creation accounts is not explained. But clearly there is a serious theodicy dilemma for literalists no less than others that Adventists have so far not really faced or explained in any kind of satisfying way. It is time that literalists stop talking about animal suffering as though it were a theodicy dilemma for others but not for them. This is not being honest to gravity of the problem. (If it is of interest to you, you can read more of my thoughts on this here: <http://spectrummagazine.org/node/1966>)

In addition, for serious conversations between people with very different views to occur, both parties must strive to understand what is actually being said by the other and to represent their ideas in the strongest light since it is the strongest form of an argument that must be shown to be beyond possibility in order for it to be categorically ruled out of consideration. You have unfortunately not articulated the most compelling theistic evolutionary accounts on their own terms where the theodicy question is concerned. You have also described Reformed theology in simplifying brush strokes that I don't think do justice to contemporary Reformed thought, which has by no means been narrowly focused on God's "sovereignty" to the exclusion of discussion of his justice. Probably America's most famous living Christian philosopher is Alvin Plantinga who teaches not far from you at Notre Dame and who stands squarely in the Reformed tradition. Plantinga wrote what is now perhaps the most famous philosophical statement ("God, Freedom, and Evil") of how God's goodness and omnipotence are logically compatible with the reality of evil. It is a defense based precisely upon the free will argument.

I agree with you, though, that we should be paying attention to large questions like the ones you are raising and that Adventists have somewhat unique concerns when it comes to questions of free will and God's character. If we thought more carefully and consistently in these terms I think we would realize that battles are being fought between people who should be allies over lines that should have been

drawn elsewhere.

Ironically and tragically, I have written previously, Adventist literalists have not hesitated to make common cause with biblical literalists of other denominations, including those who stand within the conservative Calvinist or Reformed traditions. The Creation Research Society formed in the 1960s, for example, was led by an alliance of creationists that included Seventh-day Adventists as well as members of the Reformed Presbyterian Church and Christian Reformed Church.

In fact, I would suggest, Adventist literalists and Adventist non-literalists have good reasons to stand together, on the basis of our shared understanding that there are principles of freedom at work in the natural world, against highly conservative Calvinistic literalisms that ascribe animal suffering to God's supernatural and arbitrary creation of every natural event. And of course literalists and non-literalists of all denominations can stand together in opposition to philosophical naturalism or materialism, which to my mind is the real problem believers need to resist.

Posted by: Ronald Osborn | [March 13, 2011 at 05:39 AM](#)

Dear Ron, thank you for your thoughtful comments regarding my blog on Adventism and theistic evolution. I would make the following points in response:

1. Predation and Theodicy - You are correct in stating that predation in nature raise issues of theodicy for both creationists and theistic evolutionists. But creationists don't have the problem of God's conduct in designing a system of death as being part of his "good creation." Rather, it is an act that is responding to a situation of evil brought about by other free will beings. I was involved in considering the Seminary statement on creation, and I do not recall us saying that death in nature was primarily punishment for Adam's sin. My view would be that, as Paul teaches in Romans, nature was subjected to the effects of sin so that it might create a path back to redemption for mankind. The thorn and the thistle, nature red in tooth and claw, show the outworking of the philosophy of egoism and selfishness, and are part of man's education, making him aware of the importance of the principles of God. Theistic evolution, on the other hand, has to say that this system of competition, suffering and death was part of the "good" creation that God used before sin had entered the planet. This creates a radically different view of God's preferred and ideal method of acting, one that undercuts a character of love. Yes, both the creationist and the theistic evolutionist, struggle with theodicy, but in my view, the creationist has a much smaller mountain to climb.

2. Strict literalists and creation - I would differ with you in identifying "creationists" with "literalists," as one of the points I am making is that belief in special creation has much more to do with larger theological concerns than with a commitment to rigid literalism. Historically, the Princetonian school of Biblical inerrancy, led by Benjamin Warfield and company, had a more strictly literal view of the correspondence between text and truth than Adventists did, the latter accepting a kind of thought/idea inspiration. Yet, despite his commitment to inerrant textualism, Warfield ascribed to a version of theistic evolution, precisely because, in my view, his reformed theology made him less sensitive to issues of theodicy.

3. Reformed Thought and theodicy - this brings up the question of reformed thought and theodicy. As to your first point, I want to present fair views of the arguments I am opposing, but I do have limited space in a blog, and can only present brief outlines. I would be happy to have someone explain why death before sin, death and suffering as a preferred method, a "good" method of creation, is not so problematic. But I just think it is. Your point about the diversity of reformed thought is a good one, and I do allude to it in my piece, but again space limits prevent me from dealing with it meaningfully. But I agree that there is a "free will," "character of God" concerned, reformed tradition, running from the late 18th century Hopsonian tradition, through the New Haven theology of Taylor, as popularized by Charles Finney, and entering Adventism through the commentaries of Albert Barnes, that is very much concerned with theodicy. I view Alvin Plantinga as working very much in this tradition. But many hard-core reformed thinkers look askance at this tradition, viewing Taylor and Finney as aberrations and departures from the orthodoxies of Calvin. I know this, as my advisor and mentor at Notre Dame was a long time professor at Wheaton. In my view, Walton writes from this much more traditionalist reformed tradition. I know from discussion with others that he has a determinist outlook that would conform with that perspective.

Just a few thoughts, anyway. I will look up your piece on Spectrum, and give it some attention. Thanks.

Posted by: Nicholas Miller | [March 14, 2011 at 10:47 PM](#)

Thanks for your reply Nicholas. It does, however, continue to raise troubling questions without clear answers. I don't think you have given the problem of animal suffering enough thought. You write, "The thorn and the thistle, nature red in tooth and claw, show the outworking of the philosophy of egoism and selfishness, and are part of man's education, making him aware of the importance of the principles of God."

Jonathan Edwards, writing in the Calvinist tradition, said the same thing. In effect, instead of allegorizing Scripture he allegorized nature itself so that all of reality amounted to a kind of moral pedagogy for humans.

This radically anthropocentric way of dealing with the problem of animal suffering truly turns God into a deity of cruelty we can hardly fathom. Part of what makes the problem so difficult is that most animal suffering doesn't even occur before human eyes and so serves no moral/pedagogical function at all. Another part of the problem is that this suffering is not suffering the animals themselves can comprehend and has no redemptive purpose as far as the animals involved are concerned (unless we imagine a hell for lions as "murderers" and heaven for their prey). How, then, is God's justice served by directly inflicting this kind of pain on animals in order to "educate" humans--something nowhere stated in Scripture?

Theistic evolutionary or process creation accounts, by contrast, might allow for secondary causes in a universe of freedom, so that not all of the creation is ex nihilo or by divine fiat. In this case the wildness and even ferocity of nature might be at once God's "very good" work and also not the result of God's design or willing in every aspect.

But I agree that the creation "outside of the Garden" might have been marred or distorted by sin prior to humanity. Adventists believe that evil predates humanity and there is a clear distinction in Genesis between the sheltered world of the Garden and the world beyond. Similar to C.S. Lewis, I think that humans might have had a redemptive role to play in relationship to the rest of the animal kingdom--a mission they failed. I won't try repeat all of my reasoning, though, since you can read my reflections in various articles on Genesis catalogued here:

<http://spectrummagazine.org/authors/ron-osborn>

Thanks again for taking the time to dialogue.

Posted by: Ronald Osborn | March 15, 2011 at 04:54 PM

Thank you for the continued sharing, Ron. I will take the time to look at your previous articles. I suspect my next blog will take up directly this question of animal suffering and death and God, as it calls for some extended thought and discussion not available in these short comments. Others have raised the question in a manner you have, and it deserves a considered response.

In the meantime, I think you and I can agree that these questions of theodicy as to how God might react to a sin problem, raised by the choices of free will beings, by creating an environment where the principles of sin can be fully revealed, are significantly less difficult than a view that says, "God created beings that had no choice but to sin, and that in the creation process he used suffering and death, and called it good." In my view of God, death is not good. Rather, it is the enemy, that has been allowed short term dominion because of an emergency. But it is no wise good, and not part of God's original plan of creation, nor in his future plan of recreation.

Let's keep thinking, studying and praying about this, because it deals with hugely important picture of God concerns which are central to Adventism and indeed Christianity.

Posted by: Nicholas Miller | March 24, 2011 at 05:56 PM

Nicholas, we are in full agreement that God does not "use" animal suffering in a kind of instrumentalist way to achieve some kind of greater good. (And it is equally troubling when believers depict God as a kind of Grand Utilitarian when it comes to the problem of genocide in the OT or the earthquake in Japan.)

The question is whether God creates in a way that allows the possibility of suffering and even mortality in a universe of freedom. This would be a view of creation that sees God as creating as he redeems and redeeming as he creates. It is a view that also takes seriously the fact that evil predates humanity, which might have something to do with the clear distinction made in Genesis between the sheltered world of the "Garden" and the world beyond.

I realize these are challenging ideas that won't be accepted by most Adventists (as we now move to make the language of our belief statement on creation rigidly restrictive of theological possibilities). Unfortunately, no Adventist response to the problem of animal suffering that I have seen so far is remotely satisfying.

One of the most problematic notions still very much alive in our community is the quasi-Gnostic one of satanically orchestrated "amalgamation" to explain what we plainly see in the animal world. I wrote a long article about Ellen White's highly disturbing statements on this in the Fall 2010 print edition of Spectrum. If you are seriously interested in wrestling with the problem of animal suffering in Adventist perspective I hope you will read it. It is a tragic legacy we ignore at our peril. I look forward to reading any article you might write on the topic in the future.

Posted by: Ron Osborn | [April 06, 2011 at 01:05 PM](#)

This is truly sad. Over and over we confuse our members by bringing in teachings not supported by our 27 fundamentals. I agree whole heartedly with the conclusion above. If we provide this for vespers we've blessed it - at least that is how each student will feel. I hope Andrews will consider having a vespers program critiquing this man's argument so that the students have a clear view of what the problems are and don't go away thinking the SDA church agrees with this.

Posted by: Marta | [June 07, 2011 at 09:47 AM](#)

Can you explain why there is concern about "animal suffering" in the process of evolution? The first thing God did is kill an animal to provide clothes for Adam and Eve, and imposed a requirement to worship him thru animal sacrifice (story of Esau), and even Christ killed fish and fed them to the disciples, so it is apparent that God does not see the death of animals as having any moral significance. I think we should be wary of assigning moral significance to something that obviously has no moral significance to God.

Also, Evolution can be viewed not as "survival of the fittest", ie. those who escape predation, but rather as a constant improvement, a better fitting of an organism to it's environment. From this perspective, organisms are always improving and getting better. ie. life gets better and easier for each generation. Isn't that consistent with a heart of love?

Posted by: Ron Nielsen | [June 17, 2011 at 12:23 AM](#)

Dear friends,

I apologize for meddling in your high and interesting dialog. I am not a native English speaker, I learned some English just by reading and listening, so that my intervention is risky.

My point is related not so much with the problem of scientific epistemology or the philosophical and ethical problem of animal / human suffering. I want just to ask two quesitons:

1. If evolution is the method of God's "creation", and thus death and suffering are not a temporarily consequence of sin, there are some final conclusions to be taken:

a. Bible is not a reliable revelation from God, but a collection of moralizing myths, legends mixed with history, wisdom etc. from a human viewpoint, to serve religion and social stability etc. You simply cannot explain away Genesis 1-11 and still believe the Jesus story, including resurrection and salvation (hope of immortality and final restoration). It is inconceivable that Bible is a true revelation, while it does lie or speaks in dark sentences regarding the most basic questions. It is impossible that Genesis 1 -11 is simply legend, and the rest of the Bible have a different character.

b. The God of evolution is a kind of diffuse and callous pantheistic divinity, who cannot be loved and adored, neither is it necessary.

2. The second question, deriving from the sentence above, is: Why theistic evolutionists need such God? Why they need to connect their views to the Bible? Why sheer atheism is not more preferable ? Just to have some answers beyond those brought by the evolution philosophy ? They are not necessary, since the scientific method by itself, as it claimes, never needs the God hypothesis.

If evolution were true, this would be the basic and determining truth, let's face it ! We would have no hope for immortality. (Darwin's associate, Sir A R Wallace became a spiritualist, but even spiritualists did not embrace evolutionism immediately and without reserve <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Spiritualism#Evolution>). Immortality by resurrection only makes sense, and it defies any baconian and cartesian definition of science.

What I would do, if I were "theistic" evolutionist ? Certainly I would abandon any God belief, to be consistent. Theistic evolution is only an unbelievable lip service to the Bible and Christianity, to PRESERVE a pragmatic sense of religion, and a lot of good jobs, from Church minister to theologian etc. If one day I would meet face to face that god who "created" by evolution, I would kill him, for multiple reasons. I cannot accept evolution, even if it were for real, since it is not acceptable. Fact or hypothesis, evolution is a nightmare, and I hate it. I have no need of any evidence leading to that abyss. I cannot be evolutionist and Christian in the same time, and people who marry these opposing concepts do it by sacrificing Christianity, often unconsciously.

Thank you for reading my post.

Posted by: [Florin Laiu](#) | [July 08, 2011 at 10:36 AM](#)

I would add some comments regarding Walton's remarks on the nature of the Biblical text and language. As Adventists, we do not agree with the literalist-fundamentalist theology of Biblical inspiration. As a Bible teacher (I use and teach Biblical languages and exegesis) I am very conscious of the contribution of human agency to the Bible text. And we have E G White saying that:

„The Bible was given for practical purposes. . . . The Bible is written by inspired men, but it is not God's mode of thought and expression. It is that of humanity. God, as a writer, is not represented. Men will often say such an expression is not like God. But God has not put Himself in words, in logic, in rhetoric, on trial in the Bible... "—Ms 24, 1886 (1SM 19-21).

By applying to Bible hermeneutics this realistic and cautious concept of prophetic inspiration, and thoroughly investigating the Hebrew text of Genesis, we may get more light on what we should believe. I discovered in time that some of the ideas I was taught about Creation are not in the Hebrew meaning. ברא bara' does not mean creation ex nihilo (even if the concept may be valid, but from other sources), since ברא bara' is used similarly to the English word "create", to make something new.

The reference to "heavens" (plural) is an illusion, since the Hebrew noun שמים shamáyim is ALWAYS plural, as it is also מים máyim (water). There is no heaven and water in the singular in Hebrew. This is understandably a grammatical not a physical problem, but it has important consequences for those theologians who are beginners in Hebrew, and for a lot of literalistic and superficial translators. The Hebrew terms for heaven and earth do not refer to Space and Planet Earth, but always to sky and land. "Sky, land and sea", or "sky, land and deep /underworld ocean" are the most complete expressions to name the universe. Sometimes "heaven and earth" (that is "sky and land") is used for that purpose. Genesis 1:1 do not refer to an initial creation of the universe, though reasonable this may be. It is a summary and title for what follows. In the following verses we learn that "heaven" is the name that God gave to רקיע raqí'a (the sky vault, an illusion treated as a reality, and not the tricky translation "expanse", suggesting the modern concept of "atmosphere"), and "earth" is the name God gave to the dry land (ארץ land, ground, country). The only exception is in Job 26:7, where I think it is probably a scribal error (ארץ 'aretz, corrupted from ארץ 'aritz, "The Fearful" a, Ugaritic epithet for the god Athtar, represented by a star-planet. The two verses should probably read: "He spreads the northern skies over the wastelands, Suspends the Morning Star on nothingness". It is interesting that in verses of Ugarit, the two Canaanite words, Tzaphon "north" and Aritz "[Athtar] the Fearful" are parallel at least twice, to the verses in Job, which is a strong confirmation of my textual explanation: "Thereupon Athtar the Fierce // Goes up to the crags of Saphon" [...]// "Then Athtar the Fierce declares, // I may not be king on the crags of Saphon").

The language of Genesis 1 is clearly cultural and phenomenological. It does not reflect the modern and scientific cosmology, but a prescientific model. It is extremely important to notice it and to draw the hermeneutic consequences. But we should not forget that this reality affects only the understanding of details, it cannot be forced to compromise the message itself intended by the human author and inspired by God. For example, it helps us not search for a scientific identification of "the waters above the sky vault" or the "putting" of the sun, moon, stars on the sky vault in the fourth day. We should remember that the Bible was given us for practical purposes. But if someone applies the hermeneutical principle of human imperfect language to the message itself, it is an illegitimate extrapolation, because it is obvious that the human author meant a six-day creation, a sabbath memorial, and other derived messages. It is not true that the only intended message is that God is in control of everything. It is more. When God is portrayed in Exodus 20 proclaiming the same truth (a six day creation) from the top of Sinai, this means that the Bible is categoric, and we cannot make it mean a different message. One can only choose between Bible and evolution (that is HOPELESSNESS), but not mix them, please.

Posted by: [Florin Laiu](#) | [July 08, 2011 at 12:14 PM](#)

There seems to be some utter non-sense on here.

Evolution is incompatible with Christinity. It is also unscientific.

it is a SHAME that there are non-SDA Christian scientists who have no shame in making a case for Creation.

Answers-in-Genesis

ICR

CMI

CEH

Also, i find evolution not only to be unscientific, but also insulting to one's intelligence.

BTW, has anyone read the 4th Commandment before?

Posted by: DC | [June 13, 2012 at 03:37 AM](#)

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