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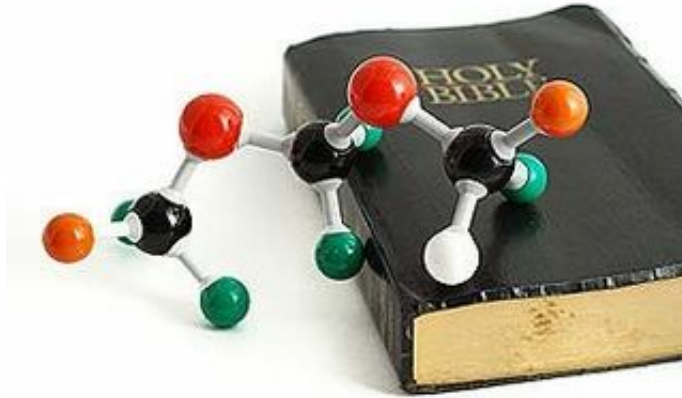
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August 08, 2011

The “Found” World of Genesis 1 Part II: How Does Science Inform Theology

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



Sometime back, I examined the claims of Professor [John H. Walton of Wheaton College](#) to have uncovered the “lost” world of [Genesis 1](#). There, I examined his argument that Genesis 1 was consistent with other Ancient Near Eastern literature in only concerning itself with functional origins, not material origins. Thus, he believed that the Genesis account was silent as to when the physical stuff of the earth, plants, animals, and even humankind was actually made.

This concern with functionality, Walton claims, allows for the teachings of evolutionary biology to remain largely unaffected by the Biblical account, as there is really no conflict between the two accounts, once they are properly understood. I argued that Walton’s arguments were problematic for Adventists, who see both a functional and material story in Genesis, and who also would have significant theological problems with their Great Controversy framework if God used suffering and death to bring about His good creation.

But given the topic, it would be remiss not to say something about science. Religious scholars believe that scientists do not take the Bible and theology seriously enough, and the opposite is also true. Scientists are often frustrated by the apparent lack of willingness to listen by their theologian colleagues. No doubt we all have much to learn and improve in the skill and art of listening.

As a professor of theology and history, I acknowledge that science does matter, and that it does make a difference to how we do theology and history. Empirical data does impact Biblical interpretation and understanding. Some of our most basic canons of Biblical interpretation, such as that metaphors should be construed symbolically, and literal passages, literally, is dependent on our knowledge of the empirical world to distinguish between the literal and symbolic. It is our knowledge of the real, natural world that enables us to see that dragons with ten heads, and goats with horns growing on horns, are symbols that require interpretation.

We also must be open to having Biblical understandings and interpretations checked by the real world. One example is the church and [Galileo](#), where many people thought the Bible taught the earth was the center of the universe, or at least of the

solar system. This was based on Greek philosophy, but some had come to view it as a teaching of the Bible. Galileo's scientific findings regarding the orbit of the moons of Jupiter and the phases of Venus, both showing that the earth was not the center of orbit of everything in the solar system, were cause to go back and look at the Biblical evidence, and to determine that in fact it did not teach a geo-centric universe.

A more recent example is the Adventist experience of 1844 and the Great Disappointment. The failure of Christ to return to earth on October 22, 1844, was empirical, real world evidence that something was not right with the Millerite interpretation of Daniel 8. It forced a re-examination of the relevant passages, and a realization that our interpretation of the nature and location of the sanctuary was in error.

So empirical observation can invalidate and guide Biblical interpretation. The question becomes one of level of demonstrability and certainty. On October 23, 1844, the fact that Christ had not come, at least in the manner the Millerites understood as described in the Bible, was an open, notorious, and observable fact by everyone alive at that time. The evidence for a sun-centered solar system in Galileo's day was similarly observable and demonstrable, at least by those with the time, patience and equipment to observe and chart the phases of Venus and the orbit of the moons of Jupiter.

What about evolution, at least the capital E kind, which claims the relatedness of all living beings and the gradual progression of all life forms? I believe that it comes nowhere close to meeting the same level of certainty or demonstrability of either Christ's failure to return in 1844, or Galileo's proofs of the place of the sun in our solar system. Don't take my word for it. Rather, consider the words of evolutionary paleontologists themselves, who considered the guardians of the most reliable and valuable proof of evolution—the fossil record.

Macroevolution is not seen in real time, ostensibly because it takes thousands and even millions of years to develop new genera and phyla. For this reason, the actual macro-evolutionary transitions can only be seen in the historic record left in the fossil record. At least that is what most people, including most scientists, think. But evolutionary paleontologists know better. Consider the words of the late Stephen Jay Gould, the most vocal, if not the most famous, evolutionary paleontologist of the 20th century. Despite being an ardent anti-creationist, he acknowledged that it was simply false to claim that the fossil record contained support for a gradual evolutionary process.

Instead, he wrote that “the extreme rarity of transitional forms in the fossil record persists as the *trade secret of paleontology*.” He pointed out that in his day, Darwin actually was less faithful to the physical evidence than the catastrophic flood geologists, who were actually “as committed to science” and more “objective” than Darwin on the matter of the state of the record. Darwin acknowledged the weakness of the empirical date for his claim. But he insisted that it was due to an almost entirely incomplete fossil record, and that as more work was done, the fossil record would support his theory.[1]

But Gould pointed out that, more than a century later, the field of paleontology is much more mature and extensive. But the state of the record persists with generally the same paucity of evidence of transitions as in Darwin's day. Paleontologists know of their special role in the eyes of others and themselves as custodians of the history of life. They just generally cannot admit how bad the evidence is. “We fancy ourselves as the only true students of life's history,” Gould writes, but in order to continue to believe in evolution, we must “view our data as so bad that we almost never see the very process we profess to study.” Niles Eldredge, Curator of the American Museum of Natural History in New York City and Gould collaborator puts it even more bluntly: “we paleontologists have said that the history of life supports [gradual evolution], all the while really knowing that it does not.”[2]

So what does the fossil record actually show? “The history of most fossil species,” Gould admits “includes two features particularly inconsistent with gradualism:

1. Stasis: Most species exhibit no directional change during their tenure on earth. They appear in the fossil record looking pretty much the same as when they disappear; morphological change is usually limited and directionless.
2. Sudden appearance: In any local area, a species does not arise gradually by the steady transformation of its ancestors; it appears all at once and ‘fully formed.’”[3]

Gould, of course, has what he thinks are very good explanations for the state of the fossil record that makes it consistent with his belief in evolution. But that does not change the main point. Which is when you look into the safe-box of the guardians of

the evidentiary crown jewels of the theory of evolution, it is basically empty. Indeed, it appears in a state more consistent with creationist notions of an abrupt creation of kinds fully formed, and their worldwide destruction in a violent, sifting, sorting deluge.

Now, I do not want to dismiss or minimize the debate for and against the mounds of evidence on both sides of the creation/evolution conflict. Both sides have their problems and challenges in the fossil record. And there is more to it than the fossil record. Yet in many ways that record lies at the heart of the contention over whether life was formed quickly and abruptly, or developed over long periods of time. Based on the admissions of leading scientific spokespersons, I am convinced that religious historians and theologians are entirely justified in taking the position that the evidence for the empirical reality of evolution is far, far less than that of the example of either Christ not coming to the earth in 1844, or of Galileo's evidence for a helio-centric solar system.

The evidence for evolutionary development of life is far too ambiguous, dubious, and contested to justify overturning, or meaningfully compromising, the careful reading of Genesis 1 and 2 as historic descriptions of a short period, young-life creation. This is especially true given the larger Biblical theological connections and contexts of these passages, especially the doctrines of the Sabbath, the atonement of Christ as the second Adam, the moral government of God, and His character of love.

Indeed, given the new openness of scientific thinkers and geologists to neo-catastrophism and certain models of intelligent design, there is actually more "scientific" evidence for a Biblical creationist these days than back in the 1960s and 1970s. Why would we change our position now that elements in the scientific community are actually moving our direction? Let's not lose the important truths of Genesis just because there have been found some Ancient Near East myths that contain philosophical, historical, and theological ideas that are mirrored by certain modern views. All this shows is that Genesis was unique in its day, and continues to be unique in our day. We should expect nothing less from an inspired account.

[1] Stephen Jay Gould, *The Richness of Life: The Essential Stephen Jay Gould* (New York, NY: W.W. Norton and Company, 2007), 262-63.

[2] Niles Eldredge, *Time Frames* (Princeton University Press: Princeton, NJ, 1989), *quoted in*, Phillip E. Johnson, *Darwin on Trial* (Regnery Gateway: Washington, DC, 1991), 59.

[3] Gould, *The Richness of Life*, 264-264.

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Dr. Miller,

How is it that empirical realities have not convinced the sinless perfectionists in Adventism that the doctrine is a fiction based on shoddy Biblical scholarship or worse.

Posted by: [Hansen](#) | [August 10, 2011 at 01:01 AM](#)

Again, an excellent article that examines past mistakes that have occurred when churches ignored empirical reality.

Regarding transitional fossils, does Dr. Miller think Neandertals or other related hominids were present on the Ark? Or was it only

hominen sapiens that made it on board? Did God create all those different hominid groups or are there fossils transitional to higher forms of hominids? What about protfeathers preserved in amber? Are they transitional forms of feathers from dinosaurs to birds?

The search for truth continues.

Your agnostic friend

Ken

Posted by: ken | [October 05, 2011 at 11:53 AM](#)

"I believe that it comes nowhere close to meeting the same level of certainty or demonstrability of either Christ's failure to return in 1844, or Galileo's proofs of the place of the sun in our solar system."

Dr. Miller, Here is an example of you, a theologian "NOT LISTENING". You select a few stray statements that support your position and refuse to deal with the facts.

Look around you and you will see that Evolution is a fundamental principle of the universe as surly as is gravity, electromagnetic and strong nuclear forces. You might find the terms: "Emergence, or "Diversification" to be more acceptable.

Every scientific discipline agrees, that "Emergence" is a fundamental law of the universe, starting with physics and the progression of energy from the big bang, to subatomic particles, to hydrogen, to protosuns, to complex atoms, to galaxies and planets. Astronomers have even shown us that the complex molecules of life, peptides and nucleotides form in the nebulae even before the suns and planets form.

Paleontologists have shown us how hominid skeletons have evolved through many species. We have complete sets of skeletons showing the intermediate forms of whales evolving from land mammals.

Geneticists and cellular biologists have shown us how the genetic code is "designed", if I may use that word, to evolve or differentiate.

In Medicine we know that the antibodies in your own body, that you personally depend on to keep you alive are generated using evolutionary principles.

We have even, now, created life, denovo in the test tube from scratch.

Horticulturists have used evolutionary techniques to make wonderful varieties of fruit like sweet grapefruit and seedless water melons that didn't exist even 40 years ago when I was a kid.

I look out my window and see the city evolve. I listen to the radio and here our language evolve. I even see humanity evolving spiritually. Listen as the world condemns the genocides of Rwanda and Darfur. That is is a huge improvement over the general acceptance of genocide that existed from Bible times to World War II.

As a theologian, you need to get together with your buddies, and start figuring out how you are going to accommodate the new reality. It doesn't matter how many Biology teachers you fire, you aren't going to make the DNA sequencing labs go away, nor are you going to make the fossils and geology go away.

Here is a suggestion as to where to start:

1. God is the creator, God is eternal, God changes not, therefore God must be eternally creating, therefore we would expect to see ongoing creation over time.
2. If God doesn't continue to create, then He is breaking his own law, that Sabbath commandment, by not working 6 days a week. It really doesn't matter to me how God chose to create this world, or how long ago he did it, there are still lots of good reasons to keep the Sabbath.
3. As for evolutionary theory requiring death, God allows people to die everyday. If time lasts, he will allow you to die, and yet, I will wager that when it comes your time to die, that you will feel that it was a privilege to have lived. God even allowed his own son Jesus to die. If life is somehow good enough that God allows you and Jesus both to die, then why not the dinosaurs? Just because things die, it doesn't mean that their life was meaningless or their existence was miserable. Isn't one of our Adventist doctrines that Death is like sleep? You don't complain that you were not alive for the billions of years before you were born, why should billions of years after your death be any different?

I would dare say, you would not take offense if your children were smarter and better adapted to their new environment than you are. How is that a curse? Isn't that what you would expect from a loving God who loves diversity? I believe an evolutionary creation, always progressing, with life continually adapting to better meet the changing environment is exactly what I would expect from a loving,

eternal, creator. And it really doesn't matter whether it started 6000 years ago, or 6 billion years ago, I expect God to continue creating throughout eternity.

Posted by: [Ron Nielsen](#) | [October 29, 2011 at 02:23 AM](#)

Ron, although I can concede you some measure of reason to your comment, there is a point that completely denigrate God character and love. Death is not so pleasure as you attempt to describe. Death is horrible, painful, and destructive. The Bible says that death is an enemy. The implications of your comments about death are also destructive of Christian hope. Christian hope implies life and joy, but death implies sorrow and misery. Another point that lack of biblical sound is the way in which you relate God as creator in a continuous creative work and death. If God is an eternal creator (I agree, he is) and to create he needs death (because evolution needs death), therefore, death becomes an eternal tool in the Creator's hands. Then, there is not hope, there is not end for sin, there is no eternal life. Consequently, we are, in the words of Paul, "of all men most miserable." (1 Corinthians 15:19).

I would like to suggest that could be important to reconsider your arguments from a biblical point of view about God, Creation, and Death.

God bless.

Posted by: A.H.F | [November 05, 2011 at 12:01 AM](#)

First of all, many things have changed in paleontology since the publication (in 1977) of Gould's article "The Episodic Nature of Evolutionary Change" (from which you indirectly quote). You should definitely read more recent literature on the topic (like Neil Shubin's "Your Inner Fish").

Secondly, why not go a step further in your historical illustration and show us how Adventists used "empirical data" in establishing their interpretation of whatever happened in October 1844. To call that piece of prophetic interpretation "historicist" (when a heavenly sanctuary clearly lies outside any verifiable history) is a gross misnomer.

Posted by: polihronu | [November 22, 2011 at 11:51 PM](#)

PS. Strictly speaking, evolution does NOT require death, it only requires sex and birth.

Posted by: [Ron Nielsen](#) | [November 27, 2011 at 02:25 AM](#)

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