

Trinity College Cambridge
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CHRISTIANITY AND EVOLUTION

Genesis 22: 1–13 Matthew 18: 10–20

Robert J Asher

Biological diversity exists today because of variation, heritability, and time. Every bird, rodent, plant, fish, or insect you've ever seen is a result of a 'winning' series of ancestors, ones that survived and generated offspring. Their success may have been due to brute force, like faster speed, more virulent toxin, or stronger bite. It may have been due to more benevolent factors like maternal provisioning or kin selection; or it may have been due to more random influences, like volcanism in Siberia or an asteroid in the Yucatan.

Whatever the particular cause, our life's diversity is due to variation and differential survival over geological time. More bluntly put, we might say that 'death' is a biologically creative process. Christianity, in contrast, is generally regarded to be about Life, and this implied conflict brings me to the subject of Young Earth Creationism. This is one of several kinds of anti-evolutionist beliefs that places a particular emphasis on the issue of death. According to Genesis 1, death came into the world due to human sin. Yet here we have an entire explanatory mechanism in biology – evolution – that is incredibly well supported but is, nonetheless, based on the existence of differential survival for over 3 billion years before humans existed on Earth. Whatever creationists may say about evidence in geology or biology, their belief is motivated by the problem of evil: why would a good god tolerate terrible things? The answer, say the creationists, is that he doesn't: death is our fault. Creationists use the Genesis creation story to squarely put the blame for death and evil on humans, not God.

I have sympathy with this outlook; the problem of evil is very serious for any Christian (and that includes me). Mainstream Christianity has contended with this for 2000 years, long before any theories of biological evolution were on the scene. I'm not going to rehash Augustine or Lactantius on this issue, other than to say that free-acting agents with the ability to choose Good actually require the existence of evil. We need darkness in order to recognize light. And we need death in order to have life. And this is not just in an evolutionary sense. Everyone here has lived as long as you have because your tissues have not grown uncontrollably; for the most part your cells die where and when they need to; when they don't die, you get cancer (making never-ending life seem less appealing).

So if it is not saying that the World was created in six days and that Life before human sin suffered no death, what is Genesis 1 telling us? Well, for starters, maybe it was saying that God didn't need the Sun or Moon to create light, as light existed since day one, and these minor players in our solar system weren't created until day four. In other words, people of Israel, don't worship stars or moons.

We have just heard the rather shocking story of Abraham and Isaac in Genesis 22. 'Kill your son' is kind of an awful thing for the all-loving, knowing and powerful God to ask of Abraham, do you not think? But consider this interpretation, one I've heard from a Hasidic rabbi of the Lubovitcher tradition: Isaac represents Abraham's religion, Judaism itself, and God is asking Abraham to place human rituals and traditions on a lower rung than God. Abraham does so; he shows himself ready to kill his own religion, and God's response is 'through your offspring all nations on Earth will be blessed'.

In chapters 1 and 22 of the book of Genesis, we are faced with the need to interpret scripture. There are undoubtedly many sincere Jews and Christians out there who wouldn't be convinced by the interpretations that I have just offered. I might add that one of this College's many overachieving alumni, Sir Isaac Newton, is almost as famous for his Biblical interpretations as he is for his science, for example in disputing the validity of Trinitarian references in New Testament scripture (First Epistle of John, 5: 7–8). I wonder if the Fellows here have ever considered the possible advantages of a name for the college, e.g., 'Unity', that Newton might have found more consistent with his understanding of Christianity.

Forgive my digression away from the extremely important topic of interpretation. How do we do it in a responsible way? Let's consider the wisdom of another Trinity alumnus, Sir Francis Bacon, quoted by Darwin on the title page of all editions of *The Origin of Species*, and paraphrased as follows:

'... Let no one think we can be too well studied in the book of God's word, or in the book of God's works... but rather let us endeavour an endless proficiencie in both.'

What he is saying here is that nature itself is a way to understand God; we can know the Divine through his works (nature) as well as through his Word (scripture). When these two things overlap, we are OK. When they don't (e.g., a scriptural interpretation that God created sabre-toothed cats to be vegetarian), then we might reconsider what we have believed these two books to be saying. Remember, inspired though they may have been, those who wrote the words of the Bible were in every case human beings, writing in the context of their times. Of course we interpret nature as well, and can be wrong about what we think it is saying (although our access to nature remains direct and improves over time to a greater extent than our access to the inspirations and motivations of the authors of scripture). In any case, Bacon tells us to 'endeavor in an endless proficiencie in both'. In other words, work hard, and life will make sense.

Let me close by interpreting a passage from our second lesson, which notes that when two or more of us are gathered in his name, synergy occurs; we are more than the sum of our parts; Jesus is among us, and our ability to understand his Works and his Word improves.