

## 133 Genesis – Creation and evolution

I have a friend who is worried about the way people like Richard Dawkins seek to undermine the Christian faith, especially in regard to creation and evolution, and I quite understand that. Does John Walton [130–132] have anything to help us? He certainly does.

My knowledge of Dawkins' view is mainly second hand, I must admit, but I gather that one of his problems with Christianity is some of the awful things Christians have done, through the centuries, in the name of Jesus of Nazareth – and I have total sympathy with him there.

Secondly, Dawkins' view of the God of the Bible is vitriolic. He's really not a happy bunny about things like God instructing his people to commit genocide – and again I have total sympathy with that view. And we as Christians have made things worse by either (a) burying our heads in the sand, and trying to point away to the thousands of other passages that show God as loving and self-sacrificing or, far worse, (b) trying to justify God's perceived actions by saying that the people they were told to kill deserved it. What?! The men *and* women *and* children *and* livestock?! But I digress; on this topic, please read Boyd's *Cross Vision* [124–129].

The other issue he has, and by which he thinks he's somehow disproved Christianity, is in the area of creation and evolution. And while Walton's book doesn't specifically mention Dawkins, he is extremely helpful on this issue.

To be fair, we make problems for ourselves by seeing Genesis as a description of the material origins. No, says Walton, it's a description of functional origins. God created the universe materially, we believe, yes, but Genesis 1 tells us how God brings the universe to functional completeness as a home for those creatures into whom God breathes the breath of life, and then God comes to dwell in this glorious temple, the cosmos [132].

How can we understand this important distinction between material and functional? Walton tries to explain it:

Thousands of years ago, when Genesis was written, people knew that God (or “the gods”, for those who didn't know **the** God) was the creator and sustainer of everything. So for them, any idea of “natural” and “supernatural” would have been meaningless – it was all God's actions.

And once we start to think in terms of natural/supernatural, we began to ask ourselves, when something happens, was it “God wot did it” or did it “just happened”? So the explicable is natural and the inexplicable is God's action. The trouble with that (totally unbiblical) view is that as science develops, much of the inexplicable is then explained; so the bit that “God did” gets less and less. Walton uses the image of dividing up a pie, with God's portion getting smaller.

He encourages us to “change dessert” and use his “layer cake” model. In this, he thinks of the layer of understanding and concern that science addresses as the bottom half of the cake. The upper part is the work of God, which completely covers the lower level. Ultimately, God is the source and controller of everything; without God, nothing would exist, and if God were to withdraw his support, it would again cease to exist.

Within its layer, science does its job, as the OED says, “The intellectual and practical activity encompassing the systematic study of the structure and behaviour of the physical and natural world through observation and experiment.” But within that job, it says nothing, can say nothing, about the existence or not of the upper layer.

A good, humble, honest scientist will say that such and such is our current best model of how things work, and she will be careful to admit that if more empirical evidence comes along that contradicts that model, she must rethink, reinterpret and come up with a better model; that’s good science, knowing its limits, and knowing that we can only ever *disprove* something, and never *prove* anything.

Bad science, really bad science, says that science can prove that God does or doesn’t exist (a) because, as I have just said, science cannot *prove* anything, and (b) because science deals only with the material, mechanistic aspect of existence; it cannot tell us anything about *purpose*. (Walton mentions teleology, the study of purpose.) So science may tell us *how* things work, but it cannot provide any teleology.

Because Dawkins is so unhappy about Christianity he allows himself – despite being a highly qualified and competent scientist – to become very unscientific. He uses the pie model and tells us that, because we’re so clever, we know how things work, so we no longer need to believe in a God who is responsible for the things we don’t understand.

But to be fair, we play right into Dawkins’ hands when we try to insist that Genesis tells us, materially, *how* the universe was made; it doesn’t, it’s more concerned about *why* it exists. So arguing about timespans is unhelpful.

Dawkins says something like: “Christians say the universe was created in six days; we know it took a lot longer, so Christians are wrong and God doesn’t exist.”

We try to argue back, on his terms, maybe talking about “days” actually meaning “periods of time”, which is not the issue. He is trying to draw teleological conclusions from scientific theories and models – which is what biological evolution is, our current best guess about how things came to be, materially.

Dawkins needs to become a better scientist, and engage in proper theological discussion, where atheism is accepted as a perfectly valid theological position – a position of personal belief.

And we need to relax a little, have faith in the God of the Bible, and allow the Bible to talk to us about purpose and relationships and worship and so on, instead of trying to treat the Bible as if it could tell us about material origins.

I’m not sure if that helps, but I have realised, in rereading Walton, that it is a quite theologically technical book. What it says is important, but hopefully I can make it more digestible.

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