

Worthwhile Reading on the Creation-Evolution Debate

By Tim Standish and Clinton Wahlen

The Seventh-day Adventist understanding of origins is rooted in a particular view of Scripture as an accurate record of the past and, consequently, as a guide to the future and salvation. But, since the Bible does not elaborate in scientific detail about our earth and the life that exists on it, we need to be careful. Books claiming to deal with questions about creation and evolution from a scientific perspective abound.¹ These commonly misrepresent themselves, dealing more with metaphysics than actual science or sound doctrine. One book that should not be overlooked, doing a good job of dealing comprehensively with both science and Scripture, is the recently updated *Origin by Design*.² In considering other, more specialized, books, we must keep in mind that, despite their scientific approach, all of them still attempt to interpret the past. We cannot time travel to do repeatable experiments, but our view of what happened in the past can be informed by data and our inferences should be consistent with the data we have. With this in mind, we will survey several recent, helpful books on the subject of origins.

David Sedley's brilliant *Creationism and its Critics in Antiquity*,³ though written from the perspective of one convinced of Darwinism, provides a wonderful context for arguments about design in nature by reviewing the debate between various pre-Christian pagan philosophers. Understanding how the ancients employed arguments still in use today reveals that these questions are not ultimately addressed by mere data accumulation. Instead, our answers provide the metanarrative for interpreting the data. For Bible-believers, understanding that the apostles themselves argued for the Creator God and against ideas essentially identical to the materialistic Darwinism of today provides new appreciation and insight into the writings of New Testament authors.

One thing that an appreciation of design in nature can awaken in believers is a genuine appreciation of all creative endeavors. For those who do not naturally come by this, Wiker and Witt's *A Meaningful World*⁴ is a wonderful, almost necessary, read. The Apostles witnessed to the seminal events of history surrounding the Creator's incarnation, death and resurrection, but what is it about the creation that witnesses to the Creator's genius? Most Adventists tend to discuss the genius of nature in terms of its utility and remarkable engineering; Wiker and Witt reveal it as a work of art exhibiting the same traits we recognize as genius in great literature. Any book that ranges coherently from Shakespeare's *Tempest* to the periodic table and does so in a seamless way that leaves the reader choked with admiration, shocked at the brilliant beauty of it all, is a treasure in and of itself.

A book that presents scientific data from a specifically creationist perspective in an interesting and engaging way is *Genetic Entropy* by John Sanford.⁵ Despite the technical-sounding title, Sanford reveals a genuine scientific mystery in a clear, easy-to-understand style. He documents that most DNA changes are not the sort of thing that natural selection can act on. As a consequence "near neutral mutations" accumulate. While these mutations do not have a huge effect, they do have some effect, generally detrimental. The accumulation of these slightly detrimental changes should eventually have a measurable impact and, given enough time, could even cause us and other living things to go extinct. How much time this should take is the mystery. Sanford provides data to show that, given current estimates of the rates of change in genomes, life cannot have existed for millions of years. He makes an interesting argument consistent with the biblical account of history and in favor of a short chronology for life. His book is particularly valuable because it engages directly with the issue of time. There are a number of excellent books on the evidence of design in nature, such as the books by Michael J. Behe and William A. Dembski.⁶ But even the presence of design does

not necessitate belief in a recent, six-day creation.⁷ Significantly, Sanford takes on from a biological perspective the more challenging issue of time and brings a telling argument to bear.

Another book that does a wonderful job of presenting a way of thinking about biology that is consistent with Biblical history is Leonard Brand's *Faith, Reason and Earth History*.⁸ All interpretations of nature spring from a collection of assumptions, some of which are so integral to an observer's thinking that they are unaware of them. Because of this, the interpretation of one person may appear to be bizarre from the perspective of another. In the case of creationism, there are many assumptions behind interpretations that are not necessarily biblical. Brand carefully considers what the Bible actually says and how it can be applied to real-world data. This is a vitally important exercise if we are to avoid arguing for indefensible positions both from the perspective of the Bible and of science. *Faith, Reason and Earth History* also provides a useful foundation of knowledge that enriches our understanding of origins and, equally valuable, avoids claiming too much.

Nancy Pearcey's *Total Truth*⁹ brims with deep philosophical insights, fascinating history, and profound theology in the tradition of Francis Schaeffer. Pearcey concentrates on the concept of worldviews, comparing various materialistic worldviews, like Marxism and Darwinism, with the theistic worldview of Christianity. In doing this, she reveals why there can in principle be no compromise between Darwinism and Christianity. Pearcey's book is particularly valuable for Adventists and should be required reading for Adventist pastors and teachers, giving as it does historical background on the Great Awakening of the nineteenth century out of which Adventism arose and practical guidance on how to effectively engage with others on the issues surrounding Darwinism while avoiding the pitfalls of the past.

Valuable contributions, mostly by theologians but one also by scientist Ariel Roth, may be found in *Creation, Catastrophe and Calvary*. The book considers the vital relation of the biblical accounts of creation, the fall, and the flood to the doctrine of salvation.¹⁰ The initial chapters deal with such fundamental issues as worldview (from the perspective of Rev 14:7), whether or not the "days" of creation are literal, and the relation between Genesis 1 and 2. Several chapters deal with the flood story, including its universality, implications from the Grand Canyon and the geologic column. The book concludes with several chapters surveying scientific challenges to evolution and the theological implications of our understanding of origins.

Each of the books we have discussed may be useful in some way for those wishing to be better informed about creation and evolution. Even if we cannot agree with everything a given author writes, these informative, honest, and carefully reasoned approaches to origins are stimulating. Those wishing to gain a better grasp of the issues or to expand their understanding will find them a good starting point.

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¹An excellent balanced introduction to the debate is Denyse O'Leary, *By Design or By Chance* (Kitchener, Ontario: Castle Quay Books, 2004).

²Harold G. Coffin with Robert H. Brown and R. James Gibson, *Origin by Design* (rev. ed.; Hagerstown, Md.: Review and Herald, 2005).

³D. Sedley, *Creationism and its Critics in Antiquity* (Sather Classical Lectures 66; Berkeley: University of California Press, 2007).

⁴Benjamin Wiker and Jonathan Witt *A Meaningful World: How the Arts and Sciences Reveal the Genius of Nature* (Downers Grove, Illinois: IVP Academic, 2006).

⁵John C. Sanford *Genetic Entropy and the Mystery of the Genome* (Lima, N.Y.: Elim, 2005).

⁶E.g., Michael J. Behe, *The Edge of Evolution: The Search for the Limits of Darwinism* (New York: Free Press, 2007); idem, *Darwin's Black Box* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1996), arguing that "irreducible complexity" points to the

presence of a Designer. Answering objections that have been raised to Intelligent Design is William A. Dembski, *The Design Revolution: Answering the Toughest Questions about Intelligent Design* (Downers Grove, Ill.: Intervarsity, 2004).

⁷On reasons given by scientists (some of whom are Adventists) for a six-day creation, see *In Six Days: Why Fifty Scientists Choose to Believe in Creation* (ed. John F. Ashton; Green Forest, Ark.: Master Books, 2000).

⁸A revised and updated version of this book should be released soon: Leonard Brand, *Faith, Reason and Earth History: A Paradigm of Earth and Biological Origins by Intelligent Design* (Berrien Springs, Mich.: Andrews University Press, 1997).

⁹Nancy R. Pearcey, *Total Truth: Liberating Christianity from its Cultural Captivity* (Study Guide edition; Wheaton, Ill.: Crossway Books, 2005).

¹⁰*Creation, Catastrophe, and Calvary: Why a Global Flood Is Vital to the Doctrine of the Atonement* (ed. John Templeton Baldwin; Hagerstown, Md.: Review and Herald, 2000).

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