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Evolution and Biblical Theology

*Adapted from Chapter 11 of **CREATION, EVOLUTION AND THEOLOGY: THE ROLE OF METHOD IN THEOLOGICAL ACCOMMODATION***

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Is biblical theology compatible with the evolutionary metanarrative, according to which life on our planet originated through deep time by way of a process in which higher organisms of life emerged from lower forms? Can biblical theology be harmonized with evolutionary science? The question is not merely whether evolution is compatible with the Genesis account of creation, but whether evolution is coherent with the system of beliefs of biblical theology. What would happen to biblical beliefs and mission if Evangelicals become convinced that evolution describes the way in which things came into existence? Can Evangelical theology answer these questions by borrowing the macro-hermeneutical pattern of Christian theology described above?

These questions are important because some Evangelical

continued on page 2

Christian Evolutionists?

Gianluca Bacchiocchi

Can a Christian be an evolutionist? Discussions about creation versus evolution have been ongoing for years, but the topic is far from over for Bible-believing Christians on whether or not being a Christian can be reconciled with being an evolutionist. The study presented in this Endtime Issues Newsletter is written by Dr. Fernando Canale, who is a Professor of Theology and Philosophy at the Andrews University Theological Seminary (and, more importantly, also my father-in-law). This study, which is adapted from Chapter 11 of Dr. Canale's book, **CREATION, EVOLUTION AND THEOLOGY: THE ROLE OF METHOD IN THEOLOGICAL ACCOMMODATION**, focuses on how evolutionary science can affect our interpretation of Scripture and ultimately the doctrines that underpin our theology.

This study may be a bit more philosophical than those which normally appear in Endtime Issues Newsletters, but the arguments have a profound practical impact on our belief system. You will find some "big words" like *metanarrative* (the overarching story), *hermeneutical* (pertaining to interpretation), *eschatology* (pertaining to last day events) and *epistemology* (pertaining to the study of knowledge), which many of you may already be familiar with, but in case you are not, don't let them scare you.

If you have been blessed by this study and would like to further your understanding on the impact that evolutionary science can have on our theology, you can order **CREATION, EVOLUTION AND THEOLOGY: THE ROLE OF METHOD IN THEOLOGICAL ACCOMMODATION** by calling us at (269) 471-2915 or visiting our website, www.biblicalperspectives.com. The cost of the book with domestic shipping included is \$29.

May God richly bless you as you read this timely lesson on evolution and biblical theology.

INSIDE THIS ISSUE

- 1 Paul and the Sabbath
- 1 Understanding the Attacks Against the Sabbath
- 2 New Pricing of Books, DVDs and CDs from Biblical Perspectives
- 2 Projectors
- 2 Endtime Issues Newsletter Advisory Committee
- 6 Contacts

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Endtime Issues Newsletter Advisory Committee

As mentioned in Issue 219, we plan to keep the Endtime Issues Newsletter in circulation by inviting various scholars and thinkers to provide articles that examine significant current issues from a biblical perspective. To further this objective, we are in the process of establishing an advisory committee of respected scholars in diverse areas to help provide, solicit and review materials that will be published in the Endtime Issues Newsletter. Our vision for the Endtime Issues Newsletter is that it will become an even more powerful source of timely, thoughtful and biblically based articles that will challenge us to grow in our relationship with God and to be more effective ministers for Christ. Please pray that God will lead in the formation of this advisory committee.

Projectors

If you or your organization is interested in purchasing a Hitachi projector with a 3 year manufacturer warranty, please call Biblical Perspectives at (269) 471-2915 and ask for Dan or email Dan directly at dan@biblicalperspectives.com. He will be more than happy to help you purchase the right projector for your purpose as well as any peripherals that you may need.

At the moment, we have a special on a brand new Hitachi CP-X450 projector that we have in stock (it is a 3500 lumens projector that works well in permanent church/auditorium applications). It retails for \$3995.00, and we normally sell it for \$1427.10. We are willing to sell it to the first buyer for \$1165.00. This includes shipping (48 states) and Hitachi's 3 year warranty. Again, only one unit remains at this price (first come, first serve).

*Evolution and Biblical Theology
continued from page 1*

scholars wrestling with evolutionary issues seem to have become convinced that evolutionary science is true.¹ How did this happen? Evangelical scientists and theologians adopt evolutionary ideas by engaging themselves in the process of normal contemporary evolutionary science.² In simple terms, scientists and theologians adopt evolutionary theory because they learn it as the methodological paradigm within which their objects of study make sense; the power of explanation makes evolution persuasive; and in their eyes, the scientific method used in its construction makes it "true." Once these convictions set in the mind, they become powerful macro-hermeneutical presuppositions requiring not only the reinterpretation of Scripture³ but also the reinterpretation of the entire theological system. Eventually, the acceptance of these presuppositions will lead to the reformulation of the entire body of Christian doctrines.

Evangelical scientists, then, find themselves between two dogmatically received and contradictory traditions: evolutionary science (evolutionary method) and biblical theology (biblically grounded theological method). The inherent rational drive in humans pushes them to reach a harmonious unified understanding of truth. Eventually,

to resolve the cognitive dissonance, one or both positions will be modified. Chances are that, in this process, scientists and scientifically oriented theologians will find it easier to modify theological teachings than to reconsider the evolutionary paradigm. To harmonize Evangelical theology with evolutionary cosmology, some scholars may borrow the theological pattern used by classical and modern theologians described earlier in my book, **CREATION, EVOLUTION AND THEOLOGY: THE ROLE OF METHOD IN THEOLOGICAL ACCOMMODATION**.

Evangelical theology arose from the naive assumption that Scripture reveals things as they really are. By applying the historicist method of prophetic interpretation, the early Adventists not only became pioneers of “eschatological theology” a century before the writings of Wolfhart Pannenberg and Jürgen Moltmann, but they also departed from Platonic cosmology and the spiritual logic of Christian theology constructed by Augustine, Aquinas, Luther, and Calvin. In fact, the doctrine of the Sanctuary, a pillar of Adventist theology, opened to view a complete system of theology and philosophy.⁴ The theological change that took place in the first five years after the 1844 Great

If creation week did not take place, then there was neither a first couple perfectly created nor an origin of evil by disobedience to the historical order created by God. Then how are we to understand sin and redemption?

Disappointment implicitly changed the hermeneutical foundations Christian theologians had assumed thus far. Simply put, they implicitly assumed that God works his salvation within the spatiotemporal order of his creation through a historical process Adventists generally describe as the “Great Controversy.” In Adventism, this historical process replaced the timeless, spiritual logic of classical and Protestant theologies. Moreover, Adventist theology is a radical challenge to the “systematicity” of classical and modern Christian theologies. As history reveals, this resulted from the close application of the *sola Scriptura* principle to the understanding of eschatology, salvation, and the whole system of theology.

In the Adventist theological system, the material condition of method is defined as the *sola Scriptura* principle and the macro-hermeneutical condition is understood temporally and historically instead of timelessly and spiritually. Thus, Gen 1-2 is not only the explanation of how the temporal stands on God as its

ground, but also of how the history of God with his creatures revealed in Scripture began. In biblical thought, creation history not only explains the existence and design of nature, but the structure and dynamic of history as designed by God in its initial stage of perfection. The entire system of biblical theology works within the same historical understanding of reality and follows the same causal dynamics of interaction between Creator and creature. If creation week does not reveal how things actually happened, then there is not much reason to believe what it says about salvation or eschatology. If creation week did not take place, then there was neither a first couple perfectly created nor an origin of evil by disobedience to the historical order created by God. Then how are we to understand sin and redemption?

If the text is taken at face value, the temporal sequence of divine actions in Genesis cannot be isolated from its “theological” meaning without in some way superimposing on the text the timeless notion of God. For instance, Calvin suggested that the sequence of days in Genesis shows how good a provider God is. However, the text reveals much more, including, among others, the high complexity of God’s creative work, the spatiotemporal level in which the creation process took place, and the way in which God brought our planet into existence. As is true of the entire Bible, in the history of creation God appears not as a timeless, spiritual entity unrelated to space and time, but directly involved and moving within the concrete spatiotemporal order of causes. Scripture contradicted Platonic cosmology before Plato invented it. Thus, the historical-theological understanding of Gen 1-2 is more necessary to explain the origin of human history and Christian theology than to provide a scientific account of origins of the natural realm. A historical-theological understanding of Gen 1-2 focuses on God’s powerful historical process of interconnected creative acts. Adventism cannot change the history of creation without pulling from under its feet the foundation upon which it stands. Without this foundation, the doctrine of the Sanctuary and the historical interpretation of prophecy become literary exercises that do not help us to understand either nature or God’s works of salvation. Evolutionary theory destroys the biblical history of salvation as a redemptive process that moves from creation to new creation.

In conclusion, evolutionary theory challenges much more than the deep historical-theological meaning of Gen 1-2.

It calls for a wholesale deconstruction and reinterpretation of the fundamental principles of Adventist theology and the rejection of the historical understanding of salvation as presented in Scripture. Accommodation to evolutionary history implies rejecting and replacing the theological revolution from which Adventism originated. In turn, the community will lose the uniqueness that is its reason for existing. Adventists need to consider these points carefully before harmonizing Seventh-day Adventist beliefs with evolutionary patterns and history.

If science can correct Scripture's views on origins, it can also correct it in any area where scientific and theological discourses overlap.

This report on method clearly indicates that the "scientific" status of evolutionary theory should not intimidate Adventist theologians into accommodating the scriptural view of history to the evolutionary view of history. Epistemologically speaking, evolutionary theory is a hypothetical, methodologically and culturally conditioned, historical metanarrative still in need of harmonizing with its data and in need of corroboration. We should recognize its rationality (power of explanation), but by no means feel that we are rationally or methodologically bound to accept it. Alternative explanations to evolutionary theory are always rationally and scientifically possible.

If, on the other hand, Adventists decide to harmonize biblical thought on the origins of life on this planet with the theory of evolution, we should be aware that what we are proposing is not a minor exegetical change in our understanding of Gen 1. Instead, we will be introducing a radical paradigm shift in theological methodology. Sweeping changes in the implicit material and hermeneutical conditions of the theological method will generate changes permeating the entire Adventist system of theology⁵ and practice.

Harmonization of the biblical doctrine of creation with evolutionary theory necessarily requires a methodological departure in the material condition of theological methodology. The Roman Catholic and Protestant methodological conviction that God reveals himself through multiple sources that include the shifting sand of philosophical and scientific teachings will replace the traditional Adventist conviction that theological truth builds on the *sola Scriptura* principle. Harmonization also involves radical changes in the

hermeneutical condition of method. For instance, a spiritual, nonhistorical pattern of divine activity conceived from philosophical sources replaces the biblical historical pattern of divine activity central to the Adventist notion of the Great Controversy. Changes in the material and hermeneutical conditions of Adventist theological methodology will unleash a new way of understanding Scripture. A new Adventist theology will replace that of the early Adventists.⁶

The notion that we should blend evolution and creation into one single explanation that somehow merges the main contributions of both implies, at least, the conviction that Scripture does not provide the correct understanding of the origin of the world. The proponents of harmonization are convinced that science needs to mend what Scripture teaches. This implication entails a methodological shift of gigantic proportions. Harmonizing creation and evolution⁷ inescapably leads to the abandonment of the *sola-tota-prima Scriptura* principle.⁸ If science can correct Scripture's views on origins, it can also correct it in any area where scientific and theological discourses overlap. Finally, any attempt at harmonization calls for a radical change in the understanding of the divine revelation and inspiration of Scripture.⁹

Harmonizing Scripture to evolution, then, requires the harmonization of the Adventist theological method to the always-changing dictates of human science and tradition.

If this way of thinking about the sources of Christian theology becomes accepted, Adventist theology will not be able to maintain its critical stance against tradition. After all, what is today called "tradition," former generations called science. In classical times, science was philosophy containing a Neoplatonic cosmology whose guidance led Christian theologians to the classical version of Christianity still found ruling in Roman Catholic¹⁰ and Protestant evangelical theologies today.¹¹ In modern and postmodern times, the same methodological dynamic is at work. Empirical science containing an evolutionary cosmology¹² leads to a process-theology version of Christianity. Ultimately, these radical changes in the material and hermeneutical principles of Adventist theology will cause changes throughout the entire system of Adventist theology.

Harmonizing Scripture to evolution, then, requires the harmonization of the Adventist theological method to the

always-changing dictates of human science and tradition. In turn, methodological changes will require a reformulation of the entire corpus of Adventist doctrine and, eventually, the reformulation of all 27 fundamental beliefs. Before seeking harmonization between the creation and evolution metanarratives, then, Adventists should seriously think whether they are willing to give up the very reason for their existence as a church.¹³

NOTES

¹James L. Hayward, "Preface," in **CREATION RECONSIDERED: SCIENTIFIC, BIBLICAL, AND THEOLOGICAL PERSPECTIVES**, ed. James L. Hayward (Roseville, CA: Association of Adventist Forums, 2000), 11-15.

²Cf. Thomas S. Kuhn, **THE STRUCTURE OF SCIENTIFIC REVOLUTIONS**, 2d ed. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1970), 193.

³Richard M. Ritland, "Distribution of Life and the Creation of Biological Diversity," in **CREATION RECONSIDERED: SCIENTIFIC, BIBLICAL, AND THEOLOGICAL PERSPECTIVES**, ed. James L. Hayward (Roseville, CA: Association of Adventist Forums, 2000), 141.

⁴According to Ellen White, "the subject of the sanctuary was the key which unlocked the mystery of the disappointment of 1844. It opened to view a complete system of truth, connected and harmonious, showing that God's hand had directed the great Advent movement, and revealing present duty as it brought to light the position and work of his people" (**GREAT CONTROVERSY**, 424). She also declares that Scripture "unfolds a simple and complete system of theology and philosophy" (**EDUCATION** [Mountain View, CA: Pacific Press, 1952], 106).

⁵By "Adventist system of theology," I mean the theological system that the Sanctuary doctrine opened to the eyes of the Adventist pioneers (White, **GREAT CONTROVERSY**, 423). White has theologically formulated this system of truth throughout her writings and the Seventh-day Adventist Church has summarized its more salient components in its 27 Fundamental Beliefs.

⁶This harmonization will bring radical changes in Adventism similar to those Ellen White envisioned had Kellogg's pantheistic ideas found a home in Adventism. Consider her words as a description of the far-reaching implications that radical changes in theological method will entail for Adventism: "The enemy of souls has sought

to bring in the supposition that a great reformation was to take place among Seventh-day Adventists, and that this reformation would consist in giving up the doctrines which stand as the pillars of our faith, and engaging in a process of reorganization. Were this reformation to take place, what would result? The principles of truth that God in His wisdom has given to the remnant church, would be discarded. Our religion would be changed. The fundamental principles that have sustained the work for the last fifty years would be accounted as error. A new organization would be established. Books of a new order would be written. A system of intellectual philosophy would be introduced. The founders of this system would go into the cities, and do a wonderful work. The Sabbath of course, would be lightly regarded, as also the God who created it. Nothing would be allowed to stand in the way of the new movement. The leaders would teach that virtue is better than vice, but God being removed, they would place their dependence on human power, which, without God, is worthless. Their foundation would be built on the sand, and storm and tempest would sweep away the structure" (**SELECTED MESSAGES**, 1:204-205).

⁷The reader should bear in mind I am speaking of harmonizing evolution as a theory of science with creation as a systematic doctrine. I am not speaking, for instance, of harmonizing the Genesis story of creation with geological data or vice versa as Fritz Guy does (Fritz Guy, "Genesis and Geology: Some Contemporary Theological Perspectives," in **CREATION RECONSIDERED: SCIENTIFIC, BIBLICAL, AND THEOLOGICAL PERSPECTIVES**, ed. James L. Hayward [Roseville, CA: Association of Adventist Forums, 2000], 297). After all, to try to harmonize geological data with the creation story is the same thing that evolutionists do when they continually attempt to harmonize geological data with evolutionary theory. To harmonize the biblical story from the geological data is impossible. Data mean nothing without a theory. Therefore, to harmonize biblical data to geology is to accommodate Scripture to a scientific theory, not to scientific data. To search for the meaning of the geological data from the perspective of biblical-creation cosmology is a scientific enterprise that works within all the characteristics and limitations of scientific methodology described in my book, **CREATION, EVOLUTION AND THEOLOGY: THE ROLE OF METHOD IN THEOLOGICAL ACCOMMODATION**. The only difference is that the hypothesis or theory being used to explain the data is not drawn from human imagination, but from the biblical record. To try to harmonize or interpret Genesis

from geology is a problem of exegesis that uses an extrabiblical assumption to interpret the data of Scripture. Obviously, the problem facing theology is the attempt to harmonize two opposite cosmogonies and cosmologies. Though a synthesis between creation and evolution is certainly possible (e.g., Teilhard de Chardin's synthesis in his **EL FENÓMENO HUMANO** [Paris: Taurus, 1955]), it always implies considerable modification in one or both of the competing cosmologies.

⁸"The Holy Scriptures, Old and New Testaments, are the written Word of God, given by divine inspiration through holy men of God who spoke and wrote as they were moved by the Holy Spirit. In this Word, God has committed to man the knowledge necessary for salvation. The Holy Scriptures are the infallible revelation of His will. They are the standard of character, the test of experience, the authoritative revealer of doctrines, and the trustworthy record of God's acts in history" (Ministerial Association of the General Conference of Seventh-day Adventists, **SEVENTH-DAY ADVENTISTS BELIEVE**, 4).

⁹Implicitly, those who seek harmonization between the teachings of evolutionary science and Christian theology seem to recognize this much. See, e.g., Raymond F. Cottrell, "inspiration and Authority of the Bible in Relation to Phenomena of the Natural World", in **CREATION RECONSIDERED: SCIENTIFIC, BIBLICAL, AND THEOLOGICAL PERSPECTIVES**, ed. James L. Hayward (Roseville, CA: Association of Adventist Forums, 2000), 195-221.

¹⁰Bonsor, 6, states: "The philosophical environment of the early church was dominated by forms of Platonism. These philosophical perspectives provided a rich source for Christian revelation, a source that continues to enlighten revealed truth."

¹¹See, e.g., Donald G. Bloesch, **GOD THE ALMIGHTY: POWER, WISDOM, HOLINESS, LOVE**, (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 1995), 208-211.

¹²The more influential version of evolutionary cosmology is process philosophy, pioneered by Alfred North Whitehead, **PROCESS AND REALITY: AN ESSAY IN COSMOLOGY**, Gifford Lecture Series, 1927-1928 (New York: Macmillan, 1960). The ontological dualism of Platonism, Neo-Platonism, and classical Christian theology still survive in process philosophy, but are greatly softened and diffused into a plurality of levels.

Diffused ontological dualistic levels of reality are apparent, e.g., in the so-called "panexperientialism with organizational duality" (Ian G. Barbour, **RELIGION AND SCIENCE: HISTORICAL AND CONTEMPORARY ISSUES** [San Francisco: HarperCollins, 1997], 288). This view applies specifically to anthropological dualism. David Jay Griffin explains: "This doctrine provides the basis for a position that avoids Cartesian dualism while still affirming a distinction between the soul and the brain, a distinction that affirms the reality of human freedom and the possibility of life after death" ("Process Theology and the Christian Good News: A Response to Classical Free Will Theism," in **SEARCHING FOR AN ADEQUATE GOD**, ed. John B. Cobb Jr. and Clark H. Pinnock [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2000], 4). For an introduction to Teilhard de Chardin's and John Cobb's versions of evolutionary process theology, see Stanley J. Grenz and Roger E. Olson, **20TH CENTURY THEOLOGY: GOD AND THE WORLD IN A TRANSITIONAL AGE** [Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 1992], 130-144).

¹³White comments: "But God will have a people upon the earth to maintain the Bible, and the Bible only, as the standard of all doctrines and the basis of all reforms. The opinions of learned men, the deductions of science, the creeds or decisions of ecclesiastical councils, as numerous and discordant as are the churches which they represent, the voice of the majority—not one nor all of these should be regarded as evidence for or against any point of religious faith. Before accepting any doctrine or precept, we should demand a plain 'Thus saith the Lord' in its support" (**THE GREAT CONTROVERSY**, 595).

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