



Daniel K. Brannan

The Two Books Metaphor and Churches of Christ

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RECONCILING THE BIBLE AND SCIENCE: A Primer on the Two Books of God by Lynn Mitchell and Kirk Blackard. Lexington, KY: BookSurge Publishing, 2009. 266 pages. Paperback; \$18.99. ISBN: 9781439240090.

This is the first book written by members of the Church of Christ (a fellowship within the Stone-Campbell Restoration tradition) attempting to fully integrate evolutionary thought into theology.¹ In the past, members of the fellowship preferred natural theology or concordist approaches.² These positions were often coupled with a commitment to biblical literalism.³ It is difficult to judge the impact of this work, or any work, on the fellowship, given our congregational polity. However, the book was the subject of a major review at the Christian Scholars' Conference at Pepperdine University in June 2011, where it was unanimously welcomed as a step forward in science/religion interactions within the Restoration tradition.⁴ Mitchell is the director of the Religious Studies Program at the University of Houston and a minister of the Heights Church of Christ in Houston.⁵ Blackard is a lawyer and conflict management practitioner.⁶ Rather than critique evolution's validity, they accept it as the best explanation from those with expertise in the field and seek to reconcile the biblical stories with science.

Their key theme is the realization "that the Bible is not a book of science, and that to discover its fundamental truths, we need to read it as a book of theology."⁷ What a refreshing statement to hear from members of a fellowship that has historically focused on "plain sense" literalism when doing its worst

exegesis, and on concordism when doing its best. The authors reject both literalism and concordism in favor of higher criticism to move the fellowship into mainstream Christianity.⁸ In the first three chapters, they show how the Genesis creation stories have their origins in ancient Middle Eastern stories. These epics were adapted so that monotheism could capture the imagination and teach deep theological or spiritual insights regarding age-old human questions of ontology, teleology, and the ultimate meaning of life. The authors' primary claim is that Genesis 1-11 is a polemic against polytheism and idolatry; it is not a science or history text in the sense of "showing how it essentially was."⁹

Many of our problems in perceiving God today are rooted in Greek philosophy when it was assimilated into Christian belief by the Scholastics.¹⁰ As an example, the authors focus on Thomistic thought in integrating Greek philosophy in the first few chapters.¹¹ The authors also cover how medieval natural philosophy through Bacon focused on phenomenal causation but developed natural theology. Later in the eighteenth century, intellectuals reacted against

Dan Brannan (BS 1975, Phi Beta Kappa UNM) earned the MS in microbiology (1977) at the Ohio State University and PhD in biology (1981) at the University of New Mexico. He worked as a research scientist at Procter & Gamble Company before becoming a professor at Abilene Christian University in 1988. He has since studied science/theology interactions at Calvin College with Phil Clayton (summer 2001) and at Wycliffe Hall, Oxford University with Ernan McMullin as mentor (summers 2003-2005).

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various forms of natural theology to see nature as a self-sufficient deterministic mechanism. The scientists who promoted such mechanisms were predominantly Christian—but they saw the purpose of Scripture as theology, not science. In fact, *theologically*, Christianity allowed modern science to flourish: nature is not to be worshiped but studied; it is not inherently evil, illusory, or chaotic; nature can make sense through basic laws that can be rationally and naturalistically described; the human mind can comprehend the natural world. Just as Laplace saw the cosmos as determined by natural laws, Darwin developed an explanation of the biological world as a result of natural processes without divine intervention. The fundamental thesis of *how* evolution occurred (natural selection) did not obviate the claim of God as the giver of natural law. But it did extract God from needing to directly intervene in each and every species' appearance. It was comparable to no longer needing Newton's angels to "nudge the planets" into their orbits.

The authors chronicle Darwin's thinking but ignore the severe impact that the death of his daughter, Annie, had on him. The point of chapter four is that even if Darwin had never published *The Origin*, the idea of natural selection would still have developed; Darwin's contribution was to develop a unified theory to explain speciation and provide evidence to support it. It was not until his publication of *The Descent of Man* in 1871 that the theory of evolution by natural selection seemed to attack the core of our being. Some saw it as claiming that we have no grand purpose; we are merely another animal and on Earth merely as a result of randomness, chance, and blind indifference. But is this view *necessary*? With laws of nature, one still has to metaphysically ask if there is directionality and purpose.

In chapter 5, the authors cover how Darwinian thought was received in the United States. At the close of the nineteenth century, evolution by natural selection was being assimilated into theological reflection.¹² But in the early twentieth century, reactions arose against modernism and German higher literary criticism. Coupled with this was a revival of flood geology by Seventh-Day Adventist George McCready Price. The atmosphere was saturated with biblical fundamentalism and "plain sense" exegesis. In 1909, a twelve-volume series of booklets called *The Fundamentals* began to be published by a com-

mittee of men from several Protestant denominations. The goal was to oppose modernist views and to establish what they felt to be fundamental doctrines of the Christian faith, including biblical inerrancy. At least three contributors, George Frederick Wright, B. B. Warfield, and James Orr, believed in some form of the theory of evolution. Nevertheless, the pamphlets spurred antievolution sentiment.

By the 1920s, the stage was set for entrenchment, with a variety of Christian groups committed to "plain sense" readings. These elements allowed for the perfect storm: the Scopes "monkey trial" in Dayton, TN. The arguments against Darwin had emotional intensity. Retreat into infallibility seemed the only option. Data just *had* to be explained away: fossils were planted by Satan to trick us or by God to test our faith or there was a conspiracy of science against Christianity. On the other side were those who saw Scripture to be consistent with evolution; the creation accounts were symbolic affirmations of the world's dependence on God. The authors address these concerns but fail to address the "fundamentalist anxiety" of how evolution affects the Fall doctrine.¹³ A quick discussion of how John Henry Newman¹⁴ and Frederick Tennant¹⁵ addressed these issues in the nineteenth century would have helped. The authors conclude that

while science did present some issues for [Christianity], the larger problems were presented by the philosophical implications ... however, the philosophical implications of Darwinism have no bearing whatsoever on whether biological evolution [by natural selection] is in fact a correct understanding of man's origin and development.¹⁶

The authors discuss epistemology in chapters six and seven, pointing out that the "debates" between science and Scripture are due to a misunderstanding of what questions science can, and cannot, answer, and how it differs from those which theology asks. Even if one agrees that our universe seems planned, it is a metaphysical position to claim it. In contrast, the intelligent design (ID) movement sees design as provable by scientific methodology. The theological concept that God is Creator is vastly different from the weakest of the Thomistic arguments ... the teleological argument from design. Christian belief flows from faith, not from a neo-Paleyan approach to natural theology such as ID. The authors conclude that theology does not design tests for the existence of God

nor does it use God to fill in gaps of knowledge. Instead, we start with the metaphysical assumption that God exists. As a person of faith, I cannot see God's existence as a hypothesis to be tested.

So what are the criteria for belief in God? Even Richard Dawkins, the vocal atheist, has realized, "the absolute impossibility of proving or disproving God ..."¹⁷ Whether one agrees with your argument depends on what counts as evidence for that individual. In epistemology, one has to first address several questions: Can logic prove existence? Does subjective experience provide for objective reality? Can physical evidence ever be offered when talking about supernatural things? Are the things internally experienced as mental events real? None of these considerations were included in the authors' attempts to address epistemological arguments. Their discussion of Hume was similarly poorly nuanced.¹⁸ Hume's fight was mainly against the physico-theologians of the time and the teleological argument; it was not necessarily an argument against God's existence.¹⁹ I would modify the authors' claim that Hume discredited orthodox religious belief and say instead that he discredited natural theology.

Moving on to atheism, the authors ask, "If one cannot prove the existence or non-existence of God, how does one become an atheist?"²⁰ The answer given, they claim, depends on how one defines atheism: simple absence of belief in deities, or positive denial or rejection of their existence. In the latter definition, what might be called "strong atheism," the secular philosophy of "scientific naturalism" is often invoked: the only things knowable are those things that are natural, physical, or material. They distinguish this from "metaphysical naturalism" which holds that the supernatural does not exist at all. From such a position, Dawkins claims that positing God is superfluous.²¹ This argument aims to discredit belief but offers no proof; one *could* postulate a deity who used evolutionary processes.²² Ultimately, atheism offers no solution to basic metaphysical questions regarding the existence of the universe or its actualization.²³

Next, the authors turn the tables and search out the origins of modern forms of creationism. Probably the greatest influence on the rise of creationism was the reaction to modernism and the teaching of

evolution in the public schools during the 1920s. Over the next 30–40 years, creationism would likely have dissolved had it not been for the emphasis on science education in the early 1960s in our race to the moon. Along with this emphasis came many science textbooks with major sections on evolution. The fundamentalist reaction was to decry the decline of traditional values and growing secularism in society, blaming it all on evolution taught in these textbooks. A variety of creationist organizations were formed in the late 1960s and early 1970s, and "creation science" or "scientific creationism" was born. Court cases decided the outcome during the 1980s.²⁴ Later attempts to force the teaching of ID were also rejected in 2005 as unconstitutional.²⁵

The authors critique ID concepts in chapter nine. Going back to Plato and Aristotle, the claim was that there must be a "prime mover" of the universe. Aquinas revived this concept and argued that design in nature pointed toward God. The key figure was William Paley in the early nineteenth century, who taught that the natural world was so complex it must be designed. The ID movement makes the fundamental claim that "intelligent causes are necessary to explain the complex, information-rich structures of biology and that these causes are empirically detectable."²⁶ By making this move, they hoped to distinguish ID from a biblically based religion; the court cases exposed this deception. The authors conclude that ID is a repackaging of scientific creationism in response to negative court opinion.

The ID movement should have left the empirical detectability claim alone and embraced natural theology. Perhaps they could have gotten it into a humanities class that way. In fact, the Dover case claimed as much. Critics of the court claimed that (1) the court assumed the actions of the Dover School Board were the actions of the ID movement when ID leaders claimed otherwise; (2) the court inappropriately equated ID with creationism; and (3) the court ignored or distorted scientific testimony by inappropriately ruling that ID was not science. Reading the case and transcripts provides an entirely different perspective to these claims. The court did not decide whether ID was metaphysically right or wrong. In fact, it recognized that "reasonable people can continue to believe, on the basis of revelation and faith, that there is a Designer who designed our universe."²⁷

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As a theological concept, design may be seen as one way to seek coherence in theism. But it is simply not science. One cannot test or put God on trial, and indeed, thinking one can is a violation of Jesus' words (Matt. 4:7; Luke 4:12). ID is poor science, and it is horrible theology.²⁸ Concordism is *also* bad theology. The authors point this out by noting that

many theologians conclude that while the Bible certainly does not argue against the big bang theory, it doesn't contain any element that is parallel to the theory ... Genesis doesn't begin with a bang. It begins with a watery chaos, just like the pre-biblical Babylonian story does, and it is out of the watery chaos that the universe is built.²⁹

The reference is to the earth *being* the watery chaos, with little reference to the rest of the cosmos except as heavens which were thought of as a firmament (dome-like structure) above the earth. Modern cosmology is not to be found in Genesis; consequently, concordism fails at the outset.

At best, ID is a counter-balance to the metaphysical assertions of naturalists such as Dawkins and Dennett—even if a potentially questionable one. Both camps overstep their bounds: ID claims to be science when it is really metaphysics (and a political movement), and the new atheists make metaphysical claims under the guise of science. The problem with inferring design is that humans are particularly bad at it. We can be told a design exists in a noise pattern, and we will search it out until, lo and behold, we actually see one! Not only are we pattern-seeking primates, our decisions regarding design “are largely a result of our personal experiences and the culture in which we have learned.”³⁰ Instead, we should exhaustively search out an explanation based in natural regularity and stochasticity, without assuming design. *This* is the process of science.

We reach the crucial point in chapter ten in which proper exegesis is defined, first, by *not* using the biblical witness for history or science lessons; the focus should be on the theological message. With this perspective, a conflict position between science and theology evaporates. The only conflict is for those who are still focused on natural theology, pro or con. On the one hand, Dawkins' brand of atheism uses metaphysical naturalism (or scientism) to bolster a metaphysical position that nature is all there is and only science provides truth (a self-defeating statement). On the other hand, creationism says that only

the plain sense understanding of Scripture (literalism) provides truth about origins of the cosmos and human beings; what can be discovered using our five senses and explainable by natural law is rejected in the light of a miraculous literalistic understanding. Each position is absolutist.

Unfortunately, the authors still favor some form of theistic evolution with all of creation moving toward a predetermined goal. Despite being more teleological than science allows, at least the authors admit that detecting purposefulness is through revelation, not science. Three theistic evolution positions are detailed: the origin of life itself and the spiritual nature of humans needing supernatural intervention (Francis Collins); evolution being guided by God via quantum chaos (Robert Russell); and God setting forth the laws of the universe so that it has the potential to evolve on its own and without supernatural intervention (Howard Van Till).

Van Till sees theology and the natural sciences as studying two different aspects of reality in which “we must carefully distinguish two categories of questions about the natural world.”³¹ These two categories are what Van Till calls “internal affairs” and “external relationships.” The first is the view of natural science which empirically reveals information about the world's properties, behavior, and history; he describes these in purely natural terms. The second is metaphysical, as it concerns how the cosmos and God can be related as revealed via Scripture. Van Till sees God as endowing creation with its ability to self-organize.³² Biological evolution is consistent with the doctrine of creation in this view. The “formational economy” of creation allows it to organize and transform itself from elementary matter to complex life forms.

In Collins' view, while there is no proof of God, the best evidence is moral law (as per C. S. Lewis and Kant before him). Collins also places weight on the scientific support for the cosmos having a beginning and obeying orderly laws. His position takes seriously that (1) the universe had a beginning about 14 billion years ago; (2) the anthropic argument is weak; (3) evolution and natural selection allow for descent with modification from a common ancestor; (4) no supernatural interference occurred once life began, including the development of humans from a common ancestor with apes; and (5) humans are

unique in their spiritual nature which cannot be fully explained by evolutionary processes (e.g., the moral law and the desire to know God).³³ Unfortunately, the last position has not been adjudicated by science so far; as such it is, potentially, a God-of-the-gaps argument.

Russell claims a “noninterventionist understanding of special providence.” It is actually quite *interventionist* since God still takes action but within the laws of nature: these actions are not violations of natural law. Quantum fluctuations cause genetic variation (via mutation) which indirectly affects the course of evolution.³⁴ Russell interprets quantum indeterminacy “philosophically to imply that there are some events in nature for which there is no sufficient efficient natural cause.”³⁵ This lack of a causal nexus at the quantum level allows for divine action by nudging quantum states rather than entire planets. Thus, Russell sees general divine action that creates and sustains the world *plus* special divine action that *indirectly* causes special events in the world. So, while the process of evolution may *appear* to be random chance, God knows how to play with quantum indeterminacy so that it chaotically magnifies to create the mutations needed for evolution to be guided. This places God as acting within time, knowing the outcome, and completely responsible for it, without violating a law of nature. The advantage, as Russell sees it, is that it does away with the “blind chance” claim of the metaphysical naturalists in which “blind chance” is the hidden action of the God who creates life.³⁶ Spooky action at a distance is deified by Russell. For me, this view provides for too much culpability when it comes to theodicy issues.

The authors fail to point out that none of the three theistic evolution positions are *scientific* explanations. They are theological constructs consistent with science in the sense that violation of natural law is not needed. However, out of the three, the only one that does not require an interventionist strategy is Van Till’s. All three positions are different from ID in that they are theological concepts attempting to reconcile evolution with belief in God, rather than trying to masquerade as an alternative “science.” Perhaps the major flaw in the book was this failure to critique theistic evolution. God’s involvement in evolution should be left a mystery – perceived in the mind of the believer without trying to find some physicalist explanation for divine action.

The last five chapters focus on how to read the Bible as theological literature, how to make judgments about science, and how these move the authors to belief. They make the case that conflict does not exist between science and the Bible when the Bible is properly interpreted. One can assimilate evolutionary thought into a Christian concept of creation without taking Genesis 1–11 either as science or as history but, instead, as symbolic revelation for the purpose of theological insight. Many mainline Protestant churches, Roman Catholicism, and theologians agree.³⁷ Although not explicitly stated in chapter eleven, the authors rely on modern higher literary criticism to understand and interpret Scripture – something which Churches of Christ rejected in the early twentieth century with the rise of fundamentalism but slowly came to accept in the latter half of the past century.³⁸ Understanding the beliefs of the writers and their audience, including the cultural landscape when the text was written, and considering the linguistic/literary relationships in the text, help us to better see the applicability of these ancient texts to our own times.

Consequently, we should not see the Genesis stories as attempts to describe in scientific detail how the stars work, or whether the universe is geocentric or heliocentric, or how or in what time frame God went about creating the universe or humans. Without this perspective, we are bound to a “plain sense/vulgar/literal” view of Scripture and, in so doing, fulfill Augustine’s prophecy of being laughed to scorn. We need to recover our sense of symbolism, metaphor, and mythic imagination when reading Scripture rather than forcing it to be “true” history or science. The authors maintain that the biblical writers never intended Scripture “to contain any science at all, whether viewed scientifically, historically, psychologically, theologically, or exegetically.”³⁹ Scripture is meant to tell us that there is only one God through whom we may receive salvation. *That* is the sole purpose of the biblical message.

By chapter twelve, the authors have thoroughly rejected “plain sense” eisegetic approaches. They point out that even when common language is used in Scripture, it is an “accommodation principle” in order to reveal God, such that anyone may understand the basics for salvation. The *details* of Scripture, especially doctrinal matters, are best left to the magisterium of the church.⁴⁰ Personal interpretation

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of Scripture without solid theological insight—so-called plain sense readings—must be rejected, even as the Ethiopian eunuch admitted to Philip in the chariot (Acts 8:30–31).

To illustrate this rejection of plain sense exegesis, the authors consider that the Genesis 1–11 stories constitute a mimetic narrative; this narrative is “a form of history and refers to historical times, event, and people, but it does not contain stories that meet the scrutiny of modern historical narrative.”⁴¹ Mimetic narrative actually *transcends* ordinary history. It is “a redescription of reality, the creation of a literary world or a textual world that reaches beyond itself and beyond its historical milieu ... into the discovery of some universal truth.”⁴² A greater truth than mere “data and facts” would provide is generated; merely focusing on details would “obscure the truth of the broader story, so one needs to read the narrative from beginning to end to understand its meaning as a single, coherent story.”⁴³ The focus of the Bible is to reveal the spiritual truth of the incarnation and the hope of eternal life.⁴⁴

Using the word “myth” or “fable” in reference to a story in the Bible often gets one in trouble with fundamentalists and some evangelicals.⁴⁵ However, it is this uneducated understanding of what “myth” means that leads to confusion. Myth is not a fictional tale when used in the literary sense. Rather, it is “a legendary narrative that presents part of the beliefs of a people or that explains a particular phenomenon ... [it] does not imply any judgment as to validity ...”⁴⁶ The mythical origin of these accounts does not denigrate their status as God-inspired or detract from their truth and value to serve a greater purpose.

How one avoids inappropriate interpretations is also covered in chapter 12. Being aware of the flaws in our own worldviews is a first step. Closely related, the authors say,

is the tendency to understand scripture according to the traditions to which we are accustomed, without giving any thought to those traditions and where they came from ... [traditions such as] sex is the original sin, or that work is punishment for sins ... or that Satan had a war with God in heaven ... none of these traditions is based on scripture or biblical stories.⁴⁷

Also inappropriate is reading Genesis in a concordist fashion: day-age theories, gap theories, placing Adam and Eve in a neolithic culture or in an oasis in the desert close to present-day Baghdad. Finally, we must not look for easy answers. Instead, we must

deal thoroughly and honestly with the text and follow accepted principles of interpretation in an attempt to understand the meaning of the passage in its original setting ... [and] to think deeply about the theological and personal implications of the deeper message.⁴⁸

This is a much more difficult and challenging task than a simple “plain sense” reading will allow—a task best left up to the magisterium of the church.

As an example of proper exegesis, the authors detail the theologically sound interpretations of the first eleven chapters of Genesis in chapter 13. The consensus of Bible scholars today is that the first eleven chapters are a composite of writings put together by an editor or editors from a variety of sources.⁴⁹ The authors draw three conclusions about the Genesis stories: (1) they are written before modern scientific understandings of the cosmos and so use a unique prescientific language for describing the physical world; (2) they are concerned with the nature of God, not mechanisms of biological development; (3) they are a consciously symbolic work, using poetic language and similar to parables rather than factual history. The focus of the stories is symbolic in order to reveal “deep, fundamental truths about the nature of humanity and our place in the universe.”⁵⁰ The point of the narrative was also to dismantle the polytheism of the time.⁵¹ Furthermore, the stories are a part of a whole that ultimately reflects why the incarnation of Christ had to be.

Probably the toughest issue to deal with is Christian anthropology. The authors point out that to “image God” does not require us to be made fully developed or without a history of common ancestry:

there is no difference between an existing human person whose ancestor was created instantaneously without progenitors just a few thousand years ago and an existing human person whose ancestors go back much further in time and whose lineage is much more deeply rooted in complex animal biology.⁵²

To illustrate this claim, the authors use an “ontology recapitulates phylogeny” argument: each of us

develops from a zygote which shows little resemblance to a human and yet still has the potential for relationship with God once fully developed.⁵³ The biblical doctrine of creation simply affirms that all humans are specially created by God regardless of ontology. The critical theological point is to know that God is involved, mysteriously, in each and every human's formation and yearns for a relationship with each person. Because each of us rejects this relationship to pursue selfish interests and desires, we *each* eat of the fruit to know evil and good in a quest to be our own god. Literalism or concordism does not help us here. Symbolism does. Whether humans have their origins in two miraculously fully formed humans or whether they were a result of a long evolutionary development, the Christian doctrine of creation is that each of us is created by God in some way. If such an "origin from a single cell is okay for one individual, it should work for our whole species."⁵⁴

The point is not to understand the two creation stories in Genesis as naturalistic, or historical, tales of how we came to be; they are theological explanations of our absolute dependence on God's providence.⁵⁵ Each story should depend on its own merits, and its individual purpose and literary style should be considered. Mitchell and Blackard prefer this approach since it argues

for a symbolic, theological, non-scientific meaning ... to convey universal truth ... Genesis is literature of the symbolic imagination ... the two [accounts] are different ways of telling the story for the purpose of communicating different ideas to different readers.⁵⁶

Consequently, they consider the *theological* interpretation of Scripture as critical, as opposed to a need to be literal, which leads to the claim that evolution is a threat to the Christian faith. They also explain how Aristotelian thought on fixity of species has been assimilated into modern creationism ever since medieval theology rediscovered Greek thought. Galileo's rejection of Aristotelian astronomy and Darwin's rejection of Aristotelian biology are both arguments against these ancient Greek ideas, not against the Bible. The problem is the acceptance of Aristotelian thought upon which is layered a "biblical" interpretation. Fixity of species is *not* a biblical concept but an Aristotelian concept of forms.⁵⁷

In chapter 14, the authors detail the symbolism of the Genesis 1-11 stories. What matters is that

humans rebel against God at all stages of development, from the dawning of consciousness (an image of God) until today. In contrast with the pagan myths of the time in which the gods purposively keep humans from immortality, the Adam and Eve story places our downfall into our own hands, but we still retain the privilege of caretakers of the earth. The imagery is there to show that each of us has lost that original innocence to pursue our own self-serving nature rooted in human pride and disobedience. The authors conclude,

Creation was good, and sin came after creation in the form of voluntary acts ... We have the same freedom and responsibility, commit the same acts, and behave the same way regardless of whether we were created six thousand years ago or have been around for millions of years.⁵⁸

The authors also reject the literalism of flood geology and the concordist approach of regional catastrophes in the Noachian deluge story. The story is not there "as a form of science that would describe how the earth's geologic features were formed ... and it was not intended as a history of events."⁵⁹ Its intent is to combat depraved pagan gods and provide a "beautiful picture of salvation by grace through faith. There was no other way to be saved from destruction ... except by coming to God's ark of refuge."⁶⁰ The Tower of Babel story is also explained from a theological perspective rather than as a literal reading, supporting a single origin for all languages.⁶¹ The story covers the recurring theme of condemning the overwhelming pride of people who defy God. It also tells us today that just because we have the technology to do something, we should ask ourselves if it contributes to the kind of justice we might expect of God. Can our "progress" really be to the glory of God if it harms the poor and oppressed?

A final chapter on epistemology rounds out the book; the authors focus on the importance of trusting expertise, not authority, in providing access to truth about the way the world works and the way theological reflection works. Despite not being scientists themselves, they have the good sense to trust those who are, when discovering validity in the physical world. Consequently, they accept scientific explanations from evolution, astronomy, geology, molecular genetics, and paleontology.

They also respect theological expertise. The mysteries of the cosmos are sufficient to cause many to

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insert “deity” whenever a naturalistic explanation is lacking. This is an impoverishing approach as it keeps relegating God to explain the gaps and then embarrassing the rest of us when the gaps are filled. The real mystery is, why is there a cosmos at all? What is its source? What is human destiny/purpose? These are the questions which theology attempts to explain. Science, by its very nature, cannot.⁶² It would be better to rely on the magisterium of the church rather than on personal interpretation to help interpret Scripture. Just as we do not read a textbook of surgery and try to perform an operation on ourselves, we would do better to rely on trained experts in the field (theologians) rather than on eisegesis from the laity when we read Scripture. In the end, the best approach is to

read Scripture in the historical and linguistic context in which it was written, to accept its mysteries, and to appreciate its fundamental truths about the relationship between God and man ... this is the approach that does not conflict with all that we observe and learn about science ...⁶³

A literal/historical/scientific reading of the creation accounts of Genesis negates their fundamental truth and power. As Langdon Gilkey puts it, “The claim to be able literally to describe God’s creative act does not so much reflect piety as it reveals the loss of the religious sense of the transcendent holiness and mystery of God.”⁶⁴ It creates God in our image: as scientist, engineer, designer, artificer, cobbler, construction worker, draftsman, and watchmaker.

Unfortunately, the authors do not clarify matters by their position on theistic evolution to illustrate God’s designing intelligence.⁶⁵ At least they do not defend it as scientific “proof” but as a theological concept. The problem with this approach is that they do not address all the examples of poor design—the “junk-yard wars” impression of things being hodge-podged together—that evolution often presents. There is far too much teleology in their version of theistic evolution for it to take science seriously. If the authors would consider process theology, they might improve their position of consilience between evolution and Christianity.⁶⁶ Effectively, process thought emphasizes the relational aspects of God’s character: God creates *with* the world in such a way to persuade or to “lure” cooperative action from creation, not to *force* it to do as one chooses. As a result, God draws all things unto him-

self, offering all things in every moment the opportunity for achieving the good while “... the whole creation groaneth and travaileth in pain together ... waiting for the adoption, *to wit*, the redemption of our body” (Rom. 8:22, 23; KJV). We are engaged in this process as well, since the creation waits in “earnest expectation ... for the manifestation of the sons of God ... [when it] shall be delivered from the bondage of corruption into the glorious liberty of the children of God” (Rom. 8:19, 21; KJV) in an eschatological future.⁶⁷ Nevertheless, Mitchell and Blackard have made a significant step forward from the fundamentalisms of plain sense readings and concordism that once characterized fellowships in the Restoration heritage. 

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Notes

¹See Douglas A. Foster, Paul M. Blowers, Anthony L. Dunnavant, and D. Newell Williams, *The Encyclopedia of the Stone-Campbell Movement* (Grand Rapids, MI: W. B. Eerdmans Publishing, 2004). Also see Leroy Garrett, *The Stone-Campbell Movement: The Story of the American Restoration Movement* (Joplin, MO: College Press Publishing, 1987); C. Leonard Allen and Richard T. Hughes, *Discovering Our Roots: The Ancestry of Churches of Christ* (Abilene, TX: ACU Press, 1988).

²Ashby L. Camp, *The Myth of Natural Origins: How Science Points to Divine Creation* (Tempe, AZ: Ktisis Publishing, 1994); Robert S. Camp, ed., *A Critical Look at Evolution* (Atlanta, GA: Religion, Science, and Communication Research and Development Corporation, 1972); Donald England, *A Christian View of Origins* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House, 1972); Calvin Fields, *Things You Never Heard: Strong and Compelling Evidence Concerning the Bible, Creation, Christ, Evolution* (Phoenix, AZ: ACW Press, 2001); Jack Wood Sears, *Conflict and Harmony in Science and the Bible* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House, 1969); Elton Stubblefield, *Creation, Evolution and the Great Flood* (Ft. Worth, TX: Star Bible Publications, 1995); J. D. Thomas, ed., *Evolution and Faith* (Abilene, TX: ACU Press, 1988); Bert Thompson, *Theistic Evolution* (Shreveport, LA: Lambert Book House, 1977). These books are authored by Church of Christ members; many of them are committed to biblical literalism and young-earth creationism.

³In *A Critical Look at Evolution*, Camp states, “Every writer holds the conviction that the biblical account of creation is a true and factual account of the origin of life on earth, in particular human life” (p. 33). The contributors were professors of Bible, physics, and biology at Harding College, Pepperdine University, and David Lipscomb College (schools affiliated with Churches of Christ).

In Thomas' *Evolution and Faith*, a move was made toward a more modern exegesis that allowed Scripture "to stand in its own literary, historical, and religious context" and without "a 'scientific' concern or presupposition" (p. 147). However, the move is shortly reigned in: "The Genesis account of creation, therefore, should be read [as] ... a straightforward, sober statement of what actually happened ... its opening chapters on creation are an integral part of Genesis' uncompromising historical character" (p. 177). The contributors were professors of Bible and various science departments at Abilene Christian University, affiliated with Churches of Christ.

⁴In a session organized by Chris Doran of Pepperdine, the book was reviewed by Donna Plank from Pepperdine, David Mahfood, a divinity student from Abilene Christian University, and James Foster of Princeton. The overwhelming positive perception was the book's commitment to respecting both science and theology as separate fields that could engage in fruitful dialogue. The reviewers appreciated the fact that this book showed that being called an "accommodationist" is not a pejorative epithet but a badge of honor. The reviewers found much to be praised in the detailed exegesis of Scripture but felt that the book was light on systematic and philosophical theology. Even though the hermeneutic was never spelled out entirely, restricting the Genesis texts to *merely* an exhortation of polytheism as the authors seem to do, did not engage as robust a theology as is needed to allow a true reconciliation of science and theology. However, it did succeed in exegetically reconciling the biblical narrative with the evolutionary one. The consensus hope was that the book's audience (the educated laity in Restorationist fellowships) would finally be freed from the plain sense biblical literalism that plagues some remnants within the tradition.

⁵Mitchell is an alumnus of Abilene Christian University (BA, 1961; MA, 1969 in doctrine with minor in Hebrew) and Rice University (PhD, 1979 in religious studies— theology and theological ethics).

⁶Blackard developed Shell Oil's internal conflict management system and has authored several books on conflict management. His role with the book was to provide a layperson's perspective.

⁷Mitchell and Blackard, *Reconciling the Bible and Science*, 14.

⁸The historical-critical method is preferred by the authors; they rely on source and redaction criticism in the spirit of the Tübingen School.

⁹Richard J. Evans, *In Defense of History* (New York: W.W. Norton & Co., 2000), 14, in reference to Ranke's principle of *wie es eigentlich gewesen*.

¹⁰Many of the "proofs" of God using Platonic and Aristotelian ideas create more conflict with modern science than scriptural literalism.

¹¹Thomistic thought became a major theological underpinning for the Catholic struggle against Protestant theology. Aspects of it are used in fundamentalist circles today (ironically assimilated by fundamentalist Protestants) when rejecting the discoveries of modern science and accepting the fixity of species and an original type species.

¹²John Henry Newman and Frederick T. Tennant are classic examples (see notes 14 and 15 below).

¹³Tatha Wiley, *Creationism and the Conflict over Evolution* (Eugene, OR: Cascade Books, 2009); Tatha Wiley, *Original Sin: Origins, Developments, Contemporary Meanings* (New York: Paulist Press, 2002); Daryl P. Domning and Monika K. Hellwig, *Original Selfishness: Original Sin and Evil in the Light of Evolution* (Burlington, VT: Ashgate Publishing, 2006); Richard Mortimer, "Blocher, Original Sin and Evolution," in *Darwin, Creation and the Fall*, ed. R. J. Berry and T. A. Noble (Nottingham, UK: Apollos, 2009), 173–96; Jerry D. Kormeyer, *Evolution and Eden: Balancing Original Sin and Contemporary Science* (New York: Paulist Press, 1998); Patricia A. Williams, *Doing without Adam and Eve: Sociobiology and Original Sin* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2001).

¹⁴John Henry Newman, *Apologia Pro Vita Sua*, ed. Martin J. Svaglic (Oxford: The Clarendon Press, 1967), 217–8. It can also be found at the Newman reader website: www.newmanreader.org/works/apologia/part7.html (last accessed June 22, 2011).

¹⁵D. K. Brannan, "Darwinism and Original Sin: Frederick R. Tennant's Integration of Darwinian Worldviews into Christian Thought in the Nineteenth Century," *Journal for Interdisciplinary Research on Religion and Science* 1 (2007): 187–217. Accessible on the web at www.jirrs.org/jirrs_nr_1/08-brannan.pdf (last accessed June 22, 2011); D. K. Brannan, "Darwinism and Original Sin: Frederick R. Tennant's Analysis of the Church Fathers' Understanding of Original Sin and an Exegesis of St. Paul," *Journal for Interdisciplinary Research on Religion and Science* 8 (2011): 139–71. Accessible on the web at www.jirrs.org/jirrs_nr_8/07-06-jirrs8-brannan.pdf (last accessed June 22, 2011).

¹⁶Mitchell and Blackard, *Reconciling the Bible and Science*, 82.

¹⁷Richard Dawkins, *The God Delusion* (New York: Houghton Mifflin Co., 2006), 49.

¹⁸Mitchell and Blackard, *Reconciling the Bible and Science*, 104.

¹⁹Hume's agnosticism was more focused against philosophies that mistakenly made assumptions to come up with metaphysical claims when the facts were not properly associated in the first place. We believe in certain ways, based more on habit, social convention, and even our natural instinct, than based on data and rationality. With this view, Hume questions not only natural theology but metaphysical naturalism disguised as science.

²⁰Mitchell and Blackard, *Reconciling the Bible and Science*, 106.

²¹Richard Dawkins, *The God Delusion* (New York: Houghton Mifflin Co., 2006), chap. 4.

²²Examples of poor design are used to question a deity as a designer or at least frame the deity as capricious or inept. This argument assumes omnipotence, omniscience and omnibenevolence for God and that he exercises, in particular, the first at all times without regard for allowing freedom of all things to "become" on their own. Open and process theology see this differently.

²³Norman L. Geisler, *Christian Apologetics* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House, 1976), 234. See the following webpage for a list of contrary arguments: www.freeinquiry.com/skeptic/theism/ (last accessed June 22, 2011).

²⁴Court challenges to the constitutionality of antievolution laws occurred in 1968 when the US Supreme Court overturned an Arkansas law that had been on its books since 1928 shortly after the Scopes trial (*Epperson v. Arkansas*).

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The Two Books Metaphor and Churches of Christ

The legal strategies have been evolving ever since. One approach is the “equal time laws,” a repackaging of creationism without reference to biblical themes. The equal time laws passed by Arkansas and Louisiana in the early 1980s were also struck down as unconstitutional in 1982 (*McLean v. Arkansas*) and 1987 (*Edwards v. Aguillard*). After these defeats, several new phrases were used in hopes of inserting “creation science” into the curriculum: “alternatives to evolution,” “evidence against evolution,” “initial complexity theory,” and “intelligent design theory.” See the NCSE website for details: <http://ncse.com/creationism/general/antievolutionism-creationism-united-states> (last accessed June 22, 2011).

²⁵Kitzmiller v. Dover, 2005. For an analysis, see <http://ncse.com/creationism/legal/intelligent-design-trial-kitzmiller-v-dover> (last accessed June 22, 2011). For full text of the case, see http://ncse.com/webfm_send/73 (last accessed June 22, 2011).

²⁶Mitchell and Blackard, *Reconciling the Bible and Science*, 126–7.

²⁷Ibid., 133.

²⁸Theologians such as John Haught testified in the *Kitzmiller v. Dover* trial that ID is “appalling theology” in that it is the attempt to bring the ultimate and the infinite down in a belittling way into the continuum of natural causes as one finite cause among others. And any time, from a theological point of view, you try to have the infinite become squeezed into the category of the finite, that’s known as idolatry. So it’s religiously, as well as theologically, offensive to what I consider the best [theology] ... (p. 27 of the court transcript)

See http://ncse.com/files/pub/legal/kitzmiller/trial_transcripts/2005_0930_day5_pm.pdf (last accessed June 22, 2011).

²⁹Mitchell and Blackard, *Reconciling the Bible and Science*, 135.

³⁰Ibid., 139.

³¹Ibid., 150.

³²This view is reminiscent of Augustine’s seed principles; it obviates the need for a God of the gaps so characteristic of creationism and ID. God does not have to intervene over and over again to get things right.

³³Francis S. Collins, *The Language of God: A Scientist Presents Evidence for Belief* (New York: Free Press, 2006), 200.

³⁴Robert John Russell, “Special Providence and Genetic Mutation: A New Defense of Theistic Evolution,” in *Perspectives on an Evolving Creation*, ed. Keith Miller (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans Publishing Co., 2003), 335–69. Also cited, R. J. Russell, *Cosmology from Alpha to Omega: Towards the Creative Mutual Interaction between Theology and Science* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2008).

³⁵Mitchell and Blackard, *Reconciling the Bible and Science*, 153.

³⁶Russell, “Special Providence and Genetic Mutation,” 368.

³⁷The authors cite Paul Tillich as seeing no conflict between faith and reason, Karl Barth as seeing the intention of the creation accounts to emphasize the distance between cosmos and creator, and Dietrich Bonhoeffer and C. S. Lewis as denying that the creation accounts have any conflict with Darwinism and in fact emphasize our connection with the rest of creation (p. 156).

³⁸Michael Wilson Casey, “The Interpretation of Genesis One in the Churches of Christ: The Origins of Fundamentalist Reactions to Evolution and Biblical Criticism in the 1920s,” (master’s thesis, Abilene Christian University, 1989), 261.09C338i ACU Library.

³⁹Mitchell and Blackard, *Reconciling the Bible and Science*, 172.

⁴⁰For fellowships within the Restoration movement, the magisterium is essentially the colleges and universities supported by our fellowship. Due to our congregational polity, however, this “magisterium” has no ability to enforce doctrine or dictate hermeneutic approaches.

⁴¹Mitchell and Blackard, *Reconciling the Bible and Science*, 177.

⁴²Ibid., 179.

⁴³Ibid.

⁴⁴Even the creation of a historical biography was not the reason for recording the life and teachings of Jesus. The point of the Gospels is to convey the message of God incarnate who loves all things (the world) so much that Jesus experiences it completely as a sentient human, the very same things we do including death. Since Jesus is also divine, the Gospels tell us that he interacts with the natural world in such a way that even death is not truly the end as he ascends in the form of a glorified body to whence he came. The character of religious language is filled with symbolism; we need to avoid taking the symbolism literally.

⁴⁵Bert Thompson, *Is Genesis Myth? The Shocking Story of the Teaching of Evolution at Abilene Christian University* (Montgomery, AL: Apologetics Press, 1986). For an analysis, see Ronald L. Numbers, *The Creationists: The Evolution of Scientific Creationism* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1992), 315.

⁴⁶Mitchell and Blackard, *Reconciling the Bible and Science*, 183.

⁴⁷Ibid., 191.

⁴⁸Ibid., 192.

⁴⁹Ibid., 196. There are at least two sources: a document derived from the oral traditions of ancient Hebrew stories from the Southern Kingdom of Judah after the time of Solomon, and a similar collection of the traditions of Israel from the Northern Kingdom of Ephraim shortly after (during the exilic or late Old Testament period).

⁵⁰Ibid., 197.

⁵¹Conrad Hyers, *The Meaning of Creation: Genesis and Modern Science* (Atlanta, GA: John Knox Press, 1984), 44. Overthrown are ideas of the creation (light, darkness, sky, sea, sun, moon, stars) being gods. They are merely physical created entities. Procreation is a blessing rather than something to be worshiped. All humans have God’s image, not just the kings who represent the gods. The stories reveal who God is through events and actions that show he is the Creator of all things, even those things once thought to be gods themselves.

⁵²Mitchell and Blackard, *Reconciling the Bible and Science*, 207.

⁵³Ibid., 207. They see this analogy as providing help to “overcome any discomfort associated with matter (such as ‘dust of the ground’), nature (such as our animal natures, natural relatives, and one-cell beginnings), and natural juices (such as ‘slime’) that refer to substances associated with the beginning of all life and the beginning of each individual life of every ‘kind.’”

⁵⁴Ibid., 211.

⁵⁵Pointing out the work of Conrad Hyers, the authors note that the stories reflect two contrasting life-settings in the history of Israel. The story in Genesis 1, which actually comes after the Genesis 2–3 story in time, reflects an agricultural-urban imagery of civilizations ruled by kings who gave commands, whereas Genesis 2–3 reflects pastoral-nomadic imagery drawn from the experience of wandering herders living on the fringes of fertile plains. Both stories were important in the history of Israel and thus are placed side-by-side. Conrad Hyers, *The Meaning of Creation: Genesis and Modern Science* (Atlanta, GA: John Knox Press, 1984), 41.

⁵⁶Mitchell and Blackard, *Reconciling the Bible and Science*, 213.

⁵⁷The authors remind us of Baptist theologian Bernard Ramm’s position that “Few reliable conservative scholars today would state that we can positively identify the Hebrew word *kind* (Hebrew, *min*; LXX, *genos*; Vulgate, *genus* and *species*) with the modern scientific notion of *species* ... We judge it improper for the theologian to try to settle specific details about scientific matters by forcing the Bible to speak with a degree of particularity its language does not indicate.” See Bernard Ramm, *The Christian View of Science and Scripture* (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1954), 37. This book was the theme of a December 1979 issue of the *Journal of the American Scientific Affiliation*.

⁵⁸Mitchell and Blackard, *Reconciling the Bible and Science*, 224–5.

⁵⁹*Ibid.*, 231.

⁶⁰*Ibid.*, 231. It is a metaphor for baptism as well; see 1 Pet. 3:20–21.

⁶¹For a naturalistic explanation of the origin of languages, see Quentin D. Atkinson, “Phonemic Diversity Supports a Serial Founder Effect Model of Language Expansion from Africa,” *Science* 332 (2011): 346–9.

⁶²Theology cannot resolve these questions completely either. Nevertheless, it *can* provide a greater awareness of the mystery, the unfathomable—that perhaps faith in God points in the right direction. The Christian religion is filled with many doctrinal mysteries (the incarnation, resurrection, eschatology, the presence of Christ in bread and wine, how baptism removes sin, etc.) in which human language is incomplete to explain them; however, it is also a faith that has a consilience which holds together to provide a benefit for its believers. Understanding God is the goal of theology, but full understanding is reserved for another time. Like St. Paul, we must remain agnostic in this life

and admit that “now we see but through a glass darkly” (1 Cor. 13:12). What is hidden about God is greater than what is known (the apophatic nature of God).

⁶³Mitchell and Blackard, *Reconciling the Bible and Science*, 245.

⁶⁴Langdon Gilkey, *Maker of Heaven and Earth* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday & Co., 1959), 54.

⁶⁵The authors claim,

We believe that God has created a world that contains the capabilities for self-organization and change, such that “an unbroken line of evolutionary development has in fact taken place ... meaning that God had a creative plan that included natural consequences and divine governance over a continuing and ever-changing process. The material behavior that we observe, including evolution, is a consequence of God’s plan and a continuing expression of His plan for the development of the universe. Natural laws describe this behavior as well as a patterned succession of related phenomena—a succession that demonstrates that God did not act impulsively or on a whim. The glory of creation took place, and the awe it engenders is not diminished by an evolutionary view of how organisms developed from original life. (Pp. 248–9)

⁶⁶For an application to the doctrine of creation, see John B. Cobb and David Ray Griffin, *Process Theology: An Introductory Exposition* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 1976), chap. 4, “A Theology of Nature.”

For an application of process theology that takes evolution seriously as an explanation for original sin, see Daryl P. Domning and Monika K. Hellwig, *Original Selfishness: Original Sin and Evil in the Light of Evolution* (Burlington, VT: Ashgate Publishing, 2006).

For an application that takes evolution seriously in Trinitarian theology, see Denis Edwards, *The God of Evolution: A Trinitarian Theology* (Mahwah, NJ: Paulist Press, 1999).

For a highly accessible and readable introduction that integrates evolution with Christian thought, see John F. Haught, *God after Darwin: A Theology of Evolution* (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 2001).

⁶⁷For a quick and easy primer on this thinking, see Marjorie Hewitt Suchocki’s paper, “What Is Process Theology?” at www.processandfaith.org/publications/RedBook/What%20Is%20Process%20Theology.pdf (last accessed June 22, 2011).



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