

# Designing the earth without a designer

A review of  
***The Privileged Planet***  
 by **Guillermo Gonzalez &  
 Jay W. Richards**  
 Regnery, Washington, D.C.,  
 USA, 2004

## Jonathan Henry

Regnery publishes books on the ‘conservative’ end of the political spectrum. As understood in the United States, the term ‘conservative’ implies an adherence to older values, though not necessarily biblical ones. One might expect this definition to be an accurate forecast for this book, and Gonzalez and Richards deliver, immediately stating that the earth is designed, not only for life, but also to allow man to learn about its design (p. xv):

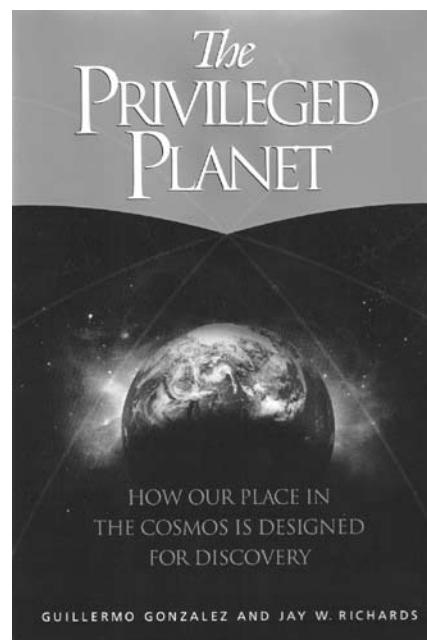
‘[T]he very same rare properties that allow for our existence ... also provide the best overall setting to make discoveries about the world around us.’

The moon, for example, is part of Earth’s design for discovery: our anomalously large moon, by reflecting Earth’s light back to us, has allowed Earth’s albedo to be measured for use in understanding climate (p. 110). The sun is also part of Earth’s design for discovery, in that solar eclipses act as chronometers (p. 17), and further, ‘[o]f the more than sixty-four moons in our solar system’, our moon ‘yields the best match’ with the sun for viewing total solar eclipses (p. 9). The biblical creationist easily discerns an outworking of Romans 1:20 in the ‘design for discovery’ premise: one aspect of knowing God’s power is discovering His design in creation. According to the authors, the conventional insistence

that the earth is not designed has generated an ‘epistemological hindrance’, which keeps us from ‘seeing patterns that are really there’ (p. 332).

As is typical of some intelligent design (ID) theorists, the authors carefully mask their religious affiliations, though they admire ID advocate William Dembski’s ‘seminal insights’ (p. 413), agree with much of what C.S. Lewis has to say (p. 412), and reject currently-fashionable Eastern interpretations of natural phenomena (p. 261). On the other hand, the universe, not God, is ‘an excellent tutor’ (p. 215). Gonzalez and Richards draw back from acknowledging God as Designer, never identifying by whom the ‘privileged planet’ has been endowed. ‘We must distinguish’, they claim, ‘between an argument for design and an argument for the existence of God’ (p. 330). Such a position leaves open the possibility that the designer is a New Age ‘force’ related to Eastern ‘interpretations’, which Gonzalez and Richards elsewhere reject. It also overlooks the implicit connection between God and design made in the Bible’s first verse (Genesis 1:1). Gonzalez and Richards see design ‘coincidences’ as ‘an outcome of the particular age of the cosmos, the age that is also the most habitable’ (p. 187), thus granting to ‘time’ the role which the Bible attributes to God.

Considering Gonzalez’ and Richards’ regard for evolutionary time, it is no surprise that according to them, naturalistic development of the earth and the universe over billions of years is beyond question. They accept the big bang as a given throughout the book, along with corollaries such as the nebular hypothesis and terrestrial and lunar evolution (p. 99). Over eons, stellar nucleosynthesis has produced the elements now in the earth, so that ‘[s]tar dust literally courses through our veins’ (p. 153). The moon formed



via the currently fashionable impact theory (p. 9). On the earth itself, we don’t know where the earth got ‘most of its water’ (p. 363), and the earth once had a primordial atmosphere (p. 72). The biblical creationist should compare these claims with biblical statements that the earth was equipped with abundant stores of water and a habitable atmosphere by God in the Creation Week (Genesis 1:2, 7, 9). In an interesting example of circular reasoning, Gonzalez and Richards claim that magnetic reversals on Earth have occurred in such a way that we can accurately infer the conventional chronology of the earth (pp. 48–53).

Gonzalez’ and Richards’ commitment to a long chronology leads to faulty conclusions. The authors wonder at the ‘fact’ that we are here on Earth at just the time in Earth’s history (4.5 billion years) which equals the average age of solar-type stars (p. 182). They seem unaware that in the conventional solar model, which is the basis for modelling other sun-like stars, the age of the sun is preselected so as to be slightly older than, but similar to, the conventional age of the earth.<sup>1,2</sup> On the presumption of great age, they claim questionable processes as part of the earth’s ‘design’. For instance, plate tectonics, acting over eons, recycle limestone, thus completing the carbon

cycle and supporting life (pp. 55–57). Based on their implicit trust in conventional nucleosynthesis occurring over eons, Gonzalez and Richards see the key (Carbon–Nitrogen–Oxygen) CNO reaction series as the basis of an anthropic argument. They suggest that because C and O are produced in the relative amounts needed for life, it confirms (1) that the cosmos is designed, and (2) that conventional nucleosynthesis must occur over eons (pp. 198–200). However, this design argument is flawed, since nucleosynthesis theory postulates progressive build-up of all elements ultimately from primordial hydrogen, a concept negating the biblical teaching that God made a finished creation in six days (Gen. 1:31, Gen. 2:1).

Gonzalez and Richards espouse other ‘design’ arguments based on a long chronology. A planet significantly smaller than Earth would not be habitable, because over eons its interior ‘might cool too much to generate a [protective] magnetic field’, by the dynamo effect (p. 59). On a larger planet, water ‘would probably have degassed more’ than on Earth, thus covering all land with water and allowing no land-dwelling complex life to evolve (p. 59). A planet orbiting too close to its star would experience ‘tidal locking’ over eons, with only one side eventually facing the star (p. 7). The difficulty with these scenarios is that the time required for them never occurred. To sum up, much of what Gonzalez and Richards write is unfortunately an example of flawed reasoning engendered by belief in evolution. Pseudo-designs are touted while the true hand of God is ignored. *The Privileged Planet* therefore cannot be recommended as a resource for a novice seeking an acquaintance with biblical creation.

If one is cognizant of these caveats, however, Gonzalez and Richards say much that can be read profitably. They correct many ‘shibboleths’ too often parroted thoughtlessly, such as claims that the earth or the sun is ‘average’. They put recent discoveries of extrasolar planets into proper perspective by pointing out that not one of them is

like the earth, thus strengthening, not weakening, evidence that the earth is not typical (pp. 254–255). They repeatedly correct the error of describing the sun as an average star, observing that ‘[t]extbook and science writers have repeated this claim so often that it has become an entrenched dogma’ (p. 253). However, ‘we now know that our sun has a number of important, and anomalous, life-permitting properties’ (p. 253).<sup>3</sup> For example, it is more massive and more stable than most stars and thus constantly emits sufficient radiation to support life on Earth (p. 137). Though sun-like stars are a minority, only the light from sun-like stars supports photosynthesis and therefore life (pp. 67–68). Further, the earth is designed for discovery in having the sun as its star, for only a solar-type star would as easily have allowed discovery of stellar elemental composition. In the spectra of cooler stars, excessive molecular absorption lines would hide information; spectra of hotter stars would have too few ‘molecular lines for astronomers to derive useful data’ (p. 125).

Earth has unique stores of liquid

water (i.e. not known to exist anywhere else), and only water/carbon-based chemistry can support life; there is not a multiplicity of chemical systems in which life could exist (pp. 32–35). Only Earth could have significant long-term feedback mechanisms involving water to insure continued habitability. For example, global warming increases water evaporation, cloudiness, and precipitation; clouds reflect ‘excess solar energy back into space’, and increased precipitation increases plant growth, ‘thereby sequestering carbon dioxide’ (p. 69). Higher albedo and decreased CO<sub>2</sub> levels are negative feedbacks leading to cooling. The biblical creationist perceives that negative feedbacks demonstrate that God designed the earth ‘to be inhabited’ (Isaiah 45:18), rather than collapsing ecologically due to widely-feared anthropogenic environmental factors. Gonzalez and Richards similarly conclude that global warming fears are faulty, noting that ‘the warming predicted for the next century may not materialize’ (p. 366). How one perceives future climate trends is ultimately a creationist/design issue. An Earth designed ‘to be inhabited’, and



Photo by NASA

*Earth rise from Apollo's lunar orbit. Of the 64 moons in our solar system, our moon yields the best match with the sun for viewing solar eclipses, while being the right size and orbit for supporting life on Earth.*



Photo by Tasman Walker

*In the Search for Extraterrestrial Intelligence (SETI), the Parkes Radio Telescope scans space for signs of intelligent life. But SETI ignores the obvious evidence that life, our world and our solar system show the hand of God. 'For since the creation of the world His invisible attributes are clearly seen, being understood by the things that are made' (Romans 1:20).*

thus equipped with robust negative feedback mechanisms, is a safer place than the 'fragile' Earth of evolutionary theory produced by inherently chaotic processes.

Gonzalez and Richards demolish common arguments that the earth is 'average', pointing out that size is 'hardly a reliable indicator of significance' (p. 274). They also demolish the 'official story' (p. 222) of how the rise of heliocentrism destroyed

special status for the earth (p. 244). Such a conclusion is only in the eye of the modern humanist beholder, and Copernicus, Kepler and Galileo saw heliocentrism as exalting the status of the earth (pp. 226, 239). Thus, extending the so-called Copernican Principle to the claim that the earth is not special at all is fallacious. This unwarranted extension, sometimes called the Principle of Mediocrity, is really about the antibiblical claim that 'We're not

*special*' (p. 285, emphasis in original). Indeed (p. 292),

'the central aspiration of the Copernican Principle [is] to restrict our gaze to a material universe that, by definition, was not designed'.

However, this agenda has arguably 'slowed the progress of science' because it has led scientists to avoid learning about 'the role of our solar system's specific configuration for the habitability of Earth itself' (p. 256).

The Search for Extraterrestrial Intelligence (SETI) assumes that life should exist in numberless places, not just on Earth, and is a key extension of the Principle of Mediocrity. Not surprisingly, SETI has 'semi-religious overtones' (p. 290) and is a 'quasi-religious quest' (p. 291). Moreover, SETI researchers typically have rejected traditional religion, toward which they have an 'anti-religious streak' (p. 291). As recent discoveries point away from the Principle of Mediocrity, SETI's aspirations have been 'shifted' from finding the solar system teeming with complex life to finding lowly microbes in possible subsurface water reservoirs of Jupiter's moon, Europa (p. 252). However, even Europa is a poor prospect for life, because it is 'naive' to assume 'that the presence of liquid water virtually guarantees life' (p. 88). Unfortunately, following the pattern that pervades *The Privileged Planet*, Gonzalez and Richards provide no biblical insights with which to guide discussions of unobservables such as extraterrestrial life. They allow that Mars and the solar system may harbour microbes (pp. 39, 40), skirting the need for addressing such questions biblically.

### References

1. Henry, J., An old age for the earth is the heart of evolution, *CRSQ* 40(3):164-173, 2003, pp. 165-166.
2. Henry, J., The evolutionary basis of Eddington's solar modelling, *CRSQ* 40(4):244-256, 2004, pp. 245-246.
3. Henry, J., The sun is not an average star, *TJ* 17(3):35-42, 2003, p. 36.