

Evangelicals needlessly cave on evolution

How I Changed My Mind About Evolution: Evangelicals reflect on faith and science

Kathryn Applegate and J.B. Stump (Eds.)

InterVarsity Press, Downers Grove, IL, 2016

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How *I Changed My Mind About Evolution* is a regrettable, 200-page survey of theological abdication. Editors Applegate and Stump¹ are both staff scientists at the Templeton-funded organization BioLogos, whose mission is to persuade people that microbes-to-man evolution is both true and compatible with Christianity (p. 16).² This book is intended as a means toward that end, but it does not attempt to reach its goal by setting out a purely rational case that resolves the conflicts. Instead, it presents personal stories—twenty-five short testimonies from people who claim to have reconciled evolution and faith to their own satisfaction.

While *How I Changed My Mind* will likely be persuasive to some, it ultimately fails to show that theistic evolution is an acceptable option for Bible believers. The book's attempts at reconciliation are inadequate, and there are several severe problems for theistic evolution which the book's contributors largely ignore.

Common themes

What persuades the contributors to merge their faith with evolution? A variety of influences are discussed, but certain themes come up repeatedly, so

the most common ones are evaluated below.

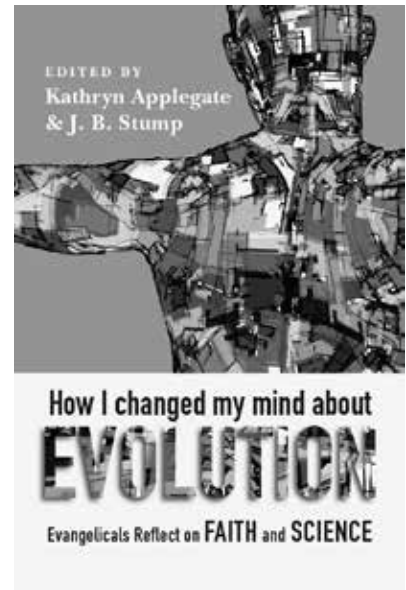
"Bad arguments for young-earth creationism (YEC) turned me off"

Many contributors recount their exposure to arguments they rightly recognize as fallacious. These include such claims as: dinosaurs are fake / Satan buried dinosaur bones (pp. 30, 140), although no mainstream creationist organization has ever taught this; the Paluxy riverbed contains dinosaur and human footprints (p. 110); God created with apparent age (pp. 125, 169), ignoring the correct view of creation with functional maturity; entropy began at the Fall (p. 126); the Bible contains advanced scientific insights (pp. 106, 119, 146, 148, 171); mammoths were snap frozen (p. 36); there is too little dust on the moon (p. 175); the speed of light is slowing down (p. 175); and there are no transitional fossils (pp. 149, 175), downplaying the fact that there are still only a handful of debatable forms compared to the huge numbers Darwin expected. Also, one chapter mentions a pastor who claimed to embrace evolution but, hypocritically, "would never say that from the pulpit" (p. 37).

Respectable creationists have long distanced themselves from such things.³ But the authors show little familiarity with the best creationist arguments, and instead repeatedly tear down the worst.

"All truth is God's truth"

The authors often use this phrase, or note that God wouldn't deceive us, and assert that we have nothing to fear from an honest exploration of



the scientific evidence (pp. 65, 79, 115, 129, 156). Agreed, but all this begs the question as to whether evolution is true. Beginning with the assumption that evolution is fact and insisting, on that basis, that it *must* be compatible with Christianity is backwards. The same reasoning could be used to justify all manner of theological errors, like condoning homosexuality because one first 'knows' it is morally right, and 'all morality is God's morality'.

"The scientific community operates in an open, objective, self-correcting manner"

Many of the book's contributors display a naïve view of how the scientific community operates when it comes to the origins debate (pp. 23, 37, 53, 67, 83, 125, 171). They lump evolution together with technological breakthroughs, ignoring the important distinction between operational and historical science (pp. 67, 171). And they fail to critically analyze the many assumptions that underpin evolutionary conclusions, e.g. methodological naturalism. For some, the only alternatives are that evolution is a fact or that evolutionists are lying conspirators (p. 140).



Figure 1. No mainstream creationist ministry has ever taught that dinosaur bones are fake, yet several contributors cite bad arguments like this as among their reasons for embracing evolution.

In reality, this is a false dichotomy since scientists are real people who, although typically sincere, are not necessarily dispassionate and objective—they are susceptible to groupthink and confirmation bias. Many honest evolutionists recognize that philosophical assumptions, politics, and personal agendas play significant roles in the scientific enterprise.^{4,5} In general, although various evolutionary models and mechanisms are debated, the overarching evolutionary paradigm itself is taken as a given and *not* open to question.⁶ Also, in academia and other arenas, there is tremendous persecution of those who doubt evolution, as has been thoroughly documented.⁷

“We can’t take all of the Bible literally”

There is a tendency to (mis) characterize the YEC hermeneutic as a strictly literalistic interpretation, and then to defeat this straw man by pointing out that nobody believes “the

sun is literally rising” (pp. 67, 118, 177). This is an inexcusable distortion, and completely fails to interact with the thoughtful exegetical arguments that creationists have been making for decades. We abide by objective rules for determining the meaning of any given text, so there is no inconsistency or arbitrariness when we regard some passages as making literal, historical claims and others as employing figurative language.

“Genesis does not describe *how* God created”

A moment’s reflection would falsify this assertion, but it is endlessly repeated by theistic evolutionists nonetheless (pp. 43, 50, 93, 171). One must wonder why so much detail is given in Genesis chapters 1 and 2 if God is totally unconcerned about communicating something of the manner in which He made things. On the contrary, the text gives readers time markers and an order of events;

it mentions the raw materials from which God fashioned Adam and Eve; and more. So on what basis do theistic evolutionists reject these statements? Jesus and the New Testament authors affirmed these details about *how* God created, but the contributors fail to engage with the relevant NT texts.^{8,9}

“God accommodated ancient Near Eastern (ANE) science”

This claim is a veiled denial of inerrancy, since it asserts that the Bible contains affirmations about the natural world which are false (pp. 43, 50, 102, 146, 148). Several contributors appeal to John Walton, in particular, who teaches that Genesis, along with other ANE documents, is not even describing the origins of material things (pp. 33, 93, 116, 118). With a nod to Richard Dawkins’ famous quip about Darwin and atheism,¹⁰ one writer goes so far as to say, “Walton’s book helped me become a biblically fulfilled evolutionary creationist” (p. 118). But Walton’s interpretation is preposterous on its face, and has been shown to thoroughly contradict Scripture.^{11,12}

More faulty arguments

“YEC is a late theological innovation”

James K.A. Smith’s essay repeats the old nonsense that Ronald Numbers’ book, *The Creationists*, “demonstrates the utter novelty of young-earth creationism as a biblical hermeneutic” (p. 25). Smith completely ignores documentation proving that YEC has been the dominant view throughout church history, held by the NT authors, the Early-Church Fathers, medieval theologians, the Reformers, and the 19th-century Scriptural Geologists—all predating the birth of the modern creationist movement.^{13–15}

"Conflict with evolution is primarily an American hang-up"

N.T. Wright's essay argues that Americans, as a result of their unique social and political history, attach more significance to the evolution debate, and conduct it with more polarization, than the rest of the world. Even if this is so, it does nothing to demonstrate that the American perspective is the wrong one, nor does it commend evolution as compatible with Christianity. It also ignores the fact that many leading creationists come from Australia and elsewhere. This issue is about truth, which transcends American concerns.

"God is slow"

The award for the most superficial theological argument in this book goes to Richard J. Mouw for his claim that "God is slow" and therefore we need not insist on six literal days (pp. 192–193). To be sure, God *may* work slowly, like when He delayed fulfillment of his promise to give Abraham a son until Abraham was very old. But other times He works quickly, like when Jesus turned water to wine instantaneously. So the question of how long God took to create cannot be decided by appealing to a half-truth masquerading as a profound insight. God revealed how long He took to create in Genesis, so that is what Christians ought to believe.

"If you were convinced YEC was wrong, would you give up Jesus too?"

Denis Lamoureux was impacted by this booby-trapped question, which apparently helped to convince him that YEC is not foundational or terribly important (p. 146). But such conclusions do not follow. Lamoureux's hypothetical question pits two truths against each other by *stipulating* that one is incorrect, even

though, in the actual world, there's no need to choose between them.

To give a parallel, Christians believe rape is wrong because it violates God's character. But atheists sometimes ask, "If you became convinced that God did not exist, would you then feel free to commit rape?" The question is meant to disconnect moral evil from God's existence. It can be rhetorically effective, because nobody wants to say that rape might turn out to be okay. People have a strong intuitive conviction that rape is wrong even if they haven't deduced this from a belief in God. But does this mean the wrongness of rape can be disentangled from God's existence? No! Moral truths are grounded in the *nature* of God, even if we can recognize them without *belief* in God. In the same way, we may personally be convinced of the Gospel for reasons distinct from biblical creation, but this does not mean that the Gospel can be logically disentangled from biblical creation.

Lamoureux is baiting YECs with a "what if ..." game that is rigged in his favour. But there's no need for us to bite, because he's presenting us with a fictitious world that forces an unnecessary choice. Regardless of which answer we give, the strength of the case for YEC remains exactly the same in the *actual* world.

Serious challenges largely ignored

One significant weakness of this book is that major biblical arguments against evolution are passed over in silence or with hasty dismissals. The contributors do not take seriously enough the numerous theological and exegetical difficulties for their position. There is very little wrestling with the text of Scripture or interacting with thoughtful creationist arguments.

Here are a few of the neglected issues.

God's involvement

In the Bible, God claims responsibility for nature. He is the Creator of living things, even of specific parts, like human eyes, ears, and mouths (Exodus 4:11; Proverbs 20:12). Thus, we can identify God's handiwork in "the things that have been made" (Romans 1:20). But many theistic evolutionists oppose the claim that living things were intelligently designed (ID), or that God's hand can be detected through science (pp. 53, 73). In fact, they often use dysteleological arguments in an effort to prove that God was *not* directing the origin of various biological systems.

One contributor does make a muddled attempt within one short paragraph to reconcile "divine sovereignty and 'purposeless chance'" (p. 67). But he conflates true randomness with apparent randomness, and fails to address the deeper incoherence in the typical theistic evolutionist's anti-ID position.¹⁶ One can't say that, on a 'macro level', chance washes out and God retains control, unless one admits that teleology is present. Unfortunately, many theistic evolutionists are unwilling to accept that. They seem to want a God who directs an undirected process—but not even God can accomplish the logically impossible.¹⁷

God's rest

Genesis teaches that God *ceased* from His creative activity on the seventh day (Genesis 2:2), so the work of creation was finished from that time. Since then, God has been *sustaining* the universe, not actively creating (Colossians 1:17), although certain miracles might be thought of as exceptions to this general pattern. But theistic evolutionists commonly believe that God's creative *modus operandi*—the evolution of stars, planets, and living things by natural processes—is still operative now.¹⁸ So, is creation finished or a work

in progress? This problem is never discussed.

Historical Adam and Eve

Several contributors allude to the fact that Adam and Eve have increasingly come under fire as theistic evolutionists have worked out the implications of their position over time (pp. 49, 51, 184, 189). They recognize that this raises significant theological questions, but they offer little in the way of resolution. About the only biblical justification given for the Adam-and-Eve rethink is the old canard about irreconcilable differences between Genesis 1 and 2 (p. 51).¹⁹ They don't exegete the Scriptures to prove that the Bible is ambiguous on whether Adam and Eve were historical, supernaturally created, the first people, or the parents of all humanity. They hardly discuss how to deal with the many important doctrines linked to Adam and Eve, like marriage, gender roles, the image of God, and the Fall. Their only comments on these vital doctrines are simple admissions that they must be radically revised. For instance: "Evolutionary creation contends that humans evolved from prehuman ancestors, and that the image of God and human sin were gradually and mysteriously manifested" (p. 153).

Furthermore, the essayists do not deal with how to reinterpret the connections between Adam and the Gospel in places like Romans 5 and 1 Corinthians 15. This leads to a final concern.

Death before sin

One of the most significant biblical objections creationists raise against evolution is that it requires the death of both animals and human beings before the Fall.^{20,21} This is contrary to the Bible's clear teachings that "by a man came death" (1 Corinthians 15:21) and that "the creation was subjected to futility" (Romans 8:20).

Yet, most of the contributors to *How I Changed My Mind* sidestep this issue. Only two of the twenty-five authors even address the problem. The first is Richard Dahlstrom, who simply dismisses the YEC perspective as a 'literal reading' (pp. 176–177). The other is Kathryn Applegate, who offers several responses. First, she seemingly trumps the Bible with her evolutionary starting point, saying, "as the fossil record makes clear, physical death has been around since the dawn of life" (p. 185). Next, she claims that humanity's mandate to subdue the earth implies that some "disorder existed in the beginning" (p. 185). But, even if we accept that debatable assertion, disorder doesn't imply death. Unfallen humans might have cultivated pre-Fall gardens, trained beasts of burden, harnessed fire, and more—imposing order where it was previously lacking, even in a death-free world. Third, Applegate points out that God uses death and suffering "for redemptive ends" and that Christ's death was "ordained from the beginning" (p. 185). True, but irrelevant. The fact that God uses evil for good doesn't mean that He might have created it directly. Death and suffering are the results of original sin.

Conclusion

It is a serious concern that this book might persuade even more evangelicals to embrace evolution. Since these are well-crafted, engaging stories, it is easy to connect emotionally with the intelligent, and apparently genuine, people involved. Also, there are many kernels of truth sprinkled throughout. In the end, however, these personal testimonies are being used to teach error. Therefore, one should not read this book without also becoming familiar with the arguments for biblical creation. Once these testimonies are subjected to an informed cross-examination, the case for theistic evolution falls apart.

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