

Baraminology, biology and the Bible

A review of
Understanding The Pattern Of Life: Origins and organization of the species
 by **Todd Charles Wood & Megan J. Murray**
 Broadman & Holdman Publishers, Nashville, 2003

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This concise and lucid textbook on baraminology marks a milestone in the development of creation biology. Few people outside this narrow field know what baraminology is, and this book will help to reach a wider audience and get more people thinking about its challenges. Wood is a leading figure in the Baraminology Study Group and teaches at the Centre of Origins Research and Education at Bryan College, under the directorship of Kurt Wise.

The book is designed for a college course in baraminology and teaches just about all the necessary groundwork—extra instruction would be needed in phenetics and cladistics. It is well structured, well written and has useful chapter summaries, review questions and discussion topics at the end of each chapter, and there is a glossary and index at the back.

I noted some strong challenges to the material as I was reading the book. But a good piece of work, well done, will inevitably launch new challenges and insights. The nature and history of life on Earth is a topic that far exceeds the limits of any single book or any single lifetime. An important contribution of the book is its exclusively biblical approach to biology. I heartily support such an endeavor because we all need to learn to think biblically—we need to re-think biology from the ground up and this book is an excellent place to start.

But we cannot do baraminology without reference to what the rest of the world is doing in biosystematics. From

that point of view, the book is somewhat deficient. We may reject the framework of evolutionary thinking, but we impoverish our own endeavours if we ignore its content and/or fail to understand its weaknesses.

The book is divided into three sections and twelve chapters under the general headings of Foundations, Methodology and Application!

Foundations

Foundations of Baraminology contains a brief history of biosystematic thinking. While this provides an adequate foundation for understanding baraminology, the absence of any mention of modern developments in evolutionary systematics (phenetics and cladistics) means that students would not be able to intelligently converse with their inevitable evolutionary colleagues, nor could they understand much of the literature in their subject.

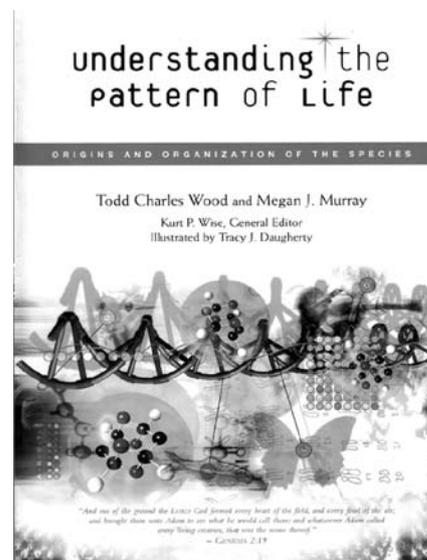
The Pattern of Life gives a detailed explanation of terms in baraminology, highlighting the fact that evolution assumes continuity while creation assumes discontinuity.

The History of Baramins outlines the biblical history of Creation, Fall, Flood and post-Flood recovery.

Methodology

Gathering and Interpreting Biblical Data is an excellent introduction to correctly handling the Word of God, providing solid exegetical guidance and useful resources.

Successive Approximation outlines the need to approach organisms holistically (they were created as whole, functioning organisms, so there is no point in tracing ancestry of single traits, as cladists do) rather than using hybridization as the sole criterion for identifying baramins. Examples are illustrated from the published literature for the cat family, the sunflower family, the grass family and turtles.



Identifying True Discontinuities discusses pointers and pitfalls and introduces the Discontinuity Matrix, a set of 11 questions that provide a holistic overview of the possible kinds of information that might point to a discontinuity.

Hybridization draws our attention to the extraordinary range of possibilities for interbreeding that are now known to exist. Hybrids are largely a nuisance in evolutionary systematics because they add noise to the tree diagrams and are often overlooked (and are deliberately rejected from cladistic analyses). But hybrid matrices point to the possibility that whole families of organisms may belong to a single baramin, and that has profound implications for the discipline.

Statistical Baraminology introduces the mathematics. At this point I became keenly aware of the lack of any reference to the evolutionary literature. The impression is given (and actually stated on pp. 89, 121, 124) that baraminologists have developed their own mathematics. What they have actually done is adapt methods developed by others, and Wood should have recognized those sources. The methods appear robust, however, and give practical means for doing baraminology.

Application

Baraminology and Design introduces the essential criterion of 'mediation'—God mediates His designs to us

through mechanisms. For example, He created us in Adam, and mediated the design to us through reproduction. This leaves behind natural theologians like William Paley, and moves us into a much more complex realm of argument. We need to develop a new theory of design based on two components—the plan, and the implementation.

Biological Imperfection answers critics and raises questions about the origin of structures apparently designed to kill. Unfortunately, the authors accept the evolutionary argument that the ‘backwardly wired’ retina in man is an imperfect design, even giving credence to antitheists such as Richard Dawkins who has no standing in ophthalmology. This is particularly disappointing because the authors should have been aware of the refutations by highly qualified ophthalmologists in the major creationist publications such as this journal¹ and even the popular-level *Creation* magazine,² which have also long ago been posted on the AiG website.

Baraminology and Diversification is an extremely challenging chapter, because it presents us with quantitative implications of the biblical record. For example, Abram received donkeys from Pharaoh only about 370 years after the Flood. Recent studies indicate that the horse family (*Hyracotherium* through to *Equus*) is a single baramin, so the famous horse series must have diversified from two horses on the ark and become decimated and fossilized within just 370 years. Is it possible? Wood outlines the requirements for diversification and then examines possible mechanisms. He favours explosive diversification via ‘genomic modularity’—the fact that whole chunks of genomes can be exchanged amongst organisms. He points out, however, that this mechanism is now largely dormant, so a big question remains.

Baraminology and Biogeography gets to grips with the distribution of life on both the pre- and post-Flood Earth. They struggle to explain the separation of mammals, birds and flowering plants from the dinosaurs and ‘ancient forests’ in the pre-Flood record, and favour the rafting theory for explaining post-Flood migrations. They make no mention of the all-important ‘decimation’ that killed and fossilized the horse series. They claim that the creationist model fits the evidence better than the evolutionary model, but I think that the battle on that score is still to come. Whatever the future, however, I was very pleased to see at least a preliminary attempt to address this crucial question. I was surprised to see that they appear to accept

the uniformitarian geological column without comment, and make no mention of the controversy over the Flood/post-Flood boundary. I suspect that both biology and geology need to be re-worked from the ground up, so both disciplines have a long way to go.

Some challenges

Wood begins on a very high note, pointing out that God’s creation is an expression of His character (Romans 1:20), and a correct view of biosystematics can transform and renew the minds of biologists (pp. 4–9). I agree. However, the book does not approach this subject again. I believe we should do so, and not get bogged down in the endless details.

The purpose of baraminology as a contribution to biosystematics remains almost entirely obscure. Knowing that all members of the Asteraceae are a single created kind does nothing to help the taxonomist who is trying to decide whether his latest taxon is a new species, a new subspecies, or just an ecotype of an existing species. This is the bread and butter of biosystematics, and baraminology appears to be silent on the subject. Indeed, Wood is unable to answer his own question—‘Why do we have species at all?’ and settles for calling it a ‘curiosity’ (p. 113).

Wood has not questioned the Weismann doctrine of inheritance (via genes alone) and I think he should. When organisms reproduce, they pass on whole cells, unchanged, to their offspring. The genes change but the cell architecture and contents do not. This is an obvious mechanism supporting stasis of the kind and should be looked into.³

There is a lot of work in the literature on treating the various different kinds of data of interest in systematics. Wood converts everything to discrete variables and thereby loses useful information.

On p. 119 he says that the more characters are used in the analysis, the more accurately we can approach the true value for a taxonomic distance. This is not true, and is a major reason why phenetics was displaced by cladistics as the method of choice by evolutionary taxonomists. Some characters are more informative than others when it comes to the history of life, and if the analysis is over-burdened with uninformative characters it skews the result.

In ignoring the evolutionary viewpoint from the outset, Wood has left his arguments somewhat vulnerable. For

example, on p. 85 he says,

‘... the Bible is a useful source of information for the baraminologist. ... We may reasonably infer discontinuity between plants, swimming creatures, flying creatures, beasts of the field, and creeping things. Going beyond this may run into problems with interpreting the language as descriptive or classificatory.’

An evolutionist could put this statement together with the claims about ‘explosive diversification’ and claim that baraminology is just a sneaky way of subsuming all the evidence for evolution under an impossibly broad concept of creation. He could then go on and say that life evolved five times by chance, so there is no difference between his definition of ‘biblical creation’ and evolution. To avoid such challenges, I believe we should not attempt to do baraminology in a vacuum. I think ReMine’s idea that God created in a way that could not be mistaken for evolution is a suitable guideline here; but to establish that, we need to know the evolutionary arguments and understand their weaknesses.

References

1. Gurney, P.W.V., Our ‘inverted’ retina—is it really ‘bad design’? *TJ* 13(1):37–44, 1999.
2. An eye for creation: Anon interview with eye-disease researcher Dr George Marshall, University of Glasgow, Scotland, *Creation* 18(4):19–21, 1996.
3. Williams, A.R., Jumping paradigms, *TJ* 17(1):19–21, 2003.