

Creationism, evangelism and that bothersome debate?

**Christians and Evolution:
Christian Scholars Change
Their Minds**

R.J. Berry (Ed.)

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Professor R.J. (Sam) Berry has been involved in the creation-evolution debate for over 30 years. He is Emeritus Professor of Genetics in University College, London, a Reader in the Church of England, and a member of its General Synod.

In a written debate published by InterVarsity Press, Leicester, UK, 30 years before the present book was published, Berry made two comments.¹ First,

“... the continuing controversy [between creation by fiat and evolution] has undoubtedly been a stumbling block in evangelism since many who are not Christians regard the wrangling as a sign that Christians are out of touch with reality, and that the Christian God is irrelevant to ... everyday life” (p. 76).

Second, “I am bored and increasingly irritated by the ‘creation debate’” (p. 107).

In response, his debating partner on ‘The Origin of Life’ part of the publication, the late Professor Verna Wright said that though Berry

“... confesses to be bored and irritated, That is unfortunate because the debate is here to stay! Neither can the matter be swept under the carpet by [Berry’s] claim that Darwin brought God back into this world [since Huxley and others]

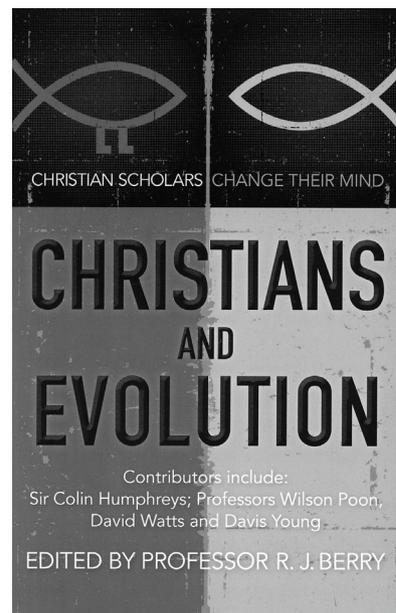
state clearly that [Darwinism] ... eliminated the idea of God from rational discussion” (p. 109).

We are therefore left wondering why Berry continues to be involved with the creation debate. He has been a major contributor to articles and book reviews on this subject in the journal of Christians in Science (CiS), namely ‘Science and Christian Belief’ in the intermediate years. You don’t dampen down a debate by continuing it. And his studious avoidance of mainstream creationist articles and high-profile debates is also disappointing.

The book

Now, just as Berry’s book cannot be construed as a personal (*ad hominem*) attack on any particular creationist, this review is not an *ad hominem* attack on him or any of his contributors. For the simple expedient of making it easier for the readers, references to Berry *et al.*, whilst they discuss the details they have written, must be seen as a comment on the positions they have taken and not they themselves.

The first 27 pages are taken up by Berry’s introduction. There are then 18 contributions in the form of ‘life-testimonies’ from different people covering the next 304 pages. Then there is a brief epilogue. Next there is a reading list called ‘Going Further’ which contains no useful references to recent creationist material or organisations, though it does refer to certain atheistic publications promoting evolution and individual books by some of the contributors. These will be mentioned below where appropriate. Finally there is an index.



The 18 individual contributions largely follow the theme of how those individuals have made peace with ‘mainstream science’ and still accept that Genesis contains important theological truths relevant to a godly life. Of the 18, five have always believed in evolution from their formative years and in four contributions we are not told whether they were ever creationists and then changed their minds. To that extent, the subtitle of the book (*Christian scholars change their minds*) is imprecise. One contributor may have been a supporter of Intelligent Design before accepting Darwinian evolution. In the other eight contributions we hear about how the individuals were influenced positively in their earlier years by creationist books, speakers, and literature, but later found problems emerging with that viewpoint from ‘mainstream science’, so they became evolutionists.

Berry’s editorial remarks

In his two-page foreword, Berry shows his dominant theme to be concerned with maintaining respectability amongst Christians with

‘mainstream science and evolution’. His words are: “We must be able to interpret and expound the Bible in ways which are consistent not only with itself but also with God’s other book, his book of works—which is creation, the study book of science.” This might have been an acceptable way to begin the book for all Christians if Berry had said that the science he is considering must not be constrained by naturalism. He did not, though a contributor to the book (David Watts) did digress on the matter briefly.

In the introduction, he states that “fossils demonstrate that the earth goes through major changes and long ages”. (Note the plural ‘changes’.) Having accepted ‘deep time’, he then scours the theologians for support that long ages can be read into Genesis. His first support is from Wenham² who describes Genesis as ‘paradigmatic and proto-historical’. Further support comes from Kevan³ and Kline.⁴ There is no reference to McDowell,⁵ an older but still very relevant apologetics book, other creationist theologians, or even to liberal theologians such as Barr.⁶ The latter has pointed out the inconsistencies with trying to pretend that the Bible is the Word of God and yet dismissing major portions of Genesis where it is obvious that the writer intended that the reader accept the writer’s view that it was history being described. Barr, although a liberal theologian, is at least consistent with his attitude to the Bible.

In the process of justifying how we might be able to explore the science of creation, Berry repeats some of his own material from that 1985 debate. In particular, he attempts to show that God does use natural process to achieve his aims. His example is that of the West wind used by God to part the Red Sea so that the Israelites could cross away from Egypt. He accepts that the West wind was unusual. So while there is a physical connection

between an unusual wind pattern and its subsequent effect on the sea, which possibly could have been explored if we had had more data, we can never explore by science how matter (protons, electrons, etc) appeared at the beginning of time. That is beyond science—what we might call a ‘bara’ event, creation *ex nihilo*. Evolution, the biological development of man from molecules is not normally detached in mainstream science from the big bang, galaxy formation, etc. Berry steers away from these further debatable subjects as if they don’t matter in assessing whether Genesis is describing real history. His focus is on a small part of the total God-driven process of ‘starting with nothing and arriving at nature’, namely the last bit—‘molecules to man’. (Note however that Humphreys’ and Godfrey’s contributions mention the issue.)

Berry then jumps straight into Darwin’s writing, without realizing that Darwin admitted⁷ in 1844 that, “I always feel as if my books came half out of Lyell’s brain.” The point about this is that Lyell, the lawyer, had a very strict anti-biblical agenda.⁸ Any suggestion that Moses had anything useful to say about the world had to be avoided just as a defence lawyer in a court totally avoids helping the prosecution. Therefore, to pretend that Darwin didn’t have this same mindset is disingenuous in spite of Berry’s later protestations.

At this point, Berry asks why Darwinism has not been universally accepted by Christians. He gives the following six reasons with brief comments which would provide focus for debate if Berry and his contributors are ready for face-to-face encounter:

First, is to ask where the essential variations necessary in evolutionary theory come from. This was a problem that Darwin expressed. Berry believes that the neo-Darwinian synthesis provides the explanation. But even

within mainstream science this is not universally accepted, but the search goes on for an explanation for something that creationists believe cannot be answered by naturalistic science.

Second, is the problem of explaining the Fall. Berry has made attempts to explain this in his CiS articles⁹ but has been challenged on his theology by other members of CiS who are not creationists.¹⁰

Third, evolution is random. Berry removes this problem from his list by referring to Conway-Morris’s work¹¹ on ‘convergence’. But Conway-Morris’s many studies rely on the robustness of the geological column and that, as the present author¹² and many others have shown, is nothing other than a correlation with wide margins of error. To that extent, it is not fit for this purpose of assessing a unique fossil order.

Fourth, God is not involved in evolution—a comment that is often made by ardent atheists. Berry’s comment is more concerned with his personal rejection of Intelligent Design rather than addressing the objection. So like the preceding reasons 1–3, there are still answers needed from Christian evolutionists.

Fifth, there are sociological issues. Berry admits that the fact that Hitler, Marx and others have been supporters of Darwinian evolution—and their pronouncements and appeal to Darwinism to justify their beliefs and actions—will remain a problem for such Christians.

Sixth, science is limited. But how many dogmatic atheists will even think about this issue and are willing to admit it?

The testimonies

We deal with those nine contributors whose testimony indicates that they were once creationists, but are now evolutionists.

Colin Humphreys

Humphreys was exposed to creationism through his parents. In his school biology lessons he was allowed to ask fundamental questions and on occasions found that the teacher could not answer the objections he then had over evolution. In college, where he did engage with biology, there were no discussions of alternatives. His final challenge to leave creationism came with his realization that radiometric dating told of an old earth. He now accepts the standard scientific view of the big bang (which Berry studiously avoids), the formation of the earth, molecules and then man.

Karl Giberson

Giberson is a physicist who encountered Whitcomb and Morris's *The Genesis Flood*¹³ before his college days. However, his college professor suggested that Genesis is poetry but having met Morris and Gish, he remained a creationist. But to quote, "... as I studied, ... I began to realize that science could not possibly have got everything so thoroughly wrong as creationists suggested." Alongside that feeling, since so few scientists accepted the thesis of *The Genesis Flood*, he then rejected creationism. We have seen this point made by theologians concerning *The Genesis Flood* in earlier years, for example Kidner.¹⁴ And from personal experience, putting the same point to Wenham in his lecture course produced the same response. Such evolution-supporting Christians are looking for atheists to flock to creationism before the anti-creationist theology will change even from evangelicals. But the reason for scientists rejecting *The Genesis Flood* is the deliberate bias within those scientists⁸ who don't want God around.

One of Giberson's own books from 2008 is referred to in Berry's 'Going Further' list. There seems to be a fair amount of common material

between that book and this chapter in Berry. The fact that Bergman¹⁵ had reviewed Giberson's book in 2011 gave Giberson an opportunity to address the points raised by Bergman, but this did not happen. The debate isn't getting to the bottom line because of reluctance by evolutionists to engage.

Stephen Godfrey

Godfrey is a palaeontologist brought up in a creationist home. The family had read *The Genesis Flood*. So until his university days he was a young-earth creationist. But then he was introduced to evolutionary 'facts' and in a geology field trip he failed to see geology in the light of *The Genesis Flood*. He claims that the Bible is cosmologically out of date, but that the parts dealing with justice, mercy and forgiveness are not. Christians who accept evolution find that they are typically accused of reading the Bible inconsistently (see e.g. Barr⁶) and this has to be one the main reasons why in Darwin's double centenary, a project with four reports¹⁶ had to be initiated by Christians keen to retain evolution, called 'Rescuing Darwin' (see below).

Scott and Grace Buchanan

Buchanan (Scott) is a chemical engineer. He met John Whitcomb of *The Genesis Flood*. But later he saw contradictions between geology and the Bible. By quoting Calvin ("God accommodated this revelation to the limited physical understanding of its ancient hearers"), that provided the final reason for them both to retain mainstream science and reject the creation as a series of fiats.

Philip Pattermore

Pattermore is a paediatrician. *The Genesis Flood* initially excited him, but he later realized that the main quotations were ancient and not typical of the twentieth century. Zoological issues, DNA and cladistics were the final nails in his creationist coffin. His

own book of 2011 isn't referenced by Berry, but a review of it by Doyle¹⁷ shows a consistent unwillingness by the author to engage with statements made by creationists rather than simply tackling the straw men of his own imagination.

Wilson Poon

Poon is a physicist and theologian. Although he devoured books by Josh McDowell, he felt at university that "creationism extracted a high price in cognitive dissonance". It is not clear exactly what he meant here. The final straw that broke his creationist camel's back was Dobzhansky's statement: "Nothing makes sense in biology except in the light of evolution." But a Christian could say: "Nothing makes sense in biology except in the light of *fiat* creation." Poon should have asked about the facts on which such as choice could be made. Making a statement at the end of his chapter that biological life "has evolved that way because of natural selection" sounds like lazy science.

Paul Thomas

Thomas is an ex-Muslim and as such was a strict creationist, though the details he would have followed were from the Koran (Adam made in heaven and delivered to earth) rather than the biblical version. Although later familiar with *The Genesis Flood*, he could not reconcile any science with the vapour canopy idea, or history even with the looser biblical chronology advocated in that book compared with the more recent creationist shorter chronology. So he was lost from creationism.

Denis Lamoureux

Lamoureux with qualifications in biology and theology was once an atheist. For a while he was a creationist, having been influenced by *The Genesis Flood* and Gish's reasoning. But on reading works by

J.I. Packer he accepted Packer's view that Genesis is poetic. Looking more closely at the fossil record without considering its problems¹² he then became an evolutionist.

Lamoureux's own book of 2008 is referenced by Berry. There is a review of it by Woodmorappe¹⁸ which shows major gaps in Lamoureux's thinking, so there is no need to re-elaborate them here.

Michael Reiss

Reiss is a biologist and a former Fellow of the Royal Society. Although an evolutionist, he was hounded from the Royal Society when he suggested that teachers should be able to discuss creationism when pupils raised the subject. He was so confident that "evolutionary biology is good science", so it is hardly likely to be wrong. In this way teachers would be able to show that "scientific creation is not good science".

He does ask some basic questions about perceived problems with evolution. These include the fact that it contradicts the second law of thermodynamics and that there may be contradictions in the fossil record. But that is as far as he goes.

What does it all mean for creationists?

The Genesis Flood book (TGF)

One of the puzzles for creationists is that six (Godfrey, Buchanan, Giberson, Pattemore, Thomas and Lamoureux) of the individuals encountered *The Genesis Flood* and to some extent were inspired by it. As the book has had a tremendous impact upon the Christian world, what went wrong for these six? Unfortunately the contributors do not provide much in the way of details that allows us to respond to their problems. We wonder if they mentioned TGF more or less in passing, to suggest that they had studied creationist material in detail.

For one contributor, it was the fact that the TGF offered the concept of a vapour canopy as the major source of flood water. As that idea has since been shown to be physically limiting, he threw the whole thesis of TGF away. Admittedly there are some shortcomings in the TGF, but the major theses are still sustained. These theses are 1) that the Bible does not leave room for just a local or mythical flood in the mind of the

author; 2) that geologists promoting uniformitarianism (e.g. Lyell) never tested the biblical story of the Flood; and 3) that there is much geological evidence of a rapid flood that occurred recently. For Berry's contributors to cling to the idea that the 55-year-old TGF is the latest word on creationism is convenient for them, but wrong.

For some who rejected the TGF theses, it was that the authors of TGF did not discuss genetics and other biological issues. But the TGF was simply a springboard into a wider range of studies. It was already a large book in its own right. There is plenty of material on these subjects now. And of course, once we discard the geological column, genetics is cast adrift because it loses its anchor in the 'fossil record'.

But by mentioning TGF, we see a bigger issue. Of those who changed their minds, and those who remained evolutionists, support for their position came from the theologians. And rarely did those quoted theologians such as Wenham, Packer, Kevan, and Kline consider TGF or wider issues of creationism. In particular, Wenham makes no mention of the TGF or its authors. His understanding of the Noachian Flood revolves around supposed J and P contributions to the final redaction of Genesis. What happened to McDowell's rejection of the Documentary Hypothesis that allowed this idea of contributions from J, E, D and P in the Pentateuch to continue in his mind? Remember, Poon recounts that he treasured McDowell. And the other problem we may have with Wenham's interpretation is that he assumes that the Epic of Gilgamesh came before Genesis. There is plenty of evidence to the contrary.¹⁹ During his lectures, Wenham was rather coy about the subject when I tried to raise it.

This interpretation of Wenham's (namely ignoring TGF) may stem from the earlier work of Kidner.¹⁴ TGF was written in 1961. In 1967,



Figure 1. Several contributors considered that the book *The Genesis Flood* could be ignored because it did not deal with genetics and DNA.

Kidner wrote a commentary on Genesis 1–8. Although he mentioned TGF, he could not accept that TGF was foundationally correct because so few scientists had abandoned their uniformitarian form of geology to embrace the idea that the Noachian Flood was a recent global event. But that misses the point that uniformitarian geology arose for the specific purpose of offering something other than biblical history for the geology of the world.⁸ Geologists and other scientists wanted to get the clergy (and their anchor within the Mosaic scriptures) ‘off their backs’. That is the biggest problem for Berry and his 18 contributors.

If we examine the writings of liberal theologians such as Barr, we find an interesting twist to the problem Berry *et al* face. Barr⁶ notes that evangelicals take most of the Bible literally, but not the first few chapters of Genesis. Modern science has proved they are wrong. “How are the mighty fallen!” Barr says. “And how ridiculous a mouse has the mountain of fundamentalist interpretation [*i.e. evangelical theology*] brought forth” as a result of believing “that God ‘only’ made the world”. To pretend that evangelism will be more successful (which is Berry’s hope) amongst people such as liberals by abandoning creationism is therefore wrong.

Will the debate continue?

Obviously, Berry wishes that it would go away. The Buchanans felt that dogmatic debate does not help. McGeowan calls for churches to join the debate, and Reiss (though not so much in the book) welcomes discussions because he feels that it will end on a positive note for evolutionists.

In 2005, there was a major debate between the Rev. Professor John Polkinghorne (then Canon Theological) and Australian creationist John Mackay at Liverpool Cathedral, UK. Polkinghorne looked

very uncomfortable, and did not even produce any visual aids. Polkinghorne has been an active member of Christians in Science, but their journals ignored the debate. Premier Radio, UK, did sponsor a wide range of debates on creationism and its fringe topics.

In 2009, the Theos Think Tank produced four reports¹⁶ with the global title “Rescuing Darwin”. Whilst the fourth report (“Doubting Darwin—creationism and evolution scepticism in Britain today”) did mention some of the reasons why whole groups of Christians reject evolution, there was no subsequent attempt (in what should have been a fifth report which many creationists would have been willing to pay for) to try and address these issues provided by creationists.

Evangelism

Berry began his 1985 debate with the comment that:

“... the continuing controversy [*between creation and evolution*] has undoubtedly been a stumbling block in evangelism since many who are not Christians regard the wrangling as a sign that Christians are out of touch with reality, and that the Christian God is irrelevant to ... everyday life.”

Recognizing that according to opinion polls¹⁶ there are about 20 million people in the UK who reject evolution, the Christian church has an amazing opportunity through creationism for evangelism.

For the sake of Christian witness, surely the time has come for a well-publicized fully recorded debate with those Christian scientists who support evolution such as Berry, Reiss or perhaps even Conway-Morris. That would focus on science. Then it would be time to engage with the theologians such as Wenham, Packer, etc on the theological issues, having sorted the science out. The book by Berry *et al* needs a response.

The alternative to debate, which could easily become dragged down into polemics, would be for regular, well-recorded discussions where we agree to differ, read each other’s material and pursue evangelism from an agreed statement of where we differ and how we are attempting to resolve it.

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