

A rather pro-evolutionary author who mischaracterizes evolutionary transitional forms

The Quest

Todd Wood

PRJ Books, Dayton, TN, 2018

John Woodmorappe

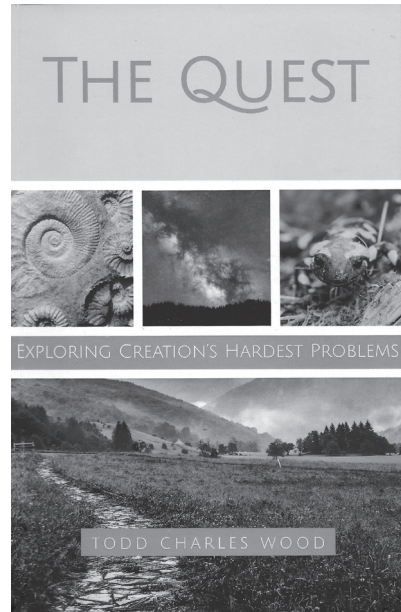
This book advertizes itself as a search for understanding of mysteries facing creationists. However, insofar as this is true, it generally ignores the creationist research that has already been done to solve difficulties and mysteries. In some ways, it comes across as an advertisement for evolution. Let us begin with a positive feature of this book.

Theistic evolution, and not creationism, makes God out to be a deceiver

Evolutionists commonly accuse the creationist position of being one that makes God out to be a Creator that plays mean tricks on us. According to this narrative, God created the universe by fiat in six days, and several thousand years ago, while leaving behind ‘so much evidence’ for organic evolution and for an old Earth.

Actually, the ‘God made into a deceiver’ accusation can be turned around, as Wood makes clear. He comments:

“But does that mean God accommodates error? Because if evolution is true and Genesis is accommodated, that is exactly what God did. He took erroneous ideas about



the origin of the universe and wrote them right into the text of the Bible. He could have revealed this theology in another way. Several creation psalms and even the end of Job present God as the absolute, unrivaled creator and sustainer of the universe without telling any detailed story about creation. He didn't have to tell a series of creation fables, but he did. He preserved them for thousands of years, and all the while, his followers assumed that they were historical and not fables at all. He knew that one day we would discover the ‘truth’ about evolution, and he knew that that discovery would cause a great crisis of faith that continues to this day. And he knew that the discovery would come at a time when the population of the world

was the greatest and communication was most sophisticated so that the greatest number of people would be offended and fall away because of evolutionary science. With that knowledge, he did it anyway. He included a myth at the beginning of the Bible knowing that Christians would interpret it as a historical account of the origin of the world and knowing the havoc that would ensue when the truth was discovered. Does that sound like a God who loves truth?" (p. 51).

The question of fideism

The author rejects the label of fideism (p. 41). However, it all depends on how the term is defined, and what it means in practice. Fideism, in the context of competing theories of origins, refers to a professing creationist who contends that the evidence supports evolution, but the 'higher authority' of the Bible is what compels him to accept special creation regardless of the scientific evidence. (I once personally heard Kurt Wise utter such a formulation.)

'Is so-and-so a fideist?' is a rather personal question, and is the wrong one to ask. 'Is so-and-so excessively conciliatory to evolutionistic thinking?' is a much more perceptive question to ask. In the case of author Wood, the answer is largely in the affirmative, as elaborated below.

Confusing mosaic creatures with valid evolutionary transitional forms

Todd Wood gives away the store as he writes: "I'm basically conceding that evolutionary theory successfully predicted the existence of intermediate forms. There really are things that look sort of like 'missing links'" (p. 26). Wood then brings up the australopithecine Lucy, *Australopithecus sediba*, the feathered dinosaurs, the mammal-like reptiles, and the 'walking' whales. Wood adds

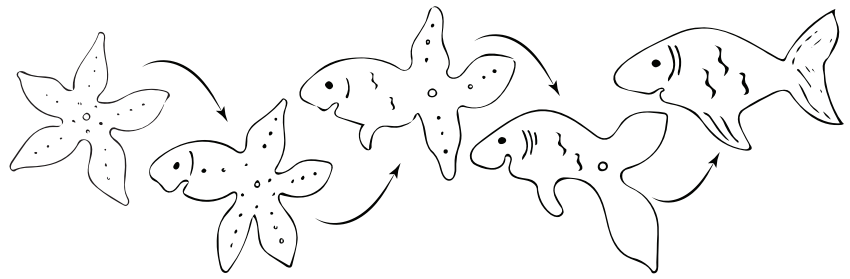


Figure 1. A series of supposed evolutionary transitions illustrating the hypothetical evolution of a fish from a starfish

that: "on the whole, the existence of these intermediate forms sure does look like a kind of evolution" (p. 29).

As if trying to sound even more pro-evolutionary, Wood quips: "That strange mix of ape and human characteristics was something that modern creationists had never anticipated" (p. 23).

Let us examine some basics. Wood's assertion is incorrect. Creationists, far from being taken by surprise, had long been aware of, and had accounted for, mosaic creatures. Think of the century-known *Archaeopteryx* and the mammal-like reptiles. Nor do mosaic creatures require, or even favour, an evolutionary explanation. They can be found among machines, which, of course, are the products of special creation, not evolution. I elaborate on this below.

Back to basics: what exactly is an evolutionary transitional form?

The central problem with Wood's thinking, and that of too many other creationists, is not only a confusion of mosaics with transitional forms. It is more fundamental: a forgetting of what is a transitional form.

Nearly 50 years ago, the immortal Duane T. Gish unambiguously specified the nature of evolutionary transitional forms. Dr Gish was in debates with evolutionists, and he was wise to the fact that evolutionists would try to pass off various mosaic creatures as evolutionary transitional forms, just as Todd Wood does today.

Let us focus on the tetrapod limb. Consider a putative dinosaur evolving into a bird. One should see, in the fossil record, this series of genuine evolutionary transitions: a 'dinobird' having 90% legs/10% wings, succeeded by a 'dinobird' having 80% legs/20% wings, one with 70% legs/30% wings ... 10% legs/90% wings, and then finally a fully-fledged bird (pardon the pun).

Similar sets of genuine evolutionary transitions should be found in all the other instances of the appearance of volant creatures—insects, pterodactyls, and bats. A comparable set of genuine transitions, albeit between the fin and the leg (90%/10%, 80%/20%, etc.), should span all the evolutionary instances of aquatic vertebrates giving rise to land vertebrates, and vice versa (leg to fin, as in the evolutionary appearance of whales, 10%/90%, 20%/80%, etc.).

The lesson to be learned from all this is clear: do not confuse mosaic creatures with genuine evolutionary transitional forms! The foregoing definition of a genuine transitional form is not limited to 'Protestant fundamentalists'. It has also been recognized by Islamic creationists. In this case, it is the hypothetical evolution of a fish from a starfish (figure 1).

Those feathered dinosaurs again—what's the hype?

Let us return our attention to mosaic creatures—on their own terms.

Feathers used to be associated exclusively with birds, but now are believed also to be found in some dinosaurs. Wood mentions this in a ‘gee whiz’ fashion without a semblance of critical analysis.

What if no feathered dinosaurs had ever been discovered? Would evolutionists have concluded that evolutionary theory had been falsified? Certainly not. They would have changed their story: they would just have said that the evolutionary origin of feathers evidently had postdated the evolutionary divergence of birds from dinosaurs.

Feathers have multiple functions besides flight. So why is it supposed to be remarkable that some non-birds have them also?

Mosaic creatures and morphospace: an analogy from machines

The finding of more and more mosaic creatures in the fossil record is hardly surprising, because there is an almost-inevitable filling of morphospace as more and more fossils are discovered. Far from being some kind of stumbling block to creationists, it can just as easily be explained by special creation as by evolution. Living things are essentially living machines, and, just like their man-made inanimate counterparts, they unsurprisingly show gradations in structure. As an example, one could easily assemble a series consisting of a conventional leg-driven bicycle, a two-wheeled motorcycle, a three-wheeled motorcycle, and a four-wheeled automobile. There is a clear gradation of structures, and numbers of wheels, but it is not the outcome of evolutionary processes. It is a product of special creation.

Let us take this further. Up to now, there has been an unambiguous boundary between motor vehicles and man-powered vehicles. Enter the ‘discovery’ of an ordinary leg-driven bike that has a working gas-motor attached.¹ This

means that man-powered propulsion can work in tandem with motorized propulsion in the very same vehicle. Does this ‘discovery’ now mean that the previously believed dichotomy between motor vehicles and man-powered vehicles is an illusion? Not quite. Does it mean that the two-wheeled motorcycle evolved from a leg-driven bicycle, moreover with the leg-driven motorized bicycle a perfect evolutionary transition? Still less likely.

***Australopithecus sediba*: baraminology vs functional essence**

The problem with conventional baraminology is that it effectively counts nuts and bolts instead of looking at the overall functional essence of the organism. To illustrate: suppose we did a baraminological analysis of the five vehicles described above, and found that, owing to the proliferation of moving parts inside the motor, the leg-driven motorized bicycle groups with the motorcycle instead of with the purely leg-driven bicycle. Contrariwise, the functional essence of the leg-driven motorized bicycle is much closer to that of the simple leg-driven bicycle than it is to the motorcycle. After all, there is a world of difference between the speed and power of the motorcycle and that of the motor-added leg-driven bicycle! Is the lack of agreement between the groupings some kind of profound conundrum, much less evidence for evolution? Hardly.

The resolution to the conflict is obvious: functional essence outweighs any grouping based on nuts and bolts. Let us apply this to *Australopithecus sediba*. What is relevant is not whether the osteological features (nuts and bolts) of *A. sediba* group it with the human (or, for that matter, the chimp), but whether, in life, *A. sediba* functioned like a human or whether it functioned like a chimp.

Is evolutionary theory consilient?

Todd Wood appears to be impressed by the overall claims of evolutionary theory. He refers to what he believes is its consilience (pp. 70–71), which means that different lines of evidence presumably all converge on the same evolutionistic explanation. He then spanks creationists a bit, saying that they need to “pony up” and show how the creation model works better than evolution, or else there never will be an effective challenge to the dominance of evolutionary theory.

To begin with, there is no way that special creation could ever displace evolution in the educated Western mind. Academia has been ruled by rationalism for at least the last two centuries, and there is no chance that any theory that relies on supernaturalism could ever be entertained as a scientific one, regardless of the strength of the evidence supporting it.

Wood contends that the presumed consilience of evolutionary theory is not affected by what he calls “a little problem here or there”. This smacks of an evolutionary self-congratulatory mindset.

Let us examine, once again, some basic facts. There have been many *ad hoc* modifications throughout the history of evolutionary theory. For instance, at one time vestigial organs were considered a powerful prediction of evolutionary theory. After all, so the argument went, no Intelligent Designer would make organisms with non-functional components. That was then and this is now. With the discovery of function for most if not all so-called vestigial organs, all of a sudden we do not hear about this powerful prediction any more. Instead, we now hear of “reduced function”. Evolutionists have moved the goalposts.

Evolutionary predictions as to what new fossils will be like are, at best, equivocally successful. For instance, ruling evolutionary orthodoxy had us believe that, so long as dinosaurs were

around, mammals were constrained to remain rat-sized or smaller, because all the medium- and large-body niches were preoccupied by dinosaurs. It made sense. And then came the discovery of mammals, of significant body size, well before the conventionally dated extinction of the dinosaurs.

Much is said about the nested hierarchies of living things. But then there is all that homoplasy, which, by definition, violates evolutionary nested hierarchies. Homoplasy systematically occurs at every level of anatomy and even molecular biology. And yet Wood is impressed by what he calls the pattern of similarities and differences and the presumed explanatory power of evolution in this regard.

Then there are those transitional forms again. Phyletic gradualism predicted their importance, while the newer punctuated equilibrium concept did not. So, no matter what turns up in the fossil record, it will be ‘consilient’ with evolutionary theory! Molecular ‘clocks’ often conflict with evolutionary origins as deduced from paleontological evidence. This is the exact opposite of consilience.

Consider human evolution as a whole. Compare the scenarios taught in textbooks, as fact, 50 years ago with those taught, as fact, today. Quite a difference. Here we are, 150 years after Darwin, and evolutionists still have no idea how life supposedly arose from lifeless chemicals. There are scores of conflicting theories about the cause of the Cambrian explosion, the relatively tiny forearms of tyrannosaurid dinosaurs, the emergence of human bipedalism, and much more. So much for the wondrously consilient, explanatory power of evolutionary theory.

Todd Wood moves on to geology, and claims (p. 96) that different evolutionary dating methods usually agree with each other for the same rock. This is certainly untrue.²

Pat answers and the pat dismissals of answers

Todd Wood states that many things are mysteries that require considerable research, and repeatedly warns creationists of relying on pat answers. However, pat answers are only one side of the coin. Pat dismissals of answers (including naïve falsification, elaborated below) can be just as objectionable as pat answers.

Let us consider an example. Wood states that he finds the long-proffered ‘Cain’s sister’ explanation for Cain’s wife unconvincing (pp. 136–137), but does not tell the reader why. At other times, Wood mentions that creationists have proposed answers to certain riddles, but does so with a rather superficial and dismissive tone. I also speak from personal experience. In evaluating a paper I had written, Wood once arbitrarily asked me not to use a certain commonly used term—without explaining the reasoning behind his objection.

When it comes to pat dismissals of answers, I also speak from personal experience. A referee used by Wood strongly (not to mention emotionally) recommended rejection of my submitted paper without so much as the slightest hint of why it was supposed to be so abysmally incorrect or inadequate. For a time, Wood unilaterally accepted the referee’s recommendation. Now, being shown to be wrong is one thing: it is part of the learning process, especially in science, and I accept it. Being summarily dismissed is quite another, and I do not.

In addition to all this, pat answers are probably not the greatest liability facing creationists: the ‘bandwagon effect’ of faddish theories is probably a greater liability. For quite a while, I have been a bit of a gadfly in challenging my fellow creationists for uncritically buying into uniformitarian ideas and ‘importing’ them into Flood geology, for failing to engage in divergent thinking, and for settling for single (as opposed to multiple) working hypotheses (e.g. catastrophic plate

tectonics instead of equal consideration of static continents; asteroid impacts instead of equal consideration of non-impact origins of such things as shock quartz; and accelerated radioactive decay instead of equal consideration of massive isotopic fractionation).

Biogeographic distributions and naïve falsification

Todd Wood brings up Acosta, who had visited South America in the 1500s, and who was amazed to find the South American animals so different from those of Eurasia and Africa. This was supposed to have profoundly upset (falsified) the idea that all land animals had originated from Noah’s Ark at Ararat, prompting Acosta to wrestle with the unexpected evidence.

For someone in the 16th century to be stymied by biogeography is one thing; for someone in the 21st century—quite another. Thus, in making the unusual fauna of South America some kind of profound mystery to creationism, Wood is engaging in simplistic dismissal by completely disregarding what has been learned about biogeography since the 1500s! For instance, we know that sweepstakes routes are very important, and these must have been quite pronounced after the Flood, for reasons discussed elsewhere.³ Moreover, those animals located on land masses the furthest from Ararat (South America and especially Australia), having gone through the most sweepstakes, should in general be the most biogeographically differentiated. And that is exactly what we find.

Nearly 30 years have passed since I investigated this subject,² and, unfortunately, very little research has since been done in this area. One could start with computer simulations of various sweepstakes routes opening and closing as animals leave the Ark. In some of these runs, the faunas on different continents could end up quite the same, and in others even more differentiated than actually exists on

Earth today. In one of these runs, the kangaroo could be found in Europe, while the placental opossum and raccoon are found only in Australia.

As for human introductions of animals, considered by Acosta and further developed by me,² there is needed an in-depth anthropological study of the kinds and patterns of animals deliberately introduced by humans.

The research results could then be synthesized. Only then can we begin to answer if biogeography is some kind of profound mystery to the creationist position.

Conclusion

No one questions the fact that creationists have mysteries that they are in need of solving. However, mixing evolutionary ideas with creationist ones, having a high view of the claims of organic evolution, and largely ignoring the work that creationists have already done, is not the way to go about it.

References

1. Gromer, C., How to install a motor on a bike, *Popular Mechanics*, 2004, popularmechanics.com/cars/how-to/a181/1276826/, accessed 19 December 2018.
2. Woodmorappe, J., *The Mythology of Modern Dating Methods*, Institute for Creation Research, El Cajon, CA, 1999.
3. Woodmorappe, J., Causes for the biogeographic distribution of land vertebrates after the flood; in: Walsh, R.E. and Brooks, C.L. (Eds.), *Proceedings of the 2nd International Conference on Creationism*, Pittsburgh, PA, 2:3610150370, 1990.