

Longwinded, sometimes interesting, and marred by evolutionary presuppositions

Is Atheism Dead?

Eric Metaxas

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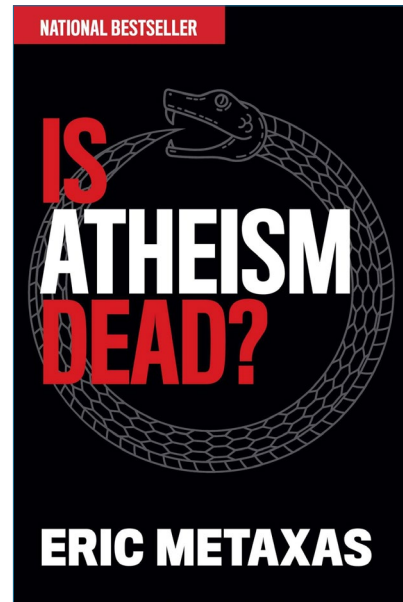
Gavin Cox

Eric Metaxas (born 1963) is an American Christian author, speaker, and conservative radio host. He has a broad influence—a number-one best selling author who has written for many major US news outlets. His latest book, *Is Atheism Dead?*, covers, for lay readers, five major themes, in 30 chapters plus a bibliography and short appendix. The list of endorsing figures on the dust jacket comprises ID and old-earth advocates, including Hugh Ross, giving away the position of Metaxas regarding issues of

cosmological origins.¹ The only reference to ‘creationist’ literature in the appendix is Hugh Ross and ID sources, but sadly no young-earth creationists (YECs)—against whom he demonstrates prejudice and woeful ignorance.

Starting off on the wrong foot

Influenced by Hugh Ross, Metaxas assumes big bang cosmology and its timeline from the outset (pp. 6, 41, 319). However, that ‘beginning’ is not in any sense the one taught in Genesis; neither is it friendly to Christianity as Metaxas believes. Before the big bang notion took hold, the universe was considered to be infinite; therefore infinite time was supposedly available for evolution to have achieved life. However, given just a finite amount of time, the laws of chemistry and physics constantly conspire against chemical evolution, as Dean Kenyon



recognized, even while believing, at the time, in evolution.² Adding billions of years (or even an infinite amount of time) just gives more time for dead chemicals to become even more dead.

Big bang—big bust

Metaxas believes the ‘big bang’ represents ultimate proof of God as creator, because it destroys the hypothesis of the eternal universe. However, scientifically, the big bang is a big bust,³ as many secular cosmologists now realize.⁴ But Metaxas appears to be entirely ignorant of secular problems with the big bang, let alone biblical problems.

According to Metaxas, Hubble “saw something astonishing” no one else had—the universe expanding, and moving away from every point (pp. 13, 17). However, Hubble saw no such thing, he merely interpreted the stars’ red shifts as representing their speed. Hubble initially doubted that the expansion was an explanation of the data. Expansion (in the big bang sense) only later became the entrenched dogma.⁵

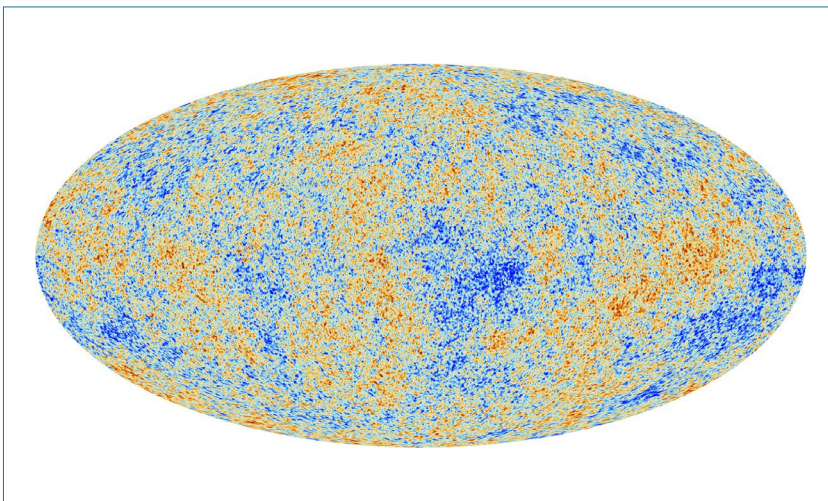


Figure 1. The Cosmic Microwave Background as seen from the Planck satellite

Image: European Space Agency / Wikimedia, CC BY-SA 4.0

Metaxas believes the 2.7-K cosmic microwave background radiation (CMBR) is ‘proof’ of the big bang’s leftover heat (figure 1). However, this is an interpretation that led to the fatal ‘horizon problem’ of not enough time in the supposed 14.7-billion-year universe for the heat to equilibrate.⁶ But even if one assumes the big bang, the CMBR is not consistent with big bang cosmology and could represent something else altogether.⁷

Earth’s privileged position

Metaxas discusses essential conditions for life to exist on Earth, including its size, distance from the sun, and large planets in outer orbits protecting the earth by catching/deflecting asteroids. But this last idea has been challenged for some years, for example by planetary scientist Kevin Grazier.⁸

Earth’s moon, according to Metaxas, was created when a Mars-sized object hit the proto-Earth, and the resultant mass ejection created our moon—an idea fraught with problems.⁹ Metaxas describes all the variables that needed to be exact for this event to have occurred. So much so that he describes it is a ‘miracle’ (p. 47). But then why not accept the miracle of creation as outlined in Genesis 1:1–16?

Fine-tuned universe

Metaxas quotes Stephen Hawking (figure 2), who recognized improbable fine-tuning for the universe to exist:

“If the overall density of the universe were changed by even 0.0000000000001 percent, no stars or galaxies could be formed. If the rate of expansion one second after the Big Bang had been smaller by even one part in a hundred thousand, million, million, the universe would have re-collapsed

before it reached its present size” (p. 56).

I accept Hawking’s first observation regarding the universe’s density, but not his second point, which presupposes big bang cosmology. Nevertheless, even hard-bitten atheist Hawking recognized the implications of such incredible odds:

“It would be very difficult to explain why the universe would have begun in just this way, except as the act of a God who intended to create beings like us” (p. 57).

As a result of such astonishing universal probabilities, Fred Hoyle, writing in the *Caltech alumni magazine*, suggested that a “super intellect has monkeyed with physics, as well as with chemistry and biology.”¹⁰

Supporting evolutionary presuppositions

Metaxas glibly states, “Life has been around for about four billion years” (p. 85). But what is life and

how did it arrive? Sadly, Metaxas doesn’t turn to Genesis 1 for answers. Neither does he even hint at the fundamental theological problem of placing death before the Fall. He rightly critiques the 1952 Miller–Urey experiment and how science ‘clung to the results’. In popular culture, the answer to ‘where the first life came from’, or at least its precursors, was ‘answered’ and everyone ‘moved on’. In reality, the Miller–Urey research was simply a revival of the antique notion of spontaneous generation.¹¹ Miller–Urey hasn’t been improved on. Rather, the problem has become compounded, because science has discovered how complex life is. For instance, a year after Miller–Urey, Watson and Crick discovered DNA’s elegant, complex double-helix structure (p. 97). More recently, Stephen Meyer calculated that an average protein of 150 amino acids in length would require a 1 in 10^{164} chance of forming. In practical terms, it could never happen even if we granted the secular timeframe of the universe (p. 98).

Biblical archaeology

Metaxas turns to the world of biblical archaeology to demonstrate the trustworthiness of Scripture. For me, this was a useful section outlining the development of biblical archaeology as a discipline. The following is a condensed summary of the artefacts he discusses.

The Hittite empire

In the 19th century, liberal theologians dismissed the Bible on account of the Hittites, who were not mentioned by any ancient historian. However, in 1880, Archibald Henry Sayce announced to the London meeting for the *Society of Biblical Archaeology* that mysterious hieroglyphs and ruins belonged to the Hittites of the Bible (p. 133).¹²

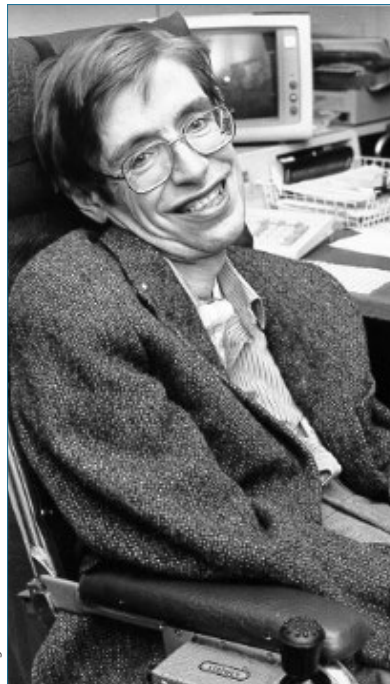


Image: NASA

Figure 2. Stephen Hawking, Cambridge Professor of mathematics, openly espoused atheism his entire career.



Image: Mbzt / Wikimedia, CC BY 3.0

Figure 3. The Mesha Stele, showing Ganneau's reconstruction from the 1870s

Shalmaneser III (858–824 BC) Black Obelisk

Sir Austin Henry Layard discovered the obelisk in 1846 in Mosul, Iraq. Two years later, Edward Hinks, an Irish clergyman and expert Assyriologist, read the names 'Omri' and 'Jehu' (2 Kings 9:5, 25) being the first extra-biblical proof of Jehu's existence (p. 140–141).¹³

Moabite stone

The Mesha Stela (3 ft x 2 ft black obelisk)¹⁴ (figure 3) is inscribed with Canaanite paleo-Hebrew text from the 9th century BC. It was discovered by Frederick Augustus Klein in 1868 in the ancient city of Dhaban, in Bedouin territory. It bore stunning inscriptions corroborating II Kings 3, describing Mesha, the Moabite king, paying Omri, the Israelite king, with sheep and included the divine name *YHWH*. Unfortunately, for unknown reasons, the Bedouins destroyed the stela, but Klein purchased the pieces.

Using a Papier-mâché 'squeeze' Klein reconstructed the stone, along with its text. It was then housed in the London Museum to the delight of Victorian society (pp. 141–147).

Merneptah stele (19th-dynasty Pharaoh, 1,200 BC)

Discovered in Thebes, modern day Luxor, in 1896 by British Egyptologist William Flinders Petrie, the stela bore the first extra-biblical mention of Canaan and Israel thus far discovered.¹⁵ This pushed back the inscriptional evidence for Israel 300 years beyond the Moabite stone, thereby burying liberal thinking regarding Israel's late formation (pp. 148–150).

Qumran ('Dead Sea') scrolls

The scrolls were accidentally discovered by a Bedouin boy in 1947. They contained writings from the first century BC. Most significantly, 37 of the OT's 39 books were represented—essentially unchanged compared to the modern texts. These discoveries provided all the evidence necessary to forever bury liberal attacks—that the Bible had been 'changed' over the centuries to suit church narrative. Metaxas deftly states, "Never in human history has an observed absence of change so instantly and dramatically changed everything" (p. 156).

Qumran Isaiah scroll

The greatest Qumran treasure discovered dates to the 4th century BC. Only three centuries removed from Isaiah's time and 26 centuries removed from modern times, the text remained virtually unchanged compared to text a thousand years younger. It was also a single scroll, contrary to liberal claims that the book of Isaiah had two or even three authors. This demonstrates the

painstaking accuracy of Jewish (and Christian) scribes who faithfully copied the Scriptures—and did not change them, as scurrilously charged by liberal skeptics.¹⁶

Hezekiah's tunnel

In 1867, Charles Warren discovered 'Warren's Shaft', suggesting a connecting tunnel was Hezekiah's. In 1880 Conrad Schick, a German archaeologist, publicized a tunnel inscription accidentally discovered by a child. Oxford's leading Assyriologist, Dr Archibald Sayce translated the paleo-Hebrew text describing activity of workmen, hurriedly completing Hezekiah's tunnel and meeting half-way in accordance with 2 Kings 20:20 and 2 Chronicles 32:30 (pp. 169–171).¹⁷

Ketef Hinnom silver scrolls

In 1979, Gabriel Barkay, then professor of archaeology at Tel Aviv University, made an accidental discovery while excavating a Jerusalem cemetery. Thanks to an unruly child assisting, a chamber hidden beneath the floor was broken into, revealing 7th-century-BC treasures—including two miniscule silver scrolls bearing the name of *YHWH*. Later, infrared imaging revealed text inside the scrolls. Careful unwrapping revealed the priestly blessing of Numbers 6:22–24. In 2004, a Southern Californian University team concluded the text was Proto-Hebrew, dating from pre-exilic times, prior to the 586 BC destruction of Jerusalem—representing the oldest biblical text ever discovered.¹⁸

New Testament manuscripts

F.F. Bruce demonstrated the NT is the most reliable of all ancient documents.¹⁹ The reasons being—the short chronological distance between

the original document and its earliest copy, and the number of copies. Other historical Greek manuscripts²⁰ exist as a mere handful of copies, with gaps of 1,200–1,500 years between the historical events described and their earliest copies!

Furthermore, the level of accuracy achieved by the biblical copyists is demonstrated as virtually flawless. For instance, *John Rylands Papyrus 52* is a fragment of John’s Gospel, textually unchanged compared to our modern versions, but dated to AD 100–175, possibly within 30 years of the original.²¹

Corroborating NT evidences

In 1887 a Greek inscription (dated AD 47) found on the northern coast of Cyprus referred to a ‘proconsul Paulus’. Then, in Rome, a stone inscription (dated AD 54) was found referring to ‘L. Sergius Paulus’ as curator of the Tiber River—the very proconsul Sergius Paulus mentioned in Acts 13:7.

In 1905, a graduate student sifting through pottery shards from the Temple of Apollo, Delphi, discovered an inscription (dated AD Jan–Aug 52) belonging to Roman emperor Claudius referring to “Julius Gallio, my friend and proconsul”. This information directly corroborates the accuracy of Luke in Acts 18:12–17 and serves as an accurate chronological anchor for Paul’s journeys.

Recent Jerusalem discoveries

In 1871, Frenchman Charles Simon Clermont-Ganneau (of Moabite Stone fame) discovered the Court of the Gentiles inscription demonstrating the existence of Herod’s Temple. Almost every stone of this temple had been cast down, fulfilling Jesus’s prophecy in Mark 13:1–2.; one stone bearing the inscription “to the place of trumpeting” (described in Josephus).

In 1990, an ossuary (bone box) was discovered in Abu Tor, Jerusalem (by a bulldozer clearing land) of Jewish high priest Josephus Caiaphas (name confirmed by Jewish historian Josephus), who condemned Jesus to death (pp. 195–197).

The Pool of Siloam, previously denied to have existed by liberal scholars, was unearthed in 2004, during works to mend a broken sewer pipe. Fed by Hezekiah’s tunnel, it was the size of two Olympic swimming pools.²²

Recently, two 1st-century Jewish homes were excavated and attributed to the Apostle Peter’s and Jesus’ family homes in Nazareth. The latter claim is quite extraordinary. It was enclosed within foundations of significant Crusader and Byzantine (AD 5–7th-century) churches—likely marking a location considered highly sacred. An account from AD 680 demonstrates an early tradition that the boyhood home of Jesus was believed to be marked by the church buildings.²³

More OT discoveries

Hammurabi Code

Discovered by Gustave Jéquier, a Swiss Egyptologist, in 1901, in the Persian city of Susa (Shushan). The black basalt stele stands 8 ft tall, covered in Old Akkadian cuneiform and crowned with a bas relief of king Hammurabi of Babylon, receiving laws from a deity. It was captured by the Elamites in the 12th century BC but remained buried until modern times. The stele contained 282 laws, which corroborated details from the Patriarchal period (e.g. 20 shekels for the price of a slave—an exact figure known only during that time, the status of sons born of concubines and wives, and protection of the weakest in society).²⁴ As Metaxas rightly points out, such concurrent details implied Genesis could not have been composed a thousand years after the time it described, as skeptics claim (p. 237).

In a prophecy condemning Jehoia-kim of Judah, Jeremiah 22:14 includes



Figure 4. Christopher Hitchens was a vocal critic of religion and a committed atheist

Image: enceptico / Wikimedia, CC BY 2.0

specific details of Jehoiakim’s lavish lifestyle, including ‘cedar windows painted with vermilion’. These were excavated in 1959—beautifully preserved from the 7th century BC (p. 239).

Sodom and Gomorrah

William Albright identified five cities at the south-eastern Dead Sea shore he believed to include Sodom (Bad edh-Dhra) and Gomorrah (Numeria). Because of his stature as the leading 20th-century biblical archaeologist, these identifications remained uncontested—until 1996, when archaeologist Steven Collins started his investigations. In 2005, Collins excavated previously unexplored Tall el-Hammam, which he believed to be Sodom. It measured nine storeys high and was vast in area (ten times Jerusalem’s area), situated north of Israel’s Dead Sea in the Kikkar ‘disk’, like the plain described in Genesis 13:10. Collins discovered evidence of settlement abandonment for seven centuries. Excavated strata was found to contain an acrid layer of ash at the expected time (1700 BC) of the conflagration event described in Genesis 19. This ‘Bronze Age Gap’ is repeated in all five cities of the plain. But, outside it, mounds show evidence of continual habitation (p. 251). However, despite Metaxas’ enthusiasm, Collins’ site is by no means universally accepted.²⁵

The Four Horsemen of the New Atheists

Metaxas severely critiques the New Atheists, especially saving his ire for Christopher Hitchens (figure 4)—whom he attacks with equal bad temper as Hitchens attacked all who he deemed ‘religious’. I found this section of the book most tedious to wade through.

According to Metaxas, the 20th century’s foremost atheists turned to God: Jean Paul Sartre, Albert

Camus, and Antony Flew.²⁶ They became disillusioned with atheism and its accompanying nihilism and desperately searched for meaning. They found purpose in a ‘creator’, even the God of the Bible (pp. 287–302).

Atheism’s founding myths shown to be hollow

Metaxas shows the atheists’ canard that faith and science are at odds to be completely fallacious—the Christian worldview gave birth to science. CMI has much to say on this.²⁷ The list of historical and modern scientists who are YECs is vast; notably, the founding fathers of each branch of science.²⁸

The Galileo affair

Metaxas does a good job in demonstrating that one of atheism’s foundational myths is hollow, in his historical summary of what happened with Copernicus, Galileo,

and the church. It was never a case of science vs Christianity, but Aristotelian cosmology and Ptolemaic astronomy, the ruling scientific paradigms of the day, were revealed to be wrong (pp. 333–346).²⁹

Metaxas recognizes atheism’s myths must be publicly rejected—I agree! He then reverses the argument and asks, is atheism incompatible with science? The answer is yes—because the inductive method means that unless we have universal knowledge, categorical statements like ‘God does not exist’ cannot be made (p. 355).

Atheism’s moral bankruptcy

Metaxas quotes John Lennox to good effect, who states:

“Like me, there are many scientists and others who think the New Atheism is a belief system which ironically provides a classic example of the blind faith it so vocally despises in others” (p. 363).

For instance, why are atheists angry at the Nazis for murdering millions in the name of social Darwinism? On what basis, when evolution provides no basis for morality?³⁰

Anti-YEC

Sadly, Metaxas unabashedly mocks YECs; for instance:

“Dawkins delights, for example, in bringing up the case of Archbishop James Ussher ... who dated the beginning of the universe to the evening of October 22 in the year 4004 BC. Any serious Christian today finds this ridiculous and of course dismisses it for any number of reasons It is today unavoidably comical that Archbishop Ussher made his assertion ... most human beings in Christendom never heard of Archbishop Ussher, even during his lifetime” (pp. 323–324).

This is astonishingly arrogant and astonishingly wrong. Bishop



Image: National Portrait Gallery / Public Domain

Figure 5. James Ussher, Archbishop of Armagh and Primate of All Ireland between 1625 and 1656

James Ussher (figure 5) was a brilliant scholar—universally recognized as such—along with his *Annals* of history.³¹

Conclusion

Metaxas provides some useful discussion on biblical archaeology—but, apart from the most recent finds, nothing new that can't be found elsewhere.³² Sadly, he dismisses Genesis 1–11 as historical and openly mocks the YEC position, without any theological reflection on the essential problem of death before sin that old-earth compromise brings. Throughout, he uncritically promotes big bang cosmology. Metaxas even compares it with belief in Jesus' Resurrection:

“... Christians unequivocally believe that Jesus rose from the dead ... [it's not] easily understood or believed. They know that it happened, it is a miracle. Like the Big Bang, it defies everything we know from science, but there is too much evidence for us to ignore it” (p. 306).

Ironic in the extreme, I consider his statement distasteful at best. It betrays astonishing ignorance regarding the limits of science and represents a hopelessly confused admixture of rank presumption and sophistry.

Is atheism dead? Not quite. Metaxas's verbose, tendentious style makes his tome a tiresome read, and, along with his prior commitment to cosmological and geological evolution, his book will likely lull atheists to sleep.

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