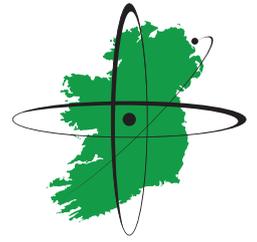


# Rescuing Genesis from the Creationists

Ron Elsdon



**Abstract.** This article argues that one of the reasons for the controversy between creationists and others over the physical origins of the universe and the biological origins of humankind is a failure to employ a properly thought-out methodology for handling the bible, especially Genesis 1. The article draws on the writings of well-respected conservative evangelical theologians such as Jim Packer and Derek Kidner to show that there is no need to insist on a conflict between Genesis 1 and mainstream science.

## Creationism in Northern Ireland

In a recent book entitled *The New Atheists: the Twilight of Reason and the War on Religion*, Tina Beattie writes as follows:<sup>1</sup>

In America there has long been an intellectual confrontation between evolutionary scientists and Christian creationists, who reject the theory of evolution in favour of a literal interpretation of the creation story in the Book of Genesis. The latter have acquired growing political influence in recent years, and there is good reason for liberal thinkers to be concerned about their attempt to hijack the American educational and political system. *However, creationism is a fringe movement in Britain which is so small as to be politically insignificant.*

The situation in Northern Ireland is somewhat different. Briefly, here are three straws in the wind:

- One local council has written to post-primary schools in its area to ask what plans they have to develop teaching material in relation to 'creation, intelligent design and other theories of origin'.
- Prominent local politicians have recently been mentioned in the media as professing creationist beliefs. On 2 October 2008, a prominent Australian creationist addressed MLA's at Stormont in an attempt to persuade them that creationism should be taught *as science* in schools in Northern Ireland.
- There are calls for a creationist account of the origin of the Giant's Causeway to be exhibited at the new Interpretative Centre, as and when it is ever built.<sup>2</sup>

The churches were asked for their reactions to this newly rekindled controversy. These were various. I simply cite the reaction of a 'spokesman for the Church of Ireland' which was suitably guarded:

The Church of Ireland recognises that there are a range of views held on how to interpret the early chapters of Genesis.

## What is at stake here?

At first sight, it may appear that the only issue at stake is that some Christians want to read scientific information directly out of the Bible.<sup>3</sup> If that were so, we would be having merely 'a small local difficulty' that everyone else could safely ignore. But I have deliberately used a provocative title, because there is far more at stake here. Here are some of the wider issues:

1. It is about what is taught in school science classes and who decides it. It is also about what goes up on public display at Northern Ireland's tourist sites, especially the Giant's Causeway. Parallels with the situation in the USA have gained public awareness with the nomination in 2008 of Sarah Palin, governor of Alaska, as the Republican Vice-Presidential candidate. What is not so well-known is the concern at these potential developments of many Christians working as scientists.
2. The issue of the relationship between science and faith, largely seen in terms of the question 'who wins?'. If some have their way, it will be 'the Bible!'; if militant atheist Richard Dawkins and his allies have their way, it will be 'science and science alone!'. There are others, however, who prefer a properly constructed dialogue between science and faith. Indeed, this dialogue has been running for many years, largely ignored by the media,

1. Tina Beattie, *The New Atheists: The Twilight of Reason and the War on Religion*, London: Darton, Longman and Todd, 2007, p. 5f (my italics).

2. See, for example, the website of the Causeway Creation Committee ([www.causewaycreation.com](http://www.causewaycreation.com)).

3. My definition of creationism is the belief that the earth was created some 6000 years ago and/or that humankind is not the result of biological evolutionary processes, *as a direct result of a particular way of reading the Bible, especially the early chapters of Genesis.*

who depressingly keep referring to 'the conflict between science and religion' as if creationism was the *only* voice coming from within the Christian community

3. Creationism simply feeds militant atheists such as Richard Dawkins with the oxygen he needs to keep his invective going. Brilliant scientist he may be, but as Tina Beattie, John Lennox, Alister McGrath and others have shown, in his crusade against religion he has left behind his own insistence on reason.

4. In a letter to *The Times*, Richard Dawkins wrote:<sup>4</sup> 'Polls suggest that more than 40% of the British population are creationists'. The survey he was referring to was conducted by Ipsos MORI for a BBC Horizon programme entitled *A War on Science*, broadcast on BBC2 at 21.00 on Thursday, 26 January 2006. In this survey over 2000 participants took part, and were asked what best described their view of the origin and development of life:

- 22% chose creationism,
- 17% opted for intelligent design,
- 48% selected evolution theory,
- 13% did not know.

Given a choice of three descriptions for the development of life on Earth, people were asked which one or ones they would like to see taught in science lessons in British schools:

- 44% said creationism should be included,
- 41% intelligent design,
- 69% wanted evolution as part of the science curriculum.

This suggests a widespread public ignorance of both science and Christianity. Again, it plays into the hands of militant atheism, and also bodes ill for society's readiness to face up to the pressing issue of how to handle responsibly the enormous power that modern science and technology have made available to us.

5. All this reflects back onto a particularly urgent issue for Christians. This is to do with how *evangelical* Christians read the Bible, because it is evangelical Christians who insist that the Bible is the inspired word of God, and who seem thereby to generate all the heat and/or light on this issue when it captures the attention of the media. I am especially concerned with the perception - a wrong perception at that - that all evangelical Christians are creationists. This is simply not true.<sup>5</sup>

As will be made clear shortly, creationists read the Bible in a *literalistic* way, in which every word is simply to be taken at face value. There is another, more considered and rigorous (but sadly neglected) way for evangelicals and others to approach this vital task. The methodology to be set out here simply draws on good evangelical scholarship.

The heart of the matter is this. It is often assumed that, *if* the Bible is the inspired word of God, *therefore* it must be interpreted literally. The importance of this issue becomes immediately apparent in Genesis 1; how, for example, are the seven days of creation are to be understood? The assumption must be challenged in two ways:

a) It *is* just that: an assumption. It does not *automatically* follow. It has to be justified but often is not.

b) Both Christians and their critics have muddied the waters by using the word 'literal' in a loose way. Applied to biblical scholarship, the word 'literal' has a slightly - but importantly - different meaning.

### **Jim Packer on how to handle Scripture**

Of great importance in this context is the work of evangelical scholar Dr. Jim Packer. His name is widely known for his devotional book *Knowing God*. Anglicans ought to know him especially well for the significant work he has done in the field of biblical interpretation. One of his most widely-known books is a classic published in 1958 and entitled *Fundamentalism and the Word of God*.<sup>6</sup> Now 50 years old, it is still well worth revisiting.

Shorter but equally significant is his contribution to an Anglican evangelical symposium edited by Melvin Tinker, and entitled *Restoring the Vision*.<sup>7</sup> Packer's essay title was 'Understanding the Bible: Evangelical Hermeneutics'. He reminds Christians that careful handling of the biblical text demands the following processes:

#### ◇ EXEGESIS ◇

which is to be understood as the extracting of meaning from the text. *Biblical passages must be taken to mean what their human writers were consciously expressing*. That is what is often missing in the way we use the Bible, and its absence makes an enormous difference. The 'literal' sense that good exegesis has always sought is the 'literary' sense, the sense that the writer meant his readers to catch, the sense that

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4. Richard Dawkins, letter in *The Times*, Saturday August 9, 2008.

5. See, for example, the website of the organisation Christians in Science ([www.cis.org.uk](http://www.cis.org.uk)).

6. J. I. Packer, *Fundamentalism and the Word of God*, London: Inter-Varsity Fellowship 1958.

7. J. I. Packer, *Understanding the Bible: Evangelical Hermeneutics* in Melvin Tinker (ed), *Restoring the Vision*, Eastbourne: Monarch 1990, pp. 39-58.

emerges as you take account of the literary genre (type, category), the linguistic character, the cultural and historical background, the rhetorical structure and communicative function of each biblical book and each unit of meaning (section, paragraph, sentence) within it.

This is not the same as the 'literalistic' meaning, in which one simply takes each word at face value, without thinking about how it functions within the text as a whole, or, as Packer observes, as if it were simply a modern newspaper report. So he complains that in Genesis 1 'celebrations of the created order get read as lessons in science'.<sup>8</sup> So one takes seriously the text as a human production (to which scripture itself gives ample testimony, see e.g. Luke 1:1-4) as well as a divine one. Unwittingly, those grandfathers of creationism, Whitcomb and Morris, in their book *The Genesis Flood*, acknowledge that. They quote with approval B.B. Warfield:<sup>9</sup>

The Church has held from the beginning that the Bible is the Word of God in such a sense that its words, *though written by men and bearing indelibly impressed upon them the marks of their human origin*, were written, nevertheless, under such an influence of the Holy Ghost as to be also the words of God, the adequate expression of His mind and will.

Packer, and many others like him, take seriously this rigorous definition of the 'literal' sense of the Bible, and follow through on it in terms of careful exegesis. Before returning to Genesis 1, note how Packer again is representative of many when he expresses himself on the subject of interpreting the Bible as a quasi-scientific document, in ways such as these:<sup>10, 11</sup>

... exegetically I cannot see that anything Scripture says, in the first chapters of Genesis or elsewhere, bears on the biological theory of evolution one way or the other. On that theory itself, as a non-scientist, watching from a distance the disputes of the experts, I suspend judgment, but I recall that B.B. Warfield was a theistic evolutionist. If on this count I am not an evangelical, then neither was he.

In fact, interrogating biblical statements concerning nature in the light of scientific knowledge about their subject matter may help toward attaining a more precise exegesis of

them. For though exegesis must be controlled by the text itself, not shaped by extraneous considerations, the exegetical process is constantly stimulated by questioning the text as to whether it means this or that.

There are two other vitally important planks that are relevant here in Packer's rigorous methodology for understanding scripture.

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where one seeks to correlate what each biblical passage has to say with others, to ensure that the entire weight of the biblical testimony in any subject is being conveyed. In other words, the *coherence, harmony, and veracity* of all biblical teaching must be taken as the working hypothesis in interpretation. Interpretation involves *synthesising* what the various biblical passages teach, so that each item taught finds its proper place and significance in the *organism* of revelation as a whole.

#### ◇ APPLICATION ◇

which brings together thought and action. *The response for which the text calls must be made explicit.*

Rather than enlarge on these in a theoretical way, we now apply all of these principles to the opening words of Genesis 1.

### Application to Genesis 1

#### ◇ EXEGESIS ◇

Here one has to perform the difficult task of closing one's ears to the noise of the creationist debate, and try to read the text as if encountering it for the first time. Wise words of another evangelical scholar, Derek Kidner, are appropriate at this point:<sup>12</sup>

To read scripture with one eye on any other account is to blur its image and miss its wisdom.

Now ask: are there internal clues as to how to detect the author's intention in Genesis 1? I suggest that one cannot ignore the repeated statements of the goodness of creation, which seem absolutely central to the meaning of this controversial chapter. The climax is encountered on day 6 (whatever the word 'day' actually means)

8. J. I. Parker, *Understanding the Bible*, op. cit., p. 50.

9. Quoted in John C. Whitcomb, Jr. and Henry M. Morris, *The Genesis Flood: The Biblical Record and Its Scientific Implications*, Philadelphia, Pennsylvania: Presbyterian and Reformed Publishing Company, 1961, p. xx (my italics).

10. J. I. Packer, *The Evangelical Anglican Identity Problem*, Oxford: Latimer House, 1978, p. 5.

11. J. I. Packer, *God Has Spoken*, London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1964, p. 170f. See also M. W. Poole and G. J. Wenham, *Creation or Evolution - A False Antithesis?*, Latimer Studies 23/24, Oxford: Latimer House 1987.

12. F. D. Kidner, *Genesis*, Tyndale Old Testament Commentaries, London: Tyndale Press 1967, p. 31.

with this significant statement:

God saw all that he had made, and it was very good. And there was evening, and there was morning—the sixth day. Genesis 1:31 (NIV)

That helps control the interpretation of another contentious statement in Genesis 1:

Then God said, "Let us make man in our image, in our likeness ..." Genesis 1:26b (NIV)

Is this about evolution - for or against? Douglas Adams has this marvellous one-liner in *The Hitch-Hiker's Guide to the Galaxy*:

Earthmen are not proud of their ancestors and never invite them round to dinner.

But what immediately follows, and is often completely ignored, is the second part of the same statement:

"... and let them rule over the fish of the sea and the birds of the air, over the livestock, over all the earth, and over all the creatures that move along the ground." Genesis 1:26b (NIV)

In other words, the whole thrust of this statement indicates that it not about biological origins, but is about our *relationships* - with our Creator on the one hand and on the other, with the good created order for which we are given an enormous privilege and responsibility of care.

And what of the 'days'? In Genesis 1 the story of creation is clearly set in a 7-day framework of work, rest and play, as Exodus 20 makes clear. What is not so obvious is whether this must be interpreted literalistically. Here again Derek Kidner, in his magnificent commentary on Genesis, suggests another equally legitimate approach:<sup>13</sup>

The days of creation ... give the reader a simple means or relating the work of God in creation to the work of God here and now in history. While a scientific account would have to speak of ages, not days, and would group them to mark the steps that are scientifically significant, the present account surveys the same scene for its theological significance ... The significance of the week ... makes man's proper rhythm of work and rest a *reminder and miniature of the Creator's* ...

#### ◇ INTEGRATION ◇

If one insists that the creation account of Genesis 1 is to be read as if it were a scientific report, it is difficult to integrate it into the rest of scripture

except by seizing a few proof texts such as Exodus 20 and Exodus 31. But in applying the kind of reverent methodology that Jim Packer sets out, it becomes apparent that for the pre-scientific agrarian people who were the original recipients of the text, the thrust of Genesis 1 was not to do with a scientific understanding of origins but was to do with the goodness of creation and its care.

Is this to go to far in accommodating scripture to the findings of modern science? Derek Kidner again has wise words:<sup>14</sup>

... it may be thought that this whole discussion allows science too much control over exegesis. This would be a serious charge. But to try to correlate the data of Scripture and nature is not to dishonour biblical authority, but to honour God as Creator and to grapple with our proper task of interpreting His ways of speaking.

#### ◇ APPLICATION ◇

Genesis 1 then fits into, and forms an ethical prologue to, the rest of the Old Testament. This is the story of the people of God, called to be a light to the nations, in 'a land flowing with milk and honey', this being a restatement, in a concrete geographical situation, of the goodness of creation. So the Pentateuch contains divinely-given laws on many aspects of life in the land, *including the care of that land*. Leviticus 25 is a good place to start, but there are other places where one must go as well (e.g. Exodus 23:29f; Deuteronomy 7:22, 20:19f). Why are laws to do with the care of creation scattered throughout the Pentateuch rather than gathered helpful in a single section? Alec Motyer's remarks about Leviticus 19 can be applied to this wider issue:<sup>15</sup>

The fact that they are in no discernible order may be deliberate, for life itself is a jumble, one thing after another, and the Lord wanted his people to live in every situation, in all the flux and whirl of life, according to his revealed will.

Deuteronomy 28 then addresses what then happens if God's people fail to live God's way in a land of fragile ecosystems.<sup>16</sup> It warns that this will lead to disaster - environmental disaster included. Dotted here and there are references to massive soil erosion (e.g. Job 14:18f) and uncontrolled forest fires (Isaiah 9:18; 10:17-19; cf. 33:12). The prophets warn of judgement coming in the form of polluted and scorched land (e.g. Isaiah 24:1-7). The new age to come<sup>17</sup> in Isaiah 65 is described

13. F. D. Kidner, op. cit., p. 55 (my italics).

14. F. D. Kidner, op. cit., p. 30f.

15. Alec Motyer, *The Message of Exodus*, Leicester: Intervarsity Press 2005, p. 212.

16. Ron Elsdon, *Greenhouse Theology*, Eastbourne: Monarch 1992, chapters 5 and 6.

17. Jim Packer also points out that biblical interpretation also has to do with the fulfilment of promise, but space does not permit me to enlarge on this. See J. I. Packer, *Understanding the Bible*, op. cit., p. 53.

in terms of new heavens and new earth, a picture that the New Testament picks up in places such as Romans 8 and Revelation 21.

All of this gets lost, sadly, in needless controversies over creationism.

### Conclusions

1. Evangelical Christians need to be released from the fear that 'science might prove the Bible wrong'. There is nothing to fear from science and scientific knowledge. It ought to be welcomed. It might actually help us to understand how to handle scripture better, as Derek Kidner (and Calvin, amongst others) before him pointed out.

There is also a related question: how scripturally literate are modern Christians? This is not simply a matter of how much has been committed to memory, or to skill in finding one's way around the Bible. It is about how to handle the whole Bible as God's word. 2 Timothy 2:15 ought to be applicable to a wider circle than simply a church's leadership.

2. There is also the issue of the public face of Christianity. There will always be occasions when Christians have to swim against the tide, to be unpopular, a nuisance, even a threat. But when this happens *needlessly*, as when we fail to handle our own scriptures properly, it is reprehensible. Genesis 1 is, sadly, a case in point.

3. There is also the relationship between Christian voices and the wider constituency. What we urgently need is for more people to join in with a properly ordered dialogue between faith and science. When creationists address large meetings of creationist Christians, no real dialogue takes place. It has to

be a meeting of Christian and secular voices. I am glad I have had the opportunity to do this in recent years with the Ulster Humanist Association and the Belfast Geologists Society amongst others.

4. Finally, there is the urgent issue of the care of creation in an age of climate change and global warming. Here in Northern Ireland fresh scepticism has been expressed in political circles about the scale of the human impact on the world's climatic systems. One can only speculate as to the extent of the influence of creationist teaching on this issue. However, it may be significant that at least one creationist website expresses similarly sceptical views. But it will not do, as that website does, simply to quote as proof texts verses such as:

As long as the earth endures, seedtime and harvest, cold and heat, summer and winter, day and night will never cease. Genesis 8:22 (NIV)

What is urgently needed from the Christian community, especially its evangelical constituency, is a far more careful and reverent handling of our scriptures which grasps the full implications of a rounded theology of creation - its past, its present and its future - as the Bible sets it out. Issues of climate change and global warming are *directly* related to the biblical theology of creation and are far too urgent and complex to be dismissed with a few isolated proof texts. The issues are so important that every voice that can be brought needs to be brought. Only then will Christians be seen to be what we say we are - people created by our God in His image and likeness, readily rising to the task He has given us of caring responsibly for the marvellous creation of which we are part.

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## About the Author

Rev Dr Ron Elsdon has been rector of St. Bartholomew's Church, Stranmillis, in Belfast, since 2002. Prior to that he served a curacy in Ballymena. Before ordination he taught geology at University College Dublin, and was later Northern Ireland Regional Co-ordinator for **CROSSLINKS**. His ongoing concerns include the relationship between science and faith, and a biblical approach to the theology of creation and environmental concerns. He is a member of Christians in Science.



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