

No Middle Ground: Why Theistic Evolution and Biblical Creation are Mutually Exclusive (With Some Implications for Eschatology)

By Greg A. King

There are some people who are dual citizens and have passports from two different countries. Australia, Canada, Switzerland, and the United States are among the countries that allow this. Having two passports does not mean they are traitors to one country or less loyal to the other.

Similarly, some people claim to be dual citizens when it comes to the issue of origins. They profess to be Bible-believing Christians while also believing in macro-evolution. They state that it is possible to hold a high view of Scripture and at the same time embrace deep time and go back to a one-cell being from which everything slowly evolved.

Perhaps they are encouraged in this approach by quotes such as this: “I believe that God is in charge and that evolution is the way he chose to carry out his creation. If life emerged from a primeval soup, then God was the Master Chef.”¹

Another quote tending in this direction is from Stephen J. Gould, one of America’s most widely quoted scientists on the topic of origins. He stated that there is no conflict between science and religion because they are concerned with separate matters. Indeed, there is “a lack of overlap between their respective domains.” According to him, evolution is “entirely compatible” with Christian belief.²

However, before joining these scholars aboard the evolutionary train, Christians might want to consider another quote from Gould that suggests his approach to science is not quite as benign in its attitude towards religion as it might first seem. In answering the question of why humans exist, he declares, “I do not think that any ‘higher’ answer can be given. . . . We are the offspring of history and must establish our own paths in this most diverse and interesting of conceivable universes—one indifferent to our suffering, and therefore offering us maximal freedom to thrive, or to fail, in our own chosen way.”³

So the question is this: Are the viewpoints of creation and evolution logically consistent? Is it tenable to hold on to both biblical creation and macro-evolution at the same time? Is it possible for a Christian church or denomination to endorse both the biblical teaching of creation and accept the teachings generally espoused by science that complex life forms developed from simpler life forms and that cellular life began several billion years ago?

The thesis of this paper is that there is no middle ground when it comes to the matter of origins. This paper will seek to show that biblical creation and the evolutionary paradigm—even when the latter is comingled with some form of belief in God, as in theistic evolution—are mutually exclusive. That is, it is not possible to be logically consistent and hold to the viewpoint set forth in Scripture regarding the beginning of life on this planet while at the same time believing in macro-evolution.

After briefly defining theistic evolution, of which some variation is accepted by nearly all Christians who don’t espouse a literal creation as described in Scripture, this paper will set forth six ways theistic evolution diverges from the biblical account. Then it will highlight seven important biblical teachings that are undermined or altered by an acceptance of theistic evolution. Finally, it will conclude with some thoughts on the importance of this matter for biblical eschatology.

Definitions

It is important to give a definition first, so we will know what is being talked about when the term theistic evolution is used. Now that isn't as easy as it might seem, because the term is often used without defining it, leaving the reader in some doubt as to what is being described. However, theistic evolution is usually understood approximately as follows: The view that God, keeping discretely in the background, used the process of macroevolution to create every living thing. That is, God somehow directed the process of evolution from simple life to complex life over millions of years.

A key part of the definition is that God keeps "discretely in the background." That is, His creative activity is not really visible, except to the eye of faith. Therefore, the evolutionary processes would be understood and described in a similar way that a materialistic scientist understands and describes it—except for the proviso that God is somehow directing or guiding the process.

Contradictions with the Genesis Creation Account

With this definition in mind, I now turn to the ways in which almost all understandings of theistic evolution contradict biblical creation. As will be seen, at its most basic level theistic evolution is in conflict with what Scripture teaches about the beginnings of life on this planet.

The first way that theistic evolution contradicts biblical creation is that there is no literal creation week. In fact, theistic evolution is not focused on the issue of time, except for implying that the development of life and the march of progress from simple to complex forms of life took place over a lengthy, indeterminate period of time.

There is no evening and morning, as in the biblical account. There is no mention of six literal days in which God's creative activity took place—just long periods of time for random mutation and the development of various complex life forms.

Now some may say that each day represents a longer period of time, but nowhere in the biblical text is such implied. Another view is that God engaged in a week of revelatory activity when revealing creation to the author of Genesis, but again this is unsupported by the biblical text. Rather, it is best to simply recognize that *the biblical account describes a creation that occurs in six literal days, which is in conflict with the understanding of theistic evolution.*

A second way that biblical creation is contradicted by theistic evolution is related to the origin of human beings. In theistic evolution there is no special creation of humans. Rather, humans are the result of the long, slow, incremental process of natural selection that God—at least, according to the proponents of theistic evolution—originally set in motion.

Now it is true that proponents of theistic evolution may in some way highlight the uniqueness of human beings. Some may say that at some point God placed an immortal soul within early hominids, thus specifying them as the first pair of humans. Others might contend that at some point God gave a sense of morality to a pair of human ancestors whom He selected. But in any case, *there is no special and unique creation of humans as described in Scripture*—that is, of humans who did not descend from animals and are the ancestors of all humans.

A third contradiction between theistic evolution and biblical creation is that theistic evolution does not depict God as personally involved with creation. On the contrary, the development of life in all its magnificent forms is

viewed in basically the same way as it is in naturalistic evolution. In fact, one might be hard pressed to find much distinction between a description of the process of natural selection by a theistic evolutionist and the description of the same process by a naturalistic evolutionist. There is no deity who speaks his creation into existence by the power of his word, as depicted in Genesis and throughout Scripture. There is no divine deliberation prior to the creation of humans (Gen 1:26); nor is there the picture of God stooping to form Adam from the dust of the ground (Gen 2:7). Instead, God is merely something like a life-giving principle. *The personal Creator God described in Genesis vanishes from the scene.*

A fourth contradiction between the account of Scripture and theistic evolution is that the latter does not have the causal linkage between sin and death that is basic and foundational in the biblical account. According to the proponents of theistic evolution, disease and predatory activity that result in the demise of living creatures have been part of this planet's history since the beginning. There was never a time when death was not present, and nature, red in tooth and claw (to use Tennyson's famous expression) has always been here.

But such a view directly contradicts the biblical account. According to Scripture, when this earth was made there was no shadow of death. This was because there was no taint of sin and everything was in harmony with God's will. But all of this changed when sin entered the world. After Adam and Eve rebelled against the divine will, death came in as a result (see Rom 5:12). The Bible teaches that *the only reason death exists is because of the intrusion of sin, while in theistic evolution it is part of the natural order of things.*

A fifth way that theistic evolution contradicts biblical creation is by removing the literal seventh day of the initial week of earth's history as the first Sabbath. Since there is no literal week of creation, just lengthy indeterminate periods of time, neither is there a literal Sabbath. The Sabbath only came along at a much later time, possibly when workers in early Israel desired a day of respite from their labors and an Israelite scribe wanted to infuse the day with some religious meaning. Or perhaps at some point the Israelites co-opted a non-working day from another culture.

But in any case, *the Sabbath is no longer a memorial of creation, as it is depicted in Scripture.* It is not the crown and climax of the week of creation, a day set aside and blessed by God Himself. This makes the Sabbath mostly a human idea, instead of a divine initiative, and is in contrast with the clear teaching of the Bible.

A sixth contradiction between theistic evolution and the biblical account of origins is its *denial of the global flood as described in Genesis.* By presenting the history of this earth and the fossil record as involving only naturalistic processes that are observable today, and by discounting the possibility that any worldwide catastrophes may have played a part in what transpired, theistic evolutionists ignore the pivotal role that the Genesis flood had in shaping the contours of the earth and the history of the human race.

As a study of the Gospels demonstrates, this perspective is at odds with the understanding of Jesus, who understood the biblical flood narrative literally (Matt 24:38–39). Additionally, those who hold this perspective deny the reality of the major divine judgment of the past—a global flood—even while they question the reality of the future return of Christ. Ironically, their disbelief in both the flood and the Parousia was anticipated in Scripture itself (see 2 Pet 3:3–7).

Doctrinal Implications

Having looked at six ways in which theistic evolution contradicts the account of origins set forth in Scripture, I now turn to some of the implications of theistic evolution for biblical doctrines. That is, if a person should embrace

theistic evolution, how would their theology be altered? What doctrines of Scripture would be affected and how would they be changed?⁴

Before looking at several of these doctrines, I should give a brief definition of the term “doctrine.” Doctrines, which could also be understood as the teachings of the Bible, are simply the summary and description of what Scripture says about God. They are the unfolding of the biblical revelation of God and His dealings with humanity, and they unveil truth about how we should relate to God and one another.

Sometimes in our day and age people say, “I don’t need doctrine; all I want is love.” But the love of God for His children is in itself a teaching or doctrine of Scripture. Instead of eschewing doctrines, we should embrace them because they tell us about God. So then, what doctrines are affected by a belief in theistic evolution?

The first doctrine impacted by embracing theistic evolution is *the doctrine of Scripture itself*. What does the Bible teach about itself? There are verses that state the Bible is inspired by God (2 Tim 3:16), and as such, it is reliable and trustworthy. Additionally, it is authoritative in what it teaches. This is what could be described as a “high view” of Scripture.

It is difficult to see how one can maintain a high view of the Bible and endorse theistic evolution. Theistic evolution, a view of origins that attempts to blend the current understanding of science with theism, is clearly at odds with Scripture in several ways (as shown above), and should be perceived as undermining the doctrine of Scripture because Scripture is no longer seen as reliable in what it states.

A second doctrine affected by a belief in theistic evolution is *the doctrine of God*. Scripture presents God as able to call the flora and fauna into existence by His spoken word (see Gen 1; Ps 33:6, 9). He is shown to be both sovereign and omnipotent, the majestic Lord of creation. There is also God’s goodness.

By contrast, the God of theistic evolution is a diminished deity. Yes, the first spark of life came from Him, but His involvement with the world from that time forward seems very remote. At best, He is detached and in the background, working in the shadows, if at all. And the god of evolution is an utterly wasteful and cruel god who uses the suffering and the death of billions of creatures to propel the development of species. This is certainly not consistent with the teaching of the deity set forth in Scripture, and thus, the doctrine of God is undermined.

A third doctrine impacted by embracing theistic evolution is *the doctrine of salvation*. The Bible teaches that Jesus came to save us from death, which resulted from the choice made by the first humans who rebelled against God (see Gen 3; Rom 5:12). The misuse of human free will led to tragic consequences, from which God delivered us with the death of His Son. This, in a nutshell, is the plan of salvation.

It is difficult to see how the biblical teaching of salvation can be reconciled with theistic evolution. According to theistic evolution, death has always been part of human experience, and in fact, it preceded the existence of humans. Theistic evolution also teaches that it was through natural selection, sometimes known as survival of the fittest, that complex forms of life arose from simpler forms. That being the case, it is difficult to even see what a plan of salvation logically consistent with theistic evolution would look like. Why do humans need to be saved if we are simply following God’s plan for achieving higher forms of life? From what do we need to be saved? There is basically no fall, and thus no sin. Evolution indirectly denies the doctrine of sin. Such basic questions should be addressed before embracing the evolutionary viewpoint.

A fourth doctrine affected by theistic evolution is *the doctrine of man*. In Scripture humans are depicted as the capstone of God’s created works. As the creation week builds to a crescendo, they are the crowning achievement, formed in the image of God Himself (Gen 1:26–27), and given dominion over creation (Gen 1:28).

This is clearly not the anthropology of theistic evolution. In theistic evolution hominids only emerge at the end of a long, slow process of development, proceeding by natural selection from the simpler forms of life to the more complex forms. If God did anything special in connection with the origin of humans, it was unnoticed and hidden, except to the eye of faith. The biblical doctrine of man is severely altered in such a scenario. In evolution there is no intrinsic value in a human being. If evolution is the survival of the fittest, why should one race not be better than another? This has severe implications on our ethics and how we treat each other.

A fifth doctrine impacted by believing in theistic evolution is *the doctrine of the Sabbath*. As noted previously, no longer is the Sabbath a memorial of creation, a day set aside since the beginning of the world. It is not the special day on which God Himself rested and which He sanctified and blessed.

Since theistic evolution has no literal creation week, its understanding of the Sabbath would be that it is of human origin instead of a divine institution, and like humans, it came about as a result of a long developmental process. Consequently, the Sabbath no longer has the significance accorded to it in Scripture and it loses much of its compelling significance.

A sixth doctrine that would be understood quite differently if theistic evolution were embraced is *the doctrine of marriage*. According to the Bible, marriage, like the Sabbath, is a divine institution, given by God Himself (Gen 2:24–25). Moreover, it goes back to the very beginning of earth’s history. Additionally, it is a binding commitment between male and female, as exemplified in the very first marriage between Adam and Eve.

This perspective is drastically altered by theistic evolution. First, hominids did not come along until life on earth had existed for millions of years. Further, marriage, instead of being instituted by God, may have arisen as part of the process of natural selection. That is, since a relationship between two members of the opposite sex could arguably be said to help promote the propagation of the species, the concept of marriage came into being. However, it is not a divinely given covenant as presented in Scripture, a permanent commitment between one man and one woman. Thus, theistic evolution helps pave the way for some of the unbiblical permutations of marriage that evidenced in our time—such as divorce, polygamy, incest, and homosexuality. It ultimately would lead to a loss of all sexual norms.

Finally, a seventh and final⁵ doctrine impacted by theistic evolution is *the doctrine of the New Earth*, which will be brought into existence when God establishes His visible kingdom. One intriguing feature of this doctrine is how it is presented in Scripture as a new creation, a restoration of what had been lost through sin. The tree of life, originally in the Garden of Eden (Gen 2:9), will also be found in the New Earth (Rev 22:2). Sorrow and death will be absent in the New Earth (Rev 21:4), just as they were not part of God’s original creation. Creation will come full circle, as God restores what was lost through sin.

This biblical teaching is certainly incongruent with theistic evolution, which has no place for a pristine original world with no taint of sin and no shadow of death. Instead it depicts a world in which decay, predatory activity, destruction, and death have always been present. Thus, it would be logically inconsistent to advocate the doctrine of the New Earth as outlined in Scripture.

Conclusion

In conclusion, because of the irreconcilable contradictions between theistic evolution and Scripture, as outlined above, and because of the profound way in which theistic evolution would alter or modify key doctrines of the Bible,

it seems clear that there is no middle ground between theistic evolution and biblical creation. As in Joshua's day (Josh 24:15), we are urged to choose whom we will serve: the Creator God as revealed in inspired Scripture or the deity implied by theistic evolution, who used a chaotic and destructive process of death and decay to bring his world into existence. As in Elijah's day, we are called to stop limping back and forth between two opinions—to get off the fence (1 Kgs 18:21).

The following quote shows why this issue matters so much in our day and age:

And so, here is our first answer to the question, "Who am I?" The Babylonian myth would answer, "You are a product of the gods to make their life easier." Modern myth would assert, "You are a product of random chance in a purposeless universe." The Bible says, "You are a personal creation of Yahweh, who cares for you, has created you male and female, and has placed you in an orderly and good creation as his representative ruler." This knowledge of God's order and created relationships is considered obsolete by many today. As a result, our age suffers the anxiety of enjoying no secure place or significance in the world.⁶

The antidote to this angst and meaninglessness is for us as Adventists to—without apology or equivocation—be about the work of "proclaiming and teaching the biblical doctrine of creation, living in its light, rejoicing in our status as sons and daughters of God, and praising our Lord Jesus Christ—our Creator and Redeemer."⁷

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¹ Colin Humphreys, "Can Science and Christianity Both Be True?" in *Real Science, Real Faith*, ed. R. J. Berry (Oxford and Grand Rapids, MI: Monarch Books, 1991), 124–125.

² Stephen Jay Gould, "Nonoverlapping Magisteria," *Natural History* 106 (March 1997): 16.

³ Stephen J. Gould, *Wonderful Life*, (New York: W. W. Norton, 1989), 323.

⁴ A recent Adventist contribution on this topic is the fine volume by Clifford Goldstein, *Baptizing the Devil: Evolution and the Seduction of Christianity* (Nampa, ID: Pacific Press, 2017).

⁵ This is not an exhaustive list. Also affected are other doctrines, such as the Great Controversy, the resurrection, the end of sin, etc. But due to the space limitations of this article, we will limit our discussion to the above mentioned doctrines.

⁶ Albert Baylis, *From Creation to the Cross* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1996), 42.

⁷ Taken from the Southern Adventist University statement on creation, titled, "A Reaffirmation of Creation." The entire statement is at www.southern.edu/academics/academic-sites/faithandscience/adventistposition/universitystatement.html (accessed 09-04-2018)