

**REVIEW ARTICLE: FERNANDO CANALE'S CREATION,
EVOLUTION, AND THEOLOGY: THE ROLE OF
METHOD IN THEOLOGICAL
ACCOMMODATION**

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Canale, Fernando. *Creation, Evolution, and Theology: The Role of Method in Theological Accommodation*. Berrien Springs: Andrews University LithoTech, 2005. 178 pp. Paper, \$25.00.

This work presents a detailed philosophical and theological defense of traditional Seventh-day Adventist understandings of the opening chapters of Genesis. As far as this reviewer is aware, in comparison with any other book or monograph-length Adventist work on creationism, this volume is unique.

In contrast to the apologetic agenda of the Seventh-day Adventist General Conference-sponsored Geoscience Research Institute, this work does not affirm young-life creationism by using a form of "scientific creationism" that disputes the *interpretation of the empirical data* supporting the standard scientific understanding of earth history, geochronology, and evolutionary biology. Rather, the author, Fernando Luis Canale, who currently serves as Professor of Theology and Christian Philosophy at the Seventh-day Adventist Theological Seminary at Andrews University, questions the conventional understanding of the scientific evidence primarily by focusing on what he argues is a postmodern approach to knowledge formation. On this basis, Canale attempts to dispute, from a traditional Adventist perspective, the *philosophical basis on which the modern scientific enterprise operates* when dealing with earth history and evolutionary biology.

In 178 pages, divided into three major sections containing 13 chapters, the author sets out his answer to questions such as, "What should be the response of SDA theologians and scholars to the teaching of evolution?" and "Should Christian theology accommodate the six-day account of biblical creation to deep time (several billions of years) evolution?" (4). An introductory section contains chapters on the methodology of knowledge formation in general. These are followed by chapters on scientific and then theological methodology. To explore various theological methods, a wide spectrum of ancient, modern, and postmodern historians, philosophers, and theologians are cited, including Thomas Aquinas, Augustine, Paul Feyerabend, Thomas Kuhn, Karl Popper, Richard Rorty, David Tracy, Alfred North Whitehead, and Joseph Cardinal Ratzinger (now Pope Benedict XVI).

In an attempt to understand how the empirical sciences approach their understanding of the physical world, Canale seeks to unpack in a detailed fashion what he views as the fundamental assumptions that underlie the contemporary scientific approach to the history of the earth and life upon it. As a theologian, he

expends a great deal of effort in an attempt to understand how the modern empirical sciences—particularly those focusing on evolutionary biology, geology, and paleontology—function in coming to a scientific understanding of how the world came to be and the time frame of that process. In his methodology, he clearly distances himself from the simplistic fundamentalist apologetic approach to science typically exemplified in popular young-earth and/or young-life creationist works, such as most of those produced by the Answers in Genesis or the Institute for Creation Research organizations.

The author indicates that most of the book was written originally as the text of presentations at the Seventh-day Adventist General Conference International Faith and Science Conferences in 2002 (Ogden, Utah) and 2004 (Denver, Colorado), with subsequent publication in the *Andrews University Seminary Studies*, while one chapter appeared in the *Journal of the Adventist Theological Society*.

Summary

This summary will focus on the arguments offered by Canale that appear to be most relevant in understanding the basis on which he advances his most salient arguments supporting his central thesis, using some of the terminology that he employs. *That central thesis is that a belief in the reality of “deep time” in the geological record and the contemporary scientific understandings of evolutionary biology concerning the development of organic life on planet earth are fundamentally and totally incompatible with a belief in what the author views as the essentials of Adventist Christianity.*

Canale is very clear that he views this topic as absolutely foundational in Adventism. He declares that “Adventism cannot change the history of creation without pulling from under its feet the foundation upon which it stands. Without this foundation, the doctrine of the Sanctuary and the historical interpretation of prophecy become literary exercises that do not help us to understand either nature or God’s works of salvation. Evolutionary theory destroys the biblical history of salvation as a redemptive process that moves from creation to new creation” (139).

The author launches his discussion by arguing that Christian theology is a “scientific enterprise” and posits that the “creation-evolution debate” is “about the differences between two scientific enterprises—Christian theology and the empirical sciences” (4). He later explains that he views his “trade [theology] as scientific in a rational, as opposed to an experiential, sense,” citing the opinion of Thomas Aquinas on this point (89). His stated goal is “to examine how human beings arrive at conclusions and at truth and to examine in what way the Bible serves as the foundation of truth.” His book, he says, is not “an analysis of the teachings of evolution and creation, but rather the rational processes that led to their formulations” (5). He informs his readers that “Our conclusion [i.e., *his* conclusion] will underline the incompatibility of deep time evolutionary history with Adventist/Biblical theology” (5).

Canale suggests that what he calls the “myth of science, as rendering

absolute certain knowledge” builds on a form of modernist understanding of knowledge. By contrast, in his view, postmodern “philosophy of science showed that all knowledge results from contributions made by both the object and the subject . . . [T]o know is to interpret.” To him, this means that it is necessary to reinterpret “the meaning of objectivity.” Modern thought, he insists, assumes the existence of an “absolute universal truth” independent of the subject’s contribution. A postmodern approach, he says, “allows for conflicting interpretations of knowledge” and “places [the creation-evolution debate] on a different footing” (9-10).

Canale says he is primarily “concerned with the application of scientific methodology in the natural sciences, particularly geology, paleontology, and biology” (20). The most prominent feature of scientific methodology, he says, is its source of information. Scientists arrive at “truth” from conclusions, which they derive from data, which they receive through sensory perception. This reliance on sensory perception as the source of scientific knowledge is “a requirement of the teleological and hermeneutical conditions of the scientific method” (20).

Continuing this line of thought, the author notes that it is “through sensory perception that natural and historical entities are revealed to human reason. Scientists . . . believe that their information derives from ‘real’ rather than ‘imaginary’ things. . . . They assume that real things are only those that can be ascertained through sensory perception and/or technological enhancement. . . . Scientists implicitly presuppose an understanding of what ‘real’ means” (20-21).

Canale insists that the development of postmodern philosophical views

mean[s] that a theology based on the principal of *sola Scriptura* is not irrational. . . . What scientists call speculation, or guesswork, in creating and building a comprehensive evolutionary worldview, Scripture calls divine inspiration. . . . Evolution stands as the rational explanation produced by the scientific community in the Western world, while biblical inspiration stands as the rational explanation of the community of faith received from God by way of divine revelation and inspiration (50-51).

We are forced to choose and in practice accept one of the competing theories [evolution or creation] as absolutely true. This acceptance is not based on reason or method, but on faith or the relative confidence we personally have on the theory we adopt as being the most persuasive explanation of reality” (74).

To reiterate this important point, Canale emphasizes that the source of data on which evolutionary views are based comes from a study of the natural world. In contrast, he insists that creationism “springs from divine revelation, God’s summary account of his handiwork” (74). The “scientific method works from empirical data. Christian theology, on the other hand, works from data believed to be supernaturally revealed” (91).

Based on this line of argument, the author insists that

[C]reationists have a broader index of reality than evolutionists. The former includes God and his revelation, while the latter

excludes them. . . . This divergence about the index of reality becomes the leading macro-hermeneutical difference between the two conflicting metanarratives. . . . Creation and evolution are not only competing in the scientific attempt to interpret the history of our planet, but, as they elicit our assent, they become metanarratives we accept by faith and use to build our understanding of the world and of Christian theology” (74-75).

He later elaborates that view by suggesting that “[s]cientific data originates from sensory-perception experiences. Theological data originates from divine revelation and inspiration. For this reason, complementarity is not possible” (102).

Continuing this line of argument, the author insists that “the truth is that each [evolution and creation] is an equally persuasive account of reality as a whole. The conflict between them, then, will never be solved rationally, only eschatologically” (75). In a footnote, Canale explains this statement by suggesting that the “creation theory will be corroborated and verified” only when God manifests himself “in space and time at the end of human history” (85, n. 84).

Turning explicitly to Adventist theology and contrasting it with other theologies, Canale argues that classical and modern non-Seventh-day Adventist theologies adopt a multiplicity of theological sources from which theological data originates. Catholic and Protestant theologians, he says, draw theological data from “scripture, tradition, reason, philosophy, science, culture, and experience” (97-98). Some Adventist theologians “hold to the traditional *sola Scriptura* [Scripture alone can provide theological data] view; others hold to the notion of *prima Scriptura* [theology can be built on a plurality of sources among which Scripture has the primary or normative role]” (98).

In addition, Adventist theologians, he suggests, seem to be divided between those who hold to *verbal* as opposed to *thought* inspiration: “Some Adventists use the notion of thought inspiration as a starting point for harmonizing evolutionary theory with biblical creation” (115, n. 14). Canale characterizes that position as arguing that God does not communicate propositional information to the prophets: “[W]e should expect to find all sorts of philosophical, scientific, historical, and ethical errors in Scripture . . . [if one espouses] a modernist definition of the origin of Scripture . . . [Adventist] theologians who believe that the inspiration of Scripture reaches not only its thoughts but also its words and who hold the *sola Scriptura* view will be more likely to reject the theory of evolution as being incompatible with Christian teachings” (99).

Since its origins, Adventism “worked from a specific macrohermeneutical perspective that E. G. White called the ‘pillars’ of Adventist faith . . . the Sanctuary, the ‘Three Angels’ Messages, the Sabbath, and the nonimmortality of the soul” (107). Because of this, the question, Canale says, is “not merely whether evolution is compatible with the Genesis account of creation, but whether evolution is coherent with the Adventist theological system of beliefs” (136). He admits that “Adventist theology arose from the naïve assumption that Scripture reveals things as they really are . . . [The] doctrine of the Sanctuary,

a pillar of Adventist theology, opened to view a complete system of theology and philosophy” (137). This “complete system of theology and philosophy” is better known to Adventists as the “Great Controversy” or, as Canale would characterize it, the “Great Controversy metanarrative.”

In a summary comment, Canale suggests that

evolutionary theory challenges much more than the deep historical-theological meaning of Gen 1–2. It calls for a wholesale deconstruction and reinterpretation of the fundamental principles of Adventist theology and the rejection of the historical understanding of salvation as presented in Scripture. Accommodation to evolutionary history implies rejecting and replacing the theological revolution from which Adventism originated. In turn, the community will lose the uniqueness that is its reason for existing (139).

Commentary

This volume constitutes a comprehensive treatise that defends with complex philosophical and theological language the traditional and officially sanctioned Seventh-day Adventist young-life creationism—where “young” is generally defined as <10,000 years—understanding of earth history (geology and paleontology) and evolutionary biology. To defend that understanding, it posits as a primary assumption that the classic Adventist theological system—the Sanctuary, the Three Angels’ Messages, and the Sabbath—is a “complete system of theology and philosophy.” It would appear that Canale believes that to reject or modify any part of that package would cause the collapse of what he views as essential contemporary Adventism.

The purpose of this volume has a long history in the Adventist subculture—that of apologetics defending what is viewed as one or more critical components of conventional or orthodox Adventism. Its uniqueness is in the extended, philosophically complex set of arguments that it employs. As far as this reviewer is aware, there is nothing else like it in Adventist literature. To understand the author’s approach requires a close and careful reading. Unpacking the arguments, at least to this reader, took a close attention to detail. One has to read carefully both the text and footnotes to even begin to understand the basis on which the author argues his points.

For this reviewer, despite the dense nature of the prose, the book is a fascinating read as an outstanding example of what a sophisticated apologetic should look like. Effective apologists—both ancient and modern—not only know the beliefs that must be supported and which ones must be questioned and undermined, but also they understand very clearly the end point at which they must arrive. Their task is to devise the most effective manner of demonstrating to others that what they personally believe to be true—and/or what the institution or ideology to which they owe allegiance teaches is true—can be logically supported.

As noted earlier, this apologetic does not offer alternative or contrary

interpretations of the massive corpus of scientific data indicating that the earth has sustained life for multiple hundreds of millions of years. It also does not attempt to enter directly into disputes as to how one should interpret the Genesis texts. Rather, it approaches its task of defending conventional Seventh-day Adventist theological understandings of Genesis from an almost entirely philosophical perspective, with a focus on epistemology—*how* one knows what one says he or she knows.

I am informed by those most familiar with that literature that, with one glaring exception, Canale does a reasonable job of unpacking the contemporary dialogue and debate between modernist and postmodernist historians and philosophers of science as to the nature of how modern science approaches its task of understanding how the world works and how it has come to its present state. He has read widely in that philosophical literature, particularly that which deals with the scientific enterprise. However, there is a serious problem bearing on the consistency of his approach in that he has been selective in his use of postmodern concepts. It is well known that postmodernists of almost every persuasion reject the meaningfulness and relevance of any grand metanarrative, whereas the core point of Canale's apologetic is explicitly focused on a defense of the validity of Ellen White's "Great Controversy" metanarrative.

In addition, it appears that the author's understanding of how science is actually pursued by practicing scientists comes only from reading and is not informed at all by any direct experience in a scientific environment. This might account for Canale's confusion concerning the nature of the modern scientific impulse. For example, he insists that scientists "dismiss supernatural revelation as an invalid source of information on which to build their views" or that scientific methodology "disregards the existence of God and his revelation in Scripture as fantasy" (22). In point of fact, for the vast majority of scientists of whom this reviewer is aware by personal contact or reading of their writings, it is not a matter at all of "dismissing" supernatural revelation as fantasy or "disregarding" the existence of God or his revelation. The core of the scientific impulse in Western scientific thought, almost from its inception, sought to express no opinion on the subject of the supernatural—it neither rejected nor accepted the existence of God. A "scientific approach" to a given topic is characterized by a set of methodological understandings—one of which is that naturalistic causes are the only agents to be employed in any scientific argument. The "supernatural" was defined as outside of its purview. That Canale is not aware of this simple consensus understanding suggests that he either may have not read very deeply in the history of science or perhaps finds it difficult to understand this approach.

Canale is also profoundly misinformed concerning the relationship between evolutionary biology and geochronology. While it is correct that biologists utilize the geochronological framework in their efforts to understand rates of evolutionary change, the contemporary geological time scale does not depend on any assumptions about biological evolution. The core data that geochronology depends upon derives primarily from research in such diverse

fields as biochemistry, geochemistry, geophysics, and, above all, nuclear physics and nuclear chemistry. None of the critical data derives from evolutionary biology. It is simply factually incorrect to state, as Canale does, that geochronology is structured “by assuming biological evolution” (68).

Finally, although there are some scientists who do indeed argue that “real things are only those that can be ascertained through sensory perception and/or technological enhancement” (21), the core constituencies of the mainline modern scientific community express no views about the ontological nature of reality. This is a domain of philosophy and theology. Scientists in their personal lives can and do hold and express a whole range of views—from an absolute ontological atheism to membership and active participation in very traditional faith communities.

In the view of this reviewer, the most glaring problematic aspect of this volume is the author’s assumption that his interpretation of the data received from his reading of the Bible comes directly from God. Creationist perspective, which a reader would assume means *his* view, he argues, “springs from divine revelation, God’s summary account of his handiwork. . . . Theological data originates [*sic*] from divine revelation and inspiration.” It appears that it is on this highly questionable foundation that Canale builds the core of his complex arguments. It would appear that Canale assumes that theologians who agree with him obtain their information directly from God and thus can be trusted to provide entirely accurate information about how the world and life upon it came to be. Theologians who disagree with him, and almost all scientists, obviously do not receive their information from God and thus cannot be trusted to provide the correct answers to these questions. This reviewer will leave it to the reader to evaluate that position.

It has been pointed out to this reviewer that Canale is either not aware of or disagrees with the clear and unambiguous views of Ellen White that the “Bible . . . is not God’s mode of thought and expression. It is that of humanity. God, as a writer, is not represented. . . . The Lord speaks to human beings in imperfect speech” (*Selected Messages*, vol. 1: 21 (1890 ed.), 22 (1891 ed.)).

It should be emphasized that the conceptual framework outlined in the pages of this volume belies the popular imagery of fundamentalists—including Seventh-day Adventist fundamentalists—as uninformed, uneducated, or intellectually challenged. This densely argued work of scholarship should lay that myth to its final rest. If any further evidence is required on this point, consulting many of the articles appearing in the *Journal of the Adventist Theological Society* should provide conclusive confirmation.

Like most of the chapters in *The Fundamentals* (the work which became the symbol of the modern American conservative Protestant Fundamentalist movement in the early decades of the twentieth century), Canale’s work and the other scholarly works contributed by members of the Adventist Theological Society represent a strong intellectualist counter movement to the progressive trends in Adventist theological scholarship in the 1960s and 1970s. The late twentieth/early twenty-first century Adventist “Counter Reformation”

mounted by the ATS and its allies is well served by Canale's volume. In some respects, it represents an exemplar of an ATS apologetic scholastic treatise. One suspects that the late Gerhard Hasel, the architect of the ATS "Counter Reformation," would have been very proud of this volume.

From the perspective of this reviewer, the conclusions of the author are profoundly problematic and, for Adventism, reactionary and retrogressive. Its creative and heroic arguments, expressed in complex philosophical language, are employed to defend what are viewed by some as critical elements of the Adventist master theological narrative, a narrative created within, and whose expressive symbols are rooted in, conservative nineteenth-century American cultural values. Canale's arguments are conceptually complex but, at their core, they advance an essentially fundamentalist approach to Scripture and employ that approach to endorse retrogressive arguments about how twenty-first-century Adventist Christians should understand the Genesis creation narratives. A number of other Adventist theologians have already pointed out that a positive appreciation of the role of the biblical Sabbath in an Adventist Christian context does not depend on or require interpretations that the Genesis creation narratives be understood as representing actual or literal history.

Despite its philosophical sophistication, Canale's treatise is an excellent example of an Adventist approach to a theological topic that is fatally trapped by its wholesale commitment to a historically and culturally particularistic American nineteenth-century conceptual package. The Adventism of the twenty-first century in North America may have a meaningful future if it can reappropriate and renew the commitment to "present truth" that was exhibited in the nineteenth century when its original conceptions were formulated. However, the general difficulty that established faith communities have in reevaluating the validity and relevance of their original "present truth" messages do not give us much confidence that this process can occur. The tragic results of the recent Seventh-day Adventist Faith and Science conferences provide vivid testimony of how difficult it is for religious traditions once solidified and institutionalized to come to terms with reality.

The author of this review wishes to express his sincere appreciation for the extensive and very constructive comments that Canale provided on an earlier version of this review, as well as the helpful comments of John Baldwin, Seventh-day Adventist Theological Seminary, Andrews University, and Fritz Guy, La Sierra University. However, the author is entirely responsible for all views expressed in this review. Canale, Baldwin, and Guy may or may not agree with any opinion expressed in it.