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Posted: 04 Oct 2011 03:42 PM PDT

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Sometime back, I examined the claims of Professor John H. Walton of Wheaton College to have uncovered the “lost” world of Genesis 1. There, I examined his argument that Genesis 1 was consistent with other Ancient Near Eastern literature in only concerning itself with functional origins, not material origins. Thus, he believed that the Genesis account was silent as to when the physical stuff of the earth, plants, animals, and even humankind was actually made.

This concern with functionality, Walton claims, allows for the teachings of evolutionary biology to remain largely unaffected by the Biblical account, as there is really no conflict between the two accounts, once they are properly understood. I argued that Walton’s arguments were problematic for Adventists, who see both a functional and material story in Genesis, and who also would have significant theological problems with their Great Controversy framework if God used suffering and death to bring about His good creation.

But given the topic, it would be remiss not to say something about science. Religious scholars believe that scientists do not take the Bible and theology seriously enough, and the opposite is also true. Scientists are often frustrated by the apparent lack of willingness to listen by their theologian colleagues. No doubt we all have much to learn and improve in the skill and art of listening.

As a professor of theology and history, I acknowledge that science does matter, and that it does make a difference to how we do theology and history. Empirical data does impact Biblical interpretation and understanding. Some of our most basic canons of Biblical interpretation, such as that metaphors should be construed symbolically, and literal passages, literally, is dependent on our knowledge of the empirical world to distinguish between the literal and symbolic. It is our
knowledge of the real, natural world that enables us to see that dragons with ten heads, and goats with horns growing on horns, are symbols that require interpretation.

We also must be open to having Biblical understandings and interpretations checked by the real world. One example is the church and Galileo, where many people thought the Bible taught the earth was the center of the universe, or at least of the solar system. This was based on Greek philosophy, but some had come to view it as a teaching of the Bible. Galileo’s scientific findings regarding the orbit of the moons of Jupiter and the phases of Venus, both showing that the earth was not the center of orbit of everything in the solar system, were cause to go back and look at the Biblical evidence, and to determine that in fact it did not teach a geo-centric universe.

A more recent example is the Adventist experience of 1844 and the Great Disappointment. The failure of Christ to return to earth on October 22, 1844, was empirical, real world evidence that something was not right with the Millerite interpretation of Daniel 8. It forced a re-examination of the relevant passages, and a realization that our interpretation of the nature and location of the sanctuary was in error.

So empirical observation can invalidate and guide Biblical interpretation. The question becomes one of level of demonstrability and certainty. On October 23, 1844, the fact that Christ had not come, at least in the manner the Millerites understood as described in the Bible, was an open, notorious, and observable fact by everyone alive at that time. The evidence for a sun-centered solar system in Galileo’s day was similarly observable and demonstrable, at least by those with the time, patience and equipment to observe and chart the phases of Venus and the orbit of the moons of Jupiter.

What about evolution, at least the capital E kind, which claims the relatedness of all living beings and the gradual progression of all life forms? I believe that it comes nowhere close to meeting the same level of certainty or demonstrability of either Christ’s failure to return in 1844, or Galileo’s proofs of the place of the sun in our solar system. Don’t take my word for it. Rather, consider the words of evolutionary paleontologists themselves, who considered the guardians of the most reliable and valuable proof of evolution—the fossil record. (Read more)

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Macroevolution is not seen in real time, ostensibly because it takes thousands and even millions of years to develop new genera and phyla. For this reason, the actual macro-evolutionary transitions can only be seen in the historic record left in the fossil record. At least that is what most people, including most scientists, think. But evolutionary paleontologists know better. Consider the words of the late Stephen Jay Gould, the most vocal, if not the most famous, evolutionary paleontologist of the 20th century. Despite being an ardent anti-creationist, he acknowledged that it was simply false to claim that the fossil record contained support for a gradual evolutionary process.

Instead, he wrote that “the extreme rarity of transitional forms in the fossil record persists as the trade secret of paleontology.” He pointed out that in his day, Darwin actually was less faithful to the physical evidence than the catastrophic flood geologists, who were actually “as committed to science” and more “objective” than Darwin on the matter of the state of the record. Darwin acknowledged the weakness of the empirical date for his claim. But he insisted that it was due to an almost entirely incomplete fossil record, and that as more work was done, the fossil record would support his theory.[1]

But Gould pointed out that, more than a century later, the field of paleontology is much more mature and extensive. But the state of the record persists with generally the same paucity of evidence of transitions as in Darwin’s day.

Paleontologists know of their special role in the eyes of others and themselves as custodians of the history of life. They just generally cannot admit how bad the evidence is. “We fancy ourselves as the only true students of life’s history,” Gould writes, but in order to continue to believe in evolution, we must “view our data as so bad that we almost never see the very process we profess to study.” Niles Eldredge, Curator of the American Museum of Natural History in New York City and Gould collaborator puts it even more bluntly: “we paleontologists have said that the history of life supports [gradual evolution], all the while really knowing that it does not.”[2]

So what does the fossil record actually show? “The history of most fossil species,” Gould admits “includes two features particularly inconsistent with gradualism:

1. Stasis: Most species exhibit no directional change during their tenure on earth. They appear in the fossil record looking pretty much the same as when they disappear; morphological change is usually limited and directionless.
2. Sudden appearance: In any local area, a species does not arise gradually by the steady transformation of its ancestors; it appears all at once and ‘fully formed.’”[3]

Gould, of course, has what he thinks are very good explanations for the state of the fossil record that makes it consistent with his belief in evolution. But that does not change the main point. Which is when you look into the safe-box of the guardians of the evidentiary crown jewels of the theory of evolution, it is basically empty. Indeed, it appears in a state
more consistent with creationist notions of an abrupt creation of kinds fully formed, and their worldwide destruction in a violent, sifting, sorting deluge.

Now, I do not want to dismiss or minimize the debate for and against the mounds of evidence on both sides of the creation/evolution conflict. Both sides have their problems and challenges in the fossil record. And there is more to it than the fossil record. Yet in many ways that record lies at the heart of the contention over whether life was formed quickly and abruptly, or developed over long periods of time. Based on the admissions of leading scientific spokespersons, I am convinced that religious historians and theologians are entirely justified in taking the position that the evidence for the empirical reality of evolution is far, far less than that of the example of either Christ not coming to the earth in 1844, or of Galileo’s evidence for a helio-centric solar system.

The evidence for evolutionary development of life is far too ambiguous, dubious, and contested to justify overturning, or meaningfully compromising, the careful reading of Genesis 1 and 2 as historic descriptions of a short period, young-life creation. This is especially true given the larger Biblical theological connections and contexts of these passages, especially the doctrines of the Sabbath, the atonement of Christ as the second Adam, the moral government of God, and His character of love.

Indeed, given the new openness of scientific thinkers and geologists to neo-catastrophism and certain models of intelligent design, there is actually more “scientific” evidence for a Biblical creationist these days than back in the 1960s and 1970s. Why would we change our position now that elements in the scientific community are actually moving our direction? Let’s not lose the important truths of Genesis just because there have been found some Ancient Near East myths that contain philosophical, historical, and theological ideas that are mirrored by certain modern views. All this shows is that Genesis was unique in its day, and continues to be unique in our day. We should expect nothing less from an inspired account.

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Posted by Nicholas Miller on August 08, 2011 in Church and Society, Church History, Science and Theology | Permalink
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Dr. Miller,

How is it that empirical realities have not convinced the sinless perfectionists in Adventism that the doctrine is a fiction based on shoddy Biblical scholarship or worse.

Posted by: Hansen | August 10, 2011 at 01:01 AM

Again, an excellent article that examines past mistakes that have occurred when churches ignored empirical reality.

Regarding transitional fossils, does Dr. Miller think Neandertals or other related hominids were present on the Ark? Or was it only homien sapiens that made it on board? Did God create all those different hominid groups or are there fossils transitional to higher forms of hominids? What about protfeathers preserved in amber? Are they transitional forms of feathers from dinosaurs to birds?
The search for truth continues.

Your agnostic friend
Ken

Posted by: ken | October 05, 2011 at 11:53 AM

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Don’t Change Our Belief on Creation, the Words of Scripture Suffice

October 4, 2011  4 Comments

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By James Londis
James Londis

In 1980 I was selected for the first time to be a delegate to the General Conference Session in Dallas, Texas. Imagine my surprise when Elder Neal Wilson, president of the Seventh-day Adventist Church, announced my name among several others to serve on a committee to prepare a draft of Seventh-day Adventist fundamental beliefs. They would be presented to the floor for a vote sometime before the week’s end.

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As anticipated, when an objection came from the floor to a specific formulation, Elder Eva pointed out it was a direct quote from Ellen White or scripture and gave the reference. The objector quietly sat down.

Since then I have realized that the statements which flow from any church “council,” including the earliest councils of the patristic church, must be “politically” astute if schismatic-level conflict is to be avoided. Prior to the Council of Nicea, 325 CE, convened by Emperor Constantine to settle disputes over Arian theology, great theological diversity characterized the Christian community. Scattered throughout the Roman Empire, the church grew steadily not because its’ doctrines were precise but because its’ communal life was dynamic and faithful to Jesus the Christ. Theological and ethical decision-making was left largely to local cultures and communities as long as the core of the Christian faith was affirmed. Such diversity of doctrine was not seen as especially problematic for over three hundred years.

Emperor Constantine’s Council did in fact resolve the dispute for a time by siding with the majority against Arius. Later, he reversed his decision and supported Arius. This would not be the last time that a dispute of this magnitude would end up splitting the Church. For millennia, even down to our own pioneers, Arian thinking has had its adherents. It illustrates how futile the use of sheer power and authority can be when settling theological differences. Why does the church through its “bishops” not trust the process of study and prayer to bring the community to a working consensus or to charitably agree to disagree?

Why We Should Not Rewrite with Greater Specificity Fundamental Belief #6:

1. I fear that reframing #6 with a specificity not found in Genesis 1-3 has the potential to cause unprecedented divisiveness in the Seventh-day Adventist church. Number 6 has been the church’s stated position for the past three decades for good reason. Why do we now need a revision? What purpose would it serve? If we want our teachers to make clear that the church position on creation is in tension with evolutionary theories about origins, we do not need a fundamental belief revision for that to happen. If we wish to make clear that we should be cautious about dogmatic scientific statements concerning the mystery of how the world began, we should be equally cautious about dogmatic interpretations of Genesis. We need to adopt a “hermeneutics of suspicion” with both of them. We must leave room for both science and theology to unfold as we learn more. (No one I know would be upset if we found unusually large human fossils which indicated phenomenal longevity and minimal disease, neither Adventists nor scientists.)

In the middle 1960s a group of graduate students met regularly in the Braun Room at Harvard Divinity School to discuss the intellectual and spiritual challenges they faced in their studies. That group eventually led to the establishment of the Association of Adventist Forums. Dr. Alvin Kwiram arranged for Professor Ernst Mayr of the Harvard Biology department to meet with us and discuss evolutionary theory and the
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2. It seems ominously clear to me that the agenda for this change is to demand that professors and pastors not only teach that the church’s position is at odds with evolutionary theory, but that they should subscribe to the church position without qualification. The change being suggested would assert that God’s twin gifts to us of scientific research and Biblical interpretation are at impossible cross-purposes on this issue. Therefore, we must choose between them now. The message appears to be that suddenly “we cannot wait!” I ask: What evidence is there that we have come to such an either/or moment in our history? What rationale can be given for asserting to the world and to our members that the Seventh-day Adventist church is so certain about an issue that divides even the conservative evangelical world at present? Is not this kind of certainty idolatrous in that it presumes to tell us explicitly what God’s word in Genesis does not tell us? How do we know that our interpretation of the text is the true one?

In conclusion: Do we really wish to make committed Adventist pastors and teachers who believe the church should wait before taking such a drastic step persona non grata? Are we so certain that neither biblical nor scientific scholarship will, in time, clarify and possibly resolve this conflict? For too many, the revision appears less an effort to clarify doctrine or unify the church, than a troubling effort to demonize scientific research, critical thinking, and those who respect both as divine gifts. It seems that the devotion and orthodoxy of our teachers and pastors will be determined by their unwavering allegiance to this new formulation rather than by their patient passion to find the truth (which passion is itself an Adventist “doctrine” omitted from the original Fundamentals and hastily added from the floor in Dallas). As the church thinks about this step, I suggest that prudence and humility require we be cautious and circumspect, for we cannot foresee the unintended (or God forbid the “intended”) consequences of what we plan to do.

—James Londis, Ph.D., is director of ethics and corporate integrity at the Kettering Medical Center Network in Ohio.

This article appeared on SpectrumMagazine.org Sept. 25, 2011.
Hi Shane

Thanks for your advice. I had read it before but it was good to read it again to refresh my memory and give context to the debate.

I certainly appreciate the Adventist theological consequences of YEC or YLC. Actually, as an agnostic, I have no qualms whatsoever with FB #6 as a statement of Adventist faith. I respect the right of individuals to practice the faith of their choice. The problem of course in your faith is how Adventists interpret their faith in light of scientific findings. As I have often said I think what Dr.Pitman and Dr Kime are trying to do is noble. If they can accomplish it they will have done a great service for Adventism and mankind.

However, as I have often opined, I think it is an error to use science for a faith or non faith agenda.
Rather, I think it should be a non biased, objective tool to examine reality to the greatest extent possible. Is this possible? As an agnostic, without a bias against or for God, I think it is. What science may be doing is disabusing us of primitive notions of God and demonstrating how natural events can be explained. That may or may not include the creation of our observable universe. But science seems to have limits. I have never seen it explain First Cause or infinite regression. These concepts seems to fall in the realm of philosophy, or religion, as the case may be. If there was no time before the creation of our universe was there no infinity as well?

What I do think is we can all learn to treat each other with love and respect notwithstanding our viewpoints. In that respect perhaps the greatest concept this site has espoused is Dr. Pitman's Royal Law of Love.

Your agnostic friend
Ken

Very commendable article, that historically outlines the politics behind interpretation of theological doctrine.

If your own, sanctioned GRI cannot vouch for a scientific YEC/YLC model, why push for a narrow, constrictive FB#6? What will happen to the rational, candid minds of your modern educated youth under such a mandate?

Dr. Londis shows much wisdom and humility in recognizing this dilemma and suggesting FB#6 remain as is to embrace a diversity of doctrine open to ongoing 'present truth'. Isn't this what science does on an ongoing basis?

I commend the editors for posting this article notwithstanding their personal beliefs. That's integrity!

Your agnostic friend
Ken

Ken, if you haven't read "A little-know history of Belief #6," please take some time to look it over. Reading this along with Baldwin's article might give you a better understanding as to why
the church thinks it important to make the wording more specific. Here is the link http://bit.ly/d14uuU

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By John Baldwin

John Baldwin

At the annual Adventist Forum conference held this year in Chicago on September 3, 2011, James Londis and I enjoyed sharing our contrastive views regarding whether a reformulated Adventist statement of belief on creation should be approved in the General Conference session in 2015. Here is a brief summary of the three-step approach I take to the issue.

Step One: What Is the Status of Belief 6 (Creation)?

Is fundamental belief number 6 (FB6) a statement of belief about origins, or is it a statement of accommodation of various beliefs on origins? If the latter, is FB6 a non-belief statement? Fritz Guy is correct in his 2009 Adventist Forum blog in which he indicates that the Adventist Church has no single belief on origins. What the church has, says Guy, is FB6 which was intentionally formulated broadly enough to accommodate various views on the natural history of the earth. Lawrence Geraty concurs by stating that FB6 was formulated to be inclusive. I assume this means the spectrum of beliefs regarding origins held within the Adventist church.

Significantly, the language of FB6 intentionally lacks descriptors of the “first week” such as “literal,” “historical,” or “recent,” and makes no mention of a Flood global in character. Thus FB6 accommodates mutually exclusive approaches to origins such as a recent six-day creation of life forms on earth as contrasted with models of earth history involving life on earth for millions of years.

Step Two: Reasons Identified for Not Reformulating FB6

I strongly concur with Londis that FB6 should not contain elements not explicitly stated in the text, or, and I would add, not inferable from the text. Londis worries that reformulating FB6 will
result in a belief statement that goes beyond the text. Moreover, according to Londis, to reformulate FB6 in such a fashion represents an act of idolatry. For these reasons, and more, he concludes that the present wording of FB6 should remain untouched.

However, by recently voted new protocol, the newly worded FB6 must be circulated for two years to the world church for the express purpose of inviting all its members, its biblical scholars, theologians, and philosophers to review and offer suggestions regarding the proposed rewording of FB6. I believe that this lengthy, fair process offers sufficient time and opportunity for all church members to respond to the statement thoroughly before the GC session of 2015, thus insuring that the statement falls squarely within the clear teaching of Scripture.

**Step Three: Five Positive Reasons for Reformulating FB6**

1. The relational tone of FB6 can be improved, e.g., “Motivated freely by love, God created . . . humans in His image for intimate fellowship with Himself and with other human beings.”

2. The environmental character of FB6 can be greatly strengthened.

3. The belief needs to indicate that Seventh-day Adventists believe that the Bible teaches that the entire galactic universe and the angels were not created during creation week as held by many Christians. The present language of FB6 with its unexplained “heaven and earth” can give the erroneous impression that Seventh-day Adventists believe that everything but God was created during the Genesis week of Creation because the language says “. . . in six days God made the ‘heaven and earth,’” which most Old Testament biblical scholars construe as meaning everything but God. No wonder the framers of FB6, presumably believing the same way, did not use “historical” before “week” because to do so would be to teach a biblical untruth, that everything but God was created during that “first week” which Adventists do not believe. However, the first week was historical, involving divine acts of creation of life forms on Earth in time and space. Thus, if used at all in FB6, the phrase “heaven and earth” needs explanation concerning its intended extent, and its relation to the “heaven, earth and sea” of Exodus 20:11.

Some Old Testament scholars, such as John Sailhamer (Genesis Unbound), Richard Davidson and Randall Younker, see a vast difference in extent between the phrases “heaven and earth” (Gen 1:1), and “heaven, earth, and sea” (Exod 20:11). The former can represent an introductory Hebrew merisim placed before the creation week to signify that God is creator of everything except God. The later does not form a merisim, but a triad signifying a more restricted focus on the local “heaven, earth and sea” of planet Earth which can indeed be involved in a seven-day historical creation week. This situation needs clarification in a reformulated FB6.

4. The statement needs to address the present natural evil conditions of planet Earth as flowing from the negative consequences of sin, rather than being constitutive, intrinsic elements of God’s original and intended method of creation.

5. Above all, and related to point four above, FB6 needs to affirm a special creation model (a recent week of creation) for the following foundational reason. In my view, the special creation
model of earth history, as contrasted with all long-age models of earth history, alone renders God worthy of worship. How so? On the special creation model alone, God does not create through death over millions of years involving suffering, extinction, disease, famine, fear, trauma and so on. In human flesh the Author of life and love died to eradicate these phenomena showing that the divine nature rejects such things.

God can act only in accordance with His nature. Since the Calvary shows that Jesus Christ died to eradicate the phenomena mentioned above, the cross irrefutably establishes that God’s nature of love is such that He could not create life forms on earth through such ungodly means, as required by any long-age model of earth history.

In sum, long-age models of life on earth render God the author of paleo-natural evil, death, and so on, thus rendering Him cruel and unworthy of worship. This shows why FB6 needs to endorse a single approach to origins in 2015, viz., the biblical, recent creation of life on earth model which renders the Creator worthy of worship.

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