



CONVERSATIONS ■ people

Jesus Loves Me This I Know: *Common Descent and the Fall*

Letter from an ecologist to a friend | BY DANA SCHUSTER

Dear Bill,

I read your letter of December 27 with interest. I appreciated the honest quality of your question as to whether I see a logical contradiction between the scientific data and the teachings of Genesis. My resolution to stay out of the Adventist controversy over science and faith is not due to a lack of interest or a belief that no progress can be made. Rather, I stay out of it because I believe the stridence exhibited by some is motivated primarily by fear, and I have no wish to be involved in those dynamics. However, I am willing to reply to the queries of a friend, and so I am sharing my thoughts with you in this letter.

Let me preface my remarks by explaining the context from which I write. First, I believe in being completely honest with data, and for now I feel the data are becoming more and more convincing for some significant level of common descent. Note that I do not accept a postmodern dismissal of data, nor can I accept a purely deductive worldview. Second, I take the teachings of Genesis very seriously indeed. When I say this I am not necessarily referring to a "creation-science" reading of Genesis, but rather a traditional understanding of its *teachings* such as the Creatorship of God and the Fall.

In this letter, I hope merely to



explain why I feel the data and Genesis are not contradictory. It is not my intention to describe what actually happened. In this regard, let me be perfectly clear that I do not know the answer, even after (and especially after) thinking about these matters for many years. I do believe, however, that I finally know the question, so I would like to start there.

In my mind, the big question is theodicy. This should come as no surprise, because theodicy, as we know from the ancient book of Job, has been an insoluble riddle for a very long time. For theists, the mystery of evil is likely to outlive every model we construct of it and survive every scientific advance.

Let me go a bit further and say that, with regard to the data and Genesis, the *only* real problem is theodicy. Now, please understand that I am totally loyal to the Sabbath, both in its identity as the seventh day and its rich mosaic of meanings. But, in fact, I do not see any problem whatsoever between the Sab-

bath and the scientific data. We know that this sanctuary in time was set aside and given to the Hebrews, and all of humanity, as a memorial and experience of God's re-creating and liberating presence. Jesus claimed the day as his own. That is good enough for me; I simply accept this sacrament with joy. There are other issues that challenge some conservative Christians, such as the nature of inspiration and whether the Bible can be read as a scientific text. Other writers, however, have dealt more skillfully with these topics than I can here.

Theodicy is a serious problem for a theistic understanding of evolution. Given the scientific data, the natural conclusion of many theists is that God must have created by means of evolution. This sets up a contradiction with the traditional understanding of the Fall, because evolution, as we know it, works via what were traditionally considered post-Fall mechanisms, and apparently these mechanisms were at work long before the appearance of human beings. The implication is that suffering did not arise initially because of the choices of human beings, but rather that suffering is part of the very fabric of God's creative activity.

It is difficult for many of us to imagine that the God we know through Jesus Christ chose to create life on this

earth via the process of natural selection. Marveling at the grand scheme of evolution as God's master design is a bit like marveling at the beauty of a palace constructed with slave labor: one conveniently ignores the ugly truth that it was built on the backs of suffering individuals who had no desire to be thus employed.

I would like to elaborate on this point about the suffering of the individual in order to emphasize why I think it is such a problem in evolution-as-creation. There are two modes in which a whole-organism biologist such as myself experiences the natural world. One mode is spiritual and sacramental. As I traverse alpine cirques, peer into the ocean depths, or look up into the Milky Way from a mountain peak, my being is still, and in that silence I am able to experience the presence and mighty creative power of God. The other mode is scientific. In my work, I see natural selection at close range, and believe me it is not pretty. Those of us who have observed the lives of individual animals for hours, days, and months on end know well the ugly side of nature. Creatures suffer, often horrendously. This suffering is part of natural selection and evolution as we know it.

Now, I have heard at least two prominent scientist-theologians claim that animals do not suffer. They say that animals feel pain and die, but do not suffer. This is a staggering assumption for one species to make about another. Furthermore, having observed animals all my life, I simply do not believe it. It strikes me as odd that these particular theologians accept an unbroken scientific continuum between humans and animals, on the one hand, while simultaneously positing an unbridgeable gulf between humans and

animals, on the other, when it comes to the quality of suffering and morality.

Such a gulf does not make sense to me. I do not think that the qualities of "good" and "evil" are equivalent to moral culpability and definable only in relation to human beings. I think suffering is of the same essential substance wherever it is found. That is, if suffering is evil in human beings (in the sense that it is a deviation from God's original plan), then it is evil in animals, including those without any possibility of moral culpability. After a day in the field observing the lives of animals, I resonate with the words of Romans 8: indeed, the whole creation has been groaning to be set free from its bondage to decay.

My point is that I think a whole continuum of species suffers, and that suffering is of the same essence wherever it is found. Thus, I, for one, am not willing to say that evolution as we know it was God's best plan for creation. Indeed, many of my research colleagues are



agnostic for exactly this reason: they cannot believe in a God who would design life to progress to a grand scale on the backs of suffering individuals. Charles Darwin, a kindly and gentle man, was not willing to believe in that sort of God, so he preferred not to believe. (My own feeling is that Darwin rightly rejected a false view of God. I imagine God remembers his honesty and gentleness with much grace and



kindness.) Although I realize that it may be absurd for me to consider myself the guardian of God's reputation, I think it is important not to assert that God is the architect of suffering for the same reason it is important not to tell a person who just lost a child that it was "God's will."

So here lies the apparent conundrum. I myself am (1) unwilling to discount the scientific data, and (2) unwilling to believe that God's best plan for creating was via evolution, which, although very beautiful on the large scale, can be horrendous on the individual scale. Many think these two statements are contradictory, but I do not believe they are. I would argue that a traditional understanding of the theological teachings of Genesis does *not* logically contradict the data.

To establish the lack of logical contradiction between two statements, all one needs to do is to construct at least one logically consistent scenario (model) in which both statements can be true. So the question is this: can we imagine a scenario in which both the Genesis teachings and the data regarding common descent are true? There is any number of such hypothetical scenarios; I will mention only one.

One might imagine that the reality portrayed by the Genesis story, including the Fall, happened before the Big Bang, in another universe. Our universe,

and all its processes, including evolution, would be post-Fall. In this scenario, God would be creating something marvelous through evolution in the same way that he creates rich blessings from our personal sufferings and regenerates hearts through his suffering. But we would not be saying that evolution was God's first or best plan for creation.

Please understand that I realize there is no evidence, whether biblical or scientific, for this model. I reiterate that the point is merely to demonstrate a lack of logical contradiction between the teachings of Genesis and the scientific data.

Because there is no logical contradiction, I can accept the scientific data and also affirm a traditional view of the Fall, but this does not mean that I know what actually happened. One thing I do know, however: whatever happened, happened, and no amount of post-hoc reasoning or angst can change it.

This leads to my final point: it is okay not to know, because not knowing is what allows faith. Faith is the evidence of things not seen. I do not need scientific evidence to believe that Jesus loves me. Indeed, I cannot obtain it, for "Jesus loves me" is not a scientific hypothesis. No scientific data, no matter how unexpected or paradigm shifting, can destroy my faith in Jesus, my

experience of his love, or my choice to follow him.

Let me summarize my thoughts. Although I do not lose any sleep over this topic or take my own ideas terribly seriously, I do have three concerns. First, I think it is important to be honest with data. Second, I think it is important to affirm the loving kindness of God. Third, I think it is important to cultivate humility and to allow the love of Jesus to release us from fear of the unknown. If I may paraphrase Roman 8:38–39, I am persuaded that neither ice cores, nor pseudogenes, nor weird fossils, nor inconceivable distances, nor unimaginably long time spans, nor any other thing in creation can separate us from the love of Christ.

Please forgive this lengthy reply to your question. I trust you will take my comments in the spirit of humility and honesty in which they are intended. I also trust that you will safeguard my reputation as the Lord watches over both of us with infinite kindness.

Warmly,
Dana

Dana Schuster is a pseudonym.

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