

## Des Ford Takes on Darwin | BY BRYAN NESS

In several ways this is a unique book, beginning with the author, Desmond Ford, who is a theologian and not a scientist. That someone with his background would write a book attacking Darwinism is not unique; what is unique is that he actually engages the science honestly and more objectively than is commonly the case for nonscientists. Most theologians who write books that are pro-creation and anti-Darwinist consistently refute scientific facts on the slimmest of evidence; the “evidence” itself often being based on a misunderstanding of the science, or at best, on a very narrow facet of the scientific evidence that is problematic; as if any hard to explain evidence from science is proof that science has failed to properly interpret the natural world.

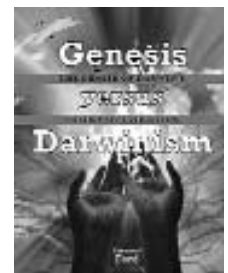
Ford’s intended purpose in writing this book is stated succinctly in the Foreword:

*The traditions I refer to have to do chiefly with the early chapters of Genesis. University professors usually ridicule the creation story of Genesis chapter 1 and the stories concerning Adam and Eve, the serpent, and the Fall. But these chapters are the foundation of the whole Bible, and if they go the whole edifice of revelation crumbles. When that happens, for most, life threatens to become a meaningless affair based on chance. . . .*

*This book is an attempt to help parents and young people with these tremendous issues. It discusses Genesis chapters 1–11 in considerable detail and also the challenge of Darwinism—that scientific giant which often threatens young Christians—and a Goliath calling upon them to surrender their faith. And this, despite the fact that the most well-known evolutionist of the twentieth century, Stephen Jay Gould, declared that neo-Darwinism is ‘effectively dead.’*

Ford appears to have carefully considered his audience, who will most likely be laypeople concerned about the inroads that Darwinism has made into Christian beliefs about creation. He spends the first part of the book emphasizing the theological importance of the creation story in Genesis, including the theological significance of the Noachian flood narrative. I doubt that most fundamentalist believers would find much problem with this section, since Ford effectively ties the Genesis narratives together with the plan of Salvation, showing how many of the details in these stories foreshadow Gospel truths not made clear until the New Testament narratives make them more explicit. He also vigorously defends the seventh-day Sabbath, while at the same time laying the groundwork for its theological imperative, regardless of whether the days of creation in Genesis are literal or not. He also spends a considerable amount of space reviewing the significance of the occurrence of the number seven throughout Genesis and elsewhere, showing how carefully constructed these narratives are:

*There is a marvelous precision in Genesis one. It is characterized by what some have called “the seal of seven.” The first sentence has seven Hebrew words and four times seven Hebrew letters. The three nouns: “God,” “heaven,” and “earth” have a combined numeric value of 777. (Each Hebrew letter stands for a number—see any Hebrew Grammar). There is a Hebrew verb “created,” and its numeric value is 203—seven times twenty-nine. According to some researchers there are at least thirty different numeric features in this verse.*



*Genesis versus Darwinism: The Demise of Darwin's Theory of Evolution, by Desmond Ford, 2014.*

At times, Ford's enthusiasm for compiling the numerical references and other parallels in Genesis with Christ's life and role in our salvation gets tiring, but he has a point in doing this. He shows a great reverence for the text and its embedded meanings. This should serve as a reminder to the reader that as Ford progresses through the book revealing what Genesis has to tell us, in light of modern scientific findings, he considers the Bible an inspired document, and its theological truths must be taken seriously.

From Chapter 9 onward, Ford gets into the meat of the book. His primary assumption, while wrestling with the problems of interpreting Genesis in light of modern science, is that God has revealed Himself equally in the Bible, and in His second book, nature. This is not a new idea and is one that was often repeated by Ellen G. White, but Ford has the courage to confront these issues head-on, assuming that these two books should have equal weight. In order to do this, he makes the case that the Bible is not intended to be a science book, so that when God's message from nature appears to conflict with God's message in the Bible, it may well be that we have incorrectly used the Bible to interpret nature. This runs counter to the long Seventh-day Adventist tradition of assuming that, at least when it comes to the first chapters of Genesis, the Bible explicitly defines how nature works, so that when data from the Bible and nature disagree, there is always assumed to be something wrong with our interpretation of nature. This is where many Fundamentalist readers will become uncomfortable, but Ford is simply approaching the topic honestly, and is recognizing a glaring problem that many Christian scientists have long recognized, that what modern science knows about nature is in direct opposition to Fundamentalist interpretations of Genesis when it comes to issues like age of the earth, the age of life on the earth and the universality of the Noachian flood. He minces no words in making this point:

*The Bible cannot rightly be used to establish even an approximate date for the age of the earth. It is nowhere interested in that topic. When genealogies are used, the years are never totaled, and there are many omissions, as anyone can prove by comparing Matthew 1 with the chronology of 1 Chronicles. "Begot" and "fathered" do not have in Scripture the precise meaning we give them. The terms are often applied to ancestors.<sup>1</sup> Archbishop Ussher was a fine Christian and an excellent scholar, but when he fixed upon 4004 B.C. for the birth of the world he made the biggest mistake of his life.*

*Today, there are about fifty methods for calculating the earth's age, and these yield results that approximate each other. That the world is about four and a half billion years old is now an axiom for scientists. Most of the evidence is drawn from the geologic column, astronomy, continental drift and plate tectonics, radiometric, radiocarbon, and amino acid dating. The evidence for the great age of the earth is overwhelming and fully valid for all who really want to know.*

These points are no surprise to those who know the scientific evidence, and are even fairly well accepted by many theologians, but Ford does not stop here. As he progresses through the book he also points out that the fossil record is very dependable and shows signs of vast time spans, and that the geologic record does not give any evidence of a world-wide flood. Ford does not suggest that we *must* reconcile these problems, but he does believe we should *not* reconcile them by pretending there is scientific evidence to support Fundamentalist interpretations of Genesis when there is no such thing. This will only insult the intelligence of well-educated believers. Ford suggests that these apparent inconsistencies between the Bible and nature be treated as mysteries that may have no complete solution, "Christians should take very seriously all that can be learned from God's second book—the book of Nature. If our understanding conflicts with either of God's books the fault is with us and not with them. Meanwhile let us ask God to help us to be fully committed to the truth of Romans 8:28: 'All things work together for good.'" This is not a copout, but rather a clear recognition of the difficulties associated with these topics.

A central thesis that Ford believes may help make sense of the problems of interpretation in Genesis is recognition that the first eleven chapters are distinctly different in character from the remaining chapters:

*Most scholars see Genesis 1–11 as a different genre to chapters 12–50. It covers an unknown vista of time whereas chapters 12–50 encompass only about five centuries. Genesis 1–11 is a global introduction to the history of one localized unknown tribe. And it begins with the Creation of the universe—about 14 billion years ago. Anyone who reads both sets will see the difference immediately.*

At this point in the book the reader may get the impression that Ford is advocating some sort of theistic evolutionary model, but as should have already been apparent, he thoroughly rejects Darwinism, the very mechanism that drives evolution. He more than once refers to Stephen Jay Gould's pithy

comment that “neo-Darwinism is ‘effectively dead.’” Although this makes a valid point, that the fossil record is not adequately explained using the gradualist process of neo-Darwinian natural selection, he is overplaying his hand a bit. Such statements by Gould, and a few others that Ford quotes, must be taken in context. Since the 1970s, paleontologists such as Gould and Niles Eldridge have attributed the distribution of fossils in the geological record as a result of “punctuated equilibrium.” Punctuated equilibrium, though, is more a description of what is found in the fossil record than a mechanism for causing the observed distribution.

In brief, paleontologists have long known that species in the fossil record often persist for millions of years, apparently changing little, if at all, until they go extinct, often being replaced by new species that seem to suddenly appear in the record with no clear ancestors. This pattern is typical of the vast majority of fossil sequences, long periods of equilibrium followed by periods of rapid appearance of new organism types, and thus the coining of the term, “punctuated equilibrium.” Neo-Darwinist theory predicts that gradual, steady changes over time, due to natural selection, is what leads to the origin of new organism types, but the pattern of the fossil record simply does not support such a model, except in sparse, isolated cases.

So, based on the fossil record, natural selection does not seem to be sufficient to account for the evolution of life. In fact, not only does neo-Darwinism not adequately account for the origin of new kinds of organisms, it has no answer for how life itself would have arisen from non-living material. Many Neo-Darwinists do not agree with this assessment, arguing that the fossil record is too incomplete (an argument used since Darwin’s own day, which is much less true today) and that natural selection could still be the primary driving force, such assertions being followed by various complex arguments that have some relevance, but actually leave the challenge from paleontologists little better than deflected.

Given these grave failures of neo-Darwinism, Ford sees the naturalistic origin and evolution of life as scientifically untenable, so that even a theis-

tic evolutionary model is inadequate to account for the fossil record. Consequently, Ford sees progressive creationism as the only viable alternative.

*May I repeat in a nutshell what the preceding paragraphs endeavor to say? The idea of an Adam who lived ages ago is very hard for us to comprehend, but the fact that Genesis 1 is telling of a creation that took place over thirteen billion years ago should help us. The Adam figure follows after the ancient creation with its progressive creation of ascending life forms and thus his great antiquity is not to be wondered at. When one reads very thoughtfully the first three chapters of the Bible, they convey a consciousness that what we have here is suprahistorical. These chapters are elevated far above anything we know in human history. They belong to a pristine era with which we are uninformed. Consider the tremendous difference between these chapters and the civilization presented in the chapter that follows (chapter 4). In chapter four we have a city, technology, culture, music, and so on—see the last verses of the chapter.*

*What a tremendous gap this creates between itself and the preceding chapters! It was God’s intention that the meaning of this gap should become apparent only when it was needed—in the era dominated by modern science.*

Of course, this sort of interpretation of the Genesis narrative immediately brings up the question of death before the Fall. Ford uses a lot of space on this issue but, in a nutshell, his conclusion is that nothing in the Bible clearly says that no death of any sort occurred prior to the Fall, and those texts that have been used to suggest such he claims have been misinterpreted.

*We know that the well-intentioned efforts of Creationists to prove a young earth and a universal flood have failed. The view of earth’s history so offered is false. Ours is the duty of acknowledging as truth all that God has made clear in both Scripture and nature. If our view of one contradicts our interpretation of the other we have erred and must look again. They agree. The geologic column is a fact that no one can deny and it proves beyond all doubt the great age of the earth, and the progressive unfolding of life’s forms with man at the summit. Death is implicit in the record—otherwise there would have been*

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*overcrowding and subsequent recurrent universal starvation. When Scripture in Romans 5 says that death entered our race with Adam, it is referring to human death. No one could even walk among Eden's bowers without inflicting death on microscopic forms of life, and the daily diet meant death to plants and fruit. Did not the elephant's descending feet wreak havoc among the minute lives in the dust? A child or an ignorant man without education can grasp the lessons of Genesis. It is not necessary that they understand science. But if that child and man ultimately must encounter unbelievers they will need to know more than they presently do. And that knowledge is readily available. God does all things well, and both nature and Scripture testify of his love and power and wisdom. Alleluia!*

Lots of ground is covered in this book, and Ford crafts his arguments skillfully. Since he is not a scientist himself, Ford quotes extensively from the writings of a plethora of scientists to buttress his interpretations of what nature has to tell us. Many lay readers will no doubt question many of the ideas presented in the book, but as a scientist myself I can say that Ford paints a very clear picture of where science currently stands on issues such as the age of the earth and the geological and paleontological record. Yes, there are Seventh-day Adventist creation science arguments used to support a more Fundamentalist view of a young earth, but the evidence used is little more than the cherry-picking of geological anomalies that cast doubt on some aspects of geological science. The argument is often made that, although creation scientists have slim evidence, at best, for things like a short term chronology or a worldwide flood, they are hard at work on the problem and a breakthrough is imminent. This approach has been around for more than 100 years, and instead of the evidence in favor of creation science growing, it has just become ever more difficult to counter the consensus of the majority of geologists.

The remainder of the book, a good half of the total, is under the heading "Miscellany." Numerous of the topics discussed in the first half of the book, and others that are tangential, are covered here, primarily with extensive quotes from other sources. Ford has clearly been mulling over these issues for many years, and felt he could not leave out the extensive material he has amassed. This portion of the book could be safely skipped, but to a reader who wants more support for the various ideas presented in the first half of the book, this is a treasure trove. The book also contains a useful glossary, for those not acquainted with some of the scientific terminology used, and an extensive bibliography.

If nothing else, I think this book makes a good argument for a continuing, open discussion about interpreting Genesis. Instead of closing ranks and shouting ever more vociferously that our traditional beliefs about Genesis are the only acceptable way to interpret the creation and flood narratives, we need to humbly admit that we do not have all the answers. It should also prod us to consider that we can and should allow a plurality of views concerning these issues, since, as Ford amply displays, the theological truths of Genesis need not be lost just because new data from nature challenges some of the contexts for these stories. The creation narrative, however interpreted, still proclaims God as the creator of the universe, it still proclaims the holiness of the Sabbath and why God still expects us to honor the seventh day, and the story of Adam and Eve still instructs us about the origin of sin and God's solution to this problem. Even the flood story, however interpreted, as global or local, still teaches us God's abhorrence of sin and man's depravity, as well as His desire to save mankind, and nature, from the pit into which we have fallen.

I will close this review with two quotes from the book that I think point to the spirit in which this book should be read:

*Genesis is not anti-scientific nor pre-scientific, but non-scientific. Scientific views change from generation to generation, but holiness, the reflection of God, never changes. And there can be no lasting happiness without holiness. Sin is suicide and insanity, but purity is paradise. How very practical Scripture is! History can be interpreted in many different ways, and historians differ in their opinion, but holiness is so clearly identified in the person of Jesus Christ that all unanswered questions have little weight.*

*Though historical and scientific questions may be uppermost in our minds as we approach the text, it is doubtful whether they were in the writer's mind, and we should therefore be cautious about looking for answers to questions he was not concerned with. Genesis is primarily about God's character and his purpose for sinful mankind. Let us beware of allowing our interests to divert us from the central thrust of the book, so that we miss what the Lord, our Creator and Redeemer, is saying to us. ■*

**Bryan Ness** is a professor of biology at Pacific Union College. His research interests include plant systematics and genetics.

