

## C.S. Lewis: creationist and anti- evolutionist?

In 2011, I became aware of an article by Dr Jerry Bergman that appeared in *J. Creation* 23(3):110–115, 2009. The article tries to make the case that in the later years of his life C.S. Lewis was a ‘creationist and anti-evolutionist’. However, in an attempt to make this case (which is clearly not true), Bergman is forced to take small snippets of Lewis’s quotes and tell the reader they mean something other than what they actually mean.

Let me start by making it clear that parts of the article do accurately characterize Lewis’s views on the origins issue. In the section entitled “Opposes Evolution and Naturalism”, Bergman does an excellent job describing Lewis’s opposition to the *materialist* worldview. However, in the section labelled “The Funeral of the Great Myth”, Bergman edits the writings of Lewis to make it sound like he believed something he clearly did not believe.

Bergman begins the section by stating, “Lewis, in his essay titled ‘The Funeral of a Great Myth’, explained why he regarded evolution as ‘the great Myth of nineteenth and early twentieth century’, one that he wanted to bury.” However, that is not correct. Lewis specifically spelled out the Great Myth in the essay itself. He states:

“I do not mean that the doctrine of Evolution as held by practising biologists is a Myth. It may be shown, by later biologists, to be a less satisfactory hypothesis than was hoped fifty years ago. But that does not amount to being a Myth. It is a genuine scientific hypothesis. But we must sharply distinguish between Evolution as a biological theorem and popular Evolutionism

or Developmentalism which is certainly a Myth.”<sup>1</sup>

Notice, then, that biological evolution was not the subject of “The Funeral of a Great Myth”. Instead, it was “Evolutionism or Developmentalism”. How does that differ from biological evolution? Lewis makes that clear in the essay:

“In the science, Evolution is a theory about *changes*: in the Myth, it is a fact about *improvements*. Thus a real scientist like Professor J.B.S. Haldane is at pains to point out that popular ideas of Evolution lay a wholly unjustified emphasis on those changes which have rendered creatures (by human standards) ‘better’ or more interesting. He adds, ‘We are therefore inclined to regard progress as the rule in evolution. Actually it is the exception, and for every case of it there are ten of degeneration.’ (Darwinism Today, *Possible Worlds*, p. 28.) But the Myth simply expurgates the ten cases of degeneration. In the popular mind the word ‘Evolution’ conjures up a picture of things moving ‘onward and upwards’, and of nothing else whatsoever.”<sup>2</sup>

So it is clear that Lewis is not trying to bury the hypothesis of biological evolution. He is trying to bury the myth that there is constant improvement throughout the course of history. This is the central problematic issue with Bergman’s piece. He continually quotes Lewis, claiming that Lewis is discussing biological evolution. However, that’s not what Lewis is discussing. He is discussing the Evolutionism or Developmentalism, which he has already distinguished from biological evolution.

Bergman then tries to back up his point by saying, “In 1951 Lewis wrote that evolution was ‘the central and radical lie in the whole web of falsehood that now governs our lives’ and modern civilization”. However, if one reads the entire quote, one realizes this is not what Lewis meant.

The quote comes from a letter Lewis wrote to Captain Bernard Acworth, and here is the entire quote:

“I wish I was younger. What *inclines me now to think that you may be right* in regarding it [evolution] as the central and radical lie in the whole web of falsehood that now governs our lives is not so much your arguments against it as the fanatical and twisted attitudes of its defenders [emphasis added].”<sup>33</sup>

Notice how Lewis is significantly more tentative than Bergman would have you believe. He didn’t necessarily think what Bergman quoted was right. He was simply *inclined to believe that it may be right*. Also, Bergman adds, “and modern civilization” in his own words after the truncated quote. However, there is no mention of modern civilization in the entire letter.

Bergman then tries to show that Lewis thinks evolution is absurd by quoting from another letter. He says:

“Lewis concluded that we live in what he called an absurd age. To illustrate this conclusion, he gave the example of a teacher who had been teaching evolution by explaining that ‘life developed from simple organisms up to the higher plants and animals, finally to the monkey group, and from the monkey group to man’. Lewis concluded: ‘You need much more *faith* in science than in theology.’”

He references *Letters of C.S. Lewis, Revised and Enlarge Edition*, which was published in 1988 by Harcourt. It contains many of Lewis’s letters, and the one, from which Bergman pulls the quote, is a letter from Lewis to his father. However, if you go to that letter, you find that Bergman has completely mischaracterized what Lewis wrote. Here is what the letter actually says:

“We live in a most absurd age. I met a girl the other day who had been teaching in an infant school (boys and girls up to the age of six) where the infants are taught

the theory of Evolution. Or rather the Headmistress’s version of it. *Simple people like ourselves had an idea that Darwin said* that life developed from simple organisms up to the higher plants and animals, finally to the monkey group, and from the monkey group to man. *The infants however seem to be taught that* ‘In the beginning was the Ape’ from whom all other life developed—including such dainties as the Brontosaurus and the Iguanodon. Whether the plants were supposed to be descendants of the ape I didn’t gather. And then people talk about the credulity of the middle ages!

“*A propos of this can you tell me who said*, ‘Before you begin these studies, I should warn you that you need much more *faith* in science than in theology’ [emphasis added].”<sup>34</sup>

Notice that this is precisely the opposite of what Bergman claims. Bergman claims that Lewis said the teacher was teaching the standard tale of evolution and that he considered it to be absurd. However, the letter clearly shows that Lewis thought the part Bergman quoted was an accurate description of evolution. Lewis found what the teacher was teaching (that everything evolved from the apes—something Bergman never quotes) to be absurd. Also, note that Lewis did not conclude that you need more faith for science than theology. He was asking his father for the source of that quote!

This leads me to perhaps one of the most egregious parts of Bergman’s piece. Bergman writes, “Lewis stressed that the doctrine of evolution is ‘certainly a hypothesis’, adding that he has concluded ‘the doctrine of Evolution as held by practicing biologists is ... a less satisfactory hypothesis than was hoped fifty years ago.’” However, this is completely false. I have already quoted this part of “The Funeral of a Great Myth”, above, but allow me to reproduce the

relevant portion here, with the words Bergman edited out in italics: “*I do not mean that* the doctrine of Evolution as held by practising biologists *is a Myth. It may be shown, by later biologists,* to be a less satisfactory hypothesis than was hoped fifty years ago [emphasis added].”

Note the difference between Bergman’s claim and what Lewis actually wrote. Bergman claims that Lewis himself concluded that evolution is a less satisfactory hypothesis than was hoped fifty years ago. However, Lewis concluded no such thing. He *conjectured* that *perhaps some biologists* in the future *might* conclude that. This is clearly a case of Bergman (seemingly intentionally) misrepresenting C.S. Lewis by cutting up a quote to substantiate his own position!

But what of Bergman’s overall point? Even though he has clearly mischaracterized Lewis’s writings, it’s possible that Lewis still was a “creationist and anti-evolutionist”. Was he? Of course not. In Lewis’s essay “The Funeral of a Great Myth”, he makes it clear what he is willing to accept from evolution and what he is not willing to accept:

“Again, for the scientist Evolution is purely a biological theorem. It takes over organic life on this planet as a going concern and tries to explain certain changes within that field. It makes no cosmic statements, no metaphysical statements, no eschatological statements. Granted that we now have minds we can trust, granted that organic life came to exist, it tries to explain, say, how a species that once had wings came to lose them. It explains this by the negative effect of environment operating on small variations. It does not in itself explain the origin of organic life, nor of the variations, nor does it discuss the origin and validity of reason. *It may well tell you how the brain, through which reason now operates, arose, but*

that is a different matter [emphasis added].”<sup>2</sup>

Note that Lewis says evolution cannot explain the origin of life or the origin of the mind. However, he is more than willing to accept that it tells us how the brain arose. That is clearly macroevolution, and Lewis was willing to accept that. He makes it even more clear in an essay entitled, “The World’s Last Night”. He says:

“In the second place, we must notice that Darwinism gives no support to the belief that natural selection, working upon chance variations, has a general tendency to produce improvement. The illusion that it has comes from confining our attention to a few species which have (by some possibly arbitrary standard of our own) changed for the better. Thus the horse has improved in the sense that *protohippus* would be less useful to us than his modern descendant. *The anthropoid has improved in the sense that he is now Ourselves* [emphasis added].”<sup>5</sup>

Note that Lewis gives two examples of changes that he thinks have actually happened over time. The first is the change from *protohippus* to the modern horse. One could argue that this was a microevolutionary change, even though Lewis never used that term. However, he then says the other change is that from an anthropoid to ourselves. That is clearly a macroevolutionary change, and Lewis is willing to accept that it happened, even though he never used that specific term.

Of course, serious scholars who have studied Lewis’s works and quote them verbatim have come to the same conclusion. For example, John G. West recently wrote a book entitled, *The Magician’s Twin: C. S. Lewis on Science, Scientism, and Society*. It is a thorough discussion of Lewis’s views on science, including the science related to origins. Here is how West describes Lewis’s views on evolution:

“Lewis addressed three kinds of evolution in his writings: evolution as common descent (the idea that we came from one common ancestor); evolution as a Darwinian process of unguided natural selection acting on random variations; and evolution as a social philosophy that explained away religion, morality, and human dignity. Lewis didn’t object in principle to evolution as common descent (evolution #1), although he placed some important limits on the idea, and by the end of his life he grew more skeptical of this claim due to things like the Piltdown Man hoax. At the same time, Lewis clearly rejected unguided natural selection (evolution #2) as sufficient to produce both the human mind and the kinds of exquisite functional complexity we see throughout nature. In fact, he believed that Darwinian accounts of the development of human reason undermined our confidence in reason. Lewis also rejected Darwinism as a social philosophy (evolution #3), especially efforts to promote eugenics (trying to breed a superior race) and efforts to debunk morality as merely the product of survival of the fittest.”<sup>6</sup>

As West tells us, then, Lewis was far from a committed theistic evolutionist. At the same time, however, he was equally far from a creationist or anti-evolutionist. He didn’t object, in principle, to macroevolution (common descent), although he became more skeptical (not anti-macroevolution, just more skeptical of macroevolution) later in life.

This is confirmed by Lewis’s own adopted son, Douglas Gresham. In October of 2011, I sent Bergman’s essay to the C.S. Lewis Foundation, asking for a Lewis scholar to review Bergman’s article. I specifically wrote, “I am trying to find a serious scholar of C.S. Lewis to evaluate an article from Creation Ministries International

(CMI). I personally think it severely mischaracterizes Lewis’s views, and I am trying to get CMI to retract it.” The Foundation sent Bergman’s article to Lewis’s son, who replied as follows (please note that Lewis’s friends and family referred to him as ‘Jack’):

“You are of course completely right. The ex-contextualisation of quotes, in a piece of creative and pseudo-explicative writing can make them mean practically anything, particularly if the minds of the readers are cleverly steered by self-conceived explanatory notes between the quotations as it seems to me that they are in this piece.

“To say that Jack ‘believed’ in ‘evolutionism’ (as it is presented today) would be a lie, but to take what he wrote on the borders of this artificially extreme topic out of context to propel one’s own ‘creationist’ barrow is equally mendacious.”<sup>7</sup>

In the end, this article does a disservice to creationists everywhere. It is, at best, a result of careless scholarship. At worst, it is a classic example of the dishonest quote-mining that evolutionists routinely accuse creationists of doing.

Jay L. Wile  
Anderson, IN

UNITED STATES OF AMERICA

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