

Creation or evolution: choose wisely!

A review of
*Creation or Evolution: Do
We Have to Choose?*
by Denis Alexander
Monarch Books,
Oxford, 2008

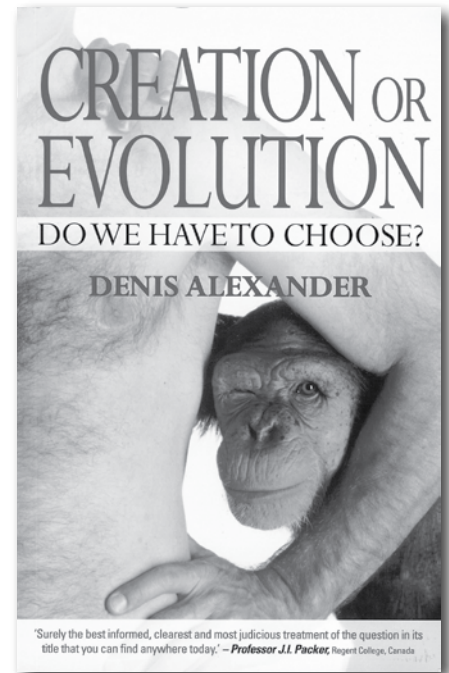
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Denis Alexander, a professing Devoangelical, is a research biochemist and the Director of the “Faraday Institute for Science and Religion” at St. Edmund’s College, Cambridge. He is also a seasoned public campaigner for theistic evolution (which he terms “evolutionary creationism”) and against both intelligent design and creationism. In this book he seeks to pull together an integrated scientific and theological argument for his position, aimed at the general reader coming from a professing evangelical, the book is likely to be one that theistic evolutionists will be recommending as a defence of their position for some years to come, and it will be good for creationists to become familiar with it. This review will concentrate on the theological aspects and arguments.

Overall, the book is a serious assault aimed against the questioning of Darwinism’s compatibility with the Bible. The aim is to persuade readers that such questions arise from ignorance. It seeks to imply that there is no real debate amongst the enlightened, and often crosses over from an educational tone to patronising condescension. As a matter of strategy, the author may well have over-reached here. A critical reader who can compare his portrayals with actual creationist arguments will soon conclude that the author’s superior tone masks a consistent unreliability in representing those he disagrees with.

The studied ignorance of creationist scientists, organisations and their publications is so systematic it can only be deliberate;¹ in 350 pages and 233 footnotes, I discovered only two such references, both from the late Henry Morris in the 1980s! Alexander prefers to contrast his own ideas with straw-men, using formulae such as, “Some Christians believe”. No public critic of creationism has any reasonable excuse for portraying creationists as believing in the fixity of species (chapter 5²), as holding that the early chapters of Genesis are essentially the genre of modern science (chapter 2), or as believing that God made the earth “look old” to test our faith (chapter 6)—a suggestion he spends three pages discussing, compared to just one on the objection from the second law of thermodynamics.

The contents page indicates this book’s comprehensive scope. The book begins with a general introduction, then an overview of the biblical doctrine of creation in one chapter and of evolution in three. Then follows some answering of objections, a more particular look at Genesis, and then a presentation of the synthesis of it all, “evolutionary creationism”. The next main division discusses how to understand various biblical and theological issues within this framework, including Adam and Eve, death, the Fall, suffering and evil. The final three chapters are more eclectic and have something of the flavour of chunks of material that the author wanted to include but didn’t know where to put them. They consider questions of intelligence and design, including the ID (intelligent design) movement, ending with a fairly technical chapter on the origin of life. The book concludes with a rather ill-tempered postscript in which Alexander childishly castigates others for spending so much time on the



issue when they could have been doing something more worthwhile—this after 350 pages of his own efforts, presumably exempt from this criticism!

The big picture

The author is in general consistent and systematic, willing to follow his controlling beliefs wherever they lead. A major weakness of this book is that he rarely takes time to argue for these controlling beliefs, but rather presents them as uncontroversial. This makes it a somewhat dangerous book for an inexperienced reader, because the problem with Alexander’s thesis is not just in the few ugly fruits that it bears but in the rotten roots. Its underlying theological method is not at heart that of historic evangelicalism. There are several disclaimers throughout the book in which the author proclaims his evangelical orthodoxy. The young Christian might swallow these at face value because of the authoritative tone of the book and the ringing endorsements on the cover. The discerning reader will soon get a heavy sense of “he doth protest too much, methinks”.

The big picture of Alexander’s approach is that he treats the scientific

method as being basically infallible. When a result is the consensus view of the mainstream scientific community, published across the mainstream peer-reviewed publications, then it should be treated as true. Non-professionals are permitted to ask questions about these things, but must defer to the scientist's authority (pp. 130–131); criticisms from non-professionals or those not accepted by peer-reviewers are invalid.³ This must hold for anything believed to be within the remit of science, whether for events supposedly taking place billions of years ago or the here and now. With no hint of irony Alexander compares science to the legal process, with checks and balances and a burden of proof, so that we can rely on its results (p. 136). Science is said to be an ideology-free zone; it is third-parties, not scientists, who weld philosophy to the study of nature.

Abandoning evangelical hermeneutics

The Bible on the other hand, and especially Genesis, is basically a theological book (e.g. pp. 153



The idea of the unbiased scientist (or unbiased anything else) comes from the secular "Enlightenment", not the Bible.

ff). Alexander makes a very sharp dichotomy. Scripture gives us high-level theological interpretations. It can "dialogue" with science, which means that we can search for possible harmonies between the real-world, physical facts of science and the Bible's theological explanations. It cannot however *critique* science or set boundaries that science cannot cross because it is not that kind of literature. What we have here is basically a "two books" approach to truth. Science is one book and the Bible is an independent one, with no practical overlap. As Alexander applies this approach, it's clear which of the two books is ultimate *in effect*, whether or not in theory. In his view, many parts of the Bible are highly uncertain and open to widely varying interpretations; no important part of present Darwinian orthodoxy is portrayed as potentially uncertain. With considerable dogmatism we are told that this or that event happened precisely 1.44 million years ago (p. 218); but whenever we come across a statement in Scripture that seems to directly contradict some evolutionary belief, Alexander quickly reverts to opining on the difficulty of the exegesis, and how many differing interpretations there are in the many commentaries (e.g. p. 268). Despite the protestations, *in practice*, in Alexander's hands the Bible loses its authority. Theology is no longer the "queen of the sciences" which is allowed to dictate the acceptable boundaries for other pursuits; biology is an independent authoritative revelation.

Ducking the hard questions

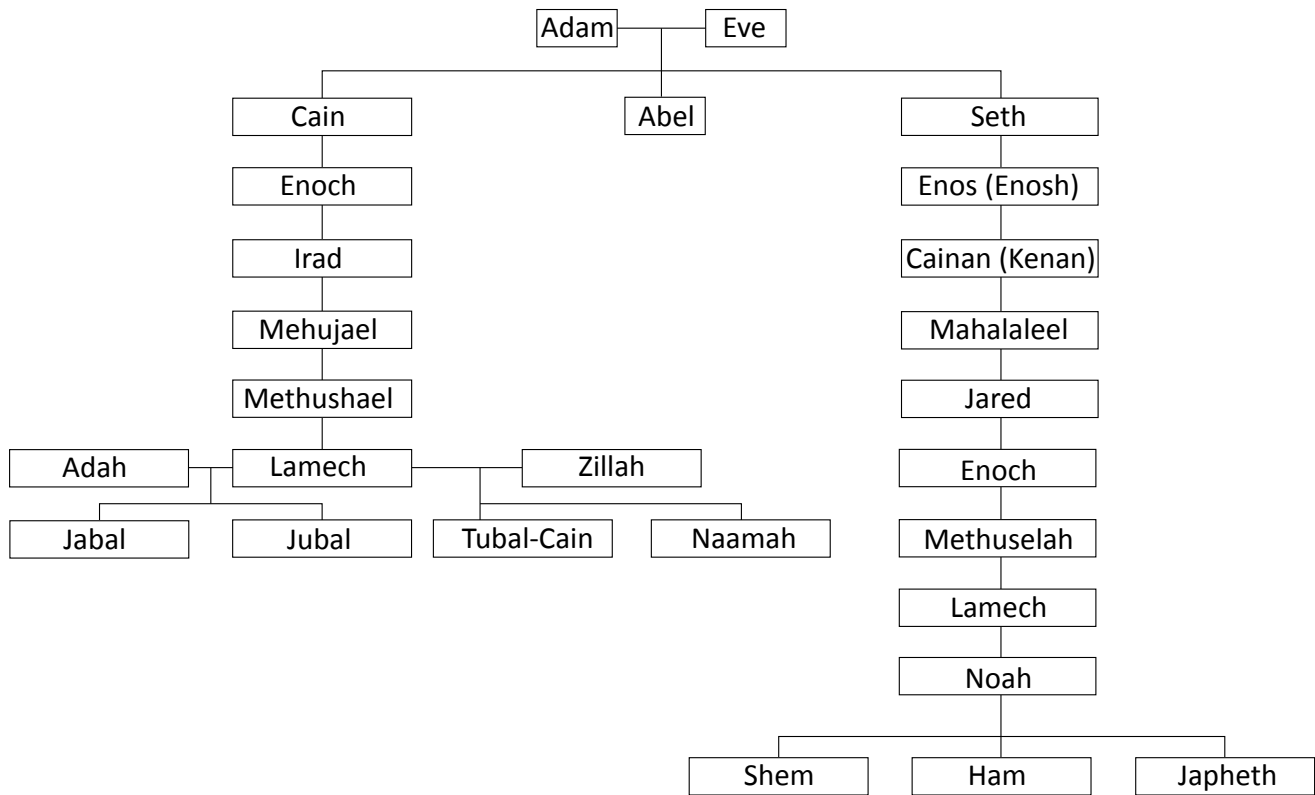
Alexander can only set up this hard "science/theology" dichotomy by ignoring the actual arguments presented by real creationists and avoiding many features of the biblical text. Instead of discussing whether the Bible should

be read as a scientific text book, the question to address is whether Genesis is a God-given *historical record*.⁴ Difficult issues are routinely avoided, such as examining the precise and detailed genealogy of Genesis chapter 5.^{5,6} What does a statement like "And Jared lived 162 years, and he begat Enoch" mean when interpreted exclusively as a "theological" and not as a historical/scientific statement? Certainly, Jared's death at 962 years and the mainstream scientific orthodoxy on human development cannot both be correct. It seems pretty hard to see how the routinely-employed "Genesis simply is not concerned with these kinds of scientific questions" dismissal would apply in such cases. Other texts in which inspired apostles teach that Genesis's historical details should be treated as real and accurate, and which Alexander spares his theory from being tested by, include 2 Corinthians 11:3, 1 Timothy 2:13–14 and 1 Corinthians 15:47.

In an exceptional departure from this usual practice Alexander, from the New Testament data, concludes that Adam does seem to be a historical individual from about 6–8,000 years ago (p. 242). What is missing is any application of the same method to other questions, or reasons why it is not applied in those cases. Elsewhere the author dismisses the possibilities that the author of Genesis intended to teach us that Adam was made directly from the ground without human parents, or that Eve was made from his side or was truly the biological mother of the whole human race. He baldly asserts that Genesis is a theological narrative and, therefore, if we look for historical realities we are making a category error. There is no examination of whether the apostles of the Christian church took his approach.⁷

Consistency in conforming to contemporary science

Alexander's consistency is seen most clearly in the parts of the book examining how to understand the



How can a family tree be true only as “theology” and not as history or science?

biblical ideas of sin, the Fall and death. Here, scientific orthodoxy requires him to not believe that any physical change happened in the world when Adam and Eve sinned (a few thousand years ago⁸). Accordingly, Alexander teaches that pain, suffering and death were all parts of God’s original design for the creation, not unwelcome intruders.^{9–12} Adam and Eve had human ancestors, and the cycle of pain, suffering and frustration in life followed by death was the only one known to, or expected by, anyone before or afterwards. There is a sharp contrast between “physical” and “spiritual” death—essentially they are independent phenomena. Adam and Eve were Neolithic farmers in the east, and human art, culture and religious endeavours had been going on for many years before them. The difference with them was that they were given a leading role in the human family and the possibility of a relationship with God; this is what “God’s image”

meant. Rejecting it, they entered a state of spiritual death, but this has no relationship to the existence of pain and death in the world. In fact, such things are essential to carbon-based life; biology is a package deal and if you want anything resembling life as we know it, logically you can’t avoid these consequences. The implications of this are that even God would be unable to create a physical world without these things. They are limits that rule Him, not curses that he imposed in holy judgment against our original disobedience—compare Revelation 21:4 with 22:3, texts which Alexander never discusses. Is this limited being really the Sovereign Lord of Scripture?

**Salvation is a
flesh-and-blood event**

This raises massive questions over the meaning of the work of Christ in redemption. Alexander follows

the implications without flinching. According to him, the idea of physical resurrection is generally unknown in the Old Testament and only hinted at towards the end (contrary to Christ’s rebuke in Matthew 22:29–32). The healing ministry of Christ is not pointing towards a restoration and glorification of the original creation, but to an entirely new order. Creation is not essentially to be redeemed, but replaced. In discussing these questions, Alexander’s dualism boils over into a new Gnosticism. Salvation is an other-worldly event, dealing with a spiritual fall and eventually releasing us from an unpleasant physical existence into something else entirely. The problem running through the whole book is most apparent here. Alexander’s approach to Scripture as a whole and to salvation in particular is thoroughly de-historicising. Despite making his own warnings against “modernism” based on Enlightenment rather than

scriptural assumptions, he buys into key Enlightenment presuppositions wholesale. The Bible becomes a book of ethereal values, dealing with a non-physical Fall and a non-physical salvation, ultimately resulting in a replacement of the physical world instead of its redemption. On this account, we wonder why the Son of God would come in flesh and blood, suffer in a true human body, die a physical death and experience a physical resurrection. Alexander simply ducks the challenge of passages like Romans 8:19–22, where the apostle Paul seamlessly moves from the bondage of fallen man to the bondage of the physical world, with the pathetic plea that lots of Ph.D. students have arrived at different interpretations (although most *commentaries* agree that *Paul* was relating the current bondage to the Fall in Genesis 3, *even if they don't believe it*^{10,11}). The worst mangling of Scripture is when he “interacts” with 1 Corinthians 15, avoiding the centrality of the *physical* resurrection of Christ, the last Adam, with empty assertions that the first Adam brought in only a spiritual and not a physical death.

This is unfortunately a logical consequence of his evolutionary compromise. Similarly, the atheistic philosopher Michael Ruse wrote a book, *Can a Darwinian Be a Christian?* which answers “yes”, but his version of “Christianity” has the Resurrection as an optional extra rather than the crux of our faith as Paul says it is (1 Corinthians 15:12–19).¹³

Recycled deism

Alexander's own theory is essentially deism with irrelevant small print. Classical deism taught that the Creator is essentially absent. He created the original state, set the rules of play, wound up the machine and left it to work itself out. Alexander firmly (and correctly) denies this, on the grounds that the Bible teaches a strong doctrine of God's universal immanence. There are no

impersonal laws; He works everything, everywhere, according to His own will. Describing secondary causes does not contradict the reality of the First Cause. Scientists can never produce alternative explanations to theological accounts, only complementary and supplementary ones. Science can never be a valid weapon against theism; rather, the orderliness of creation is a consequence of and testimony to the divine mind behind it.

This theoretical material all being covered, though, it ultimately has no “cash value” for the overall scheme Alexander advances. He teaches that because the vocabulary used in the creation accounts does not include certain key-words used to indicate miracles, the ordering of life was not miraculous. This is a word fallacy (one of many word or definitional fallacies in the book¹⁴) because the words he requires are those of “sign” and “wonder”, associated in Scripture with redemption in particular (such as from the Exodus and in the healing ministry of Jesus, etc.), not the supernatural in general. Alexander simply overlooks the fundamental connection, that both creation and the miracles of Christ were events accomplished by an immediate divine Word (John 1:1–5). This supposed “proof”, that the origin of life and its development was not “supernatural”, is then intended to make Darwinism the default explanation. Darwinism is the secondary-cause-based explanation from objective science.¹⁵ The end result is functional deism, or “soft deism”. Though the Bible provides the theological interpretation of God's immanence, it is a bolt-on extra. Hard theoretical deism, or an invisible magical wizard living down the road, could also provide possible explanations. Because of his chosen science/faith dichotomy, under which science is value-free and philosophical interpretations are entirely external, the only way to choose is by a naked leap of faith. The significant clue—that Darwin himself was a deist¹⁶—to

appreciating the fact that scientific theories of origins are not ideology-free zones, is not considered. Had it been, the book's central thesis would have imploded.

Intelligent design

The chapters covering issues to do with intelligence and design are particularly disappointing. Many of the points are no more than uncritical repetitions of cheap-shot arguments from internet atheist apologists. Thus we are informed that Judge Jones of the Pennsylvania school board case was a Lutheran appointed by President Bush,¹⁷ that the Discovery Institute has a document dubbed the “Wedge Strategy”, that ID advocates lack peer-reviewed articles in the mainstream literature³ and they don't do research, etc.

Alexander also argues that ID is essentially a “God of the gaps” argument from ignorance, easy prey to future scientific advances. This untrue¹⁸ assertion assumes Darwinism's truth in advance; unless Darwinism is true, then future scientific advances would widen and not contract the gap between it and observed reality.

Alexander is not a reactionary “village atheist”, so to read him uncritically re-hashing these sophomoric arguments is disappointing. His avoidance of the heart of the ID/Darwinism issue is worse. The key point is that Darwinism explains the complexity of biological life in a manner that makes the input of an intelligent agent *redundant*. It is an explanation of why no mind is necessary to explain biological diversity as we know it: an a-teleological creation story.

Alexander, by avoiding actual interaction with the writings of real ID advocates,¹⁹ arbitrarily designates other subsidiary questions as the key ones and talks around those instead. Overall, though, he accepts that Darwinism is not a process where intelligent input can be observed, and hence he comprehensively opposes ID.

When he seeks to explain how to harmonise evolution with the idea of design, he suggests that design may perhaps be located in the overall parameters of the system, not in any of its internal workings. That is, the design of the system itself has basically made life as we know it inevitable—Darwinism is not ultimately random, but the periodic table and laws of interaction that we have pre-determine the outcome.²⁰ Here, he departs from the axiom employed elsewhere, because this interpretation of Darwinism as a whole is a controversial one, not a mainstream consensus.

Conclusions

Ultimately Alexander's book is a gift horse to the Enlightenment and secularism. It concedes the whole field of science as an ideology-free zone and hands over the real-world, flesh-and-blood creation. Christians are left only with a book of ethereal theological interpretations and values, together with a vague future hope of being lifted out into something entirely different. The Bible is made an uncertain book with many possible explanations, whilst objective, unbiased and infallible science is a king-maker which reveals irrefutable truths. Sin, death, the Fall, and ultimately the gospel, are divorced from the physical world. The physical incarnation, death and resurrection of Christ, and hence the gospel itself, are left as theologically inexplicable events.

In short, our evangelical inheritance is sold for nothing. The idea that "God created the world using evolution" can be made to sound plausible if presented briefly. To me this book reveals the wide-ranging theological results when you adopt that belief whole-heartedly. The creation-evolution debate is not, as Alexander seeks to paint it, a storm in a tea-cup kicked up by the ignorant. Christian orthodoxy is being compromised, and we need to choose wisely.

References

1. And par for the course among compromisers—see also Cosner, L, A pathetic case for an old earth, A review of *A Biblical Case for an Old Earth* by David Snoke, *J. Creation* **21**(3):52–54, December 2007; <creation.com/snoke>.
2. This is in the context of discussion of micro/macro evolution—see <creation.com/dontuse#micro_macro>; later on page 159 when discussing a separate issue Dr Alexander indicates in an aside that he is aware that the identification of the Genesis "kind" with the species is not necessary.
3. See Kulikovsky, A.S., Creationism, Science and Peer Review, *J. Creation* **22**(1):44–49, 2008; <creation.com/peer>.
4. Is Genesis poetry / figurative, a theological argument (polemic) and thus not history? <creation.com/fh>, from Batten, D., Catchpoole, D., Sarfati, J. and Wieland, C., *Creation Answers Book, ch. 2*, Creation Book Publishers, 2007.
5. Freeman, T.R., The Genesis 5 and 11 fluidity question, *J. Creation* **19**(2):83–90, 2005; <creation.com/fluidity>.
6. Sarfati, J., Biblical chronogenealogies, *J. Creation* **17**(3):14–18, 2003; <creation.com/chronogenealogy>.
7. Sarfati, J., Genesis: Bible authors believed it to be history, *Creation* **28**(2):21–23, 2006; <creation.com/gen-hist >.
8. That is, a few thousand years by Alexander's own agreement as indicated earlier.
9. Sarfati, J., The Fall: a cosmic catastrophe: Hugh Ross's blunders on plant death in the Bible, *J. Creation* **19**(3):60–64, 2005; <creation.com/plant_death>.
10. Smith, H., Cosmic and universal death from Adam's Fall: an exegesis of Romans 8:19–23a, *J. Creation* **21**(1):75–85, 2007; <creation.com/romans8>.
11. Gurney, R.J.M., The carnivorous nature and suffering of animals, *J. Creation* **18**(3):70–75, 2004; see also <creation.com/carniv>.
12. Cosner, L., Romans 5:12–21: Paul's view of a literal Adam, *J. Creation* **22**(2):105–107, 2008.
13. See the review by Weinberger, L., Preaching to his own choir, *J. Creation* **19**(2):42–45, 2005; <creation.com/ruse2>.
14. Other examples being the dismissal of the question of whether Darwinism has limits by defining the question purely in terms of speciation (chapter 5), the dismissal of the threat of naturalism by defining it simply as the doing of science without including explicit God language (chapter 14), and the dismissal of the question of the application of information theory to the study of DNA by the arbitrary assertion that "information" should be allowed to have a unique meaning in biology (chapter 5).
15. My argument in this section, describing Alexander's teaching as "soft deism" should not be understood to be directed against secondary causes in general, or that miraculous explanations are to be preferred when possible. The point is that Scripture explicitly uses the language of immediate causation, and this cannot simply be collapsed into second causes without a strong justification, which is not offered.
16. This is also seen in the undeveloped aside in which Alexander notes that many 19th century theories dove-tailed very nicely with a common "Victorian gentleman" view of the world, p. 179.
17. But he was no conservative, and his "findings" were almost word-for-word copied from the ACLU submission. See <creation.com/nas#appendix>.
18. The fundamental aim of ID theorists, as they explain *ad nauseum*, is to positively identify characteristic signatures of design, e.g. Put a Sock In It: Arguments we've heard many times before and don't want to hear again, <www.uncommondescent.com/comment-policy/put-a-sock-in-it/>; cf. Sarfati, J., *By Design: Evidence for nature's Intelligent Designer—the God of the Bible*, Creation Book Publishers, 2008.
19. Though, in contrast to his treatment of creationists, Alexander does name and quote several ID theorists and publications.
20. Alexander also holds that alien life may exist elsewhere, and is likely for these reasons to be like life on earth. Once again, he ignores the powerful arguments against this, e.g. Bates, G., *Alien Intrusion: UFOs and the Evolution Connection*, Master Books, AR, 2005.