

Evangelical scholars still misinformed about creation

The Enduring Authority of the Christian Scriptures

D.A. Carson (Ed.)

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The *Enduring Authority of the Christian Scriptures* is a significant contribution to evangelical scholarship. Edited by one of the foremost living Bible scholars with essays contributed from well-respected scholars from across historical, biblical, and theological specialties, this over-1,000-page book is weighty both in terms of its bulk and the level of its argumentation. There are many positive things that one can say about this book, which makes it all the more disappointing how it treats biblical creation.

Genesis: the lowest common denominator?

D.A. Carson makes the first comments in the book about creation vs evolution. He begins by contrasting Richard Dawkins and the new atheists with theist John Polkinghorne and pantheist Arthur Peacocke, the latter being “scientists who reject the philosophical naturalism of the new atheists, and find ways to think about the integration of scientific learning and fundamental Christian claims, including supernatural claims” (p. 34).

He continues on to note the need for “cautious skepticism” regarding scientific claims: “Not that many decades ago, phrenology and eugenics were both almost universally espoused and commonly practiced. They were,

after all, ‘scientific’. Today they are equally universally dismissed” (p. 35).

However,

“... this stance does not sanction arrogant dismissal; it mandates respect, careful listening, evaluation, and sometimes patient uncertainty, as we refuse to be intimidated by the overconfident claims of some scientists or by the popularity of some nearly universally adopted theories” (p. 35).

So far so good. But he criticizes Christians who “appear to be utterly certain about how to read every line of Genesis 1–11”, and counsels:

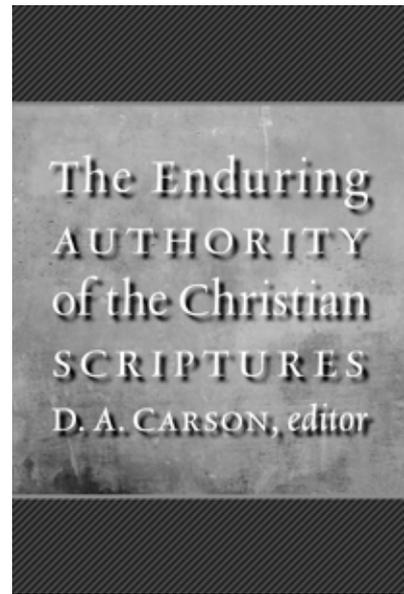
“Frankly, in the light of the complexity of the hermeneutical issues raised by these opening chapters of Scripture, the question posed by Francis A. Schaeffer forty years ago is still the most pertinent one: What is the least that Genesis 1–11 must be saying in order for the book of Genesis, and the rest of the Bible, to be coherent and true?” (pp. 35–36).

However, it is difficult to imagine Carson arguing for this sort of least-common-denominator theology in regard to the Trinity or the Resurrection, but in fact the doctrine of creation is every bit as foundational for the Christian faith.¹

That Augustine quote!

Another author, Glenn S. Sunshine, in his essay, “Accommodation Historically Considered”, quotes Augustine’s famous statement in *On the Literal Meaning of Genesis* to the effect that

“... it is a disgraceful and dangerous thing for an infidel to hear a Christian, presumably giving the meaning of Holy Scripture, talking



non-sense on these topics; and we should take all means to prevent such an embarrassing situation, in which people show up vast ignorance in a Christian and laugh it to scorn” (p. 245).

Sunshine says: “Augustine’s comments in *On the Literal Meaning of Genesis* are among the first to address the typical modern question of the relationship between the Bible and science” (p. 246). However, this quote is *misused* when people use it to argue against young-earth creation, because evolution does not meet Augustine’s definition of ‘fact’ in that quote, and he was himself a young-earth creationist.²

Science and Scripture

Kirsten Birkett in her essay “Science and Scripture” helpfully, accurately, and surprisingly explains the case of Galileo’s persecution as an instance of the church of the day being overly *pro-science*, i.e. pro-Aristotelian science. While there were very good reasons at the time for being cautious of accepting Galileo’s theory (Newtonian physics, which is critical for making sense of heliocentrism, was still in the future, for one). There is very little to dispute in this retelling,

and one hopes its appearance in such a substantial collection of scholarship will help to debunk the false religion-vs-science narrative.

Sadly, there is much less to celebrate in her discussion of chronology, the age of the earth, and the days of Genesis (p. 956ff). She notes that certain Jewish and Christian interpreters had non-literal understandings of the days in Genesis, but fails to examine the text of Genesis 1 to see if the grammar itself allows for such a non-literal view. She also does not mention that a literal view of the creation days was the majority view throughout church history.

Birkett helpfully recounts the history beginning from the Renaissance of the attempts to create a chronology of the world, and the calendrical problems of the period that complicated things. However, disappointingly the conclusion was that “the Bible could not stand alone” (p. 960).

She also cites Isaac La Peyrère as an example of questioning whether Adam was the real historical first person (p. 960). His goal in interpreting Adam figuratively was to reconcile “Bible chronology with the longer ones of the ancient pagans, the American Indians, and the Chinese” (p. 961). This supports the idea that “church scholars were quite aware of claims to a long history of the earth and to various degrees were prepared to accept it” (p. 961). However, the example of La Peyrère shows that there *were* people who were *not* prepared to accept it; as she says:

“... as the ideas spread, they attracted violent criticism. ... Calvinist Holland and Catholic France alike condemned it. La Peyrère was arrested by the Inquisition in Brussels. His master Conde secured his release at a price

of his conversion to Catholicism. He had to publish a retraction and died a pauper” (p. 961).

Is creationism ‘Scripture against science’?

Birkett discusses and dismisses young-earth creation without citing one prominent young-earth theologian or scientist (and while citing their critics exclusively). It is not a fair or a scholarly way to critique someone, so the kindest thing I can say about this part of her essay is that she needs to inform herself about the actual arguments creationists use—she seems unaware, for instance, that creationists have various ways of accounting for predatory structures (discussed on p. 968).

The bias in her examination of young-earth creation is even

more apparent when compared to her analysis and criticism of John Polkinghorne, which cites many of his own writings. If Birkett had similarly cited biblical creationist scholars, one might have still *disagreed* with her analysis, but there would be less grounds for criticizing the bias of it.

Positive points

It is a shame that the book is so weak overall when it comes to the doctrine of creation, because in other respects it is quite good and contains a lot of worthwhile information. For instance, the historical chapters contain a lot of evidence that inerrancy is not a modern invention, but can be found as far back as the Patristic period, through the Reformation, and in every strain of Protestant thought.

Among the biblical/theological topics, Craig Blomberg’s “Reflections on Jesus’ view of the Old Testament” was notable. He asserts:

“When it comes to the inspiration, truthfulness, authority, and relevance of the Bible of his world, Jesus could scarcely have held to higher views. ... He acknowledged Scripture’s divine origin as God’s word and words. He quoted from the Bible extensively and intensively. He affirmed the inviolability of its contents down to the smallest details. To whatever degree the contents of the Hebrew canon had solidified by his day, Jesus affirmed their unity but also their tripartite division. He interpreted the historical narratives in ways that suggest he believed that at least most (and probably all) of the events narrated really happened” (p. 696).

This necessarily has implications for the Christian’s view of Scripture:

“If we are followers of Jesus, we will want to adopt his view



Figure 1. Augustine is misquoted to criticize young-earth creation.

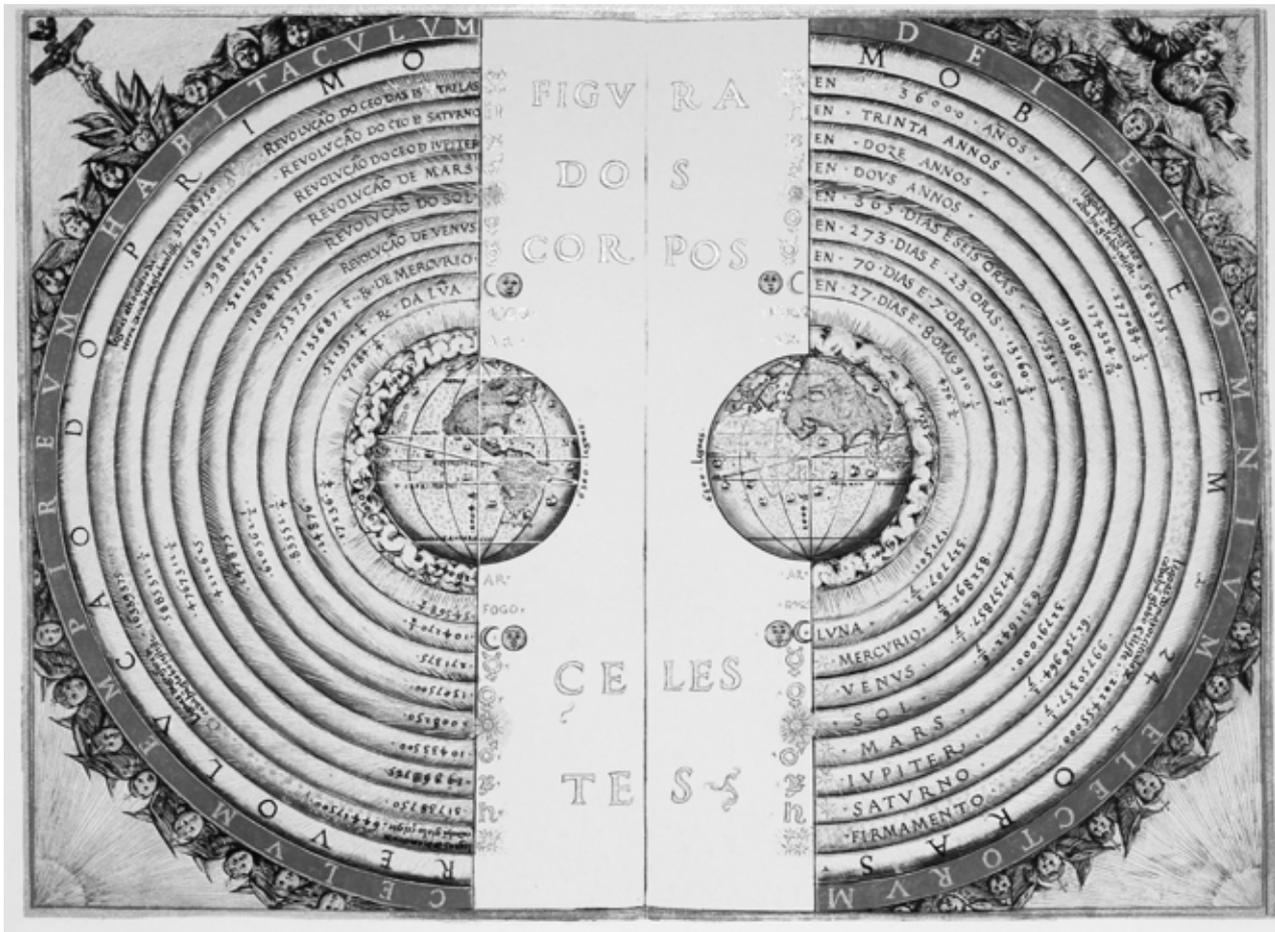


Figure 2. Galileo's conflict with the Aristotelian academy of his day was an instance of the church being too wedded to a scientific theory.

of the Scriptures. He believed in their fully divine origin, reliability, and authority. Therefore, our view of the Old Testament should accept their complete God-given trustworthiness and claims on our lives as well. And just as nothing in the humanity of a person requires that a given writing of theirs contain errors, nothing in the humanity of Scripture logically compels us to find mistakes in it” (p. 699).

This, at least, is something with which biblical creationists can wholeheartedly agree!

There are also sections on philosophy and comparative religions, with which some readers will doubtless disagree (one may question the wisdom, for instance, of seeing the Buddhist *sutras* as a possible

gateway to evangelism), but which are nonetheless informative and interesting.

Conclusion

A review of a work like *The Enduring Authority of the Christian Scriptures* will necessarily fail to address the whole book, so one is forced to cover the topics most interesting to the readers of a given review. Unfortunately, this may give an unbalanced view of the book in that on the topic of creation, it is very disappointing for young-earth creationists to find that we have once again been misrepresented. But in other ways the book is very useful and contains arguments that are of use to young-earth creationists. Because of this potential usefulness,

we shouldn't completely reject books like *The Enduring Authority of the Christian Scriptures*, even if we wish the authors were a bit more well-informed about creation. The very academic and densely argued nature, however, makes it most suitable for specialists.

References

1. See a critique of the same sort of argumentation in a popular-level article at Cosner, L., *Timescale and theology*, creation.com/timescale-theology, 28 June 2016.
2. See Cosner, L. and Sarfati, J., Non-Christian philosopher clears up myths about Augustine and the term 'literal', *J. Creation* 27(2):9-10, 2013; creation.com/augustine-myths-debunked.