

Does Creation Out-of-Nothing Tally with Evangelical Evolutionism?

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‘Catherine knew not how to reconcile two such very different accounts of the same thing’

Jane Austen: Northanger Abbey

I Two Views of Genesis One

Supernatural Creation

Young-earth creationists and evangelical evolutionists¹ have such different interpretations of Genesis 1 that Jane Austen’s heroine might have had difficulty in recognizing that they were both about the same passage of Scripture.

Young-earthers see Genesis 1 as a plain, historical account of supernatural creation. The last chapter of Professor Edgar Andrews’ book *From Nothing to Nature* is entitled *The Miracle of Creation*. He says, ‘the Bible makes it clear that by a miracle God created the whole universe out of nothing’². The words ‘God said’ tell us that what followed was ‘not the work of natural or scientific law’³, but a miracle, though ‘perhaps making a natural process happen much more quickly than it would usually do’⁴. The appearance of plant-life has no scientific explanation ‘because this was... [the result of]...a miraculous act’⁵. Obviously man himself did not evolve. He was the deliberate and special creation of God.

Similarly in the Gospels our Lord says the word and the miracle is done [cf. Matt.8:8, 26; John 2:8; 11:43-44, &c]. Did He work differently in creating the world?

An Evolutionary Genesis 1

Evangelical evolutionists think that He did.

[1] In their book *Reason, Science and Faith*⁶ under the heading ‘Mechanisms of Creation’ Forster and Marston allege that in Genesis 1 ‘There is no necessary implication that creation is either instantaneous or...miracle’.⁷

[2] Prof. R. J. Berry in his book, *God and the Biologist*⁸ says, ‘The key question [is about]...what processes God used in creation.’ He continues, ‘It is wholly consistent with both science and Scripture to insist that God is Creator but also that He worked through mechanisms, which we may discover through scientific research.’ Creation was *not* instantaneous miracle!

[3] So how do evangelical evolutionists explain the discrepancy between an apparently supernatural Genesis One and the process of evolution? Forster and Marston explain: ‘The...doctrine of ‘Creation’ is a statement about person and purpose. In this context ‘evolution’ describes a natural physical process whilst ‘creation’ speaks of the purpose behind it’.⁹ So Genesis 1 tells us, not what God actually did in creating the world, but that He is the Force behind evolution, and working out His purposes through it.¹⁰

II Creation Out-of Nothing v the Eternity of Matter

Creation out-of-nothing

Although the theory of evolution comports with the eternity of matter rather than creation *ex nihilo*, it appears that *evangelical* evolutionists generally subscribe to the plain, literal, historical statement that *In the beginning God* [miraculously] *created the heavens and the earth* [out of nothing]. Prof. Berry says, ‘Prior to the action of

God ‘in the beginning’ ...there was no other kind of existence than God... This means that matter is not eternal.’¹¹ Meredith Kline, who popularised the ‘poetic’ interpretation of Genesis 1, said, ‘among its [Genesis One’s] normative disclosures [is] the divine act of creation *ex nihilo*.’¹² Derek Kidner, who espoused the poetic interpretation of the creation-account agreed that ‘until God spoke nothing existed.’¹³ Prof. David Fergusson thinks that arguments against creation-out-of-nothing ‘are not cogent’.¹⁴

So evangelical evolutionists agree that Genesis 1:1 is a literal statement of stupendous supernaturalism.

The Eternity of Matter

Why do these evolutionists not opt for the eternity of matter – and an *entirely* unsupernatural, non-literal, Genesis 1 via natural processes? The answer is probably that Christian theology has traditionally held to creation *ex nihilo* since the second century. Before that, ‘The prevailing assumption was that matter is eternal.’¹⁵ For instance, according to the Babylonian creation-account Marduk, the chief god of Babylon, fought with and killed Tiamat, the goddess of chaos. Having killed her he chopped into two pieces and made out of one piece the heavens, and out of the other, the earth.¹⁶ That was creation out of something [or rather *someone!*] pre-existent. The Greeks also believed in the eternity of matter. Parmenides in the 5th century BC wrote, ‘Nothing comes from nothing.’¹⁷ If he was right, God could not have made the universe *ex nihilo*. Plato too believed in creation out of pre-existent matter. He says, ‘God...finding the whole visible sphere not at rest, moving in an irregular and disorderly manner, out of disorder...brought order.’¹⁸

Christian Reaction to the Eternity of Matter

But early Christian thinkers realised that, if Christianity were true, the doctrine of the eternity of matter must be false. Irenaeus [AD 130-200] said that God alone could be eternal.¹⁹ Theophilus of Antioch, writing around AD 180, argued that, ‘If matter exists eternally alongside God, then God cannot be regarded as the Creator of Everything. If like God, matter is unoriginate – uncaused, without beginning or end – then to that extent it must be regarded as godlike.’²⁰ Obviously, if God did not create matter, its properties such as the fundamental forces [which hold everything together], the structure of the atom, &c would be outside the power of God. Augustine [AD 354-430] appreciated something of this when he prayed, ‘You did not work as a human craftsman, making one thing out of something else....Your word alone created [heaven and earth].’²¹

To be sure, evangelicals of all persuasions believe the Bible when it says that the God is *Almighty, Is anything too hard for the LORD? All things are possible with God, &c*. Indeed we sing:

Our God is so big, so strong and so mighty,
There’s nothing that He cannot do.

Evangelical evolutionists may not like the literal interpretation of Genesis 1 – but they make an exception of the first verse!

III DOES GENESIS ONE ACTUALLY TEACH CREATION OUT-OF-NOTHING?

Gain-sayers!

But it must be conceded that not everyone thinks that God did create the heavens and the earth out of nothing (in Gen.1:1). They think that we are reading between the lines. For example, Prof. S. H. Hooke, one-time professor of OT at London University (and member of ‘the Brethren’), wrote, ‘It is a mistake to suggest...that there is no note of conflict in the Hebrew description of the divine activity in creation, or that the Hebrew word *bara* [made] implies creation *ex nihilo*. Chaos, tempest and darkness are all symbols of what is opposed to the divine will and purpose and must be overcome.’²² On Hook’s view chaos and darkness were pre-existent, aspects of eternal matter. Ephraim Speiser²³ translated Gen.1:1-3 in the following way: ‘When God set about to create the heavens and the earth...the world being then a formless waste and only an awesome wind sweeping over the water – God said, ‘Let there be light!’

Evidently assuming – like Hook – that Genesis One is just another ancient world creation-story – Speiser supposes that God did not create His basic materials.

Exegesis of Gen.1:1

But many scholars have resisted Speiser’s translation! Victor Hamilton says that although Speiser’s translation is grammatically possible, nevertheless the traditional [AV] rendering is correct grammatically and contextually.²⁴ The interpretation hinges on the word translated ‘beginning’: should it make the following clause dependent [commencing with the word ‘When’] or not? Prof. E. J. Young pointed out that in Isaiah 46:10 exactly the same form of the word ‘beginning’ occurs in what is undeniably an independent clause: ‘I make known the end from the beginning.’²⁵ Prof. Gordon Wenham says that ‘most modern commentaries agree that ver.1 is an independent main clause.’²⁶ So the AV rendering is surely correct.

Of course, if ‘the heavens and the earth’ did not represent absolutely everything that exists outside God, Speiser’s translation might as well stand. However John Currid notes that this expression is a ‘merism’, a figure of speech, which comprehends everything in terms of two opposites, like ‘rich and poor’, ‘young and old’, ‘East and West’,²⁷ &c.. Coplan and Craig agree that ‘heavens and the earth’ have this significance.²⁸ This destroys Speiser’s exegesis, since his translation in effect says, ‘When God set about to create Absolutely Everything, the world was then a formless waste’. But this invites the question, ‘Which world?’

So there is no doubt that Genesis 1:1 does teach *creatio ex-nihilo*.

The rest of the Bible agrees!

How did the original readers of Genesis 1 understand it? The nearest answer to this question is found in such texts as Psalm 33:6 and 9, ‘by the word of the LORD the heavens were made, their starry hosts by the breath of His mouth...For He spoke and it came into being’. Prof. H. C. Leupold comments that ‘here we have *fiat* creation’ in its most superlative form’.²⁹ According to Coplan and Craig the LORD’s title in Isaiah 44:6, ‘the First and the Last’, implies that God is ‘the ultimate originator and only eternal being.’³⁰ That constitutes an excellent commentary on Gen.1:1. Certainly John 1:1 was written (by a Jew) with Genesis in view: ‘In the beginning was – not eternal matter but - the Word.’ The next verse says, ‘All things were made by Him.’ That implies that there is no such thing as uncreated matter. Similarly, St Paul – no mean student of the Old Testament! – says that ‘From Him [God] and through Him and for Him are *all things*.’ Everything, including matter, the fundamental forces, the structure of the atom, &c originated with God and was created for His glory. Hebrews 11:3 sums it all up: ‘By faith we understand that the universe was formed at God’s

command, so that what is seen was not made out of what is visible.’ F.F. Bruce said that ‘while this text does not in so many words assert creatio *ex nihilo*...that is practically what is implied.’³¹

The Bible teaches that God created absolutely everything out of nothing.

Big Bang supports creation out-of-nothing

This is the theory that the universe began its existence as a primeval atom about 15 billion years ago. It is not the business of this article – or West Yorkshire Creation Group! – to promote or defend this theory, which has been heavily criticised and may suffer the fate of the geocentric Ptolomaic model of the universe, which hobbled on for centuries as astronomers tried to make it fit the facts!

Nevertheless Big Bang theory is similar to creation *ex nihilo* – only this time it is a doctrine devised by scientists – some of whom may be Christians. Edmund Whittaker, a British physicist, said, ‘There is no good ground for supposing that matter and energy existed before [Big Bang]...and was suddenly galvanised into action. For what could distinguish that moment from all other moments in eternity? It is simpler to postulate creation *ex nihilo*.’³² Nobel Prize-winner, Arno Penzias, said, ‘Astronomy leads us to a unique event, a universe which was created out of nothing.’³³ There is a new scientific aversion to the eternity of matter! Greg Easterbook writes, ‘This realisation – that something transcendent started it all – has hard science-types...using terms like ‘miracle’.’³⁴ Geoffrey Burbage complained that his fellow astronomers were rushing to join ‘the first Church of Christ of the Big Bang’.³⁵

It is an ill wind that blows no good! Big Bang theory – whatever its validity – has helped undermine the doctrine of the eternity of matter and highlight the miraculous beginning of the universe. Creation – so far as it is *ex nihilo* - rests on good Biblical exegesis and is endorsed by contemporary scientific thinking.

IV SO CAN THE EVOLUTIONARY VIEW OF GENESIS ONE STAND UP?

Evolution

On pages 114-115 of their *Reason, Science and Faith* Forster and Marston say that the science faculty of Dr Marston’s university³⁶ teaches [as do other universities] that ‘life evolved by a series of mutations in the genetic code...each change which had survival value being preserved by natural selection.’ They then say that, though some Christians [meaning young-earth creationists] reject evolution, ‘we believe their view mistaken theologically, no less than scientifically’ [p115]. So they appear to endorse the theory of evolution in some form. To be sure, ‘puzzles remain...but the general picture is based on overwhelming evidence.’³⁷ Then, despite rehearsing excellent arguments against evolution on pp432-3, they conclude, ‘Our own view is that there is good circumstantial, though not conclusive, evidence that macro-evolution occurred.’ Finally, as if to resolve their doubts once and for all, on page 469 they reject the description of themselves as ‘theistic evolutionist[s]’ and ‘prefer the term evolutionary creationist[s]’. So they do believe in evolution of some sort.

The real history of ‘creation’ on their view is evolution.

If evolutionary, then un-miraculous

Obviously, if the real history of creation is evolution [through natural processes in whatever form], then the alleged supernatural events of Genesis 1 were

not supernatural after all. But, as Forster and Marston recognize, you may wonder, ‘What about the specific language of Genesis 1[?]...could there not be something in the actual text and language....which indicates [say] a type-ii miracle...?’³⁸ Is creation by *fiat* [Latin for ‘Let there be!’] not miraculous? Here Forster and Marston are unequivocal: ‘The simple answer to this is ‘No’....There is no necessary implication carried by the Hebrew language that... ‘creation’ is either instantaneous or a type-ii miracle.’³⁹ That suggests that Prof. Edgar Andrews⁴⁰ is quite wrong! However on page 433 they seem to back-track a little: ‘We remain open to the degree to which type-i⁴¹ or type-ii miracles were involved.’ That suggests that that in their view there *might* be miracles in Genesis 1 though the text does not actually say that there were.

Neither Moses in Exodus 20:11 nor the Psalmist [33:6, 9] found the language of Genesis 1 a barrier to supernatural creation. But, if you believe in evolution through natural processes, it is not easy to see where miracles could fit in.

But what about miraculous creation ex nihilo on ‘poetic’ Day One?

1. If God created the heavens and the earth out of nothing. Creation began with unimaginable miracle (Type-ii. There is no scientific explanation for that!).

However it is significant that Prof.Kline assigns creation *ex nihilo* to Day 1 of the *poetic* creation-week, which evangelical evolutionists say is not a *real* week.⁴² Day 1 then is not a real day, but an imaginary, poetic day. For if – as Kline says – ‘Exegesis indicates that the scheme of the creation-week itself is a poetic figure’,⁴³ not to be treated literally and chronologically, by what exegesis is ver.1 excluded from the unreality of the ‘poetic figure.?’

2. But here we strike a problem. How can a real event occur on an imaginary day? Suppose you say you went to Paris on the 29th February 2007. You are wrong – there was no such day! So the creation of the ‘heavens and the earth’ on Kline’s fictitious Day One must have been a non-event. Now imagine, if you will, a series of six ‘events’ – parallel with those of Genesis 1 –alleged to have taken place on Feb.29, April 31st, June 31st, Sept.31st, Nov.31st and Dec.32nd 2006! Did these ‘events’ take place? Either the dates are wrong or the events are imaginary. If the dates simply form part of an imaginary scheme, then the alleged events are equally imaginary.

It follows:

[a] That if the ‘heavens and the earth’ really were created *ex nihilo* on Day One, then Day One – whatever we conceived a ‘day’ to be – *must have been a period of real time.*

[b] A real creation *ex nihilo* can only co-exist with the ‘poetic’ week of evangelical evolutionism *provided it is outside it.*⁴⁴ But it is not outside it - if Kline is right.

But may history not be mixed with fiction?

Is that not precisely the art of the historical novelist? Could a real creation *ex nihilo* not be referred to on a fictitious Day One? Take as an example Thomas Armstrong’s novel *The Crowthers of Bankdam*⁴⁵ set in Ramsfield, a fictitious mill-town in the 19th century West Riding. The characters and the plot are entirely fictitious, yet historical events, such as the Crimean War and the American Civil War, are referred to, along with real places such as Bradford and Leeds, and real people like Palmerston and Disraeli. Since these historical references do not cease to be true, because they are made in a work of fiction, why should a historical creation *ex nihilo* not be related in a ‘poetic’ passage on a figurative day?

By what criteria?

While we can separate historical fact from fiction in Armstrong's novel by reference to 19th century documents, there are no similar criteria for separating fact from fiction in Genesis 1. Ultimately the evangelical evolutionist must rely on the theory of evolution for a *true historical* account of origins (which at least endorses, if it does not inspire, the 'poetic' view of Genesis), even though that theory is flawed. For the 'history' may Genesis 1 cannot be judged by ancient history – certainly not Babylonian or Greek!

Nor is literary analysis a safe guide. Poetry in fact *may* relate history (read Shakespeare!). In the Bible Lamentations 2 is an elaborate acrostic poem, yet Prof. John Bright cites it as historical evidence on pages 344 and 348 of his standard work, *The History of Israel*.⁴⁶ What literary reason can there be why a 'poetic' Genesis 1 should not also constitute historical evidence?⁴⁷

Conclusion: Evangelical evolutionism does not comport with Genesis 1:1

1. Let us now assume that the literal, historical statement of creation *ex nihilo* is outside the poetic week of Genesis 1, that Day One relates to the creation of light (Gen.1:3), not to the creation of the entire universe. In this case Gen.1:1 is the title of the passage or a summary of the creation-account. This seems reasonable, since, after all, the sun, moon and stars appear to have been made on Day 4, not on Day 1.⁴⁷ Many scholars think that ver.1 is a title.⁴⁸ If so, creation *ex nihilo* seems to be *outside* the creation-week, making it possible to reconcile Gen.1:1 with Darwinism.

2. But how could creation-via-natural processes be summarised by a statement of stupendous miracle? How could creation *ex nihilo* be the sensible title of an account of creation by *natural* processes? You would be surprised to find laundry items on your shopping list! You would have been even more surprised, if Darwin had entitled his book, *Supernatural Origin of Species!* It follows that whether the statement of stupendous creation *ex-nihilo* in Genesis 1:1 is title or summary, what follows is either supernatural or a colossal *non sequitur*. In fact the general statement (as understood by other Biblical writers) is that God created Absolutely Every Thing out of Absolutely Nothing: the details are that through mere acts of Divine Will He created everything else in like manner: *He spake and it came to be*.

3. Evangelical evolutionists cannot have it both ways. Have a poetic Genesis 1 if you must – but give up creation *ex nihilo* and with it the Biblical doctrine of God. On the other hand to embrace the Biblical view of God and the world, you must give up your Darwinism and the Framework Hypothesis. You cannot have your cake and eat it!

Notes

1. We generally term Christians who believe in Darwinism as 'theistic evolutionists', but Forster and Marston rightly point out that this expression covers huge differences of doctrine and outlook.
2. Prof. Edgar Andrews, *From Nothing to Nature*, Evangelical Press 1978 p109
3. Ibid. p114
4. Ibid. p116
5. Ibid. p117
6. Forster and Marston, *Reason, Science and Faith* Monarch 1999 p
7. Ibid. p
8. Prof. R. J. Berry, *God and the Biologist* Apollon 1996 p44
9. Op.cit. p276
10. Jacques Monod wrote famously: '[Natural] selection is the blindest and most cruel way of evolving a new species....The struggle for life and elimination of the weakest is a horrible process against which our modern ethics revolts...I am surprised that a Christian would defend the idea that this is a process which God more or less set in order.' Quoted I Henry Morris *Long War against God* Baker 1989 p58

11. Op.cit. p47
12. Meredith Kline, 'Genesis' in *New Bible Commentary* IVP 1970 p82
13. Derek Kidner *Genesis* Tyndale 1967 p43. Kidner was not an aggressive evolutionist.
14. David Fergusson, *The Cosmos and the Creator* SPCK 1998 p32
15. Fergusson Op.cit. p24
16. Prof. S. H. Hook *Genesis* in Peake's Commentary 1964 p177
17. John Burnett, *Greek Philosophy* Macmillan 1950 p68
18. Paul Helm (ed) *Faith and Reason* OUP 1999 p21
19. Coplan & Craig, *Creation out of Nothing* Baker/Apollos 2004 p124
20. Fergusson op.cit. p25
21. Coplan & Craig op.cit. p143
22. Hook, op.cit. p179
23. Quoted in Robert Reymond, *Systematic Theology* Nelson p387. Speiser's translation appeared in the *Anchor Bible* 1964.
24. Victor Hamilton *Genesis 1-17* Eerdmans, 1990 pp103-108
25. Prof. E. J. Young *Studies in Genesis One* P&R 1964 p4
26. Wenham op.cit. p12
27. Quoted in Douglas Kelly *Creation and Change* Mentor 1997 p79
28. Coplan and Craig, op.cit. p43
29. Prof. H. C. Leupold *Genesis* Evangelical Press, ad loc.
30. Coplan and Craig, op.cit. p65
31. F. F. Bruce, *Hebrews* Marshall Morgan Scott 1964 p281 fn.
32. Lee Strobel, *Case for a Creator* Zondervan p111
33. Ibid. p153
34. Ibid. p93
35. Quoted in Hugh Ross, *The Creator and the Cosmos* Navpress 1993 p20
36. Forster and Marston op.cit. pp114-115
37. Ibid. p115
38. Ibid. p275. Forster and Marston explain that their 'type-ii' miracle is not scientifically explicable, see p132.
39. Forster & Marston op.cit.p275
40. Andrews, op.cit. last chapter.
41. Forster & Marston op.cit.p132. Type-I miracles (they say) 'involve no alteration of the regular physical cause-effect sequences, but involve coincidences to such a degree that participants see them as divinely provident'.
42. Kline, op.cit. p82
43. Ibid.
44. If the creation *ex nihilo* is only a poetic element in a poetic 'schema', then matter is eternal and God is not the Creator of Everything.
45. Published by Collins (nd)
46. John Bright *History of Israel* SCM 1972
47. Tom Edmondson, *Genesis is History*, on this website.