

Thirteen Essays on Evolution and Creationism in Modern Debates

Stephen C. Barton and David Wilkinson (eds): *Reading Genesis after Darwin*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2009. pp. xiv + 254. S/b \$24.95

Kim Paffenroth

Published online: 18 March 2010
© Springer Science+Business Media, LLC 2010

This anthology consists of 13 essays written by professors trained in biblical studies or theology, writing on the interpretation of Genesis (by which they almost exclusively mean the first chapter of Genesis) since Darwin's *Origin of Species* (1859). After a brief Introduction by the editors, the book is then divided into three parts: "Engaging again with the Scriptures," "Understanding the History," and "Exploring the Contemporary Relevance." It includes an index of modern authors and a subject index. References of works cited are included in the notes for each chapter, though a bibliography at the end would've been a welcome addition.

Section 1, "Engaging again with the Scriptures," includes four essays. In "How Should One Read the Early Chapters of Genesis?" Walter Moberly discusses the implications of taking Genesis as "a literary phenomenon." His conclusion is probably unremarkable to anyone trained in modern, liberal biblical criticism, and it will recur in similar terms in several of the other essays: Moberly challenges us to see in Genesis biblical ideas such as "wonder and delight of the world, creaturely contingency, creaturely responsibility, the gift of relationship between creature and Creator, and the difficulty that humans have in genuinely trusting God as a wise Creator and living accordingly". I think he is quite correct that this view maintains the text's meaning and relevance, without insisting on a literal reading of it.

Francis Watson takes the history of controversy much further back, in his essay, "Genesis before Darwin: Why

Scripture Needed Liberating from Science." He traces what he calls the "annexation" of the Bible by astronomy and geology in the sixteenth to nineteenth centuries: harmonization of the biblical account with scientific findings (e.g. the "days as eons" solution) was done to the detriment or obfuscation of both. Darwin put forth his theory with no reference to Genesis, and according to Watson, this shows a more fruitful and beneficial relationship between Genesis and science—separation or liberation from one another.

In "The Six Days of Creation according to the Greek Fathers," Andrew Louth discusses the interpretation of Genesis by Theophilus of Antioch and Basil. Louth's conclusions echo Moberly's, in that he counsels some of the same attitudes toward creation, showing how ancient theologians regarded the created world with "wonder" and "humility" and were convinced of its "interconnectedness".

In "The Hermeneutics of Reading Genesis after Darwin," Richard S. Briggs examines the comparison of Genesis with other ancient Near Eastern texts (a method of biblical study that was coming into vogue contemporaneously with Darwin), concluding that the process and implications of such "triangulating" are similar, whether one is comparing Genesis to the Enuma Elish or to Darwin.

Section 2, "Understanding the History," includes three essays. It starts with John Rogerson's "What Difference Did Darwin Make?: The Interpretation of Genesis in the Nineteenth Century," which examines some biblical commentaries published shortly before and shortly after Darwin's work, to see what effect (if any) it had on their interpretation of the Genesis text. The examination does a good job of showing there was no unanimity among interpreters as to the meaning of Genesis, and a range of interpretations were advocated, both before and after Darwin. Perhaps even more interestingly, even within the

K. Paffenroth (✉)
Iona College,
715 North Ave.,
New Rochelle, NY 10801, USA
e-mail: kimpaffenroth@msn.com

group that rejected his theory, interpretations of Genesis often differed.

John Headley Brooke, in “Genesis and the Scientists: Dissonance among the Harmonizers,” returns to some of the scientific controversies already examined in Watson’s essay, concluding similarly that Darwin’s theory may be more amenable to Christianity than attempts at harmonizing Genesis with current scientific theories, since Darwin “purged it [Christianity] of a semi-deistic position”. This is an important distinction for those who would “defend” the Bible, who too often seem to be defending a deistic position that God created the universe and let it go on its own subsequently, rather than defending the idea of a God who wishes to be in communion with humans (the more narrowly biblical concept of God, in either Jewish or Christian interpretation). He also speaks in terms similar to Moberly and Louth, counseling a “nonliteral reading of the text”, and focusing on the text’s primary relevance to “our human existential condition”. David Brown concludes the section with a discussion of some paintings in his essay, “Science and Religion in Nineteenth- and Twentieth-Century Landscape Art.” The most familiar of these to readers is probably Dali’s “The Sacrament of the Last Supper.”

Section 3, “Exploring the Contemporary Relevance,” includes six essays. David Wilkinson’s “Reading Genesis 1-3 in the Light of Modern Science” gives perhaps the fullest summary of the interpretive issues, compared to the other essays in this collection. He puts Darwin in the context of other, sometimes more fundamental and intractable controversies with the Bible; he briefly describes the creationist alternative (pp. 132-135); he traces the various attempts at harmonization, with their pros and cons; and he lays out possible points where Genesis may still speak to the human condition and understanding. Echoing previous essays in the volume, his conclusion is that a primarily literary approach is needed to understand or appreciate the text, and this will yield an interpretation that does not address cosmogonic or biological data, but rather our “unique conscious intimacy with God”.

In “All God’s Creatures: Reading Genesis on Human and Nonhuman Animals,” David Clough argues that in light of evolution (and other observations of animal consciousness and rationality), Christians should abandon anthropocentric readings of Genesis (what he calls “human-separatist” readings throughout). Jeff Astley argues in “Evolution and Evil: The Difference Darwinism Makes in Theology and Spirituality” that evolution exacerbates the problems of theodicy by making suffering (and large amounts of it) intrinsic to creation.

In “‘Male and Female He Created Them’ (Genesis 1:27): Interpreting Gender after Darwin,” Stephen C. Barton examines constructions of gender in the classical world, in the Bible, and in subsequent biblical interpretation, con-

trasting these with modern and postmodern analyses. Ellen F. Davis looks at how organisms fit into their environment in her essay, “Propriety and Trespass: The Drama of Eating,” drawing some conclusions for our current environmental situation and its (un)sustainability. Finally, Mathew Guest’s essay, “The Plausibility of Creationism: A Sociological Comment,” examines the current popularity of creationism in the USA (and to a much lesser degree in the UK), suggesting some sociological forces that may contribute to its acceptance, despite its logical or factual shortcomings.

Although I was excited when I first began reading this volume, this wore off in the course of study. I would single out three essays for praise. Moberly’s is a very helpful look at how believers could still maintain the importance and sacredness of the biblical text, without interpreting it literally. Rogerson’s is a wonderful and suggestive illustration of how Christian belief and interpretation are never monolithic, and never a matter of “good guys” versus “bad guys.” Wilkinson’s is a thorough and accessible discussion of the issues at stake. But overall, I was struck by how little the book deals with Darwin: it could be entitled “Reading Genesis in the Modern World” with little loss of focus. Several of the essays make only the barest nod toward Darwin before moving on to some topic only tangential to his work. The suggestions for the future interpretation of Genesis (literary criticism, a reading that encourages a sense of wonder and humility, the acknowledgment of human incompleteness and contingency, etc.), while sober and encouraging, are repeated by several contributors without much expansion or specificity (Moberly, Louth, Brooke, Wilkinson); such heuristic suggestions are also commonplace in biblical studies, so I found little new here that couldn’t be found in many introductory classes or texts on Genesis.

Several essays were much more deficient, in my estimation. Briggs’s idea that comparing Genesis to other, contemporaneous myths, and comparing it to a scientific treatise written 2,500 years later, are somehow similar comparisons, and the two interpretive acts can shed light on one another, struck me as odd, if not misleading. It overlooks the more fundamental difference in genre: comparing Genesis to other myths (contemporary with it or not) is probably more helpful to understanding it, than comparing it to scientific writings (from whatever time period, though especially a work that eschews teleological questions, and therefore has a completely different outlook than Genesis). Brown’s essay has little to do with the topic of this collection and barely mentions Darwin or Genesis: its observations would make a fine beginning to a chat about “art and spirituality,” but it has no place here. Clough’s essay doesn’t deal with “stewardship,” which many interpreters today would see as the crucial way to

understand the biblical teaching on how humans differ from, and yet are immersed in, the created order. Neither Clough's nor Barton's essay deals with the differences between Genesis 1 and 2, again a crucial interpretive issue for understanding the text's ambiguities (and discrepancies) on anthropocentrism and gender.

I say all this from the perspective of a biblical scholar of a decidedly liberal Protestant bent, for whom these issues are well-worn. Perhaps if I try to step outside of this context (and many of the essays in this collection properly remind us of how much context determines meaning), I might better see where some of these essays could fit into a useful

discussion. I'd say that for someone who thinks (as many of my atheist and agnostic friends do) that all Christians are creationists, that all Christians immediately opposed Darwin's ideas and continue to do so today, or that there is only one way to interpret Genesis—for a reader with such impressions, the better written, more thorough of these essays would prove enlightening, and might promote a dialogue that goes beyond secularists versus Biblicists, those who would discard the text versus those who cling to a literal interpretation of it. Such a dialogue might even become a mutual search for truth, conducted with real exchange, understanding, and respect.