



## Darwin revisited: arguing **for** evolution

# *humility required*



Pete Moore holds a PhD in physiology and works as a freelance science writer and speaker. Among many interests he is a visiting lecturer in ethics at Trinity College Bristol. He is an authorised lay-reader in the Church of England. Pete is starting a project that aims to present the scientific evidence that relates to our origins to school and church audiences and would be interested in hearing from any teachers who would like to help in its creation.

### Issues of faith

'Where were you when I laid the earth's foundation?' God asked Job. The point being that when it comes to big questions we need to establish the correct attitude of humility within humanity.

Humility is vital within any debate about origins, not least because sincere, Bible-believing Christians hold such a wide range of opinions. They span from 'old earth' to 'new earth' and from 'some form of Darwinian-evolution' to 'six day creation'. We can't all be right. In fact, my hunch is that we are probably all wrong – at least to the extent that no one (except God) knows the full picture. That, however, is no reason for not chasing after truth, but a humble approach is more likely to win the race. My personal search has led me to give talks on the evidence for seven-day special creation and spend time with members of the Institute of Creation Science on a field trip on Mount St Helen's, Washington. While I have changed my mind, I did not dismiss a young earth lightly.

That said, what do we know? A starting point is to realise that some elements of the debate are new. As someone who believes in using the Bible, church tradition and reasoning as guiding principles, it's interesting to note that mainstream

Christian thinking and theology has not been founded on a rigid belief that the world is a few thousand years old, or that the days of Genesis should be thought of as periods lasting 24 hours.

Very early Christian thinkers such as Origen (AD185–254) and Augustine (AD354–430) were explicit in stating that the biblical creation narrative must not be taken in a literal sense and that the nature of 'days' was most unclear. These are not casual or ignorant observers, but key people in Christianity's history. My point is not that we should trust everything that ancients say, but that by believing in a young earth you are not returning to Christian spiritual roots – you are, in many ways, departing from them.

I believe that this departure has been driven by a fear that secular thinking is watering down issues of faith. There is nothing new in this fear and we are called to stand our ground on issues of faith. What is relatively new is the place of science within that debate. But remember, while science has given us many insights and revealed a lot – it hasn't revealed all.

### Balancing evidence

So what can we say of our origins? What can we say about evolution? There is now an overwhelming mass of evidence that the universe is incredibly old. Many, many millions of years old. How many millions is under debate – but taking a view that it is around 6,000 years old means that you have to ignore a massive weight of interconnecting evidence. The thing that fascinates me is the way that data from geology, biology, cosmology, genetics – I could go on – are all consistent with an old universe.

*Very early Christian thinkers such as Origen (AD185–254) and Augustine (AD354–430) were explicit in stating that the biblical creation narrative must not be taken in a literal sense and that the nature of 'days' was most unclear*

## *The evidence that organisms share common ancestors and have traceable heritages increases almost daily*

I am not about to rehearse all the data. Instead I will simply say that this data has not been collected by people who are in the game of active and wilful (self)delusion. There is not a conspiracy to *pretend* the world is old; there is just a mass of evidence collected by tens of thousands of scientists (religious, agnostic and atheist) pointing that way.

### **Room for intelligence?**

Part of the recent religious focus in our origins has come from a renewed interest in an idea called Intelligent Design – ID for short.

Christians believe in a God who created and sustains His universe. We believe that this God is intelligent – using the word loosely, as the scale of intelligence required is so vastly greater than our own that it seems insulting to use the same term. It seems at first sight that all Christians, Jews or Muslims (as well as members of a few other faiths) should be proponents of ID.

The problem comes from the current use of the term, because ID theorists extend the claim to say that science can reveal the intelligent creator at work. They claim that there are certain elements within the universe that could have come into existence *only* through the deliberate intervention of an intelligent designer. They are careful not to attribute this intelligence explicitly to ‘God’, but they leave that inference open to anyone who wants to extrapolate in that direction. Most ID theorists do not claim that the earth is young, nor do they deny that species are interlinked – their point of departure from mainstream science is in the claims they make about the mechanisms involved.

A key plank in ID is the idea that some aspects are ‘irreducibly complex’. Pointing to blood clotting as an example, ID scientists show that if you take away one protein from the system, the cascading set of reactions fails. It is therefore difficult to see

*We can't all be right. In fact, my hunch is that we are probably all wrong – at least to the extent that no one (except God) knows the full picture*



*The scientific evidence indicating that the universe is old is so substantial that it would be remarkable if this was ever overturned*

how evolution built these systems step-by-step, as any intermediary step would have had no function – and hence no selecting pressure. ID theorists claim that such complex systems *must* have come about through divine intervention. In effect they are God’s incriminating fingerprints at the scene of creation.

It is an interesting idea. But I wonder if it is driven by the same desire that Philip had when he asked Jesus to show him the Father (John 14:8). Philip wanted concrete proof. Jesus’ line of argument was that we come to the Father through Him (John 14:6) and *not* via any other ‘proofs’ of His existence.

Looking at ID, what happens when new scientific discoveries offer evolutionary explanations for these complex systems? Do we scratch God’s involvement out of this bit of the biological system? If so this is just a re-run of an old ‘God of the Gaps’ argument – where God is invoked to fill the gaps in our knowledge. It is a genuine question because the blood clotting ‘gap’ just got closed (see *Beyond Belief* by Denis Alexander, published by Lion in 2004).

It is an old debate. Newton (1643–1727) realised that the planets wobbled in their orbits, and

## Most ID theorists do not claim that the earth is young, nor do they deny that species are interlinked — their point of departure from mainstream science is in the claims they make about the mechanisms involved

suggested these wobbles were God pushing them back into place. But a few decades later Pierre-Simon Laplace (1749–1827) presented his ideas, and the ‘gap’ closed – maths alone could explain the system. When Napoleon Bonaparte commented that God had been removed from the equations, Laplace replied that he had ‘no need for that hypothesis’. Critically, Laplace wasn’t dismissing the existence of God – he was dismissing Newton’s hypothesis of the way God had to nudge the universe back into order. For Laplace, God still existed, but the physical role He played within the system remained a mystery.

ID has caused a large noise in science, largely because of a currently running court case relating to American education, but its evidence-base is far, far too light to be taken seriously as a scientific theory by the vast majority of scientists who have looked at it.

### Where do we go?

As a fellow traveller in this realm of discovery, a few things are becoming clear:

- The scientific evidence indicating that the universe is old is so substantial that it would be remarkable if this was ever overturned.
- The evidence that organisms share common ancestors and have traceable heritages increases almost daily. Again it would be shocking if this was overturned.
- There are some interesting hypotheses about how species have emerged from each other, but the mechanism is still unclear.
- The mechanism that enabled life to emerge is deep, deep in the realm of the unknown.
- God is the only ultimate explanation that makes sense to me, and to many millions of other Christians.

- But, vitally for this debate, how God did His creating and how he works to sustain His creation is far from being established in any scientific terminology.

There are two traps to fall into. One is exemplified by Oxford academic Richard Dawkins, who claims that science has written God out of existence. The other is that science is sufficiently advanced to reveal His fingerprints and almost catch Him in action.

I don’t believe science is anywhere near achieving either the claims of Dawkins or proponents of ID. Science has revealed many wonders, but it is far from the level of sophistication required to close the debate.

If you want to have a serious look at the biblical and scientific issues then *The Message of Creation*, by David Wilkinson, is as good a starting point as any. Published by IVP in 2002, *The Message of Creation* carefully describes the arguments used to defend various viewpoints. The author, a Methodist minister and an astrophysicist, finishes by presenting his personal belief in an old earth. He shows how this standpoint is compatible with the ‘best’ interpretation of the key biblical texts.

Whatever our conclusions, we need a huge dose of humility when we stand before each other, much less our God, and make definite pronouncements.

■ Pete Moore

### References

Denis Alexander & Robert S White (2004) *Beyond Belief: Science, Faith and Ethical Challenges*. Lion.

David Wilkinson (2002) *The Message of Creation*. Inter Varsity Press – The Bible Speaks Today (series editor: Derek Tidball)

