

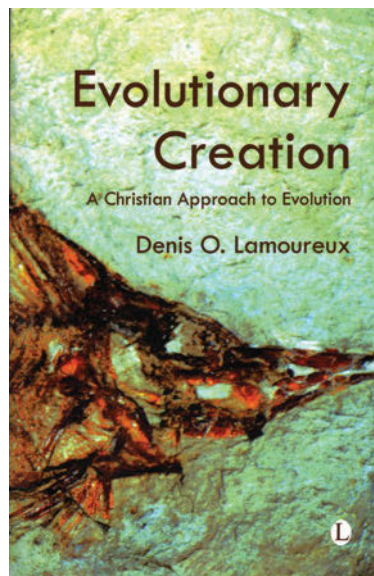


Genesis: not suitable for modern scientific understanding?

Stephen Lloyd

These two books, both published in 2008, share similarities that extend beyond the first name of the author. As the titles suggest both authors regard the evidence for the evolutionary account of earth history to be overwhelming. Both identify themselves as Bible believing Christians. And hence both view evolution as the process by which God has created. Yet they offer two contrasting approaches to how that evolutionary account should be reconciled with the Bible. In this article I intend to focus on this contrast rather than provide a detailed review of the two books. It is a contrast that we need to understand, and, to an extent exploit, as we interact with the range of theistic evolutionary positions.

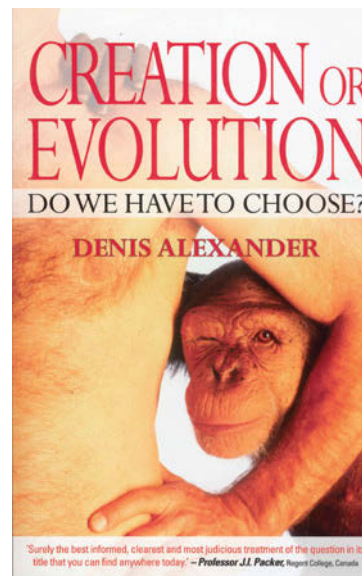
Alexander's book has been reviewed widely and in detail.¹ He sets out a scientific case for the evolutionary account of earth history, particularly focussing on genetic evidence. This is combined with a lengthy discussion of theological issues such as the biblical doctrine of creation, Adam and Eve, and death and suffering. Some have expressed surprise (and concern) at the position Alexander defends as if it is a new development but those who have heard him speak on these topics for many years will find very little new. In fact the book is valuable for the way it cogently expresses in a single readable volume the view of many theistic evolutionists in the UK who would identify themselves conservative evangelicals.



It certainly represents the basic position promoted by the organisation *Christians in Science* (in which Alexander is prominent), although not all its members or leaders would follow Alexander's line in every detail.

Lamoureux's work is less familiar. The author is well qualified to tackle this subject with doctorates in dentistry, biology and theology. Perhaps more significant, however, is his own life story. He travelled on a path from a religious

qualified theologian – at Regent College, Vancouver. Gish questioned the choice of college and it was during Lamoureux's study at Regent that he moved towards the position set out in this book. This personal journey is fascinating and is recounted in detail in the penultimate chapter of the book, but it also lies behind the detailed argument before. In essence the book is an extended commentary on why Lamoureux moved from Gish's 'Creation Science' to his own 'Evolutionary Creation.'



Lamoureux's change of view did not come from a new understanding of what the text of the Bible was saying. Rather, he came to think that the text reflects an ancient understanding of the world that we should not expect to fit with our modern scientific understanding. He says, "The Holy Spirit inspired Scriptures make numerous statements about the structure, operation, and origin of the natural world that are scientifically incorrect"

upbringing towards atheism, rejecting the Bible because he thought that science had shown the Bible's account of origins was wrong. He was made to rethink his rejection of the Bible in part through watching Duane Gish of the Institute of Creation Research debate a biology professor, and 'win' (p338). Following a conversion experience during a period with the military Lamoureux felt a calling to be a creation scientist in Gish's footsteps. The first step was to become better

(p166). Does this mean God lies in the Bible? Lamoureux responds, "God does NOT lie in the Bible. Rather, He accommodates to the level of the ancient writers and their readers when referring to nature in order to reveal as effectively as possible Messages of Faith" (p166). He has some favourite examples to which he repeatedly refers. Gen. 1v7 speaks of God making the "firmament" (as translated in the King James Version) which, he argues, is an accurate

Evolutionary Creation: A Christian approach to evolution

Denis O. Lamoureux
Lutterworth Press, Cambridge, 493 pp.
ISBN 978-0718891916 **£30.00**

Creation or Evolution Do we have to choose?

Denis R. Alexander
Monarch, Oxford, 382 pp.
ISBN 978-1854247469 **£10.99**

translation of what the ancients understood to be a solid dome “hammered out” above the earth (p123). We now know there is no such solid structure above the earth. The Bible is employing ancient cosmological ideas that we now know are false. The impact of ancient cosmology is seen in the New Testament too. For example, Phil. 2v10 refers to heaven, earth and under earth, reflecting the ancient belief in a 3-tier universe made of 3 physical levels: the heavenly realm, the earthly world and the underworld. Lamoureux argues this cannot be quickly dismissed as “phenomenological language” because Paul (he assumes) would have believed the cosmos was *literally* constructed in this 3-tiered way (pp107-109). Even Jesus understood the early chapters of Genesis as teaching real history (pp23-24), but that was a mistaken belief since, as Lamoureux states categorically later, “Adam never actually existed” (p319).

Lamoureux’s thinking about Adam is crucial to understand the argument that underpins the whole book. For example he says, “Genesis 1 and 2 present the *de novo* creation of the heavens, earth, plants and animals. This is an ancient origins science with no correspondence to physical reality. Consistency within these first biblical chapters demands that this is also the case with the origins of humans” (p319). Using the same logic Lamoureux argues sin did not enter the world through Adam and there was never a “cosmic fall”, there is no causal connection between sin and death.

On pp309-310 he makes the same argument more provocatively²: “The Bible makes statements about the physical world that are false. The mustard seed is not the smallest of all seeds. The earth is not stationary. And there is no firmament holding up a body of water overhead.

In particular, modern astronomy disproves the 3-tier universe found in passages by the authors of Gen 1-11, the apostle Paul and the Lord Jesus. But recognising that Scripture understands the physical world and its creation from an incidental ancient phenomenological perspective easily solves this problem. It is only consistent that biblical statements regarding the origin of death are also a product of this ancient way of conceiving physical reality. In other words, the entrance of mortality into the world, as stated in Gen 3 and then repeated in Rom 5 and 1 Cor 15, derives from an incidental ancient science. The implication is clear: the origin of physical death presented in Scripture cannot be true.”

Lamoureux’s book reflects years of study in what is a well-argued and insightful book that eschews simplistic answers. It is more theologically thought-through than Alexander’s work. But what is immediately striking about his argument is the sheer amount of theological fallout he obtains from the Bible’s use of ancient language and categories when describing the world. Do the examples of ancient scientific language he documents in chapter 4 really demand the radical theological conclusions he draws?

Lamoureux’s assumption that the biblical writers believed in, for example, a 3-tier universe is far from self-evident.³ Were not ancient writers able to use metaphor in their descriptions?⁴ Reviewing a different book that makes a similar argument Carson comments⁵: “The much published line-drawing of Dickin, complete with foundations of the earth, pillars of the earth, sheol, lower and higher waters, and all the rest, raises interesting questions about how the OT writers themselves understood these expressions. Did they

think of literal pillars, as the drawing suggests? Perhaps so – but I wonder, and I have my doubts.” If, in fact, the ancients did not understand these descriptions of the natural world as literally as Lamoureux requires his argument rests on a very shaky premise.⁶ He also assumes the ancients did not ask the same questions that we do, “...questions about the origin of Cain’s wife or his potential killers probably never crossed the mind of the ancient writer or readers” (p207). Really? That assumes the ancients were remarkably lacking in imagination and curiosity.

Lamoureux portrays the biblical writers (and the Spirit who inspired them) as locked in a cultural straight-jacket when it comes to their understanding of the natural world. Yet repeatedly the Bible challenges the beliefs of the surrounding cultures. The accounts of creation and the flood differ in significant ways from the equivalent accounts in other cultures. It will not do to argue it is only the theology of the surrounding nations that is challenged (p167). The theological mistakes arise because their account of what happened historically is wrong. Theology cannot be divorced from history. The sun and moon are not gods precisely because they are mere created objects – created after light itself on day 4 (Genesis 1v16). Lamoureux argues the flood story in Genesis challenges the theology of surrounding cultures concerning the reason for the flood (p220), so why cannot the biblical account also challenge the mistaken belief (in his view) that the flood was a historical global catastrophe?

There is something a little selective about Lamoureux’s appeal to ‘accommodation’. Why should accommodation to ancient beliefs only



apply to the early chapters of Genesis or descriptions of the natural world? If Genesis 1-11 does not in fact record real events, only what the ancients thought were real events, why should we take the stories of Abraham or the Exodus and conquest as describing historical events? Plenty of modern scholars deny there ever was a deliverance from Egypt as described in the Bible. But if the Exodus, for example, never happened there would be serious theological implications. In Exodus 20v2 God defines himself, and the ethics he requires of his people on the basis of a real historical deliverance from Egypt, not a universally held cultural myth. The annual celebration of the Passover was to mark a real historical deliverance.

Lamoureux anticipates the following objection that his reasoning should also apply to the gospels: "If statements in Scripture about the nature are not scientifically, historically and literally accurate, then neither are the miracles and resurrection of Jesus" (p162). His response is that, "first-century individuals were certainly capable of knowing whether or not water had been turned into wine, a paralytic had walked away, and a man born blind could now see." Later (p374) he argues the gospels are a very different genre based on eyewitness testimony rather than "recycled ancient Near Eastern motifs." The problem is that Lamoureux assumes the early chapters of Genesis cannot similarly include eyewitness material – was not Noah capable of describing the rise and fall of a flood? – or that God cannot provide his own description of what in reality occurred without relying on "recycled ancient motifs". Literary arguments (not dissimilar to those applied to the early chapters of Genesis) have been employed to argue the gospels should not be read as literal history⁷.

The problem of where cultural 'accommodation' should stop is not confined to merely historical issues⁸. Lamoureux argues that the biblical writers believed (wrongly) that physical death came through sin. That is a theological issue as much as it is a historical one. As I argue elsewhere⁹ how one

understands the relationship between death and sin affects how one understands the atonement. If the biblical writers are incapable of breaking free from the ancient cosmology, how could they break free from ancient soteriology? How far can we trust the theological teaching of the Bible about the incarnation, or the resurrection or the existence of Satan if the writers are locked into their own worldview? This takes us to the heart of why Lamoureux's argument cannot work. It weakens the essential historicity of the Christian gospel. The life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ are part of a larger story, a story that has no theological traction unless it is historical. The most serious problem with



In their differing ways Lamoureux and Alexander both try to make the Bible consistent with evolutionary history. But there is another option they both leave unexplored.

Lamoureux's argument is what it does to the authority of Jesus, the apostles and therefore the authority of the whole Bible. Lamoureux is clear that, "Jesus and the biblical authors often refer to the early chapters of Genesis as a literal historical account" (p34). Earlier (p24) he says, "Clearly, Jesus employed a literal reading of the first chapters of Genesis... He appealed to the creation of the first humans, the marriage of Adam and Eve, the murder of Abel and Noah's flood."

It is not a problem (if expressed sufficiently carefully) to suggest that the incarnate Jesus had limited knowledge,

learnt in a similar way to that of any other first century Jew¹⁰. It is, however, dangerously wrong to suggest Jesus taught things that were not true, and, in particular, that his understanding of scripture was defective. It cannot be that the Word which became flesh (John 1v14) misunderstood the word by which we live (Matt. 4v4).

Jesus' teachings about Adam and Eve and the flood were not merely reflecting the thinking of first century Israel. His teaching came directly from the Hebrew scriptures. Similarly the apostles in their writings were not adopting some of the beliefs of their day about the nature and history of the cosmos. They based their belief on earlier biblical witness. In other words Jesus and Paul accepted the historicity of Adam and Eve on the basis of the text of Genesis, not a cultural myth. They did not think it inappropriate to go to the Hebrew scriptures to find ancient historical data that accurately described real events. If their use and interpretation of the Old Testament went awry here, why should we trust their use of the Old Testament in its witness to the person and work of the Messiah?

Lamoureux wants to steer a new path in the creation-evolution debate. But at heart the position he adopts has more than an echo of classic liberalism. He does want to hold onto the authority of the Bible, unlike liberalism, but his methodology leads to sitting over, not under the word – not unlike the way the 'Jesus Seminar' decided which sayings of Jesus in the gospels were authentic. Ultimately it is a question of authority. Who is to decide, and on what basis, which parts of scripture are giving accurate historical and theological information? Astonishingly it would seem that Jesus was not up to the task, in Lamoureux's view.

In short, Lamoureux's understanding of scripture is faulty. His argument destroys the authority of scripture. If there is a conflict between what the Bible appears to teach and modern scientific models, it is the Bible which must be wrong (although excusably in his view). It appears that there would be no

way the Bible could in principle affirm as true an understanding of the cosmos that conflicted with our modern understanding. In spite of these extremely serious failings I suggest that Lamoureux's position actually respects the text of the Bible more than someone like Denis Alexander whose doctrine of scripture would appear more orthodox.

Lamoureux insists that the Biblical text teaches a historical Adam and Eve, a global flood and physical death through sin. It would make his argument much more straightforward if he could say the Bible did not in fact teach these things. To his credit, he cannot in all honesty do that. He feels the exegetical force of the arguments used by creationists (and others). Conversely, he is not convinced by the exegesis of fellow theistic evolutionists like Denis Alexander. He says, "Church history reveals that nearly all Christians have understood Gen 1-11 to be a record of actual events in the past" (p34).

Alexander attempts to reconcile evolutionary history with biblical history in a different way. He argues that although Genesis 1 is not intended to be a linear historical account of creation there are some genuinely historical elements in the early chapters of Genesis. For example, there was a historical Adam and Eve, but Eve was not made from Adam's rib (p197). He argues Genesis 3 refers to a historical act of disobedience but it does not teach that *physical* death came as a punishment for sin, and nor do Paul's epistles (pp254-276). In other words, unlike Lamoureux, Alexander would not deny that the Bible intends to give real historical information, or that its writers can transcend their cultural beliefs. Rather, where there is a conflict between the evolutionary account of earth history and what the Bible appears to say, he argues that the Bible can be interpreted in a different way that removes the conflict. Hence he insists that while Adam was a historical individual the Bible does not teach he was the physical ancestor of all humanity, or that the flood was global or that physical death came through sin. His assignment of which events are historical is driven by the

need to remove any conflict with evolution leading to arbitrary interpretative choices: Adam's nakedness (Gen 2v25) is symbolic whereas the description of Adam as a farmer is historical (p236).

The problem is that Alexander's exegetical arguments are very weak (as ably exposed by Lamoureux). But that is not of great concern to Alexander. The logic of his position undercuts the need for convincing exegesis: if the evolutionary account of earth history is a fact, and the Bible is inerrant then logically the Bible *cannot* teach physical death came through sin (for example), however strongly exegetical arguments point in that direction. Alexander states that he is not seeking to impose science onto scripture (p191), but his overwhelming confidence in scientific evidence pointing to humans and apes sharing common ancestry (pp200-213) and death before the fall being a "reality that will not go away" (pp273-4) leave him no option but to ensure the Bible is understood in a way that is consistent with these 'facts.'

Unfortunately Alexander's approach to scripture on this topic shares similarities with the strategy employed by other groups with which Alexander would most definitely not want to be associated. Jehovah's Witnesses see the doctrine of the trinity as a logical absurdity and hence Jesus cannot be divine, however many biblical passages appear to teach that he is God. Such passages are 're-interpreted' (and sometimes re-translated) to say something consistent with their assumptions. When faced with Jehovah's Witnesses we do not say that we both sit under the authority of the Bible, but we respectfully differ in our interpretations. We insist that their so called interpretations are *wrong*. They are so far removed from what the text is saying that they cannot claim scriptural support. Sadly, as many readers will know from personal experience, a patient discussion of the exegetical reasons for our belief in the deity of Christ rarely impact Jehovah's Witnesses. Their starting assumptions control what they are ready to see in scripture. Similarly I fear that exegetical arguments are

unlikely to convince theistic evolutionists like Alexander until they are willing to first question the evolutionary narrative.

At heart the origins debate is a battle over our doctrine of scripture. Alexander undermines his impeccably orthodox doctrinal belief by accepting interpretations of the text that are untenable, interpretations forced by his acceptance of evolution. Lamoureux's view of scripture is more obviously a deviation from the historic position of the church, but at least he does not distort what the text is actually saying. It is the more stable position of the two as the weak exegesis required by Alexander will make his position increasingly implausible as it faces scrutiny, particularly from New Testament scholars. To put it another way, the version of theistic evolution represented by Alexander will tend to degenerate into the version represented by Lamoureux.

In our interaction with theistic evolution it is worth highlighting these contrasting approaches to show the inherent biblical difficulties of a theistic evolution position, in all its different forms.¹¹ Lamoureux's insistence that Paul *did* teach physical death came through sin, even though to say the opposite would make it far easier for his argument, is a powerful challenge to theistic evolutionists adopting a position more similar to Alexander's.

In their differing ways Lamoureux and Alexander both try to make the Bible consistent with evolutionary history. But there is another option they both leave unexplored. Evolutionary history can itself be challenged. It does not need to be a given to which the Bible must conform. Rather the Bible can inform a model of earth history that is scientifically satisfying and robust. Both books disappoint at this point in failing to engage seriously with the scientific difficulties of evolutionary history. More seriously they also completely fail to show awareness let alone understanding or engagement with modern creationist research. Their citations of creationist material extend little beyond Henry Morris. Lamoureux's omission here is particularly inexcusable given his former close association with creationist thinking.



Appendix 7 of *Evolutionary Creation* contains a critique of what he regards as the young earth creationist understanding of the fossil record, yet it bears no relation to anything I have ever heard or seen from *any* creationist, however ill-informed!

The failure of Alexander and Lamoureux to understand their opponents is ultimately counter-productive to their own argument. But it is also a reminder to modern creationists that we must do more than communicate specific anti-evolutionary arguments or particular pieces of evidence that support a creationist model. We need to communicate our whole *methodology* in constructing a biblical model of earth history: a methodology that seeks to embrace data rather than dismiss it and explain it in a multi-disciplinary model informed by experts in their respective fields. Perhaps Lamoureux's own journey away from the creationism of his youth was undertaken because this methodology of creationist thinking was never adequately communicated. With the right framework in place students are better placed to retain their creationist convictions even when particular arguments are challenged in the light of new discoveries. But that framework has to be grounded in a confidence in scripture that neither Denis appears to enjoy. Ironically it is theistic evolutionists, not creationists, who fear the discoveries of science. ■

Notes

- ¹ David Anderson has provided a very helpful and detailed chapter by chapter review and critique. See <http://david.dw-perspective.org.uk/writings/creation-or-evolution-dr-denis-alexander/index.php/intro>. For a multi-author discussion of the theology and science presented by Alexander see Norman C. Nevin (ed.), 'Should Christians Embrace Evolution? Biblical and scientific responses' (IVP, Nottingham, 2009).
- ² He has a footnote at this point expressing his expectation that the first sentence will be quoted and manipulated by his critics! I have done the former, but I hope avoided the latter.

In response to the charge that he is making God a liar (in saying the Bible contains statements that are false) he argues that lying requires a deceptive and malicious intent, something which cannot be attributed to God.

- ³ In places this assumption is read into the text as if it was impossible for an ancient reader to think of the universe except in these categories. For example, referring to the Sabbath command in Exodus 20v11 Lamoureux says, "It must be remembered that the words 'heavens' and 'earth' in the Bible do not have the twenty-first century meanings of outer space and a globe, respectively. Exodus 20 subtly refers to the creation of a 3-tiered universe" (pp192-3).
- ⁴ This is an important point that some creationists need to consider. For example, it is sometimes argued that the Bible teaches the earth is a sphere on the basis of texts such as Isaiah 40v22 which refers to the "circle of the earth." Maybe. But if we insist this is a literal description of the shape of the earth then surely the "corners" of the earth referred to in Isaiah 41v9 should be understood equally literally (as Lamoureux notes, p132). I am not arguing every phrase needs to be understood metaphorically any more than every phrase should be understood literally. My point is that we need appropriate hermeneutical criteria to distinguish metaphor and literal descriptions. What we must not do is choose literal or metaphorical interpretations according to which is most convenient to support our case.
- ⁵ D.A. Carson, 'Three more books on the Bible: a critical review' *Trinity Journal*, 27NS (2006) p34.
- ⁶ G.K. Beale raises a number of lines of evidence that suggest the ancients did not understand the sky to be a solid dome. See 'The erosion of inerrancy in evangelicalism. Responding to new challenges to biblical authority', (Crossway, Wheaton, 2008), pp198-200.
- ⁷ M.A. Noll, 'Between faith and criticism', (Apollos, Leicester, 1991) pp167-9.
- ⁸ The diagrams on p174 and p179 that make the classic separation between 'inerrant' theology and 'errant' history cannot be sustained given the way Christian theology is inseparable from history. Despite its claim to be an 'incarnational' approach to scripture it

reflects a distorted understanding of the incarnation. Jesus was fully human, but he was also the Word who was God.

- ⁹ See S. Lloyd, 'Christian theology and neo-Darwinism are incompatible: an argument from the resurrection' in G. Finlay, S. Lloyd, S. Pattemore & D. Swift, 'Debating Darwin. Two debates: Is Darwinism true & does it matter?' (Paternoster, Milton Keynes, 2009), pp1-29, pp69-78.
- ¹⁰ We need to tread exceedingly carefully on this question as the Bible does not answer all the questions we might have. Luke 2v52 tells us he went through the normal processes of human development. Human beings are not omniscient. Jesus certainly displayed supernatural knowledge at times (as did Old Testament prophets) but this is not the same as infinite knowledge. As Donald Macleod puts it, "The incarnation inevitably involved some mode of ignorance. Humanness cannot be omniscient." ('The Person of Christ', (IVP, Leicester, 1998) p167.) But limitations in knowledge need not imply fallibility. Macleod goes on to say that, "the choice facing us need not be restricted to either assuming that Jesus was a flat-earther or assuming that he was conversant with the cosmology of Copernicus and the physics of Einstein. There is a third possibility: that Jesus knew the provisional nature of science and metaphysics of his day and suspended judgement. If he knew that he did not know the day or the hour of the *parousia*, could he not also have known that he did not know the speed of light; and even that many questions relevant to the environment and to cosmic origins had not even been posed in the first century?" (p170).
- ¹¹ The recent book 'Darwin, Creation and the Fall. Theological Challenges', eds. R.J. Berry & T.A. Noble (Apollos, Nottingham, 2009) represents a similar diversity of views on issues such whether physical death is a consequence of sin.