



CREATION AND EVOLUTION

Evolution and God's hiddenness

Steve Motyer

Overall as an evangelical movement at the moment we don't know whether to praise Darwin or to curse him. How strange! Believing deeply in a Scripture which affirms creation in completely unequivocal terms as a direct action performed by God (e.g. Psalm 33:6), many of us are happy to believe that planet earth has actually existed for 4,500 million years – for most of this time a hostile, barren place – and that animate life has only been around for the last tiny fraction of this huge time-span.

I can understand the powerful anti-Darwin, anti-evolution feeling to which Professor Alexander refers in his essay, "Creation or evolution – do we have to choose?". It arises, I think, because the evangelical world-view has at its heart an *interventionist* God. We believe in a Creator who doesn't just launch the world and then sit on the sidelines, but involves himself, gets his feet dirty in incarnation – and now turns up regularly in words of prophecy and knowledge, healings, tongues and other direct 'interventions' in the world. It doesn't seem like it would *fit*, to believe that God did indeed sit on the sidelines while the world slowly evolved.

But is this "interventionist" God really Scriptural? Time doesn't seem to matter to the God of the Bible. A thousand years, to him, are like a moment of sleep (Psalm 90:4), a single day (2 Peter 3:8). He is the Lord of time. He is very happy to wait, while we badger him to act (see Habakkuk 2:3-4, Psalm 44). His ways are not ours (Isaiah 55:9), and this is why, throughout the Bible, God constantly turns out to be *not what his people expect or want*.

'Truly, you are a God who hides himself, O God of Israel, the Saviour!' exclaims Isaiah (45:15) – because he saves us by such an extraordinary route. Why does God hide his saving activity behind the *real politik* of Cyrus, the upstart Persian emperor? – that was Isaiah's question. Why not do something, obvious, open, unmistakable? But that's not God's way. Isaiah knew that it would be the same with the coming Messiah: 'Who has believed what we have heard? And to whom has the arm of the LORD been revealed? For he grew up before him ... like a root out of dry ground. He had no form or majesty that we should look at him, nothing in his appearance that we should desire him.' (Isaiah 53:1-2). Hidden, unobvious, even unappealing.

That's our God, the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ. *Incarnation* - what a strange idea! If God wanted to save the world, why did he decide to do it by burying himself in a distant corner of the Roman empire, making sure that he left behind not a mass movement and a vast corpus of literature, but a tiny group of demoralised followers and no writing at all?

Our God does not press in on the world, demanding attention, proclaiming his presence loudly. Atheists can thrive on this planet. Yes, we feel him so clearly in our hearts, we trace his action in our lives, we see his artist's hand around us in the magnificence and moods of creation, we love him, and know with every bodily fibre that he loves us: but why does he not make himself more obvious? We are left with huge questions – not just about inexplicable suffering and unanswered prayer, but this really big one: if Jesus is truly the Saviour, and the work of salvation is finished, then why are our children still born into an unredeemed world? If eternal life is ours already (John 5:24), why do we still have to die?

The biblical answer, of course, is that God has spread salvation over the two "ages" – the new age has been "inaugurated", but has not yet fully arrived. New Testament scholar Oscar Cullmann famously used the picture of 'D-day' to illustrate this: as soon as the allied troops landed in northern France on 'D-day', 6th June 1944, the fall of Nazi Germany was inevitable. But it took nearly a year until VE-day arrived.

But "inaugurated eschatology" isn't the answer, *it's the problem*. Why on earth has God decided to organise salvation this way? Why not sweep the cosmos gloriously into renewal with the resurrection of his Son? We have a heavenly Father who staggers us with his love and puzzles us with his hiddenness, in equal measure.

Paul knows how to handle this. He turns the puzzlement into amazement. Reflecting on one particularly odd feature of God's salvation plan – the relationship between the election of Israel and the salvation of the Gentiles – all he can do is to burst into praise: 'O the depth of the riches and wisdom and knowledge of God! How unsearchable are his judgments and how inscrutable his ways! "For who has known the mind of the Lord? Or who has been his counsellor?" "Or who has given a gift to him, to receive a gift in return?" For from him and through him and to him are all things. To him be the glory for ever.' (Romans 11:33-36)

We must love God in his inscrutability: a God of awesome mystery, who does not cooperate with our tidy need to organise him; a God, in fact, who is more than capable of hiding his creatorial power behind silent evolutionary aeons, creating *en route* a fossil record that points to thousands of living creatures that have come and gone, leaving only stone traces behind them. What a God we have!

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