



# The Real Debate over Creationism and Species

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As we remember the 150<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the publication of Charles Darwin's *Origin of Species*, it is appropriate to ponder the intense controversies that his work initiated. Obviously, this volume deals with the particular controversy regarding the Christian response to Darwin's understanding of the origin of species. We are not concerned here with just any Christian response, but with the conservative response signified by the label "creationist."

Throughout *Origin*, Darwin used the doctrine of special creation repeatedly as a contrast for his own theory of adaptation and divergence of species by natural selection. Each time he mentioned it, Darwin emphasized the impotence of special creation in explaining biological phenomena. In this influential book, Darwin established the dichotomy that still very much defines the propaganda of the creation/evolution wars: Species originate by evolution from other species or by special acts of divine intervention. To Darwin, there was no other choice.

But as Wood (2008) has shown, there were other choices, even in Darwin's day. The concept of limited evolution, that is, evolution within limited, taxonomic categories, had been discussed for at least 100 years prior to the publication of *Origin*. To be sure, these proposals were the minority opinion and little known, but they existed. Modern historians would see in them precursors to Darwin's evolution, but only in the sense of the dichotomy that Darwin established in *Origin*.

The primary attitude towards creation in Darwin's day was exemplified by the doctrines of accommodation and natural theology. Under accommodation, popularized by Galileo's *Letter to the Grand Duchess Christina*, the Bible was treated as a source of information about salvation and morality but not science. Since God wished to communicate the message of salvation to all people, He found it necessary to use certain figures of speech regarding the natural world, figures of speech that were not literally true. As a result of the accommodation of revelation to the ignorance of humanity, scientists could not rely on the Bible to reveal reliable information about the natural world.

Natural religion or natural theology was an outgrowth of the doctrine of accommodation. Instead of using biblical revelation to enhance science,



the natural theologian used science to bolster religion. Paley's version of natural theology, anticipated more than a century before by John Ray's *Wisdom of God Manifested in the Works of Creation*, emphasized what we now call the design argument: the evidence of God's wisdom, power, and benevolence in the "admirable contrivance" of living things.

Writing in the preface to his *Wisdom of God*, Ray (1717) claimed, "by the Works of the Creation, in the Title, I mean the Works created by God at first, and by Him conserv'd to this Day in the same State and Condition in which they were at first made." Thus at the beginning of natural theology, we find a strong emphasis on the fixity of nature. Indeed, a brief reflection reveals why this fixity was necessary. One could not derive evidence of God's design from the admirable contrivance of the woodpecker's adaptation to retrieving insects from wood, as Ray did, if the woodpecker had developed naturally from some other species (or at the very least, it would require a radical re-imagining of the design argument, which the natural theologians were unwilling to do).

Thus, by Darwin's day, the special creation and fixity of species was insisted upon primarily by the natural theologians, and it is to them that we should look for the identification of Darwin's doctrine of special creation. In our modern culture, the doctrine of special creation has evolved into something quite different. First and most importantly, the modern creationist (*sensu* Numbers 1999) holds that the Bible does contain true and reliable information about science. In particular, the first eleven chapters of the book of Genesis are held to be authoritative revelations of the earliest earth history. The special creationist holds to the reality of a week-long creation, a literal Adam and Eve, the onset of human and animal death as a direct consequence of sin, the global nature of the Flood, and the confusion of language at Babel, all within a 6000-year timescale for the age of the earth. In holding these beliefs, the modern creationist explicitly rejects the doctrine of accommodation popular in Darwin's day and still among modern theistic evolutionists (or "evolutionary creationists," as some of them prefer to be called).

Modern creationists also agree with Darwin in rejecting the special creation of each individual species. Frank Lewis Marsh in particular had rather strong words for those who equate creationists with species fixists:

In our day the inaccurate portrayal of the position of creationists on this point which evolutionists give, is doubtless due to the opinion of Louis Agassiz. We have referred above to his strange belief that modern animals had been created and placed in the very ecological niches which we find them today. Apparently considering that the whole of the theory of special creation was sealed up in Agassiz, evolutionists commonly teach that creationists are all of Agassiz' opinion. As remarked

several times before, however, those who would know the basic tenets of the doctrine of special creation must go to the Bible and read them for themselves rather than depend on some one scientist's exposition of them (Marsh 1947, pp. 289-290).

Development of the concept of limited evolution preceded Marsh, as evolution preceded Darwin, but Marsh became most closely associated with the opinion due to his lifelong advocacy of the concept of the "Genesis Kind" or baramin (from the Hebrew *bara*, create, and *min*, kind).

For the modern creationist, then, the debate is not over the origin of species *per se*, about which we generally agree with Darwin to a limited extent. Rather, the debate turns on other issues, especially over the limits of speciation. How many species ought we assign to each baramin? There are conservative creationists who would assign to a baramin only a few species, perhaps within a single genus. More liberal creationists accept a great deal of speciation and many species per baramin. Both camps are concerned with the origin of species themselves. The conservative creationists tend to accept conventional speciation mechanisms (e.g., by natural selection), while the liberal creationists look to yet undiscovered mechanisms to produce many species in a short amount of time.

In the public creation/evolution debate, dominated as it is by propaganda, anticreationists continue to define creationism as a kind of species fixity, as Darwin did. These anachronistic "special creationists" have little in common with the creationists of the twenty-first century. Considering the recalcitrance of the nineteenth century definition of creationist, it might seem superfluous to once again attempt to explain modern creationist opinions regarding the origin of species. Why then bother producing this book?

The book of Proverbs counsels, "Flog a mocker, and the simple will learn prudence; rebuke a discerning man, and he will gain knowledge" (Prov. 19:25). We know full well that the mockers, those responsible for the propaganda war, will never be satisfied by any creationist response. For the sake of those who might not understand, the simple still looking for prudence, we offer these papers on creationism and the origin of species. These papers are not simply educational tools, though. We hope that each will advance the creation model of the origin of species. We therefore pray that the discerning man will gain knowledge.

This volume opens with a survey of Christian opinions on the origin of species by Paul Garner. Paul notes that those believing in creation are not in any sort of agreement on the origin of species. Ken Turner then surveys the meaning of the "kind" of Genesis 1, especially in the context of biblical theology. Roger Sanders revisits the issue of endemic species on oceanic islands to establish the minimum speciation



that modern creationists should all accept. Todd Wood evaluates the evidence of discontinuity—the separate origin of baramins. Kurt Wise looks at the issue from the fossil record of mammals, developing a new method of identifying created kinds. Joe Francis concludes the volume with a new perspective (for creationists) on the origin of species based on symbiosis.

This book will in no way finish the debate. Mockers will continue to accuse creationists of accepting species fixity, and many poorly informed creationists will likely defend the outmoded nineteenth century “creationist.” In the meantime, though, we hope and pray that creationists interested in biological issues will continue to study and develop a uniquely biblical and creationist understanding of the origin of species.

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## References

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