

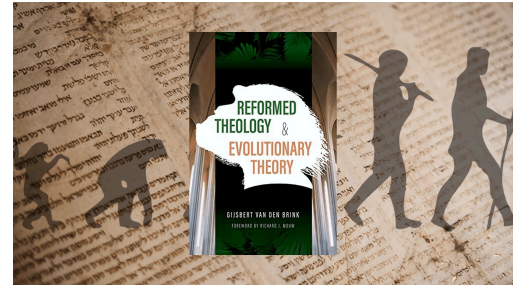


# Evolutionary Theory and the Interpretation of Scripture

Gijsbert van den Brink

in *Reformed Theology and Evolutionary Theory*

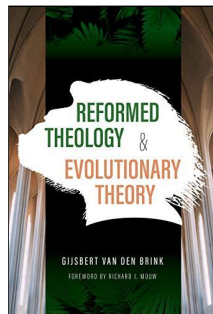
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Nature is as truly a revelation of God as the Bible; and we only interpret the Word of God by the Word of God when we interpret the Bible by science. ... When the Bible speaks of the foundations, or the pillars of the earth, or of the solid heavens, or of the motion of the sun, do not you and every other sane man interpret this language by the facts of science? For five thousand years the Church understood the Bible to teach that the earth stood still in space, and that the sun and stars revolved around it. Science has demonstrated that this is not true. Shall we go on to interpret the Bible so as to make it teach the falsehood that the sun moves around the earth, or shall we interpret it by science ... ? —Charles Hodge<sup>1</sup>

## The Bible and Modern Science

Many people think that accepting the data of evolutionary theory is incompatible with a plain reading of the Bible. According to them, anyone who is convinced of evolutionary theory cannot but reject biblical claims to truth and authority, whereas conversely anyone who wants to be a “Bible-believing Christian” can only reject evolutionary theory. Especially for Reformed Christians this is a sensitive issue, since, as we saw in chapter 1, it belongs to the very heart of Reformed theology’s identity to go back to the Bible time and again, and to consider it the final arbiter in matters of faith and life. That is why we start our discussion of doctrinal issues elicited by evolutionary theory with the doctrine of Scripture, which is pivotal in so many contemporary debates on evolution. Although I know of no statistics measuring why groups of Christians reject evolutionary theory, its presumed incompatibility with the Bible is no doubt a very prominent reason among Reformed and evangelical Christians. Moreover, this incompatibility is often seen to extend to each of the three layers of



This article is chapter 3 of the book *Reformed Theology and Evolutionary Theory* by Gijsbert van den Brink, © 2020 by Eerdmans, Grand Rapids, Michigan. Used by permission. All rights reserved.

evolutionary theory distinguished in chapter 2. Indeed, if we adopt a so-called literal understanding of the Bible, even its first layer—the notion that forms of life appeared progressively on earth over vast periods of time—can hardly be squared with the biblical witness, since we would have to squeeze millions if not billions of years into each of the six days of creation in Genesis 1.

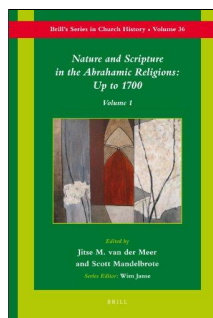
Strictly speaking, it is not just evolutionary theory but first of all the underlying geological timescale that raises serious questions concerning the “literal” interpretation of Scripture. Those who only take on board the first layer of evolutionary theory may escape most of the dilemmas discussed in this book, but they cannot escape the question of biblical hermeneutics. How did previous generations deal with this question when scientific discoveries caused tensions with traditional understandings of the meaning of biblical texts? A sublime example here is the case of heliocentrism versus geocentrism. Nowadays most people assume that when the biblical authors represented the sun as turning around the earth, they did not propose a particular model of how the universe is structured<sup>2</sup> but simply proceeded on the basis of how we see things when we look around us. In his day, the Reformed theologian Gisbertus Voetius (1589–1676), although well acquainted with this approach, rejected it outright. He considered the idea that the Holy Spirit did not convey the factual truth in every biblical detail as absolutely blasphemous. The patriarchs and the prophets, and the entire people of Israel, were certainly not so stupid as to be incapable of understanding the Copernican system. The Holy Spirit could simply have explained it to them, and through them to the first readers of the Bible. Voetius believed that nothing less than the authority of Holy Scripture, and therefore the entire Christian faith, was at stake here.<sup>3</sup> Voetius’s disciple Martin Schoock (1614–1669) agreed with him: in the Bible the Holy Spirit may adapt himself to what we can understand, but never in such a way that the Bible “lies with liars and errs with those who are in error.”<sup>4</sup>

2. It is tempting to speak of a worldview in this connection, but since that concept often has religious or metaphysical overtones, I will avoid it here. What I have in mind is a “world picture” (Dutch: *wereldbeeld*), as in Eduard Jan Dijksterhuis’s classic *The Mechanization of the World Picture: Pythagoras to Newton* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1986 [1961]).

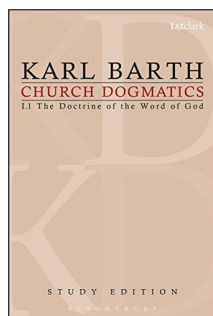
3. Gisbertus Voetius, *Thersites heautontimorumenos* (Utrecht, 1635), 256–83 (especially 271, 281, 283); cf. Rienk Vermij, *The Calvinist Copernicans: The Reception of the New Astronomy in the Dutch Republic, 1575–1750* (Amsterdam: KNAW, 2002), 249–50 (cf. 162–64), and Rienk Vermij, “The Debate on the Motion of the Earth in the Dutch Republic in the 1650s,” in *Nature and Scripture in the Abrahamic Religions: Up to 1700*, vol. 2, ed. Jitse M. van der Meer and Scott Mandelbrote (Leiden: Brill, 2008), 605–25.

1. Charles Hodge, “The Bible and Science,” *New York Observer*, March 26, 1863, 98–99, as quoted by Mark Noll, *The Scandal of the Evangelical Mind* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1995), 184; cf. Charles Hodge, *Systematic Theology*, vol. 1 (New York: Scribner’s Sons, 1872), 59, 170–71, 573–74.

As far as I know, no one today agrees with Voetius and Schoock. We have become entirely satisfied with the “observer’s perspective interpretation” of Joshua 10:12 and similar texts (after all, we see the sun moving around the earth) that at first sight suggests a geostatic model of the world (e.g., Eccles. 1:5; Pss. 19:6; 104:5). Therefore, it seems that in retrospect we must say that Voetius cum suis jumped to conclusions too rashly, believing that the authority of the Scriptures was at risk while in fact it was not. Their argument that the Christian faith would perish with the acceptance of the heliocentric model led many Reformed Christians of that day astray. It is an intriguing question how their spiritual heirs could ever have become convinced heliocentrists. In whatever way this historical process precisely took place, in hindsight Christians should be grateful that the required change in hermeneutics eventually took root. Otherwise, the Christian witness would still be hopelessly entangled in an obsolete model of how the universe is built up.



Does not something similar happen when, with an appeal to the Bible, Christians continue to deny any form of “macroevolution”? It seems to me that this is a serious question that contemporary Christian theology cannot ignore. If theology is “the scientific self-examination of the Christian church with respect to the content of its distinctive talk about God,” as Karl Barth argued, it should investigate how this talk relates to such dominant contemporary patterns of thought as the theory of evolution.<sup>5</sup> But is it possible to bring this theory into harmony with a truthful reading of the biblical witness? Would this not imply that we turn the Bible into a ventriloquist, or at least that we mix up faith and science in such a way that no justice is done to either of them? In this chapter I will not discuss the exegesis of individual texts or passages from the Bible in detail but will focus on the underlying hermeneutical problem: How should Christians (for whom the Bible is authoritative) interpret biblical texts that seem to be at odds with what we know from science—and how should we approach scientific claims that seem to be at odds with biblical utterances? First, we will examine some traditional reading strategies that can be subsumed under the label “concordism” ([The Search for Harmony: Concordism](#)). Then I will argue that an alternative hermeneutical approach, which I call “perspectivism,” is more promising ([Beyond Category Mistakes: Perspectivism](#)). This approach, however, does leave one important question unresolved: how to deal with constitutive historical claims in the biblical narrative ([Where Science and Christianity Overlap: History](#)). I end up with a conclusion ([In Search of Cocceians](#)).



## The Search for Harmony: Concordism

A rather obvious way of handling the tensions is to try to attune our exegesis of the relevant Bible passages to the broadly accepted aspects of evolutionary biology. This approach starts with the presupposition that at a fundamental level what the Bible tells us and what scientists have discovered in their work are in harmony with each other, and that it is possible to bring this to light; to put this in terms of the metaphor that we discussed in the first chapter: the two books of God—nature and Scripture—do not contradict but rather confirm each other. The theological challenge, however, is to exhibit this underlying harmony between the Bible and science, to make it visible. To the extent that this succeeds, the divine authority of the Bible is highlighted, since it has been demonstrated that the Bible is in agreement with scientific discoveries that took place many centuries after it was written. Because of its harmony-searching strategy, we will refer to this approach as “concordism.”<sup>6</sup>

Here is a provisional definition of this reading strategy: *Concordism is the hermeneutical view that biblical statements pertaining to the physical world correspond to scientific facts.* The presupposition behind concordism is that the Bible either overtly displays or covertly implies scientifically correct information about the way in which the natural world came into being and is structured. A prime example of the concordistic approach is the theory of so-called young-earth creationism. Adherents of this view maintain that, according to the book of Genesis, the earth is about six thousand to ten thousand years old. They claim that this observation corresponds to a scientific fact, since unprejudiced scientific research would yield the same age.<sup>7</sup> For obvious reasons, however, on further consideration, doubts may arise concerning the correctness of this assessment. Even young-earth creationists themselves nowadays honestly admit that their view is, “at the moment, implausible on purely scientific grounds.”<sup>8</sup> One can imagine that this insight leads some of them to conclude that the earth and the cosmos in fact have a much greater age. Oftentimes, the exegesis of Genesis is then adapted to this newly acquired insight, and a form of “old-earth creationism” is adopted.<sup>9</sup>

6. This term was coined to refer more particularly to so-called old-earth creationism by Bernard Ramm, *The Christian View of Science and Scripture* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1954), 145; the reader should notice that I do not use it in this restrictive sense. The more comprehensive meaning I adopt here can, for example, be found in Stanley Jaki, *Genesis 1 through the Ages* (New York: Thomas More, 1992), 43: “Concordism usually denotes the efforts whereby ... numerous commentators of Genesis 1 [and 2–3] tried to establish its concordance with cosmogonies taken for the last word in science.”

7. For a recent elaboration and defense of young-earth creationism, see Terry Mortenson and Thane H. Ury, eds., *Coming to Grips with Genesis: Biblical Authority and the Age of the Earth* (Green Forest, AR: Master Books, 2008). The best-known present-day representative of this view is perhaps Ken Ham, an Australian who moved to the United States (see “[Ken Ham](#),” *Wikipedia*, last edited March 29, 2019).

8. Paul Nelson and John Mark Reynolds, “Young Earth Creationism,” in *Three Views on Creation and Evolution*, ed. J. P. Moreland and John Mark Reynolds (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1999), 51; cf. Kenneth D. Keathley and Mark F. Rooker, *40 Questions about Creation and Evolution* (Grand Rapids: Kregel, 2014), 195–99. The only reason they continue to endorse the theory that the earth is relatively young is their reading of the Bible.

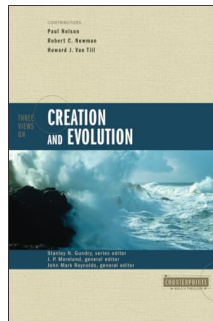
9. This is not to suggest that old-earth creationism is historically derived from young-earth creationism; in fact, the process was the other way round: young-earth creationism arose as a reaction to old-earth creationism. Old-earth creationism, however, emerged as an adaptation of naïve readings of Gen. 1 that were more openly articulated and defended in later young-earth creationism. On the history of creationism, see Ronald Numbers’s landmark study *The Creationists: From*

4. Martinus Schoock, *De scepticismo pars prior* (Groningen: H. Lussinck, 1652), 406, as quoted in Vermij, *The Calvinist Copernicans*, 251.

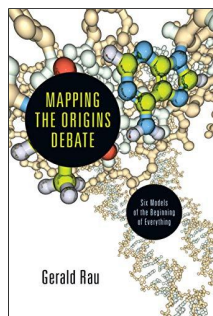
5. Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics* I/1 (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1956), 3. In his doctrine of creation, however, Barth himself intentionally avoided a discussion of the questions posed by science; see the famous preface of *Church Dogmatics* III/1 (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1958), ix–x. Barth rightly sensed, though, that future dogmatic theologians would not be satisfied with this decision (x).

This first happened when in the nineteenth century the so-called gap theory was invented, according to which an enormous time gap occurs between Genesis 1:1 and 1:2. The billions of years that have passed since the creation of the cosmos are then located between these two verses.

While the gap theory allows for an exponentially greater age of the earth than the traditional six thousand to ten thousand years, it is still at odds with gradualism: the idea, emerging from the fossil record, that biological groups appeared on earth one after another over long periods of time. Therefore, when people become convinced of gradualism, they tend to adopt another form of old-earth creationism, according to which the “days” of Genesis 1 are interpreted as geological periods of many millions of years.<sup>10</sup> In this view the theory of common descent is still rejected; at the beginning of each biological group or main species is God’s creative word. However, the progressive unfolding of God’s creative work over long periods of time is accepted. The order in which the main species appeared on earth is considered to mirror the sequence of God’s creative acts as recorded in Genesis 1. The separate creation of humans is relatively recent, in accordance with the time period one arrives at when adding up the ages in the genealogies of the first chapters of Genesis. It is acknowledged that death must already have been present on earth before the human fall into sin, in the realms of plants and animals, as is clear from the fossil record. The flood may be seen as a regional rather than a global event, but, except for Noah and his family, all human beings living at the time perished in the water. In this way, data of contemporary science and of traditional biblical exegesis are connected to each other in what is supposed to be a more or less coherent story.



From time to time, however, an old-earth creationist will begin to suspect that there has been an evolutionary development of life on earth that passed the boundaries between the main groups (for instance, fish and amphibians, or reptiles and mammals). This would allow her to better understand the many different intermediate forms that have been found in the fossil material as well as the genetic similarities between all forms of life. If this happens, it may be expected that, after some further consideration, she will come to accept “macroevolution.” Most probably, however, she will start to make an exception for the human species, in view of its unique place in Genesis and elsewhere in the



Bible. This means that she has moved in the direction of what is being called—with a rather poor term—theistic evolution. But she does not yet fully endorse this view, since she continues to accept the special creation of the human species.<sup>11</sup> She will argue that, if correctly understood, the story of the Bible still largely corresponds to the story of the natural sciences: both suggest that the various species and groups developed from each other—or at least followed up on each other—in a process of millions of years, ending up with the appearance of the human being. And although there is no scientific evidence for the special creation of the human being, there is no counterevidence either, so that, for all we know, this part of the story as well may refer to an actual fact.

However, probably it will not be long before it dawns on this person that the intermediate forms between reptiles and mammals do not essentially differ from the so-called *hominins*—beings which, as testified by their fossil remains, were in between the apes and present-day human beings. She may especially be impressed by the enormous degree of genetic similarity between hominins and humans. All this puts pressure on the idea that in the process of creation God made an exception for the human species by creating it *de novo*. For clearly, in the empirical data nothing can be detected that supports such a special position. Yet, the Bible depicts the human being as somehow unique as compared to all other creatures. This gives rise to the idea that God may have allowed the human body to evolve from earlier forms of life but added a soul to this body in a special creative act. Although other parts of the Genesis story can no longer be read concordistically on this view, here still is a clear correspondence between the special status of the human being (which we can observe empirically) and the biblical picture of God breathing the breath of life in the human being (Gen. 2:7).<sup>12</sup>

This view has been the official Roman Catholic position ever since several popes pronounced that “if the body takes its origin from pre-existent living matter, the spiritual soul is immediately created by God.”<sup>13</sup> But how convincing is such a dualism between body and soul, both from a scientific and from a biblical perspective? Both the Bible and present-day philosophical anthropology rather seem to describe the human being in holistic terms as a deeply embodied psychosomatic unity. Moreover, could not the rich spiritual aspect of human existence also have emerged along natural lines? When this realization takes hold, the moment is near that “the penny drops” and concordistic attempts to harmonize (i.e., to make correspond) biblical exegesis and scientific data concerning the origin and development of life give way to a different hermeneutics—one that concedes that both the Bible and science have distinct roles to play that should not be conflated. Most probably, this will lead the person in question to adopt a variety of theistic evolution, that is, roughly speaking, the view that the Bible tells us *that* God created life on earth whereas

*Scientific Creationism to Intelligent Design*, expanded ed. (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2006).

10. The best-known proponent of this view in the USA is probably the astronomer Hugh Ross, with, among many other publications: *The Fingerprint of God: Recent Scientific Discoveries Reveal the Unmistakable Identity of the Creator* (New Kensington, PA: Whitaker House, 1989) and *The Genesis Question: Scientific Advances and the Accuracy of Genesis* (Colorado Springs: NavPress, 1998). For a more concise defense, see Robert C. Newman, “Progressive Creationism,” in Moreland and Reynolds, *Three Views on Creation and Evolution*, 103–33; his conclusion is noteworthy: “It seems, then, that harmonization should be our ultimate strategy” (131).

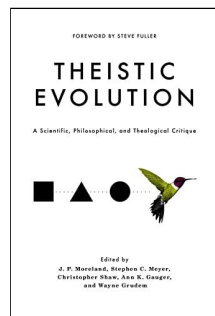
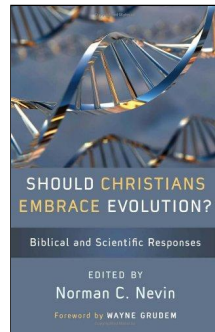
11. By special creation is meant here what is sometimes called *creatio de novo*: the immediate instantiation of a new species “out of the blue” rather than through evolutionary processes. For an instructive overview of the different versions of both creationism and theistic evolutionism, see Gerald Rau, *Mapping the Origins Debate: Six Models on the Beginning of Everything* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2012), with a particularly helpful table on p. 41.
12. The idea that God, in an evolutionary context, made Adam into a spiritual being through a special creative act can be found in Bruce Waltke, *An Old Testament Theology: An Exegetical, Canonical, and Thematic Approach* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2007), 203.
13. John Paul II, “Message to the Pontifical Academy of Sciences on Evolution,” *Origins* 26, no. 22 (1996): 351 (rephrasing a point made earlier by Pope Pius XII).



science informs us about *how* God did so. Scientific facts are now no longer pressed into a biblical framework—nor is an exegetical framework imposed on the scientific data.

This brief survey may suffice to clarify which objections can be raised against concordism. First, one has to bend the scientific data and the exegetical findings toward each other in ways that do not do real justice to either side. Both the data of evolutionary theory and the biblical texts must be interpreted in a strained way—which outsiders (e.g., atheists) will regard as forming a complicated brainteaser and experts on both sides will think of as arbitrary and far from convincing. Some biblical passages, for instance, are taken in a literal sense while other passages are read symbolically (or as mythical, or as divine accommodations to a limited human understanding), and often the criteria that are used remain quite murky. Conversely, some aspects of the newer cosmological and biological theories of origin are taken seriously while others are ignored or explained away. Of course, we do not always find people developing from young-earth creationism through old-earth creationism to theistic evolution, but still, it is a fairly common pattern among Christians who gradually become more familiar with the methods of science and the evidence for Darwinian evolution.

Second, as soon as the artificial character of a particular harmonization becomes manifest within the circles where it was developed, the temptation arises to make minor adjustments in order to find a more solid position. This may temporarily reduce one's cognitive dissonance, but as time goes by, the new position proves to be equally untenable. Thus, as a matter of fact, one is hopping from one ice floe to another, having to recant earlier positions every now and then and ending on very thin ice. This explains why some young-earth creationists are very determined to stay with their position, since they fear that ultimately the core of the Christian faith may be at risk as soon as they start moving even a tiny little bit.<sup>14</sup> Yet, young-earth creationism itself is also based on the concordistic presupposition that the Bible reflects the main contours of a scientifically reliable account of the origin of life on earth. It seems to me that it is precisely this assumption that almost unavoidably leads to the process of ice-floe-hopping. If the Bible does indeed provide us with, or implies, correct scientific knowledge, we will continuously have to adapt our readings in order to harmonize them with current scientific knowledge, making exegetical moves that look more and more spurious.



Now obviously, nothing is wrong with having to change our minds every now and then on the basis of newly acquired information. On the contrary, it is a sign of mental health to be able to undertake such processes of intellectual change. It is different, however, when we know in advance that a position we adopt will almost certainly be wrong, since new information will most probably make it obsolete. This makes it quite understandable that today many Christian natural scientists, theologians, and others plead for a different, nonconcordistic, reading of biblical texts that touch on questions of origin.

## Beyond Category Mistakes: Perspectivism

The question may be posed whether the presupposition behind concordism in its various forms is valid: Does the Bible indeed provide—or, in some hidden manner, imply—correct scientific knowledge about how (life on) planet earth developed? Was it the intention of the Bible writers—or of the Holy Spirit—to give us that kind of information? Today it has almost become a cliché to state that “the Bible is not a manual for natural science.” Nonetheless, with many the idea that the Bible is such a manual is still fully alive. And it is not true that it has never been claimed or promoted by anyone.<sup>15</sup> At the same time, it is extremely dubious whether the biblical authors, even in places like Genesis 1–3, were really engaged with the historical and scientific questions of origin that so heavily concern us today. In any case, we should not search for answers to questions that the authors of the Bible did not address.<sup>16</sup> We are reminded of this in the letter to the Hebrews, where the writer tells us that “*by faith* we understand that the worlds were prepared by the word of God.”<sup>17</sup> If that is so, there is no need for proofs or arguments in this connection. In particular, the Christian belief that God created the universe is not dependent on a detailed correspondence between the Old Testament creation records and the results of scientific research.

This leads us to examine a second approach with regard to biblical insights on the questions of origin, this one based on a different hermeneutical assumption from concordism. This assumption is that the Bible is, when push comes to shove, a fully *theological* book, in the sense that it is primarily focused on the relationship between God, the world, and human beings.<sup>18</sup> To be sure, these human beings are not perceived as disembodied individuals but as deeply embedded in their social, historical, and natural environments. When

15. Gisbertus Voetius, e.g., referred to the Bible as “the book of all sciences”; *Sermo van de nuttigheyt der Academien ende Scholen mitsgaders der wetenschappen ende consten die in deselve gheleert worden* [Discourse on the benefit of academies and schools as well as the sciences and arts that are taught in them] (Utrecht, 1636), 16. Centuries later, Henry M. Morris, the father of young-earth creationism, stated in his book *Many Infallible Proofs: Practical and Useful Evidences of Christianity* (San Diego: Creation-Life Publishers, 1980), 229: “The Bible is a book of science!”

16. Gordon Wenham, *Genesis 1–15*, Word Biblical Commentary 1 (Milton Keynes, UK: Word, 1991), liii. A highly significant attempt to read Gen. 1–3 in its own ancient Near Eastern context before applying it to our contemporary questions is provided by John H. Walton, *The Lost World of Genesis One: Ancient Cosmology and the Origins Debate* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2009), and John H. Walton, *The Lost World of Adam and Eve: Genesis 2–3 and the Human Origins Debate* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2015); see also chap. 6 below.

17. Heb. 11:3.

18. For a brief elaboration of this view, cf. Cornelis van der Kooi and Gijsbert van den Brink, *Christian Dogmatics: An Introduction* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2017), 554–61.

14. I was made aware of this in personal correspondence with young-earth creationist Terry Mortenson (2009). See, for similar concerns, Nigel M. de S. Cameron, *Evolution and the Authority of the Bible* (Exeter, UK: Attec, 1983), and Wayne Grudem’s foreword to *Should Christians Embrace Evolution? Biblical and Scientific Responses*, ed. Norman C. Nevin (Nottingham: Inter-Varsity Press, 2009), 10: “Belief in evolution erodes the foundations.” See also *Theistic Evolution: A Scientific, Philosophical, and Theological Critique*, ed. J. P. Moreland et al. (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2017).

referring to the natural world as it is investigated by contemporary science, however, the Bible writers intuitively followed the ideas and conventions that were current in their day. Not surprisingly, many of these ideas are no longer plausible. This does not present a problem, however, since it does not in any way diminish the way the Bible leads us to God and confronts us with his message—a message that, according to the Reformed stance, pivots on God’s sovereign grace in Christ vis-à-vis human sin and misery. We must concentrate on this message as we read the Bible, for that is where its authority lies; we should not mix up that message with scientific categories, since we are dealing with two different *perspectives* here. Whereas the scientific perspective is focused on all sorts of “facts,” the theological perspective focuses on the meaning of life. To be sure, in this theological perspective facts are involved as well, but these are of a unique sort, pertaining to the relationship between God and us.<sup>19</sup> These two perspectives are incongruent, which is to say they should not be merged but should rather carefully be kept separate.<sup>20</sup> Taking the notion of various perspectives as a cue, I will refer to this approach as *perspectivism*.

Let us provisionally define perspectivism as *the hermeneutical view that when the Bible is interpreted, its theological content should be distinguished from the world picture within which this content is embedded*. Whereas the theological content is authoritative, the world picture is circumstantial. This world picture frequently helps us understand the theological meaning of a passage, but the world picture itself is not part of that meaning. For example, when Jesus says that a mustard seed is the smallest of all the seeds (Matt. 13:32), he does not intend to convey a biological truth that we should take to heart, but he wraps up his message in a piece of contemporary conventional wisdom.<sup>21</sup> More detailed elaborations of perspectivism can be found (1) with biblical scholars who worry that the unique voice of the biblical authors and the integrity of their texts get smothered in our modern creation-versus-evolution discussions, and (2) with natural scientists and theologians—many of them self-identifying as adherents of “theistic evolution”—who feel much impressed by the great amount of material that points toward geological and biological evolution. Let us look more closely at the reasons for perspectivism that are put forward from these points of view by briefly discussing a representative of each of them.

19. Cf. the opening sentence of Calvin’s *Institutes*: “Nearly all the wisdom we possess, that is to say, true and sound wisdom, consists of two parts: the knowledge of God and of ourselves,” and these two are “joined by many bonds.” John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, ed. John T. McNeill, trans. Ford L. Battles (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1960), 1.1.1.

20. Of course, the two perspectives do not contradict each other, but they do not fit together either, as they do in the various forms of concordism. They relate to each other “as an organ and a vacuum-cleaner,” as Karl Barth once wrote in a letter to his niece Christine (meaning by “organ” the musical instrument): “there can be as little question of harmony between them as of contradiction”; Karl Barth, *Letters 1961–1968*, ed. Jürgen Fangmeier and Hinrich Stoevesandt, trans. Geoffrey Bromiley (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1981), 184. The letter is dated February 18, 1965. Barth’s view is an example of the “independence model” distinguished by Ian Barbour as one of the models for relating science and religion; cf., e.g., Ian G. Barbour, *Religion and Science: Historical and Contemporary Issues* (New York: HarperOne, 1997), 84–89.

21. We might even surmise that Jesus, being *vere homo* (truly human), actually believed a mustard seed to be the smallest of all seeds (cf. Mark 13:32 for his human ignorance of certain things). Another example is the grain of wheat that supposedly dies when it falls into the earth (John 12:24; 1 Cor. 15:36); from a biological point of view we now know that grains of wheat do not die before they germinate—but that does not at all detract from the theological meaning and significance of this image.

(1) Francis Watson, a biblical scholar, resists the common view that, at long last, thanks to Darwin, scientific secularity has triumphed over ancient superstition.<sup>22</sup> This view is based on the assumption that the message of the Bible and that of Darwin are total opposites, and that only one of them can be true. In reality, however, Darwin does not present us with a worldview that allows us “to explain everything” and overthrows the outmoded view of Genesis. Darwin’s theory is merely “one possible and partial account of a certain complex development alongside others.”<sup>23</sup> Next to it, another story can and should be told—one that allows the biblical texts to speak for themselves. It then becomes clear that the biblical perspective cannot be integrated into the scientific picture but has “its natural habitat within the Christian story of ‘salvation.’”<sup>24</sup> To discover this much more important perspective, however, we must abandon the idea that somehow Genesis provides us with correct scientific information—in that respect Darwin has done us a major service by showing us that such information is not to be found in the Genesis narratives.<sup>25</sup>

To support his argument Watson begins with John Calvin’s exegesis of Genesis 1:16: “God made the two great lights—the greater light to rule the day and the lesser light to rule the night—and the stars.” It appears that Calvin is not worried that—in spite of what this text suggests—the moon neither gives light nor belongs (together with the sun) to the largest heavenly bodies. In a very down-to-earth way, Calvin comments that Saturn is bigger.<sup>26</sup> But we do not have to ascend into heaven to understand Moses’s intentions, for Moses refers to our *earthly experience* of sun and moon as the largest light-giving objects. He wants us to understand that even the light of the moon at night is a gift from God. In our terminology: his message has a theological point, not a scientific one. Watson rightly points out that Calvin does not propose a harmony along the following lines: “And God made two big lights (that is to say, lights that on earth *appear* to be the biggest); the big light to rule the day, and the small one (small in the sense that it derives its light from the sun) to rule the night; and he also made the stars (including the planets, which actually may be bigger than the smallest of these two big lights).” Such a harmony would mix the biblical claims with those of a scientific nature, in such a way that neither of them receives full justice. On such a reading, we would fail to note that Moses intends to make clear that not only the light of the sun but also that of the moon is a gift from God.<sup>27</sup>

22. Francis Watson, “Genesis before Darwin: Why Scripture Needed Liberating from Science,” in *Reading Genesis after Darwin*, ed. Stephen C. Barton and David Wilkinson (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), 23–38 (24).

23. Watson, “Genesis before Darwin,” 24.

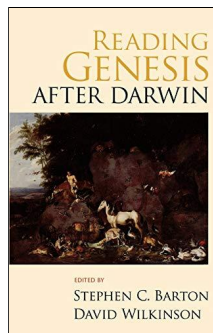
24. Watson, “Genesis before Darwin,” 35; we should add, of course, that this story was a *Jewish* story before it also became a Christian one.

25. Watson, “Genesis before Darwin,” 24, 35–36.

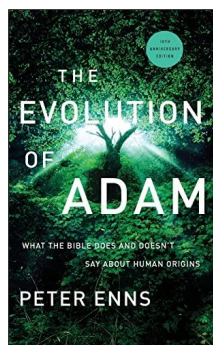
26. Cf. John Calvin, *Commentaries on the First Book of Moses called Genesis* (1554), trans. John King (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1948), 86: “Moses makes two great luminaries; but astronomers prove, by conclusive reasons, that the star of Saturn ... is greater than the moon.” The original Latin text (from 1554) is in G. Baum et al., eds., *Joannis Calvinii opera quae supersunt omnia*, vol. 23 (Brunswick, Germany: C. A. Schwetschke, 1882), 22–23. Note that Calvin does not try to cast doubt on the findings of the astronomers, even though they deviate from a plain reading of the Genesis text.

27. Watson, “Genesis before Darwin,” 25–26.

Although Watson knows that Calvin was not always fully consistent in this approach, he nonetheless derives from Calvin's detailed exegesis of Genesis 1:16 general guidelines for dealing with questions about the Bible and science: (1) Where the two differ, we must find out whether they perhaps offer different but mutually compatible perspectives of reality, rather than mutually exclusive truth claims. (2) Since the biblical perspective concerns our relationship with God, this perspective is "primary and foundational" as compared to the additional perspectives that science provides; therefore, "the scriptural account should have precedence over the scientific one." (3) The scientific perspective must not be neglected, because it "provokes a more insightful reading" of the biblical text and uncovers the "significance and rationale" of its "fact-like assertions." (4) The difference between the two perspectives must be explained and not denied. The integrity of the perspectives of the Scriptures as well as of the sciences is compromised when we try to show that the Bible is confirmed by science, or vice versa. Darwin was right in demonstrating that science had to be liberated from the dominance of the Scriptures, but the Scriptures must also be protected against the dominance of science.<sup>28</sup>



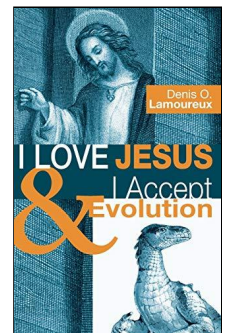
To some degree Watson takes the easy option by focusing on a detail that is doctrinally innocent. He does not make any concrete statements about the implications of letting the two perspectives of Bible and science stand beside each other in matters that seem theologically more important, as, for instance, the origin of the natural world, the historicity (or the lack thereof) of Adam and Eve, the relationship between sin and death, the origin of sin, etc. A significant amount of other literature favoring perspectivism suffers from the same problem, thus ignoring important questions.<sup>29</sup> For example, if the Bible only tells us about God's encounter with human beings, how does the world in which this encounter unfolds relate to God? Is it God's world, or is it none of God's business, as Marcion thought? If it is the world of the Father of Jesus Christ, how do we explain its many perils and the widespread suffering of both animals and humans in it? Did human beings at some point break their relationship with God by choosing evil? Or has evil always been an intrinsic part of humanness? Such essential theological questions are too often ignored by perspectivists.



(2) This is certainly not the case in an intriguing contribution to the debate on biblical interpretation and evolution by the Canadian biologist, theologian, and "born-again Christian" Denis Lamoureux.<sup>30</sup> Lamoureux wants to endorse the biblical faith without any reservation

while also accepting the data of contemporary science in an unqualified way, and he hardly leaves any question about their mutual relationship untouched. Taking science seriously implies for him that, though science is as fallible as any other branch of human endeavor, we should not assume that entire branches of science are rooted in misunderstandings or spiritual deception. Therefore, he also takes evolutionary biology seriously. Lamoureux himself went through a number of phases in his life—among them an atheistic as well as a creationist period. He now labels himself an adherent of "evolutionary creationism" (which term he prefers to "theistic evolutionism"; though this might indeed be considered the better term since the substantive now refers to what is most important—belief in the world as being created—its potential association with other forms of creationism makes it confusing).

Within this stream of thought, however, Lamoureux occupies a radical position. He consistently refuses to consider any concordistic attempts at harmonization and wants the Bible to speak its own language. In Genesis 1 and 2 man is created *de novo* by God; that this happened "from the dust of the ground" (Gen. 2:7) should not be explained in terms of man's evolutionary emergence from the animal world, since clearly that is not what the biblical author had in mind. Genesis 2 and 3 sketch an idyllic picture of worldwide bliss, not a picture of a small garden as an exceptional oasis in an otherwise wild world.<sup>31</sup> This idyllic reality is brutally disrupted by the fall into sin of the first human pair. This led to the death of Adam, Eve, and all their descendants. Genesis does not present this death as some kind of vague "spiritual" death (an existential loneliness because of the rupture in the relationship with God) but simply as physical death. This is how Paul in Romans 5 and 1 Corinthians 15 reads these chapters.<sup>32</sup> As a result of Adam's sin, suffering and death made their entrance into creation. These events did not only affect humans but also made the animal world go awry, causing havoc in all of creation. As a result of this, creation henceforth has to "groan in travail" (see Rom. 8:22).



However, in light of what we now know, this entire presentation must be seen as part of the ancient Eastern *science of the day*;<sup>33</sup> it does not correspond to physical reality but to how physical reality was construed and imagined at the time. In that sense, it is on a par with the world picture of a three-layered universe (heaven, earth, and

30. Denis O. Lamoureux, *I Love Jesus and I Accept Evolution* (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2009). The phrase "born-again Christian" occurs on the back cover. The title speaks for itself, but note the verbs: I love Jesus and I accept evolution. Whereas a Christian's relationship to Jesus is existentially charged, his acceptance of evolution is much more sober and down to earth. By the way, in the final sentence of his book Lamoureux adds a typically Reformed twist to the evangelical confession of his love for Jesus: "But more importantly, as the children's Sunday school song has taught me, 'Jesus loves me, this I know, for the Bible tells me so'" (168). For further elaboration of his views, see Lamoureux's earlier five-hundred-page book *Evolutionary Creation: A Christian Approach to Evolution* (Cambridge: Lutterworth, 2008).

31. For this view, cf., e.g., Marguerite Shuster, *The Fall and Sin: What We Have Become as Sinners* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2004), 77.

32. Lamoureux, *I Love Jesus*, 84, 141.

33. Lamoureux, *I Love Jesus*, 144.

28. Watson, "Genesis before Darwin," 27–28.

29. A well-known case in point here is Peter Enns, *The Evolution of Adam: What the Bible Does and Doesn't Say about Human Origins* (Grand Rapids: Brazos, 2012). Enns admits that in this book he "is focused solely on hermeneutical issues ... and so I make no claim to answer the many intellectual issues that the Christianity/evolution discussion raises" (126).

netherworld) we meet, for instance, in Genesis 1:6–7, Exodus 20:4, and Philippians 2:10.<sup>34</sup> In his revelation, God went to great lengths to adapt to the ancient Near Eastern picture of the world, prompted by his desire to reach human beings with the message that he is their creator and the creator of the world.<sup>35</sup> Contrary to Voetius, Lamoureux is convinced that the first receivers of God's revelation (Moses, Paul, etc.) would never have been able to understand this message if it had been clothed in the conceptuality of our contemporary model of the universe.<sup>36</sup>

Lamoureux does not mince words when he states what all of this means: Adam never existed, and hence death did not enter the world through him.<sup>37</sup> The vast number of fossils excludes this possibility, for animal remains are found in much older strata of the earth than those in which we find human remains.<sup>38</sup> As a matter of fact, whereas death on earth dates back to the very first manifestations of life, both the image of God and the reality of sin gradually emerged with the appearance of *Homo sapiens*. This happened tens of thousands of years ago, probably at various locations in the world, when groups of hominins more or less simultaneously made a radical jump in the evolutionary chain, developing into what we know as human beings.<sup>39</sup> It makes no sense to place Adam and Eve somewhere in this chain—that is like trying to fit the ancient Near Eastern three-layered universe into contemporary cosmology.<sup>40</sup> If we do this, we make a big *category mistake* by mixing up the perspectives of Bible and science, and we are guilty of a serious misuse of the Bible.<sup>41</sup>

In the meantime, Lamoureux continues to insist that his evolutionary creationism does not detract from the biblical message or from the authority of the Bible. We must carefully distinguish the Bible's embeddedness in an ancient worldview from its theological content. From this perspective we can discern the "eternal spiritual truths"

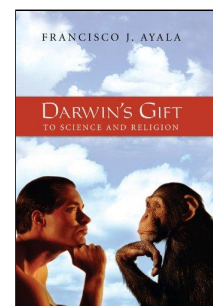
that compose the proper message of the Bible.<sup>42</sup> This message does not deal with *how* questions, such as how we became a creature and, subsequently, a sinner. It just tells us that we are sinful creatures—and that, therefore, we are radically dependent on the grace of God, which is revealed to us in the person and saving work of Jesus Christ. In this way, Lamoureux's hermeneutics go hand in hand with a doctrine of sin and grace that we can easily recognize as authentically Reformed. Thus, the question comes up how we should evaluate this perspectivist approach. It avoids the serious drawbacks of concordism, but does it solve all problems?

## Where Science and Christianity Overlap: History

The perspectivism sketched above represents an attractive position. It goes beyond any artificial harmonizing attempt. Instead of trying to "salvage" as many individual biblical texts as possible, it makes a clear and unambiguous choice in favor of the dominant views in natural scientific discourse, while it recognizes in all honesty that often these are incompatible with (decontextualized) statements on the physical world that are made in the Bible. From a hermeneutical and doctrinal point of view, that is no problem, since such factual statements simply do not belong to the message conveyed in the Bible. A big advantage of this approach is that apparently things cannot become "worse" time and again. As a result, there is no "ice-floe-hopping" going on here, since there is no risk that ten or fifteen years from now new scientific evidence will force Lamoureux to change his position. The same is true for authors who have opted for a similar position.<sup>43</sup>

But is not such a position at odds with the Reformed doctrine of Scripture, which strongly emphasizes the *literal* meaning of the Scriptures? We must realize that this emphasis was originally directed against all kinds of allegory that, at the time, were popular. For this reason, it was important to let the Bible speak for itself. This did not, however, imply a *literalistic* way of dealing with the Bible that ignored the genre and scope of specific texts. We already noted how Calvin made sure to take this scope into account in his exegesis of Genesis 1:16. In fact, an approach that operates in this way—that is, that takes into account factors like literary genre and scope—may well be called "literal."

Let us use the so-called "framework interpretation" of Genesis 1 as an example here. According to this interpretation, the "days" in Genesis 1 form a framework in which day one corresponds with day



34. In his *Evolution: Scripture and Nature Say Yes!* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2016), Lamoureux provides an extensive description of "ancient science" as it figures in the Bible (28–31, 85–112). It is debatable, however, whether the ancient Near Eastern picture of the world was as uniform, constant, and free from contradictions as is suggested by this type of description. See, e.g., Noel K. Weeks, "The Ambiguity of Biblical 'Background,'" *Westminster Theological Journal* 72 (2010): 219–36, and "The Bible and the 'Universal' Ancient World: A Critique of John Walton," *Westminster Theological Journal* 78 (2016): 1–28 (esp. 1–21). On the other hand, it is incontrovertible that contemporary pictures (plural) of the world are reflected in the biblical texts.

35. In *I Love Jesus*, 44, Lamoureux provides the example mentioned above of Jesus presupposing the "scientific" view of his day in the parable of the mustard seed (Matt. 13:31–32). He points out how concordistic considerations have seduced some Bible translators to add phrases like "as you think" or "as it appears" to the words "the smallest of all the seeds."

36. Lamoureux, *I Love Jesus*, 146. Of course, it can be discussed to what extent the ancient Near Eastern world picture also included certain cultural ideas, for example, as pertaining to polygamy, corporate thinking, the place of women in relation to men, the use of violence (cf. the "ban" in the Old Testament), the use of oracles or the casting of lots as revelatory means, etc. This is not the place to discuss these issues, but for a balanced evaluation, see Hendrikus Berkhof, *Christian Faith: An Introduction to the Study of the Faith*, rev. ed. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1986), 252–53.

37. Lamoureux, *I Love Jesus*, 148.

38. Lamoureux, *I Love Jesus*, 142–43.

39. Lamoureux, *I Love Jesus*, 138.

40. Lamoureux, *I Love Jesus*, 140.

41. Cf. for the notion of a "category mistake" in this connection, Vincent Brümmer, "Introduction: A Dialogue of Language Games," in *Interpreting the Universe as Creation: A Dialogue of Science and Religion*, ed. Vincent Brümmer (Kampen: Kok Pharos, 1991), 4.

42. Lamoureux, *I Love Jesus*, 18; elsewhere he speaks of "inerrant spiritual truth" (45).

43. The best known among them are geneticist Francis Collins, with his *Language of God: A Scientist Presents Evidence for Belief* (New York: Free Press, 2006), and from a Roman Catholic background evolutionary biologist Francisco J. Ayala, with, among other publications, *Darwin's Gift to Science and Religion* (Washington, DC: Joseph Henry, 2007)—a book that especially targets creationists but remains theologically too much on the surface to convince them. See also, e.g., Kenneth R. Miller, *Finding Darwin's God: A Scientist's Search for Common Ground between God and Evolution* (New York: HarperCollins, 1999); Keith B. Miller, ed., *Perspectives on an Evolving Creation* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2003); Darrel R. Falk, *Coming to Peace with Science: Bridging the Worlds between Faith and Biology* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2004).



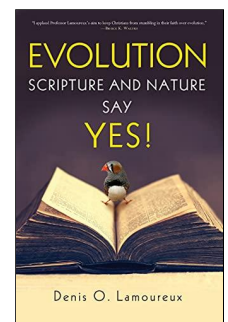
four, day two with day five, and day three with day six—in each case God first creates order out of chaos in three realms (the light on day one, the water and the heavens on day two, the land on day three) in order to then fill each of them with fitting inhabitants (sun, moon, and stars on day four; birds and fish on day five; animals and humans on day six). The author(s) did not want to suggest that God filled the earth with its inhabitants in six days but used these days as a framework to highlight the careful ways in which God made all things fit in with each other and to emphasize that God's creative work culminated in the introduction of his royal Sabbath rest on day seven. When this framework interpretation indeed reflects the genre and scope of Genesis 1, then an exegesis based on it might be regarded as literal.<sup>44</sup> In such a scenario one should not say that “the days are not taken literally,” for that is exactly what happens: the *litterae* (= letters) of the text display a particular genre, and this genre is taken seriously. It is the genre of an impressively crafted opening chorale, like the opening chorus of Bach's *Christmas Oratorio* where, in anticipation of what follows, God is already praised for the mighty works he has brought about.<sup>45</sup>

Moreover, the doctrine of accommodation, to which Lamoureux appeals, is not in opposition to the Reformed doctrine of Scripture. On the contrary, it was already applied by Calvin, who in turn stood in a long tradition here.<sup>46</sup> Opposing the so-called anthropomorphites, who concluded from the ascription of a mouth, ears, eyes, hands, and feet to God in the Bible the corporeality of God, Calvin argued: “For who even of slight intelligence does not understand that, as nurses commonly do with infants, God is wont in a measure to ‘lisp’ in speaking to us? Thus such forms of speaking do not so much express clearly what God is like as accommodate the knowledge of him to our slight capacity. To do this he must descend far beneath his loftiness.”<sup>47</sup>

It has been argued that Calvin's use of accommodation was different from other early modern and modern applications of the same principle. For example, Faustus Socinus and representatives of the Enlightenment used it to explain away various Christian doctrines that they could not believe because of their rationalist assumptions.<sup>48</sup> Indeed, accommodation is a risky hermeneutical category, since it

can easily be used to turn the Bible into a ventriloquist. According to some, Calvin cannot be accused of opening the door to this path, since he used the principle in such a way that it did not detract from the truth of what the Bible writers claimed.<sup>49</sup> It is questionable, however, whether such a watertight distinction can be made here. Calvin's use of the principle of accommodation was inspired by his view of God's transcendence, which forbade him to ascribe, for example, passions to God. Strictly speaking, Calvin did not contend that the Bible makes any claims in this connection that as a matter of fact are false—he does not go any further than saying that they “do not so much express clearly what God is like.” However, the result is the same, namely, that the biblical text is not reliable on such issues. For, according to Calvin, God does not *really* repent, become angry, or undergo other forms of change. As Huijgen writes: “Calvin rather pays the price of insufficient certainty that God's words are unequivocally true, than ascribing change of whatever kind to God.”<sup>50</sup> Thus, Calvin used the accommodation principle to regulate nothing less than our thinking about *God*—that most crucial theological theme! It seems far more innocent to apply it to the way in which cosmographical world pictures appear in the Bible, as Lamoureux proposes.<sup>51</sup> For in such pictures we can quite easily distinguish between what is said and what is meant in the Bible. In more technical language: the authority of the Bible should not be found at the surface level of all its locutions but at the level of its illocutions—that is, it resides in what is *conveyed through* its locutions.<sup>52</sup>

Nonetheless, the approach of Lamoureux raises serious theological problems. The most important of these, it would seem to me, is that the biblical “message” cannot so easily be detached from the narrative form in which it comes to us and reduced to a couple of timeless messages, as he suggests.<sup>53</sup> Those who reduce this message to lessons or principles, however orthodox these may be, and leave the historical garment in which these have come to us behind them, as an empty cartridge, will be left with something else than the biblical view of how God relates to us human beings. For this biblical view is thoroughly historical in nature: God deals with us by going a particular way with us—a way that has a beginning, a certain course, and a goal. The temporal sequence of creation, sin, and salvation is crucial in this respect—at least (though not only) in Reformed theological appropriations of the biblical message. Moreover, the gospel hinges on God's involvement



44. The framework interpretation of Gen 1 was introduced by the Dutch Old Testament scholar Arie Noordtjij in 1924 and has been adopted and elaborated by prominent evangelical biblical scholars such as Meredith Kline, Henri Blocher, Bruce Waltke, and Gordon Wenham. See, e.g., Lee Irons and Meredith G. Kline, “The Framework View,” in *The Genesis Debate: Three Views on the Days of Creation*, ed. David G. Hagopian (Mission Viejo, CA: Crux, 2001), 217–304.

45. For a more recent interpretation of Gen. 1 that goes beyond the framework hypothesis (based on a closer comparison of Gen. 1 with other ancient Near Eastern cosmological texts), see Walton, *The Lost World of Genesis One*. Walton argues that Gen. 1 is not about the material origins of the cosmos but about the assignment of the functions God had in mind for each of its inhabitants, prior to his taking up residence in the cosmos, as in his temple.

46. Cf. Cornelis van der Kooi, *As in a Mirror: John Calvin and Karl Barth on Knowing God: A Diptych*, trans. Donald Mader (Leiden: Brill, 2005), 41–57; Van der Kooi points to Origen, Irenaeus, and Philo as earlier representatives of this hermeneutical tradition, and he clearly shows how crucial the idea of accommodation was to Calvin.

47. Calvin, *Institutes* 1.13.1.

48. Cf. Arnold Huijgen, *Divine Accommodation in John Calvin's Theology: Analysis and Assessment* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2011), 28–33, on the erosive effect the doctrine of accommodation had on belief in the Bible's reliability during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries (among Cartesians, German rationalists like J. S. Semler, etc.).

49. See, e.g., Hoon J. Lee, “Accommodation—Orthodox, Socinian, and Contemporary,” *Westminster Theological Journal* 75 (2013): 335–48; Glenn S. Sunshine, “Accommodation Historically Considered,” in *The Enduring Authority of the Christian Scriptures*, ed. D. A. Carson (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2016), 238–65.

50. Huijgen, *Divine Accommodation*, 274.

51. For more analysis of the function and background of divine accommodation in Calvin's thinking, see Jan Balserak, *Divinity Compromised: A Study of Divine Accommodation in the Thought of John Calvin* (Dordrecht: Springer, 2006), and Huijgen, *Divine Accommodation*, esp. 106–54.

52. For this application of speech act theory (J. L. Austin and others) to the nature of biblical authority, see John Walton and D. Brent Sandy, *The Lost World of Scripture: Ancient Literary Culture and Biblical Authority* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2013), 41–48, and *passim*.

53. In *Evolution: Scripture and Nature*, Lamoureux interchangeably speaks about “life-changing spiritual truths” (31), “inerrant spiritual truths” (110), and “life-changing messages of faith” (111).



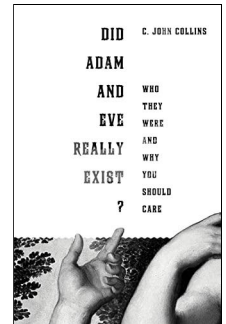
in history: the incarnation, cross, and resurrection of Jesus that constitute our salvation took place during specific moments in time and history. That renders the Christian faith vulnerable, because such events can by definition be contested and contradicted; from a Christian point of view, however, we cannot avoid such vulnerability by withdrawing into a sealed fortress of supertemporal principles and ahistorical truth claims.

When dealing with questions of human origin, reducing the biblical message to a set of lessons or principles or “eternal spiritual truths”<sup>54</sup> is inadequate for yet another reason. What we need here, it seems, is a comprehensive view or constitutive *story* of how life on earth and we human beings became what we are right now. Without such a story, our way of thinking will easily be stamped by atheistic stories according to which God does not play a role at all in the emergence and history of life on earth. From a methodical point of view, Lamoureux’s attempt to remove all world-picture elements from the magisterium (domain of authority) of the Bible does not differ from Rudolf Bultmann’s program of demythologizing the proclamation of the New Testament.<sup>55</sup> To be sure, Bultmann went much further than Lamoureux (who does not deny God’s involvement in the history of salvation), but Lamoureux’s approach is structurally similar—and should perhaps, if consistently thought through, end where Bultmann’s program ended. Bultmann as well had noble intentions with his proposals; in fact, his motives were strongly apologetic: as a Lutheran pietist, he wanted to defend the Christian faith in the context of his own time. In the process, however, a large part of the content of the Christian faith evaporated, because he considered talk of God’s salvific acts as part and parcel of the ancient Near Eastern world picture. As a result, he detached the entire domain of *history* from God’s active involvement.

Therefore, the question remains whether we should protect ourselves against any possible “collision” between the Bible and science by opting for a radically perspectivist approach. It is true that much is to be said for keeping faith and theology separate from science, as two distinct perspectives. The problems arise, however, where the two inevitably overlap: in the domain of *history*. There we see that the two perspectives are not completely incommensurable, like “organs and vacuum cleaners” (Barth), but cross each other at some point, illuminating one and the same reality. The text of Genesis 2–3 is a clear example here. As we will see more closely in chapter 6, these chapters do not allow for a completely ahistorical reading. Old Testament scholar C. John Collins has argued that the chronological sequence of creation and sin defines the biblical story of our humanness.<sup>56</sup> Indeed, according to the main thrust of the biblical narrative, sin is not inherent in creation. If it were, that would give us humans an excuse and would make God’s anger about sin hard to

understand. Sin goes back to a step taken by the first human being(s)—at whatever time or place that may have been. Sin is nonoriginal but corrupts the good life God had intended.<sup>57</sup> The view that sin is “not the way it’s supposed to be” is of major importance for how we regard the relationship between God and humanity. Collins rightly begins by establishing this point—not on the basis of a biblicistic hermeneutics but from the desire to do full justice to the leading theological perspective of the Bible.

Only then does Collins take a look at what may, and must, be said scientifically about human origins. This does not lead him to a new harmonization in which the Bible and natural science confirm each other but leads him to develop guidelines for what must minimally be said about the issue of origin from a Christian point of view. These guidelines or criteria stipulate (1) that, because of our unique status as the bearers of God’s image, we cannot just be the product of a natural process; (2) that Adam and Eve stand at the beginning of the human race—possibly together with others, among whom they may have occupied a special representative position; and (3) that, in some way, in the early period of the human race a decisive “fall” into sin occurred.<sup>58</sup> Collins agrees with C. S. Lewis, who graphically depicts the Christian story of creation and fall along similar lines.<sup>59</sup> In chapter 6 we will examine more closely whether such a picture is credible at all from a scientific point of view. To conclude, we are well advised to reject concordism and take perspectivism as our default position. The particular genre of a biblical text is decisive, however, in determining its theological perspective. From the first chapters of Genesis onward, this theological perspective is indissolubly linked up with history. The Old Testament hinges on a series of salvific events that points forward beyond itself and culminates in the New Testament in the coming of Jesus Christ and the Spirit. This is how Christians, including Reformed ones, have read their Scriptures all along—at least ever since Irenaeus. As Reformed theologian Hendrikus Berkhof rightly claims: “Salvation depends on the historicity of ... events.”<sup>60</sup> Indeed, in this sense the Christian faith is not about “eternal spiritual truths” (Lamoureux) but about down-to-earth historical events. It is precisely on the historicity of events, however, that the sciences—in our case especially the sciences of origin—have something to say as well. At this cross-section of science and faith, therefore, we cannot escape the search for harmony. Christian theology cannot take the easy way out by withdrawing to the spiritual realm in order to circumvent historical critique; it can only prove its value by showing



54. Lamoureux, *I Love Jesus*, 18.

55. See Rudolf Bultmann, *The New Testament and Mythology and Other Basic Writings* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 1984), 1–44 (the original German essay “Neues Testament und Mythologie” appeared in 1941).

56. C. John Collins, *Did Adam and Eve Really Exist? Who They Were and Why You Should Care* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2011), 133–35. Collins deliberately uses the concept of “story” here to make clear that the Bible does not merely give us distinct messages but provides us with an overarching narrative, comparable to the way in which the self-understanding of other cultural and religious communities is shaped by their stories of origin. Cf. for a similar view, Henri Blocher, “The Theology of the Fall and the Origins of Evil,” in *Darwin, Creation, and the Fall: Theological Challenges*, ed. Robert James Berry and Thomas A. Noble (Nottingham: Apollos, 2009), 149–72.

57. Cf. Cornelius Plantinga Jr., *Not the Way It’s Supposed to Be: A Breviary of Sin* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1995), 16. Unlike John Schneider, “Recent Genetic Science and Christian Theology on Human Origins,” *Perspectives on Science and Christian Faith* 62 (2010): 202, it seems to me that this is not just “Augustinian” but belongs to the constitutive pattern of the biblical narrative.

58. Collins, *Did Adam and Eve Really Exist?*, 120; as appears from (2), Collins allows for the possibility of polygenism.

59. C. S. Lewis, *The Problem of Pain* (New York: Macmillan, 1962 [1943]), 69–88 (= chap. 5, “The Fall of Man”). To cite only one sentence from this moving passage: “They [= the first humans] wanted to be nouns, but they were, and eternally must be, mere adjectives” (80).

60. Berkhof, *Christian Faith*, 274; Berkhof is referring here to “what has actually happened through and with Jesus,” but this can be extended to other salvific events as, for example, those related in the Old Testament.

that it can stand the test of historical research. There is no reason to fear such research, however, when we hold that the book of Scripture and the book of nature and history have, in the end, the same Author. If that is true, we may from time to time either have to reread the (alleged) data of science in the light of Scripture, or reread Scripture and reconsider established interpretations of it in the light of science. For even though the Bible does not contain scientific statements, as concordists think, neither can its theological meaning contradict what we know from the sciences.

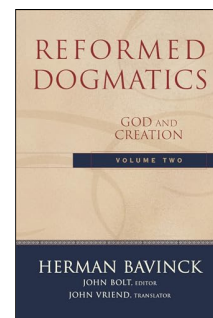
## In Search of Cocceians

The main upshot of this chapter is that when it comes to truthful biblical interpretation, we have to carefully differentiate between the scope or focus of what the biblical authors wanted to convey and the traces of an outdated model of the world in which they incidentally clothed their message. In doing so, we may learn that we will have to explain certain passages (for example, Gen. 1–3) in ways that differ from traditional exegesis. Surely this cannot mean that we should impose the results of contemporary science on Scripture, as if they had been stored there all the time. That would be a relapse into concordism. Given the nature and goal of Scripture, we should not expect it to anticipate the results of scientific research. Neither should we expect, however, that its theological content or focus or “message” is at odds with what we know from science.

Fortunately, there is a third way to go here. As G. C. Berkouwer argued, “certain results of science, be it natural science or historical research, can provide the *occasion* for understanding various aspects of Scripture in a different way than before.”<sup>61</sup> That means that we may welcome scientific developments as far as they help us better understand what Scripture intends to teach. Berkouwer recalls that his predecessor Herman Bavinck rejoiced in the “excellent service” that geology may offer us “in the interpretation of the creation story.”<sup>62</sup> Indeed, Bavinck held that

Scripture and theology have nothing to fear from the *facts* brought to light by geology and paleontology. The world, too, is a book whose pages have been inscribed by God’s almighty hand. Conflict arises only because both the text of the book of Scripture and the text of the book of nature are so often badly read and poorly understood. In this connection the theologians are not without blame, since they have frequently condemned science, not in the name of Scripture but of their own incorrect views.<sup>63</sup>

This reconsidering of traditional biblical interpretations in light of newly discovered scientific facts usually involves a slow and painful process. However, the rise and gradual acceptance of heliocentrism show us that it may well succeed over time. Even in orthodox Reformed theology it is possible to appropriate new understandings of the Bible, provided that we recognize that these are not violently imposed on the Bible because of science but do justice to its inner thrust. One might even argue that Reformed theology is especially open to such revisions, since, as we saw in chapter 1, its motto is to return to the Bible over and over again because of the expectation that in this way one may at all times learn surprisingly new and timely things.



Moreover, it was in the Reformed tradition that the “organic doctrine of inspiration” was developed by theologians like Kuyper and Bavinck—a doctrine that was to gain broad acceptance within the Reformed community and beyond.<sup>64</sup> According to this view, in guiding, enlightening, and inspiring the writers of the Bible, the Holy Spirit did not typically dictate what they should write down (as in the “mechanical” view of inspiration) but took them in his service in a much more organic way. That is, the Spirit put to use their personal skills and talents, characters, linguistic habits, biographical paths—see, for example, Luke’s many references to medical issues—and cultural backgrounds.<sup>65</sup> If this view of divine inspiration holds water, it is not at all inappropriate to assume that when writing the texts later included in the Bible, the biblical authors took for granted the picture of the world with which they were raised, and which most of their first readers would immediately and intuitively recognize. Thus, it seems to me that perspectivism is much more in line with the Reformed doctrine of Scripture in its organic articulation than concordism is; concordism presupposes a mechanical view of inspiration, God as it were dictating certain facts to the biblical writers out of the blue. For how else could the biblical writers have come to know present-day scientific facts than in a mechanical way, through special divine communication that would have overruled their own cultural embeddedness? Thus, if the doctrine of organic inspiration does not jeopardize the authority of the Bible, as most Christians hold, perspectivism with regard to world-picture issues does not do so either.

So why do Reformed Christians continue to reject evolutionary theory with an appeal to Scripture? No doubt, one part of the answer is that, for all of us, from a psychological point of view it is hard to reconsider certain Bible interpretations, especially when we have imbibed them from our youth onward.<sup>66</sup> The role of children’s Bibles should not be underestimated here, especially when they have not been followed

64. Cf., e.g., Herman Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics, vol. 1, Prolegomena* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2003), 428–35.

65. “Their native disposition and bent, their character and inclination, their intellect and development, their emotions and willpower are not undone by the calling that later comes to them. ... Their whole personality with all of their gifts and powers are made serviceable to the calling to which they are called.” Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics*, 1:432.

66. By the way, we also see such tenacity in science. The famous historian of science Thomas Kuhn has pointed out that paradigms usually don’t disappear because their adherents become convinced by a new one but simply because they die out. Thomas S. Kuhn, *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*, 2nd ed. (Chicago:

61. G. C. Berkouwer, *Holy Scripture*, trans. Jack B. Rogers (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1975), 133.

62. Berkouwer, *Holy Scripture*, 133, referring to Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics, vol. 2, God and Creation* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2004), 496.

63. Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics*, 2:396; interestingly, Bavinck himself goes on in his next section to condemn Darwinian evolution, partly on theological grounds (511–29).

up at a later age by more open and mature interpretations of the Genesis texts. Another part of the answer, however, is that evolutionary theory has oftentimes been hijacked by naturalists in support of their atheist worldview, as a result of which in popular perceptions it became strongly associated with atheism.

This need not continue forever, though. It is illuminating to briefly return to the question how, in spite of the fierce and principled resistance of Voetius and his followers, the heliocentric model was eventually accepted by the Dutch Reformed orthodoxy. The studies of Rienk Vermij give us some insights. In the seventeenth century, the Copernican view became inherently linked to Cartesianism, which meant that in order to be a good Christian one had to reject it. When at a later stage, however, the theology of John Cocceius (1603–1669) came to prominence, things began to change.<sup>67</sup> Followers of Cocceius started to combine his piety and his deferential attitude toward the Bible with the recognition of the correctness of the heliocentric model. And they were able to hold on to this combination. At first, this attracted groups of Cartesians, but, in time, it also appears to have influenced the Voetians. In the end, heliocentrism became *communis opinio* among Christians, and it was generally perceived that the revised interpretations of some biblical texts did not detract from the authority of the Bible. If we ask how this process came about, Vermij's conclusion is telling: "Clearly, good and pious intentions counted more than rigorous ratiocination."<sup>68</sup>

Perhaps, then, this is what we also need today: new Cocceians—that is, Christians who show that it is possible to live faithful lives as Christians while accepting the results of evolutionary science. Already in 1964 Billy Graham gave a good example of this, when he argued:

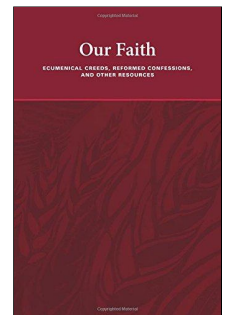
I don't think that there's any conflict at all between science today and the Scriptures. I think that we have misinterpreted the Scriptures many times and we've tried to make the Scriptures say things they weren't meant to say. I think that we have made a mistake by thinking the Bible is a scientific book. The Bible is not a book of science. The Bible is a book of Redemption, and of course I accept the Creation story. I believe that God did create the universe. I believe that God created man, and whether it came by an evolutionary process and at a certain point He took this person or being and made him a living soul or not, does not change the fact that God did create man. ... Whichever way God did it makes no difference as to what man is and man's relationship to God.<sup>69</sup>

Some Christians, however, argue that the parallel drawn here between heliocentrism and evolutionary theory does not hold, because accepting evolutionary theory implies that so many *more* biblical texts than only one or two (as in the case of the heliocentric

model of the universe) have to be interpreted differently. True as this may be,<sup>70</sup> we should ask here: Different from what? In most cases the answer will be "different from what we were used to because of the tradition in which we stand." Here, however, Protestants have a clear advantage as compared to Roman Catholics. No tradition is sacrosanct to them, and especially traditions that try to bind the Word of God by prescribing how it should be interpreted are met with critical suspicion. For the Bible itself should have the final say, and no human traditions should stand in its way. That is why, as the Reformed motto has it, Reformed churches have to return time and again to the Bible, instead of satisfying themselves with fixed interpretations of what it is supposed to mean. In a particularly telling passage, the Belgic Confession puts this point as follows: "Therefore we must not consider human writings—no matter how holy their authors may have been—equal to the divine writings; nor may we put custom, nor the majority, nor age, nor the passage of times or persons, nor councils, decrees, or official decisions above the truth of God, for truth is above everything else."<sup>71</sup>

Therefore, the findings on which evolutionary theory is based may urge us to go back to the Bible, asking ourselves whether our traditional interpretations of various verses really captured their meaning or were partly inspired by a model of the world that has now become obsolete and should no longer be used as a hermeneutical lens.

Yet, while granting this point, one may still doubt whether the parallel between the case of evolutionary theory and that of heliocentrism fully applies. For it seems that evolutionary theory not only forces us to update our exegesis of a number of individual verses but also has much more serious *theological* consequences than adopting heliocentrism had at the time. As we have seen above ( [Where Science and Christianity Overlap: History](#) ), this is a keen and fair observation indeed. I will therefore use the rest of this book to address it. Let us examine in the next couple of chapters which theological issues have to be revisited as a result of Darwinian evolution, focusing once again (though not exclusively) on the Reformed tradition. In deciding whether or not to take evolutionary theory on board, we need to know as exactly as possible how doing so will affect our theological outlook. Quite understandably, many Christians apply Luke 14:28 to the situation: before deciding to accept evolutionary theory (at least as a *possible* explanation for the natural world's biodiversity), they "sit down and estimate the cost." Let us see how we can do this. Could it be that we end up with a gain rather than a loss?



University of Chicago Press, 1970), 150–51. Or as German physicist Max Planck (1858–1947) reportedly said: "Science advances one funeral at a time."

67. For an introduction to Cocceius, see Willem J. van Asselt, *The Federal Theology of Johannes Cocceius* (Leiden: Brill, 2001).

68. Vermij, *The Calvinist Copernicans*, 358; cf. also his "Debate on the Motion of the Earth," 621–23.

69. David Frost, *Billy Graham: Personal Thoughts of a Public Man* (Colorado Springs: Victor Books, 1997), 73; the quotation goes back to an interview of Graham by Frost on the BBC2-TV in 1964.

70. However, one should not underestimate the number of biblical texts involved at the time: opponents of heliocentrism sometimes mentioned no less than ten biblical texts that in their view were in conflict with this new theory! (I am indebted to my PhD student Tera Voorwinden for pointing this out to me.)

71. Belgic Confession, art. 7, in *Our Faith: Ecumenical Creeds, Reformed Confessions, and Other Resources* (Grand Rapids: Faith Alive, 2013), 30.

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