

JONATHAN MARKS



Why Are There Still
Creationists?

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Human Evolution and
the Ancestors

Jonathan Marks

polity

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Contents

<i>Acknowledgments</i>	vii
<i>Preface</i>	ix
1 Introducing the Ancestors	1
<i>Establishing the coincident, but distinct, histories of biology and biblical scholarship in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries.</i>	
2 Scientific Stories of Our Ancestors	22
<i>Summarizing the major features of human evolution, not just biological, but social; and the moral implications of rationalizing inequality biologically.</i>	
3 Attacking Evolution	42
<i>A thumbnail sketch of the history of creationism in three phases: Banning evolution (the Scopes Trial); “scientific creationism” (1970s–80s); and Intelligent Design (a modern anti-theory derived from scientific creationism).</i>	

Contents

4	Biblical Literalism and Rationalism	65
	<i>Why the Bible is read today as sacred literature, culled from a broader set of texts, and historically situated; having been written down, redacted, translated, and interpreted.</i>	
5	Myths of Science and Religion	81
	<i>Difficulties with seeing science as supplanting religion, as part of a narrative of intellectual progress. Establishing creationism as a theological, rather than a scientific, problem.</i>	
6	Sacred Ancestry	104
	<i>Ancestry is a significant symbolic status, both from scientific and humanistic standpoints. But biblical literalists narrate a story of human ancestry that is antagonistic against both scientific scholarship about our ancestry and humanistic scholarship about the Bible.</i>	
	<i>Notes</i>	118
	<i>Bibliography</i>	129
	<i>Index</i>	143

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Preface

There is a joke that goes, “What’s the difference between a biblical literalist and a kleptomaniac?” – “The biblical literalist takes things literally, and the kleptomaniac takes things, literally.”

The biblical literalist, however, also rejects what science says about where we came from, whereas the kleptomaniac, or at least the educated kleptomaniac, acknowledges that our bodies and genes are very similar to those of apes, and that a couple of million years ago in Africa, there were no people, but there were apes that had some key human features. The key features were small canine teeth, long thumbs, and a lower body that provided a range of movements like a human’s; that is to say, standing up, walking, and running.

A creationist is someone who accepts a literalist reading of the beginning of the Bible in lieu of the scientific narrative that our species has descended from other, earlier species over the course of hundreds of millions of years.¹ There are of course many scholars

Preface

who understand evolution, and science more generally, to refer to a set of *secondary* causes and processes, while simultaneously maintaining faith in a transcendent *primary* cause, who is in essence God-the-Evolver.² Or, as theologian Sarah Coakley puts it, “God is that-without-which-there-would-be-no-evolution-at-all.”³ Whether life is ultimately meaningful is an interesting question, but not a scientific one – since science concerns itself with empirically based inferences, not with spiritual or moral propositions. At issue here is simply whether the origin of people involves apes as ancestors a few million years ago, as the comparative anatomical, genetic, and fossil evidence strongly seems to indicate.

Every generation of evolutionists, however, also inscribes their values into their science. That is not an adulteration of the science, but simply a consequence of being a cogitating social animal. Sometimes those values are sexist (see Charles Darwin’s *Descent of Man*, 1871), racist (see Ernst Haeckel’s *History of Creation*, 1876), cooperative (see Peter Kropotkin’s *Mutual Aid*, 1902), xenophobic (see Charles Davenport’s *Heredity in Relation to Eugenics*, 1911), colonialist (see William J. Sollas’s *Ancient Hunters*, 1911), egalitarian (see Theodosius Dobzhansky’s *Mankind Evolving*, 1961), hereditarian (see E. O. Wilson’s *Sociobiology: The New Synthesis*, 1975), or reductive (see Richard Dawkins’s *The Selfish Gene*, 1976).

Some scientists try to link their evolution to their atheism. That troubles me, because it makes a positive assertion – “God does not exist” – in the absence of appropriate scientific evidence and inference. Although that assertion is a reasonable hypothesis, I don’t think it is mandated by science.

Preface

So let me position myself. I am agnostic about God. I capitalize Him out of politeness and custom. But I do not know whether supernatural beings of any sort exist. If they do, that would be nice; and if they don't, that also works. I find it difficult to believe that if they *do* exist, they would care whether or not I *believe* that they exist, when it would actually be very easy to convince me, if they really did exist and care. The only beings that I am aware of interacting with are the ones inhabiting the natural realm, not the supernatural.

I sometimes invoke God, but generally situationally and transiently; for example, towards the waning moments of a Carolina Panthers football game. Usually it doesn't help.

I have no quarrel with people who believe in God, or are generally religious, as long as they don't (1) maintain that their position is validated by science; or (2) try and wheedle me into adopting their beliefs. That directly parallels how I feel about atheists.

I don't think it is "human nature" to believe in God, but I do think it is human nature to think symbolically and imaginatively, rather than resolutely materially.

With that out of the way, let me briefly answer the question posed in the title of this book. There aren't "still" creationists at all. There have always been people who are uncomfortable with the idea that our species is the product of a naturalistic descent from ape ancestors. Christian fundamentalism, which dates to the early twentieth century, mandated a biblical literalist theology, but modern-day opposition to human evolution is actually the product of a reactionary descent from 1960s pseudoscience. In particular, it descends from *The Genesis Flood*, a book first published in 1961, and

Preface

devoted to the proposition that everything you know about geology and earth history is wrong. Instead, there really was a worldwide flood a few thousand years ago in which Noah and his family and pairs of all the animals were the only survivors. And incidentally, evolution is wrong, because God had created all species *ex nihilo* not long before that.

The intellectual and cultural context of that book is worth considering. As we will note in Chapter 3, just a decade earlier the scientific community had been scandalized by a book that denied and rewrote not biology, but astronomy. It was published in 1950 and called *Worlds in Collision*. Its author was a Russian-born psychoanalyst named Immanuel Velikovsky.

Velikovsky took a classic question from outdated biblical criticism: Falsely assuming that stories are just poorly remembered histories, then what natural phenomena might have been mis-remembered in the Bible as miracles? He then combined his pseudo-biblical musings with his readings of other mythological corpora to arrive at a stunning conclusion: The Hebrew Exodus from Egypt under Moses was accompanied by the planet Venus shooting out of the Great Red Spot of Jupiter, veering close to Earth and causing the biblical Ten Plagues, then careening into Mars, before both planets eventually settled into their now-familiar orbits. Of course, the science of astronomy would have to be refitted to accommodate this bizarre theory.

Needless to say, the scientific community didn't take that at all well, although the astronomers did a famously bad job of trying to engage with and refute *Worlds in Collision*. Their arguments were properly dismissive, necessarily technical, sometimes ad hominem, and occa-

Preface

sionally incoherent.⁴ And although Velikovsky's ideas eventually receded from public consciousness, there were significant parallels between *Worlds in Collision* and *The Genesis Flood* scarcely a decade later. Both prominently cast themselves against science, and in favor of their particular interpretations of the Bible. One bluntly opposed astronomy, the other geology. Yet the biblical text figures prominently in both, as misunderstood "history" in the colliding planets narrative, and as properly understood "history" in creationist narratives.

We have engaged most commonly with biblical literalist creationism as a false theory of biology,⁵ or as an archaic remnant of older modes of thought,⁶ but it is modern, not primitive,⁷ and treating it as a false story simply replicates the astronomers' frustrating engagement with *Worlds in Collision*. It will always prove unsuccessful to engage with creationism in terms of "our story is true and yours is false" – since, at the very least, many aspects of *any* story of human evolution are debatable or downright inaccurate. Indeed, both evolutionist and creationist narratives of human origins have at times freely incorporated racist elements.

The thesis of this book is that modern creationism is not part of a vast conspiracy of stupid. It indeed opposes the normative views of science, but that opposition is different from the economic roots of climate-change denial, the misguided yet still unbiblical sincerity of the anti-vaccinators, or the sheer perversity of the flat-earthers. Of these popular modern "anti-science" positions, only creationism is religiously motivated. It is consequently a special kind of anti-science. To grapple effectively with creationism, then, the scholar of human origins and the scholar of religion are natural allies.

Preface

Happily, those two scholarly endeavors converge in anthropology.

This book will adopt two positions about religion and science, or more specifically about evolution and creationism, which seem unfortunately uncommon but are nevertheless rather straightforward and true. First, one can take the Bible seriously (as sacred writings, as literature, as a glimpse of ancient life, as ancient wisdom) without taking it literally. Second, most Catholics, Jews, and even Protestants aren't literalists. Consequently, to the extent that this is a scientific and a religious issue, it isn't science vs. religion. It is religion vs. religion about science. By implication, then, the argument between evolution and creationism is ultimately a sectarian theological dispute within Protestantism (even Islamic creationism is derived from the Protestant literature), and consequently the appropriate battleground is not science at all, but theology. Science, especially biology, is marginal to the question of whether the Bible should be taken literally.

I

Introducing the Ancestors

It is not a secret that about half of Americans are morons. Were the journalist H. L. Mencken alive today, he would very likely regard that as a considerable understatement. They eschew vaccinations. They take right-wing provocateurs seriously. They vote against their rational interests. They can't distinguish between gut feelings and informed thoughts, and privilege the former over the latter when they can. And they aren't all necessarily even the same people.

There is a veritable industry of aggrieved social critics condemning the stupidity of ostensibly modern citizens who reject science. But of course nobody totally rejects science, and maybe they have some reasons for rejecting some particular science. After all, not all science is good. Back in the 1920s, when the science of the age called for solving social problems by sterilizing the poor and restricting the immigration of genetically feebleminded Italian and Jewish immigrants, the people who were anti-science were actually in the right.