Creation or Evolution: Do We Have to Choose?

by Denis Alexander

reviewed by David R Vinson

The title alone gives a lot away. The audience, for starters, isn't hard to guess. What major group in the Western world is even faced with a choice between creation and evolution? You got it—conservative evangelicals, the bulk of whom are caught in the snares of a false dichotomy: “choose one (only one!),” they are told, “creation or evolution.” Pulpits and press conspire tirelessly to sustain this polarity, which usually runs along these lines: “Either believe that the God of the Bible made all species separately by inexplicable miraculous means or chuck your faith, reject Scripture, and give in to the secular, God-denying lies of macroevolution.” Sadly, this is no caricature. When these are the only available options, it is no wonder that the faithful turn a blind eye to the otherwise compelling (and faith-inspiring) case for evolution.

Fortunately, both for science and for Christianity, these aren’t the only options at hand, as our revealing title suggests. A tertium quid is on offer that happily integrates both poles of the creation/evolution divide. If evolution is viewed as the creator’s magnificent means of bringing diversity and complexity to life, then evolutionary science can be seen as exploring the very works of God. So asserts Denis Alexander in his enlightening book Creation or Evolution: Do We Have to Choose? Working past the divide, Alexander aims to win over disciples in the evangelical world to the simple and liberating paradigm of creation-via-evolution.

Though simple, this perspective remains subversive for many within evangelicalism. Why? It challenges and overthrows two popular, though misguided, tenets of belief: (1) evolution is ungrounded—the evidence is spurious; (2) Christian scripture teaches special creation, on which hangs humanity’s distinctive glory (being created in the divine image) and spiritual need (as exemplified and inaugurated by the “fall” of humanity).

People cannot be led out of their captivity to creationism without addressing these twin assumptions. Scientific evidence for evolution must be marshaled in such a way as to demonstrate that evolution doesn’t undermine central theological truths. Who is qualified for such an ambitious task? Only someone able to move with facility within both the scientific and the evangelical worlds.

Fortunately, Alexander is able to speak intelligibly and credibly in both realms. On the scientific front he earned a PhD in neurochemistry from the Institute of Psychiatry, London University, later switching to research in immunology and cancer. He was previously Chairman of the Molecular Immunology Programme and Head of the Laboratory of Lym-
phocyte Signalling and Development at the Babraham Institute, Cambridge. On the theological front he stands solidly within the conservative evangelical tradition with its distinctive views of the Bible’s divine inspiration and God’s active relationship with the world. Working constructively at the nexus of science and faith, Alexander is now Director of the Faraday Institute for Science and Religion, St. Edmund’s College, Cambridge, editor of the journal Science & Christian Belief, and currently serves on the National Committee of Christians in Science.

With the publication of this book, he himself notes that he is filling a sparsely populated lacuna: “I have found surprisingly few books written by professional biologists who take the Bible seriously…” Another book that fits this bill is Darrel Falk’s Coming to Peace with Science: Bridging the Worlds Between Faith and Biology (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 2004; reviewed in RNCSE 2004;24[3–4]:32). Whereas both books speak to conservative evangelicals, Falk’s irenic introduction is understandable at the high school level, while Alexander’s more thorough treatment seems to have a more highly educated audience in mind.

The first two chapters of Alexander’s masterful work lay out the biblical landscape of creation. The author observes that all Christians are united in believing that their God creates and sustains everything. But how creation is implemented is where opinions vary. Before looking at the Bible’s creation texts, Alexander provides a helpful, though necessarily brief, introduction to biblical interpretation, giving attention to topics like literary genre, cultural contexts, authorial intent, and literal versus figural language. A discussion follows on various ways of understanding, which allows scientific and religious knowledge to complement, not contradict, each another. He closes this section with an historical excursus of magisterial figures in the Christian and scientific tradition, including Galileo, from which Alexander draws the instructive parallels with today’s science/faith conflict.

Alexander then turns in the next three chapters to an introductory summary of evolution written for the non-specialist who needs to be brought up to speed on the basics of evolutionary theory. Though compact, Alexander’s explanation is crisp, lucid, and well-organized. His assemblage of topics ranges from the science of an ancient earth, the basics of genomics, the mechanisms of genetic variation, the logic of natural selection, as well as speciation and “fossilized” pseudogenes. Frequent real-life examples are given to illustrate how these things play out in the workshop of life.

The largest section of the book—eight chapters—is devoted to objections that the conservative evangelical community commonly lodge against evolution. The wisdom that Alexander has acquired from his long experience in the fray of public discourse on the interface of science and faith is evident as he navigates these contentious topics. Addressed in full are the opening chapters of Genesis, with particular attention given to the figures of Adam and Eve, the “fall” of humanity, the introduction of death and natural evil in the world, and divine agency, that is, how the God of the Bible might work through the unfolding of this evolutionary narrative.

As the book closes, Alexander turns his attention to the “intelligent design” (ID) movement, which he accurately characterizes as “episodic creationism”. In one chapter, he exposes the
fallacies that riddle the ID enterprise, fallacies both scientific and theological. Whereas proponents of ID restrict their designer's hand to a few complex biochemical processes that they can't imagine having evolved, Alexander takes the wiser and more encompassing approach. He celebrates divine handiwork in all of biology, whether aspects of its evolutionary history are currently well explained or whether the details require further elucidation. Citing Augustine, a fourth- and fifth-century theologian, Alexander affirms that "nature," the whole of it, "is what God does."

The title encapsulates succinctly what this substantive book is all about: *Creation or Evolution: Do We Have to Choose?* The answer that is palpable in every chapter is "No—that choice is unnecessary and runs counter to the evidence." Alexander's *tour de force* of scientific, biblical, and theological argument provides a better way, one that is sure to be of great value to open-minded Christians who are puzzled by the frenzied debate and eager to find some well-informed, biblically-sensitive guidance out of the dichotomous snares and into a constructive reconciliation between faith and science.

**About the Author**

David R Vinson is an emergency physician and clinical researcher in California. He maintains a website to help to educate Christians that evolutionary science and Christian theology can collaborate as complementary disciplines: http://science.drvinson.net.

**Author's Address**

David R Vinson  
Department of Emergency Medicine  
Kaiser Permanente Medical Center  
2025 Morse Ave  
Sacramento CA 95825  
drvinson@ucdavis.edu