I Love Jesus and I Accept Evolution

by Denis O Lamoureux
Eugene (OR): Wipf and Stock, 2009. 184 pages

reviewed by Dennis R Venema

One might wonder, given the recent flurry of books on reconciling evolution and Christianity, if there is any need for yet another foray into what appears to be well-travelled territory. For those working primarily in evangelical settings, however, the answer is yes: there remains a need for works that have theological as well as scientific depth. Denis Lamoureux’s work Evolutionary Creation: A Christian Approach to Evolution (2008) was such a book, but at over 500 pages it is not suitable for most readers. Lamoureux’s latest work, I Love Jesus and I Accept Evolution, is an attempt to condense the heart of Evolutionary Creation into less than 200 pages, including endnotes.

While many evolution-and-faith books focus on the science, Lamoureux’s book is weighted toward theology. The thrust of the opening chapters is to open the reader’s mind beyond “creationist” and “evolutionist” as popularly perceived by evangelical Christians (that is, young-earth creationism and atheistic materialism, respectively). A main tenet of this section is removing dysteleological overtones from the word “evolution” and introducing the concept of “evolutionary creationism” as a conservative, evangelical Christian approach to origins. This material is derived from Lamoureux’s long-taught material on the subject and clearly benefits from its honing in the lecture hall.

Staking out a distinctively evangelical position that embraces evolution immediately raises two concerns for a theologically conservative evangelical: primary is “What about Scripture?” secondary only to “What about the lack of evidence for evolutionary theory?” While both of these concerns must be addressed in a book of this nature, Lamoureux wisely tackles the theology first. What evangelicals need, first and foremost, is not better evidence for evolution. What evangelicals engaged in the origins controversy need is a deeper understanding of the contextual and cultural backdrop for two sections of the Bible: Genesis 1–11 (naturally), but also the writings of the Apostle Paul, particularly how he uses Adam as a typological figure in contrast to Christ in Romans 5. Lamoureux is the first evangelical author of whom I am aware who tackles these issues in detail in a book targeted to a popular audience.

The theological tack Lamoureux takes in two tightly-argued chapters is to establish that the Bible assumes an ancient science: ancient cosmology, ancient biology, and ancient anthropology. As a result, Lamoureux’s hermeneutic for Genesis is very literal: the firmament really is a solid sky-dome; animals, plants and humans are truly created de novo; and Adam’s transgression is understood to be the source of genuinely physical (that is, not “spiritual”) death. Lamoureux fully accepts that this is what God inspired the original authors of Gen-
esis intended to convey—but acknowledges that it is (obviously) scientifically inaccurate. While this would be a theological impasse for a young-earth creationist, Lamoureux moves on to discuss how, in his view, a high view of scripture can be held with an understanding that Genesis is not modern science. The expectation that Genesis should agree with modern science at some level (that is, scientific concordism) is common to virtually all forms of creationism, and Lamoureux sets it squarely in his sights. The key, in his mind, is the doctrine of divine accommodation: that God, in order to communicate theological truth to the original recipients of scripture, took for granted the “science-of-the-day” as not to dilute the message with potentially confusing ideas. Accommodation as Christian theology has been around at least since Calvin, and Lamoureux does a thorough job of appropriating it for the origins debate. What truly distinguishes this book from other evangelical treatments, however, is that he applies this approach to both Genesis and Paul’s use of Adam typology. Indeed, he uses his past experience as a young-earth creationist to tackle virtually every portion of scripture that is used in antievolutionary apologetics. Lamoureux certainly knows the territory, and he goes chapter-and-verse with all comers.

Having done the theological heavy lifting, the book turns to scientific evidence for the antiquity of the earth and biological evolution. This section, which covers two chapters (one devoted to human evolution) is done well enough, and covers a broad sweep of evidence in short order (for example, radiometric dating, fossil succession, transitional cetaceans and hominids, genetic homology, and so on). Lamoureux’s doctoral thesis focused on teeth, and dental evolution is prominently featured. While I was personally quite interested in the material, I felt that the comparative genomics evidence received proportionally short shrift. Anatomical homology is more easily resisted than molecular evidence, in my experience. While the fusion of human chromosome 2 and pseudogenes do receive mention (and to good effect), I could not shake the feeling that a stronger treatment of evolutionary genomics would have been a benefit. The closing portion of the human evolution chapter returns to theological concerns, where Lamoureux discusses how he integrates the Christian theology that humans are made in the image of God with evolutionary biology. Also noteworthy in this section is that Lamoureux rejects monogenism—the scientific concordist expectation, based on the Genesis narratives, that the human race is derived from a single pair in the recent past. Monogenism remains a hurdle for many evangelicals, even if they accept common ancestry (for example, see Keller 2009). A short summary chapter rounds out the book, a breathless run of only 168 pages.

Lamoureux’s strengths for an evangelical audience are several. First, he brings a wealth of personal experience to the discussion. Second, he has PhD-level training in evolutionary biology and theology (as well as dentistry)—and he puts all three to good use. Third, he is strongly evangelical and speaks from that perspective with language familiar to that “in group” (though his tone, as a result, may be off-putting to non-evangelical readers). This is a book that calls for evangelicals who view their theology as robust to accept no less in their science, and to recognize the theological resources within their own tradition that allow them to do so. I have already begun to recommend it to those in my sphere.

References


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