Science, Creation and the Bible: Reconciling Rival Theories of Origins

by Richard F Carlson and Tremper Longman III
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reviewed by Justin D Topp

The highly publicized misconception that science and faith are incompatible has been addressed in many books over the last few decades. In the highly religious culture of the US, results have been mixed and correlated with the stream of Christianity within which one navigates. For moderate Christians, the compatibility of science and faith either is a non-issue or has become one with time. Yet for the more conservative and highly abundant Evangelicals, reconciliation has been turbulent, if not virtually non-existent, due to the existence of additional roadblocks specific to this branch of Christianity (the most important being the interpretation of the early chapters of Genesis in the Bible). To remedy this, several books have been written by and for Evangelicals to help to alleviate the special concerns this group has about science and faith.

Science, Creation and the Bible is a short introduction aimed at reconciling Christian and scientific theories of origins that deals specifically with the Bible and its interpretation. Authors Richard F Carlson and Tremper Longman III are professors of physics and biblical studies at the University of Redlands and Westmont College, respectively. The pairing of a scientist and biblical scholar is relatively distinctive for a work such as this, as similar books are usually solely authored by religious scientists or theologians who have respect for science. The more collaborative and interdisciplinary efforts like this by practicing scholars, the better.

The authors’ thesis is that the first two chapters of Genesis are not to be understood in a literal sense and, as such, there is no need for conflict between the biblical and scientific creation accounts. In their words:

The first two chapters of Genesis, which accurately present two accounts of creation in terms of ancient Hebrew scientific observations and their historical understanding, are neither historical nor scientific in the twenty-first century literal sense. Instead, the underlying message of these chapters applies for all time and constitutes a complete statement of the worldview of the Hebrew people in the ancient Near East. They accurately understood the universe in terms of why God created it but not how in the modern scientific and historical sense … If the first two chapters of Genesis present the fundamental character of the ancient Hebrew people rather than a factual scientific account of beginnings that meets contemporary standards, then it is not appropriate to try to reconcile contemporary science with the Genesis accounts. (p 14)
The book introduces creation and briefly discusses the natures of science and theology, but it is primarily focused on methods of Biblical interpretation and the specific passages of the Bible that are relevant to origins. In writing such a short introductory volume, the authors sacrificed depth for brevity, and this isn’t without its problems. In multiple areas, the book would have been improved by greater exposition. For example, discussion of the characteristics of science and theology, their “data”, and the relationship between the two disciplines is oversimplified and focuses on similarities at the expense of differences. Cosmological beginnings are addressed, but there is very little treatment given to the evidence for evolution, possibly because of the other books on evolution and faith that are available. Also, those with experience in the area of science and religion will note several times where issues were introduced that could shock the intended audience and open up a can of theological worms, so to speak. The declaration of the Council of Chalcedon on the essential character of Jesus is said to “defy common sense” (p 41–2). Metaphorical truth is said to be “more true” than “merely factual accounts” (p 58). In light of this last argument, it is unclear why Adam is assumed to be an historical individual: why read Genesis 3 in a historical and scientific manner but not Genesis 1 and 2? Even in a short introduction such as this, it should have been acknowledged that the reconciliation of science and theology is complex, and the reader would have benefitted greatly from more depth and/or references to the wealth of resources available in this area.

That said, the book is uniquely strong in the areas of Biblical interpretation and teaching on Biblical passages about origins, especially those outside of Genesis 1 and 2. Furthermore, the authors hold to a very high view of the Bible, affirming the 1978 Chicago Statement on Biblical Inerrancy. The combination of Biblical breadth and acceptance of inerrancy (that the Bible is accurate and totally without error) is music to the ears of conservative Evangelicals and makes the book more likely than others to be welcomed by this community. This alone makes Science, Creation and the Bible an essential addition to the discussion of science and faith. Yet the authors don’t shy away from engaging areas of research that could be considered controversial by conservative Christians, such as comparative ancient Near Eastern mythology, the Incarnational model for the Bible, and of course, the scientific truth of origins. In total, this makes for a challenging, but compassionate, considerate, and conservative introduction to scientific and Biblical accounts of origins.

This book is recommended for conservative Evangelicals who have no academic background in science and religion or for high school students and young college students from a similar Evangelical background. The authors write that they hope their work will reach both Christians at broad and non-Christians who see science as a barrier to the Gospel, but it isn’t clear to me that those hopes will be founded by this introductory volume alone. Also, the goals or “gains” as they call them (p 137–140) that would accompany acceptance of their thesis seem unrealistic, because of the book’s lack in the areas mentioned above. However, this book in combination with several other good ones in the area (Miller 2000; Towne 2003; Falk 2004; Collins 2006; Alexander 2008; Walton 2009; Evans 2010; Giberson and Collins 2011) that appeal to a broader Christian audience and are collectively more thorough could achieve the gains the authors seek. In any regard, the coupling of a high view of the Bible and high respect for science and its results makes the book in itself a worthy contribution to the discussion of science and faith.
References


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