Mapping the Origins Debate: 
Six Models of the Beginning of Everything

by Gerald Rau
Downers Grove (IL): InterVarsity Press, 2012. 236 pages

reviewed by Timothy H Heaton

Most books on origins are designed to defend a particular perspective, but occasionally a book comes out that offers a semi-fair analysis of different viewpoints. This book falls into that category. The focus is a comparison between six models of origins, each representing a distinctive theological and scientific worldview. In addition to Naturalistic Evolution (#1), Old-Earth Creationism (#5), and Young-Earth Creationism (#6), Rau divides Theistic Evolution into three models: Nonteleological [Deistic] Evolution (#2), Planned Evolution (#3), and Directed Evolution (#4). As the numbers suggest, Rau considers the six models to represent a linear spectrum from the purely naturalistic to the most literal reading of the Bible. Though written from a distinctly Christian perspective, Rau does not attempt to pursue the theological or philosophical implications of any of these models beyond that necessary to distinguish them. He spends a good deal of time in the introductory chapters explaining what models are and arguing that they are based more on presuppositions than on evidence.

Rau does not defend any of the six models explicitly or even admit which one he favors, but he seems to have the least empathy for the extreme positions. Anyone familiar with the origins debate will recognize that nearly all of the detailed model building has been done by advocates of those extreme positions, while advocates of the middle positions tend to pick and choose various elements from those extremes (thus the linear spectrum). A dislike for the extremes would explain why Rau offers little insight into the inner workings of creationism or scientific research and focuses instead on the subtle differences between the six models. Ironically, Rau has trouble identifying self-professed advocates of his three subcategories of Theistic Evolution, and he has to pretend that the advocates of the various models are much more unified than they actually are. Nevertheless, this approach allows him to cover some interesting ground that is lacking in most other treatments.

Nonteleological Evolution differs from Naturalistic Evolution in a belief in God, and Planned Evolution differs from Nonteleological Evolution in that God knew and planned the ultimate outcome (especially the advent of humanity). None of these three models include supernatural intervention (after the Big Bang, at least) or any expectation that science will be able to identify a designer. The other three models require ongoing supernatural intervention (miracles). Directed Evolution includes common ancestry but with God helping evolution along, while Old-Earth and Young-Earth Creationism include separate creations of life (usually at the species to family level), and they differ mainly on the age of the earth and universe. Since the first three models are indistinguishable scientifically, there are only
four options to consider using scientific evidence and argument. These are the ones that Rau focuses the most attention on.

While the “intelligent design” (ID) movement takes a “big tent” approach and doesn’t advocate a particular model, its major tenet is that supernatural design is detectable and has been detected. Thus its proponents support the three models that include intervention (Directed Evolution and Old- and Young-Earth Creationism), while supporters of the other three models oppose ID. Rau spends a good deal of the book discussing ID and its arguments, and he seems supportive of the movement. He spends considerable time discussing various definitions of science and on what basis ID might fit under that umbrella. He denies that ID is “closet creationism” but fails to address the historic and polemic bases for that charge. At times he engages in ID rhetoric, such as promoting “information” (in DNA) as evidence for design without adequately defining what it is or the alternatives for how it might have been generated.

It is difficult to conclude a book that takes a conciliatory approach to the creationism/evolution debate, and this was obviously a struggle for Rau. In fact, the two sections of the conclusion nearly contradict one another. First he compares the scientific data to a globe that evolutionists and creationists are viewing opposite poles of, and he suggests that working together is the key to solving the puzzle. He goes on to detail what evidence each group has to contribute to such a project and also what questions each needs to address. This is a follow-up to the assertion, stated early in the book, that each camp focuses on evidence that supports its model while ignoring or downplaying problematic data. But then he goes on to conclude:

> The problem is that each of the six models of origins presented here is intimately wedded to a certain theological interpretation of scripture, so the model and the theology rise or fall together. Since we each have a faith commitment to a certain theology, we also have a faith commitment to a corresponding model. To change our model we also need to change our theology and admit that what we believed is incorrect. This is something few are willing to do, so the conflict continues. (p 189)

Whether the creationism/evolution debate is ultimately solvable is only one of the many loose ends in this book. For someone so interested in how God might have guided the earth’s history, Rau does little to address what a combination of natural and supernatural activities might look like and what the scientific and theological implications of such a mixture would be. It would seem worth addressing whether a natural/supernatural distinction even makes sense, or whether it is a convenient invention of our mixed scientific/religious culture. But Rau states in the opening pages that he had to scale this book way back because he only had space for an overview. I expect we will hear more from this author.

About the Author

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