

Why I Still Believe in a Young Earth:

A review of *The End of Christianity*¹, by William A. Dembski²
By Gerald H. McKibben

Introduction – I found much to like in *The End of Christianity*, in spite of disagreeing with the Author on some of his major premises. First of all, his character, honesty and humility, as well as his Christian commitment, came across in his writing. That he is a warm and personable person seemed obvious. I was gratified when my impressions were confirmed by a former student of his at Southern Evangelical Seminary that I happen to know.

I was interested in the subject book because I still believe that the earth is thousands, not millions, of years old, and I had read reviews of Dr. Dembski's conclusions to the contrary. The title lends itself to several interpretations; the Author stated that by giving it this rather provocative title he hoped to attract atheists to read it. Apparently that failed, so he added a sub-title, which is on the dust cover of my copy: *The End of Christianity: Finding a Good God in an Evil World*.

The sub-title appears to express the real purpose of the book. Many skeptics have stumbled at the notion of a good God existing while there is so much pain, suffering, and evil in the world. But those who – like the Author of this review – take the Bible as the written word of God see the explanation of how this can happen contained therein: evil came about because of the Fall – man's sin in the Garden of Eden. God's self-proclaimed assessment of His creation before the Fall was that "It is good."

Thus death came after Adam and Eve's sin, which conflicts with contemporary scientific thought that the earth, along with pain, suffering and death, existed for millions of years before humans came on the scene. In the minds of many people, almost incessant reminders that the earth is millions of years old cast doubt on the Biblical creation account. What Dembski has done is to propose a way to reconcile the effects of the Fall with an earth that existed millions of years before the Fall even happened, through what he calls the retroactive effects of the Fall. In other words, he proposes that God created the earth with all the effects of the Fall before it happened, because He knew in His omniscience that it would happen. The compromises he makes in his reconciliation will be discussed in this review.

Part 1: What I like in the book

"Evolving gods" – I agree with the Author's view of mainline theologians today who are quick to accept without question anything from "science". He expresses this view very eloquently:

...mainline theologians now increasingly adopt a pared-down view of divine wisdom, knowledge, and power. We thus get a god who means well but can't quite overcome the evil in the world, a god who is good but in other ways deficient. The goodness of God is thus preserved, but at the cost of his other attributes...Evolving gods constrained by natural laws are much the rage these days.

Defense of Intelligent Design – Because he is a central figure in the movement, I expected the Author to give a strong defense of ID, and this I found, especially in the Introduction. He believes that the atheistic worldview, "supposedly buttressed by science" constitutes a major obstacle in the minds of many to taking Christianity seriously (p. 2). He states that today, unlike 20 years ago, many Western intellectuals now treat Christianity with open contempt, "expending a great many words to denounce it." He is actually encouraged by this; previously these same intellectuals routinely ignored Christianity.

Comments on human language – Attacking an important tenet of Darwinian understanding of human language, the Author states (p. 101):

Human Language is therefore not an evolutionary refinement of grunts and stammers once uttered by apelike ancestors. We are creatures made in the divine image. Human language is a divine gift for understanding the world and therewith God himself.

Human uniqueness – The Author states (p. 161) that “Unfortunately, scientific research can be suitably slanted to support just about anything.”, and then cites some primate research in which the workers make a case against human uniqueness. Dembski and Jonathan Wells in their book *The Design of Life* emphasize human uniqueness based on linguistics, mathematics, and cognitive psychology. He points out that these differences, along with moral capacities, represent a “difference in kind and not, as many evolutionists hold, merely a difference in degree.”

Evolution – Quoted from page 161: “When the writer of Genesis 1:21 and 1:25 stated that organisms were created ‘after their kind,’ it’s hard to imagine that he intended the fluidity of all species as required by evolution.” I agree.

Darwin’s belief in the superiority of the races – Few realize that the title of Darwin’s popular book now called *On the Origin of Species* was not the exact title Darwin gave it. The full title was: *On the Origin of Species by Means of Natural Selection or the Preservation of Favored Races in the Struggle for Life*. In this context, Dembski quotes Darwin (p. 165) expounding his views that there are superior and inferior races of humankind. It is not popular to point this out in our present climate, with many scientists and purveyors of popular news media so infatuated with Charles Darwin.

Thought experiment illustrating God’s omniscience - Dembski introduces the experiment (p. 118) to illustrate a related principle of how a world in which events are pre-arranged could still allow for real-time interaction from outside. I will paraphrase and shorten the example somewhat, but the idea is his alone: Suppose you walk into a room and see four boxes. You walk over to the nearest one and open the lid and see a slip of paper with writing on it. You read: “Good Morning! How are you?” You are surprised to be addressed like this in a note, and you mutter “I’m fine, but I would be better if I knew where I could find my wallet.”

You walk over to the second box, open the lid, and find another slip of paper with writing. This one says “It’s on the table near the window”. You look and, sure enough, there is your wallet lying on the table. You’re thinking “Whoever wrote this certainly seems to know a lot about me” as you walk over to the third box. That note says “I know everything”. As you open the lid of the fourth box you’re thinking “only God knows everything”. That note says “I am God.” Then you learn that the notes were written hundreds of years earlier.

Supernatural intervention – While firmly believing that God can and does “move particles” (divinely intervene in a supernatural manner), he also introduces the thought-provoking principle that “what appears to be supernatural intervention could just be ordinary events suitably coordinated to achieve extraordinary results.” (p. 121). (Such as a note hidden a long time ago in a box?)

Thankfulness – Though it might seem out of place in this kind of book, the next to last chapter is titled *Thanking God FOR all things*. The following is the Author’s summation of the chapter:

The good news of Christianity is that this great redemption is ours in Christ. Our great Redeemer, the Lord Jesus, has accomplished this redemption by bringing good out of the Cross. As Christians, we thank God for the Cross. Yet, if we can thank God for the Cross, the ultimate instrument of torture and death, for what can we not thank God? The living God, who brings good out of the Cross and is able to bring good out of all life’s

circumstances – regardless of how we, from our fallen vantage, regard them as good or evil – is always worthy of our thanks and praise. That is why Paul can write: “Give thanks always for all things to God the Father in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ.” (To which I will add a hearty “Amen!”)

The remainder of the section that I call *What I Like in the book* comes from the final chapter, entitled *Luminous with Purpose*. It was written by William Dembski’s wife Jana. Thus I have taken her title and used it as the title for the following section of my review:

Luminous with purpose – The following is a quote from page 187:

Though banished from the Garden with its gate forever barred, the memory of that perfect union with God keeps alive the hope of Paradise. When we let that memory fade, this earth is a place of exile. But when we remember that the divine image is in each of us, this earth becomes an arena of purpose. Then our vision is liberated. The divine images in all of us shine and collectively illumine the way – a way of purpose.

Well stated. And finally, after identifying Love as a supreme unifying force, she states “The Christian faith describes this Love as God himself, from whom all things proceed, to whom all things are drawn, and who charges all movements of humanity with purpose.” (p. 193).

Part 2: Things in the book I don’t like

Fundamental issues – The Author states that science never trumps the Bible, and I certainly agree. But this principle is admittedly not so easy to define in specific cases, dependent as it is not only on Biblical interpretations, but also on our interpretations of what *science* says. And here I want to point out that in my opinion many of Dr. Dembski’s points would be better made if he had substituted *scientific consensus* for *science*. When I think of science I think of that which is testable; subject to empirical methods. We know the planets in our solar system revolve around the sun because we can observe it through the telescope. And we know a molecule of table salt contains an atom of sodium and an atom of chlorine. That is science. I don’t believe anything in the Bible conflicts with *science*. However, much in the Bible does conflict with *scientific consensus*.

As stated earlier in this review, the Author wrote (p. 161) “When the writer of Genesis 1:21 and 1:25 stated that organisms were created ‘after their kind,’ it’s hard to imagine that he intended the fluidity of all species as required by evolution.” I agree completely with Dembski’s interpretation of Genesis 1:21 and 1:25, but I wonder why he doesn’t apply the same principle when it comes to issues of the age of the earth, where he unquestioningly aligns with the scientific consensus. And yet a plain reading of Genesis one indicates that the writer intended six literal days of creation. It’s the same method of interpretation.

Slippery slope – The path of compromise is a steep, slippery slope. And once begun, it’s difficult to know where to get off. If the days of creation in Genesis 1 are not literal, then perhaps the worldwide flood is likewise not to be taken literally; neither is the literal existence of Adam and Eve. The Author departs from the Bible on both these events (Page 170 for the flood, and pages 146, 161, and 158 for Adam and Eve).

The literal existence of Adam is evident from the writings, not only of the Book of Genesis, also of the NT writers Luke, Paul, and Jude. Luke gave the genealogy of Jesus in chapter 3, verses 23 – 38, beginning with Joseph and ending (v. 38) with “*the son of Enosh, the son of Seth, the son of Adam, the son of God.*” (NKJV³).

Jude reiterated the literal Adam when he wrote: “Now Enoch, the seventh from Adam, prophesied about these men also...” These references make no sense without a literal Adam. In addition, the Apostle Paul (Romans 5:12; 14; 1 Corinthians 15:22; 45; 1 Timothy 2:14); wrote of Adam as a literal person. The Timothy passage speaks explicitly of a literal Adam and Eve: “For Adam was formed first, then Eve.”

Dembski even admits that, although young-earth creationism was the basic position up through the Reformation (p. 52), and it “makes exegetical sense,” he would accept it “in a heartbeat”, except that “Nature *seems* to present such strong evidence against it.” (p. 55; Italics mine). Thus the scientific consensus is allowed to trump scripture.

Getting off the slope – The Author obviously believes in the Resurrection, referring to it several times. In First Corinthians 15, Paul writes that if there is no resurrection from the dead, Christ did not rise, and our faith is in vain. I would assume he also believes in the virgin birth of Christ, for neither of which modern science would have an explanation.

Geocentrism – One of the Author’s rationales for rejecting a literal interpretation of Genesis is the history of the church’s resistance to the teaching that the sun, and not the earth, is the center of our solar system. He believes that the church erred once, and that it shouldn’t err again of the issue of the age of the earth. In other words, we have a chance to redeem ourselves in the eyes of the world. The idea that the earth is the center of the universe, called the Ptolemaic system, was generally believed for almost 2,000 years. It was not until the late sixteenth century that the theory was gradually superseded, primarily as a result of the work of Copernicus, Galileo, and Kepler.

Does the Bible teach that the earth is stationary? – The claims that the Bible does is based on extremely poor exegesis in my opinion. For example, in Joshua 10:12, Joshua proclaimed “Then Joshua spoke to the Lord in the day when the Lord delivered up the Amorites before the children of Israel, and he said in the sight of Israel: ‘Sun, stand still over Gibeon; And Moon, in the Valley of Aijalon.’” (NKJV).

Other verses supposedly used by the church to defend geocentrism are found in the book of Psalms. For example, 104:5 “*You who* laid the foundations of the earth, *So that* it should not be moved forever,” (NKJV). Psalm 93:1 and 96:10 are similar, as is 1 Chronicles 16:30.

But do these passages teach that the earth does not rotate on its axes and travel in an orbit around the sun? There are nine places in the Psalms where the same wording is used for the individual. For example, consider 55:22: “...He shall never permit the Righteous to be moved.”

Other references were similar. No one would think the use of this terminology means that we humans can’t move around. The word ‘moved’ is understood to mean to stray from an appointed path. And besides, a primary rule of Biblical interpretation states that major doctrine should not be taken from the Book of Psalms. That is not their purpose.

Peter defended the worldwide flood, but failed to mention anything about the earth being stationary:

For this they willfully forget: that by the word of God the heavens were of old, and the earth standing out of water and in the water, by which the world that then existed perished, being flooded with water. 1 Peter 3:5, 6. (NKJV).

I don’t know of any NT writer that commented on the motion of the earth. Biblically, the case for geocentrism has extremely weak foundations, although it should be pointed out that this viewpoint was not limited to the church. Since the prevailing notion among scientists for many years had been that the sun rotated around the earth, I’m sure the church’s opinion on the subject was influenced also by contemporary science and popular opinion.

I reject the notion that for many centuries Bible readers were misinformed on the creation account as revealed in Genesis due to a lack of modern scientific information. A plain reading of Genesis 1-3, without input from any other source, is, I believe, sufficient to arrive at the truth that the writer intended.

We should continue to defend the Bible against compromise. To compromise is to ultimately cast doubt on the record we have of Jesus, His virgin birth, His sinless life, and His vicarious death on the cross as payment for our sins.

Conclusions

Who is right? – A clear distinction should be made between *science* and *scientific consensus*. Often the two are used interchangeably. Truth is never determined by a vote. Regrettably, statements by influential scientists are often influential in the way many think today. As University of Oxford Mathematician and Christian Apologist John C. Lennon wrote in *God's Undertaker*, "Statements by scientists are not necessarily statements of science."

Does science trump scripture, or does scripture trump science? – I would say neither, because the premise of the question is flawed. How could God's natural laws (science) trump the words He inspired men to write? Is there a conflict between God and God? But if we substitute *scientific consensus* for *science*, then I would emphatically state that scientific consensus should never trump the scriptures. We must remember to whom we ascribe the attribute of infallibility; to God or to men.

END

Footnotes

1. *The End of Christianity*. 2009. B & H Publishing Group, Nashville, Tennessee.
2. William A. Dembski holds Ph.D. degrees in both philosophy and mathematics and masters degrees in philosophy, theology, and statistics. He is Senior Fellow with Discovery Institute's Center for Science and Culture and Senior Research Scientist with the Evolutionary Informatics Lab. He has taught at the Southern Evangelical Seminary, Southwestern Seminary, Southern Seminary, and Baylor University. A prolific writer, Dr. Dembski is one of the central figures in the modern Intelligent Design movement.
3. All scripture verses are from the New King James Bible, copyright 1979, 1980, 1982, 1985 by Thomas Nelson Publishing, Inc., Nashville, TN.

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