

# Adventist theology and deep time history: Are they compatible?

**Editorial note:** This is the first in an extensive series of articles that will be published in *Ministry* over the next year. They will be presented in no particular or logical order. These articles were first presented as papers at the Seventh-day Adventist Faith and Science Conferences of 2001 to 2004. This article has been adapted for *Ministry* and edited with the *Ministry* reader family in mind.

FERNANDO L. CANALE



This article attempts to assess the compatibility of Seventh-day Adventist theology with deep time history and cosmology.<sup>1</sup> It deals with questions such as, Can the Adventist Church adopt or adapt one of the many “intermediate models of origins” that harmonize Christianity with evolution? Can the church harmonize biblical creation to deep time evolutionary history without changing its essence and theological system? Is deep time/evolutionary thinking compatible with the inner logic of Adventist theology as articulated in its understanding of the “great controversy between Christ and Satan”?

To achieve this aim we will explore some systematic consequences that would follow from abandoning the historical-literal meaning of Genesis 1. We will start by considering the nature of the issue before us, and then focus on biblical history, God’s actions, and the inner logic and coherence of these theological ideas. Finally, we will note the hermeneutical role that cosmology plays in the formation of theological thinking.

## The nature of the issue

The issue before us is not whether Adventist theology could harmonize Genesis 1 with deep time/evolution, but whether deep time/evolution fits with the entire system of biblical theology. In short, are the six 24-hour days of

Genesis 1 an essential component of or compatible with biblical religious truth?

Some Adventists suggest that Adventist theology is compatible with deep time evolutionary history. For them, to harmonize evolutionary theory with Adventist/biblical theology is to interpret Genesis 1 theologically, that is, not literally.<sup>2</sup> Those who view the Genesis record this way feel that if we were to make such a concession, Adventist theology and doctrine would not only remain unchanged but would also become “relevant” to those persuaded of the truthfulness of deep time and evolutionary ideas. The intellectual credibility of the church would be enhanced and its intellectual appeal broadened.

This view assumes that the deep time history of origins does not disturb the theological truths of Scripture or the system of Adventist theology and belief. When it comes to the theological understanding of creation, this view assumes that *time is not of the essence*. Yet, if due to scientific and methodological conviction, Adventists take deep time and evolutionary ideas as true, they will have to harmonize not only Genesis 1 but also the entire system of Adventist doctrine.

Those who assume biblical creation and deep time evolutionary history are compatible, forget that in biblical thinking, *time is of the essence*. It is basic to

the way Scripture treats its subject matter that God acts historically in human time and space. The truth of biblical religion is largely expressed in literal historical terms.

If time is of the essence when it comes to biblical theology, deep time evolutionary history conflicts with the closely knit historical system of biblical thinking. Under the innate or systemic expression of biblical thought and reality, the evolutionary version of historical development cannot coexist without severely impairing and even destroying the essence or basic truth of the Bible. Thus, God’s works in history cannot follow evolutionary patterns.

God’s history cannot (not may not) become evolutionary history.

## Rewriting biblical history

I agree with the need for us to read Genesis 1 theologically and to embrace the resulting richness that flows from such a reading. *But* we need to recognize that there are very different ways of doing theological readings of Genesis 1.<sup>3</sup> Theological interpretations of Genesis spring from our preunderstanding of God’s nature and His actions in created time.

Many, if not most, Christian theologians derive their understanding of God’s reality from Greek metaphysics, according to which “ultimate” reality is timeless. Since a timeless God does not act directly within the historical sequence of events, we can understand why in this view history does not belong to what is properly theological.

We can also understand why for most Christian theologians, the evolutionary rewriting of history does not affect theological (religious) content. This presuppositional perspective allows these theologians to harmonize creation with evolution by separating the theological (religious) content of

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Genesis 1 (its truth) from its historical wrapping (the story).

Accordingly, the period of six 24-hour days described in Genesis 1 and the historical process the text describes are dismissed by these theologians as "nontheological," and God's actual creative action is displaced from the historical and moved into the spiritual realm.

Adventists and others depart from many in the Christian theological tradition and that at the deepest hermeneutical level. Decidedly rejecting the timeless definition of ultimate reality as expressed in Greek metaphysics, they assume the biblical understanding of ultimate reality as historical. Thus, Adventist theologians do not read Scripture from the perspective of Greek metaphysical timelessness but from the biblical understanding of God's being and acting in human history.

To them the God of Scripture is not timeless but infinitely and analogously temporal. He creates and saves, acting directly from within the sequence of natural and human historical events. For this hermeneutical reason, when Adventists read Genesis 1 theologically, they see God creating our planet in a historical sequence of seven consecutive 24-hour days.

This sequence of integrated divine actions forms part not only of the history of God but also of the history of our planet. In creation, God is performing a divine act in a historical sequence within the flow of created time. In this sense, God and His action on this planet are inseparable.

However, all attempts to harmonize theology with evolution start by accepting the evolutionary rewriting of the history of humankind as it is described by Genesis as actually taking place. When evolutionist-oriented paleontologists, geologists, and biologists, for example, give their account of what they see to be historical reality, because the Genesis "story" does not fit the "facts" as understood by evolutionists, most Christian theologians, assuming the Greek timeless understanding of ultimate reality, seriously consider letting

biblical history go. For them, changing history is not important theologically, because God does not act historically but spiritually and timelessly.

When theologians believe that God's act of creation does not take place in history, they feel free to let the biblical history of creation go as myth,<sup>4</sup> saga,<sup>5</sup> or literary framework. The problem is that the actual inner logic of theological thinking suggests that letting the biblical history of creation go also entails letting go of the biblical history of redemption along with the future eschatological history of God with His redeemed church in eternity.<sup>6</sup>

For instance, some theologians, working from the historical critical method of biblical interpretation apply the same evolutionary patterns to the entire sweep of biblical history. They are willing to let go not only the history of creation but also much of biblical history, particularly when it presents God acting historically within the spatio-temporal flux of human history.

According to this approach, the reality of the new earth will be not historical but spiritual.

Can Adventist theology let go of biblical history? Is the reality and truthfulness of biblical history of the essence in Christianity? Can an Adventist theology let the Genesis 1 history go without also letting biblical and eschatological histories go?

At this point, we need to turn our attention to the actions of God involved in the process of creation. The answer to these questions depends on our understanding of "ultimate" reality.

**Spiritualizing biblical theology?**

Theology revolves around reality and its causes. Evolution also revolves around reality and its causes.

Genesis 1 explains the origin of the physical world as an historical sequence of divine creative acts in space and time.

Evolution explains the origin of the same physical world by constructing a different history with different length, events, and causes.

Clearly, only one history took place.

The two historical scenarios cannot be true at the same time. Thus also their innate theological implications and meanings cannot both be accepted.

Thus, harmonization of biblical creation with evolution requires not only the acceptance of a different account of history but also a different understanding about the causal role God had in generating the history of the world.

The systematic centrality of this issue for theology cannot be overemphasized. Theological consistency requires that once we adjust our view of how God relates to the world to coincide with evolutionary history, we should also apply the same view of all divine relations to the whole history of the world. Thus, in the same way, we should embrace the entire range of human history articulating all the contents of Christian theology from within this framework.

### **How might God function in evolutionary history?**

This brings us to a central issue that arises in any theological harmonization of Genesis 1 to evolution: The divine causality in evolutionary history. How does God operate in evolutionary history? Does God operate historically within the future-present-past sequence of time as Scripture says, or spiritually as some Christian theologies suggest?

Consider how the leading intermediate models harmonizing creation and evolution theologially conceive the nature of divine action in creation. Both theistic evolution and progressive creationism understand divine causality in evolutionary history spiritually rather than historically. Let us review each view briefly.

*Theistic evolution.* Teilhard de Chardin, a French Roman Catholic priest, imagines a system of theistic evolution where God works from the inside of nature and history, not from outside.

God works as spiritual energy to animate evolution in its lower stages. This "could of course only act in an impersonal form and under the veil of biology."

Thus, according to Chardin, divine

causality does not operate within the spatio-temporal dynamics of historical causes but as hidden energy from the nonspatio-temporal realm of the spirit.

*Progressive creationism.* Bernard Ramm,<sup>8</sup> an American Evangelical theologian, rejects theistic evolution because, according to him, it springs from a pantheistic view of God. Instead, he suggests progressive creationism as the theory that best accounts "for all the facts—biological, geological, and Biblical."<sup>9</sup>

"Progressive creation is the means whereby God as world ground and the Spirit of God as World Entelechy bring to pass the divine will in Nature."<sup>10</sup> God works in creation by a combination of instantaneous miraculous events of fiat creation, and by a derivative and complementary process of evolution. God operates fiat creation transcendently from *outside* history.<sup>11</sup>

Ramm suggests that several acts of fiat creation have occurred through deep evolutionary time.<sup>12</sup> These acts help to clarify the starting point and gaps in evolutionary history that science cannot explain.<sup>13</sup> Then God "turns the task of creation over to the Holy Spirit who is *inside* Nature."<sup>14</sup> The Holy Spirit is the energy that brings about the evolutionary side of God's plan of creation.<sup>15</sup>

According to these theories, God works out the events of natural and human history using the biological mechanism and laws of evolution.<sup>16</sup> However, according to Scripture, God created our world by acting not from the inside or outside of the spatio-temporal series of historical causes but from within its historical flow.<sup>17</sup>

The difference between theistic evolution and progressive creationism consists in the way each sees God's involvement in the process of evolution. Both, however, share the conviction that evolutionary science tells the true history of what took place in reality. Moreover, following the dictates of Greek metaphysics, both views assume that God does not work historically within the spatio-temporal sequence of historical events.

Divine causality does not operate his-

torically (sequentially), as they see it, but timelessly (simultaneously). Thus, Christian harmonization of creation and evolution stands on the prior harmonization of the biblical view of ultimate reality as spatial and historical to the Greek metaphysical and anthropological dualisms that guided Augustine's and Aquinas's theological constructions.<sup>18</sup>

They systematized the dehistoricization and spiritualization of Christian doctrine on which theistic evolutionism and progressive creationism build their theological syntheses.

The way in which theistic evolution and progressive creationism deal with creation may help Adventists and other creationists to see that harmonizing biblical creation with deep time evolutionary history requires more than a theological interpretation of the account in Genesis 1.

The way in which God acts in history must also fit the biological mechanism of evolution and the actual historical events it generates. How will this reinterpretation of divine activity affect Adventist theology?

### **A conflict of metanarratives**

All systems of theological interpretation stand on the strength of their inner logic. In terms of our discussion, this logic revolves around the way theologians understand the being and actions of God and how He relates to human beings. Our "preunderstanding" of these issues acts as a hermeneutical "template" for the interpretation of Scripture. The point is that changes in the theological template necessarily unleash changes in the understanding of all theological ideas and interpretations of Scripture.

As already established, many theologians share the same template from which they develop their theology. Their template is a metaphysics with a timeless God, sovereign providence, and the immortality of the soul. Bernard Ramm recognized the defining role that the classical metaphysical template plays in his "progressive creation" model as he seeks to accommodate Evangelical theology to evolutionary

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theory. “[A] theory is antichristian when it denies something in Christian metaphysics, i.e., when it attacks the very roots of the Christian faith.”<sup>19</sup>

Ramm goes further, “If it can be demonstrated to the satisfaction of all that evolution is contrary to Christian metaphysics then we must brand theistic evolution as an impossible position. We shall be either Christians or evolutionists.”<sup>20</sup> The same criterion applies to progressive creationism.

Obviously, theistic evolutionists and progressive creationists believe that evolutionary history is not contrary to Christian metaphysics. For them evolution fits within the metaphysical template Christian philosophers constructed from Plato and Aristotle’s interpretations of ultimate reality.

According to this shared hermeneutical template, contradictions between the biblical and evolutionary versions of the history of life are not important because they do not take place in the timeless, spiritual, nonhistorical level of ultimate theological reality.

We need to ask ourselves, does evolution “fit” within the Adventist theological template? Does Adventist theology have a template? Does Adventist theology have a metaphysics?

Adventist scholars seldom address

this issue, even though Adventist theology has a theological template. It has implicitly rejected the metaphysical template on which much Christian theology stands and replaced it with what has come to be known as the great controversy metanarrative.

The main difference between the classical metaphysical template and the biblical metanarrative template as Adventists interpret is that the former places God and His acts in a spiritual-timeless, nonhistorical realm of reality while the latter places God and His acts within the historical continuum of created reality.

This metaphysical template helps us to understand why some Roman Catholic and Protestant theologians argue that evolution is compatible with their version of Christianity. Since evolution does not conflict with the template of classical metaphysics, they can harmonize it with Christianity without changing its theological structure, doctrines, or the inner logic of their respective traditions.

From the perspective of the biblical metanarrative template, we can also easily understand that evolution does conflict with the biblical template embodied in the great controversy metanarrative that includes the six 24-

hour consecutive days of divine creation of life on our planet, the inner historicist logic centered in the sanctuary, and the eschatological prophecies of Daniel and Revelation.

The reason for this situation is simple. Evolution is a metanarrative about the origins of human history that fits well with the timeless nonhistorical template. By the same token, however, the evolutionary metanarrative collides with the great controversy metanarrative because both attempt to explain the same historical reality using different views of the causes involved in the process.

As Ramm correctly pointed out, we should reject deep time evolutionary history if it contradicts Christian metaphysics. Because biblical thought deals with metaphysical issues by way of historical metanarrative, it unavoidably conflicts with the deep time evolutionary metanarrative.

Evolution and biblical creation are rationally incompatible metanarratives between which theologians and believers must choose.

## The role of cosmology in theological hermeneutics

To understand how the acceptance of deep time evolutionary history will affect Adventist theology, we need to recognize the macro hermeneutical role cosmology plays in Christian theology.

In theological thinking, cosmology is not a side issue. The design and history of creation set the stages from which sin, covenant, sanctuary, redemption, atonement, and eschatology draw their meaning and logic. Thus again, changes in the understanding of cosmology will necessarily unleash changes in the entire theological system. Besides, biblical cosmology assumes and depends on the biblical view of divine reality.

Those attempting to adapt Genesis 1 to evolutionary history will find themselves changing not only the length of time of creation but also its actual content and history.<sup>21</sup> This is so because we cannot accommodate Genesis 1 to deep time history without also accom-

modating the theological order of causes implicit in the biblical text to the order of causality implicit in the mechanism of evolution.

In short, accommodating the six biblical 24-hour consecutive days of Genesis 1 to deep time scientific history requires accommodating not only the length of time but also the understanding of the order of reality and causes involved in the generation of life on earth.

Changes in cosmology require changes in divine reality and action. In turn, the changes in the understanding of divine reality and actions require accommodation of biblical thinking to evolutionary history and a wholesale reinterpretation not only of Adventist doctrine but of many other of the understandings in the broader world of Christian truth and faith.

Moreover, such an accommodation leads to a paradigmatic shift in Adventist theological authority: Science and philosophy replace Scripture as the source of what has truly happened in history.

## Conclusion

The issue before us is not to decide between a literal or theological interpretation of Genesis 1 but between two rationally conflicting metanarratives that affect the entire scope of Adventist and even Christian theology. One posits God and ultimate reality as timeless-spiritual; the other understands God and ultimate reality as historical. One is rooted in Greek metaphysics; the other in biblical revelation.

These two incompatible metanarratives attempt to explain the entire history of reality. In postmodern times, incompatible metanarratives are the equivalent to incompatible metaphysics in classical and modern times. We cannot harmonize or rationally overcome conflicting metanarratives. Therefore, Adventist theology cannot harmonize biblical creation to deep time evolutionary history without changing its essence, doctrines, and theological system.<sup>22</sup>

Adventist theology and indeed other thoughtful Christian people have to choose the metanarrative on which

their theology stands. What can that be except the biblical narrative, literal and historical, with an infinite God acting in time and space?

Adventists and other creationists, therefore, need to reaffirm the theological understanding of Genesis 1 as describing the literal-historical-six-24-hour-day period within which God created our planet. Such an affirmation is essential to the theological thinking of Scripture, and therefore, to the harmonious system of truth that gave rise to the Christian and the Adventist Church and its mission in the world. ■

*Fernando L. Canale, Ph.D. is professor of theology and philosophy at the Seventh-day Adventist Theological Seminary, Andrews University, Berrien Springs, Michigan.*

- 1 Deep time and evolutionary ideas in this article refer to the origin of life on planet Earth, not to the origin of the universe or life in other galaxies.
- 2 See for instance, Fritz Guy, "Interpreting Genesis One in the Twenty-first Century," *Spectrum* 31, 2 (2003), 5-16.
- 3 Progressive creationism and theistic evolution are theological readings of Genesis 1, see below.
- 4 Bultmann's demythologization program described biblical sacred history as "myth." See for instance, Rudolf Bultmann, *Existence and Faith* (New York: Meridian, 1960).
- 5 Barth favored the term "saga" to categorize theologically the type of history Scripture presents in Genesis 1-11. Barth argues that "in addition to the 'historical' there has always been a legitimate 'non-historical' and pre-historical view of history, and its 'non-historical' and pre-historical depiction in the form of saga" (Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, 13 Volumes, ed. G. W. Bromley and T. F. Torrance (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1936): III/1, 81).

- 6 Jurgen Moltmann applies the Greek understanding of ultimate reality to eschatology. The world to come will not have a continuation of human history forever but will consist in timeless reality of the soul coming to share in the divine life of the Trinity. *The Coming of God: Christian Eschatology*, trans. Margaret Kohl (Minneapolis, Minn.: Fortress Press, 1996).
- 7 Pierre Teilhard de Chardin, *The Phenomenon of Man*, trans. Bernard Wall (New York: Harper & Row, 1959), 291, 292.
- 8 Bernard Ramm argues, "[a]ccording to the Biblical view pantheistic identification with Nature is wrong. God is not Nature, but world ground to nature as both Augustine and Aquinas taught" (*The Christian View of Science and Scripture* [Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 1955], 108).
- 9 *Ibid.*, 293.
- 10 Ramm, 115, 116.
- 11 ———, 116.
- 12 *Ibid.*
- 13 ———, 228.
- 14 ———, 116 (emphasis in the original).
- 15 ———, 116.
- 16 Not all representatives of progressive creationism will explicitly affirm that God uses the mechanism of evolution. Yet, the result of His providential guidance between ex-nihilo creative events follows the same history and development that science has reconstructed by using the patterns and biological mechanism of evolution.
- 17 Ramm claims that the way to fit evolution to creation is to understand it as "an element in providence" (*ibid.*, 292). However, in Scripture divine providence does not act from "inside" or "outside" nature and historical events but from within their flow.
- 18 Bernard Ramm borrows freely from Augustine and Aquinas as he argues that "God is world ground." Ramm, 106-108.
- 19 Ramm, 291 (emphasis in the original).
- 20 Ramm, 292.
- 21 See, for instance, Langdon Gilkey "Cosmology, Ontology, and the Travail of Biblical Language," *JR* 41, 3 (1961), 196.
- 22 In 1982 the International Council on Biblical Inerrancy "concluded that adherence to six consecutive twenty-four-hour creation days is nonessential to belief in biblical inerrancy." Hugh Ross, *Creation and Time: A Biblical and Scientific Perspective on the Creation-Date Controversy* (Colorado Springs Colo.: Navpress, 1994), 156.

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