

Ekkehardt Mueller

Introduction

1. The Evolution-Creation Debate

During the year 2009 people around the world celebrate the 200th anniversary of Charles Darwin's birth and the 150th anniversary of the publication of his most important book, *On the Origin of Species*.

Here are some opinions on the evolution versus creation debate and on related concepts such as the Fall. All of the following quotations come from people who consider themselves to be Christians:

Francisco J. Ayala, scientist and philosopher writes: "The evidence for evolution is overwhelming . . ."[1] "That evolution has occurred . . . is a fact."[2] "It was Darwin's greatest accomplishment to show that complex organization and functionality of living

beings can be explained as the result of a natural process, natural selection, without any need to resort to a Creator or other external agent.”[3]

On the other hand, scientist Cornelius G. Hunter holds: “How then can evolution be a fact if even the positive evidence does not support it very well? The answer is that evolution is considered to be a fact because Darwinists believe they have disproven the alternative: divine creation.”[4] “Darwinism depends on religion, but only to overrun the opposing theory. . . . Evolution, by default, becomes the explanatory filter for all we observe in nature, no matter how awkward the fit.”[5]

The British scientist-theologian Arthur Peacocke takes a different position. He states: “Biological death can no longer be regarded as in any way the consequence of anything human beings might have been supposed to have done in the past, for evolutionary history shows it to be the very means whereby they appear . . . The traditional interpretation of the third chapter of Genesis that there was a historical ‘Fall,’ an action by our human

progenitors that is the explanation of biological death, has to be rejected. . . . There was no golden age, no perfect past, no individuals, ‘Adam’ or ‘Eve’ from whom all human beings have descended and declined and who were perfect in their relationships and behaviour.”[6]

Theologian Christopher Southgate talks about “a spurious and equally unscientific appeal to a historical fall.”[7] And philosopher-theologian “Patricia A. Williams objects to fall narratives . . . From her perspective they are a misreading of Genesis 2-3, which [-according to her-] was misread long ago by Paul in order to provide the ‘catastrophe’ from which the Christ-event is our ‘rescue’.”[8] At least this is clear enough with regard to the implications: If there was no creation, there was no Fall, and the coming of Jesus did not mean salvation from sin for humanity. Many Christians are inconsistent by believing in Jesus as Savior while denying Jesus as Creator.

2. Colossians 1:15-20

We now leave these various opinions and listen to Scripture. In Colossians 1:15-20 we find one of Paul's wonderful hymns about Jesus Christ:

He is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn of all creation. For by Him all things were created, both in the heavens and on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or dominions or rulers or authorities-- all things have been created through Him and for Him. He is before all things, and in Him all things hold together. He is also head of the body, the church; and He is the beginning, the firstborn from the dead, so that He Himself will come to have first place in everything. For it was the Father's good pleasure for all the fullness to dwell in Him, and through Him to reconcile all things to Himself, whether things on earth or things in heaven, having made peace through the blood of His cross.

I. Context

1. The Historical Context

Colossae was a city about 11 miles from Laodicea and 13 miles from Hierapolis with its hot springs. We still know the site. I have walked the hill where at least part of Colossae is buried. No modern city was build on top of the ruins. Nevertheless Colossae has not been excavated.

The Christian church in Colossae was probably founded by Epaphras. Here also played the famous story involving Philemon and his runaway slave Onesimus converted by Paul in Rome. But the church was struggling with false teachings.

We do not know the precise nature of this heresy but can recognize some elements by looking at Paul's refutation. The Letter to the Colossians portrays Jesus in highest terms. The heresy must have downplayed the preeminence of Jesus.

In Col 2:8 Paul warns against "philosophy and empty deception" which may point to Hellenistic elements in this heresy. According to Col 2:18 angels were being worshiped. "Elements of the world" occur in Col 2:8,20.

Extreme forms of asceticism associated with mystical experiences may have accompanied that heresy (Col 2:16), and finally, the heresy may have contained Jewish elements such as circumcision (Col 2:11; 3:11) and references to feasts (Col 2:16). Paul mentioned also “human tradition.” Probably, the false teaching was a mixture of Jewish and pagan ideas, attractive to many people.

How to help the church? Paul’s struggle for the Christians in Colossae is recognizable right from the beginning of his letter when he talks about truth (Col 1:5,6), about Epaphras’ faithful teaching (1:7), and his own desire that the Colossian Christians may grow in the knowledge of God (1:9,10). The solution to the problem with heresy is found in Jesus, the correct understanding of his nature and ministry and a life following the master’s example.

2. The Literary Context

After a short opening salutation of his letter (Col 1:1-2) Paul expresses his gratitude and prays for the church (Col 1:3-14). The paragraph ends with

a reassuring message about the certainty of our salvation and the assurance of forgiveness of our sins (Col 1:13-14).

How has this redemption become possible? It has become a reality through Jesus. In the hymn that follows, Paul now dwells on Jesus, praising his work and supremacy (Col 1:15-20).

II. The Text

1. The Structure

The first part of this wonderful hymn stresses Jesus as creator (verses 15-16):

“He is . . . the firstborn of all creation.

For in Him all things were created . . .

all things have been created through Him and for Him” (vss.15-16)

The hymn ends in a parallel way (verses 18b-20) with Jesus as the reconciler and redeemer “who has made peace through the blood of his cross:”

“He is . . . the firstborn from the dead . . .

For in Him it was His Father's good pleasure for all the fullness to dwell, and through Him to reconcile all things to Himself . . ." (vss. 18b-20)

Notice:

(1) There is the firstborn of all creation and the firstborn from the dead.

(2) In him and through him all things were created. On the other hand: In him dwells the fullness and through him all things are reconciled.

(3) Things in heaven and on earth were created through him. And things on earth and in heaven are reconciled through him.

The very same person who has created all things is able to reconcile all things through his blood shed on the cross.

The middle section of the hymn-verses 17 and 18-emphasizes that all things hold together in him. Jesus is the sustainer. Everything is dependent on

him and his care

The hymn about Jesus portrays his all encompassing greatness as creator, sustainer, and redeemer of the entire cosmos. These aspects of Jesus' work cannot be separated from each other.

2. Jesus as Creator

a. The Unique NT Perspective

The NT adds a unique dimension to the topic of creation in the OT. We are very much used to have in view both the OT and the NT when it comes to a biblical teaching. And this is good.

But imagine we had the OT only. What we would hear about creation would be impressive. We would be informed that God created everything including humanity. This creation was quite recent, several thousand years ago, and took only a few days to be completed. Later the fall changed not only humanity's relationship with God and introduced death to creation, but also altered the entire ecosystem.

However, without the NT some aspects of creation would not be completely clear. Although the OT points to Christ as the Creator in a hidden way (e.g., the plural in Gen 1:26), it is the NT which clearly spells out that Jesus Christ, fully human and fully divine, is the Creator of all things (John 1:3; Col 1:15-16; Heb 1:2,10). These texts exclude Jesus from the realm of created beings. His role is not exhausted in bringing about salvation. He has also created us and has a personal interest in each one of us. In addition, the cosmic perspective, which includes more than the creation that we encounter, is spelled out quite clearly in the NT.

Jesus left us also with personal statements about creation, for instance, when he said that the Sabbath was made for humanity (Mark 2:27-28), or when he confirmed the creation account: “. . . from the beginning of creation, God made them male and female. For this reason a man shall leave his father and mother, and the two shall become one flesh . . .” (Mark 10:6-8). In another place, he talked about “the creation that God created” (Mark 13:19). He

also mentioned Abel, the son of Adam of Eve and understood him to be an actual person that lived on earth (Matt 23:35).

The NT authors followed Jesus' example and again and again connected creation, fall, and salvation. One is dependent on the other. No creation - no salvation. According to the last book of Scripture in a time of crisis God's end time people calls the human race back to the worship of God as creator.

Let us now return to our text and see what it says about Jesus. The various phrases all are somehow related to the concept of creation.

b. Jesus in Col 1:15-20

(1) The Image of God

Col 1:15: " He is the image of the invisible God." Verses 13 and 14 make it clear that we are talking about Jesus Christ.

That Christ is the image of God means that, in some way, the unseen or invisible God who created

us and saves us becomes visible and moves into our sphere. Christ participates in the nature of God and perfectly reveals God in human form.

(2) The Firstborn

Jesus is also the firstborn of all creation. This text has been misunderstood frequently. How does Scripture understand the term “firstborn”?

A human firstborn enjoyed the birthright (Gen 43:37) and a double portion of the inheritance (Deut 21:16-17). The firstborn son of a king received the kingdom (2Chronicles 21:3). The chiefs of the tribes of Israel were the firstborn (1Chron 5:12).

However, in a number of cases persons who originally did not belong to the category of the firstborn were made firstborn. For instance, Manasseh was the firstborn (Gen 41:51), but Ephraim, the second, took his place (Gen 48:20; Jer 31:9; cf. 1Chron 26:10; Exod 4:22).

Very enlightening is Psalm 89. It describes God’s lovingkindness and faithfulness. He had made a

covenant with David and had promised that his throne would endure. Speaking about David God states in verse 27: “I also shall make him firstborn, the highest of the kings of the earth.” David who was the eighth child of his parents (1Sam 16:10-11) would be made the firstborn. What this means is expressed in the second half of the verse: David as the firstborn would be the highest of the kings. The covenant with David was finally fulfilled in the Messiah, the Son of David. Ps 89:27 does not stress the issues of being born or being the first chronologically, but emphasizes the special rank, dignity, and authority of the firstborn.

In Colossians the issue is not whether Jesus was born or created. The issue is that he is the one through whom creation has become possible. This is stressed in the very next verse: He has created all things. If he created all things, he himself is not created. But neither is he born in eternity past. Paul parallel the “firstborn of creation” in verse 15 with the “firstborn of the dead” in verse 18. As Jesus is the firstborn of creation, so he is the firstborn of the

dead. The issue is not birth. Jesus was raised from the dead, but not literally born from the dead. But even as the firstborn of the dead he was not the first in a temporal sense. Others were raised before him. He was first in the sense that all resurrections whether past or future were and are dependent on his resurrection. Without his resurrection no other resurrection is possible.

Verse 18 shows what it means that Jesus is the firstborn, namely “that he himself will come to have first place in everything.” As in Psalm 89 so here too, being the “firstborn” is associated with being exalted as the supreme king and ruler of the universe. He is the King of Creation, and he is the King of resurrection. Both creation and resurrection are only possible through him.

(3) The Creator of All Things

Verse 16 begins and ends with the statement that all things were created by him and through him. The list of created realities in verse 16 is all inclusive and presents a cosmic picture: heaven and earth,

the visible and the invisible, and all the rulers and authorities. This leaves no room for Jesus to be part of the created world. He created not only this world with its solar system but all powers and authorities, and he surpasses them all.

(4) The Preexisting One

Jesus is before all things (Col 1:17). This statement talks about his preexistence. Not only did he live prior to his incarnation, but he also existed before any other thing. As far as we would like to go back into eternity, there is no time when Christ was not. He is not created or born but is the Creator God.

(5) The Sustainer of All Things

Jesus is also the sustainer (Col 1:17). All things” that were created by Jesus are now sustained by him. The verb indicates Jesus’ continuous sustaining activity of all things. At all times, even during his incarnation, Jesus sustained his creation. Without this “continuous sustaining activity . . . all would disintegrate.[9] “No creature is autonomous.”[10]

(6) The Beginning

In verse 18, Jesus is called the beginning or ruler (Col 1:18). Paul in this letter uses the word consistently in the sense of “ruler”(1:16,18; 2:10,15). Jesus is the supreme ruler. According to Rev 3:14, Jesus is the origin or ruler of God’s creation.

(7) The Head

In a similar way the idea of headship should be understood (Col 1:18; 2:10,19). The concept that Jesus is the head of the body, the church (Col 1:18; 2:19) is widened in Col 2:10. Jesus is the head over all rule and authority. He is seated at God’s right hand (Col 3:1).

(8) The One Who Has First Place in Everything

Jesus who has created all things and sustains all things will have supremacy over all things. This includes “the final great enemies of mankind, sin and death.”[11]

(9) All the Fullness Dwelling in Him

Col 1:19 ascribes fullness to Jesus Christ. What that means is further developed in Col 2:9: “For in him [Jesus] all the fullness of Deity dwells in bodily form.” The very essence of divinity is found in Jesus, even in the incarnate Christ. Therefore, he has the ability to create through his word and speak things into existence.

(10) The Reconciler

Reconciliation of all things through Jesus is stressed in Col 1:20 and applied to the Christians (verse 22). The Father’s saving activity mentioned in Col 1:13 and the Son’s saving activity refer to the same reality. The term “all” and the sphere of reconciliation, namely the heavens and the earth reflect, precisely what was said about creation in verse 16. Jesus the Creator God is Jesus the Savior God. Jesus has bought about a universal creation. He “effects a universal reconciliation, and . . . exercises a universal reign . . .”[12]

c. Summary

Taken together this marvelous description of Jesus emphasizes him as creator. At the same time he is Sustainer and Savior. In our hymn and its context Paul follows the Genesis account which moves from creation (Gen 1-2) to the fall (Gen 2) and to the promise of salvation (Gen 3:15).

The concepts of creation and salvation are linked inseparably. Therefore, it is illogical to give up Jesus as Creator or to reinterpret his creative activity into an evolutionary process and yet maintain him as Savior. To claim that Jesus has saved us through his once and for all death on the cross, a short event in history, but maintain that he has created us through a process, which takes millions or billions of years and involves death as crucial mechanism, is inconsistent.

Furthermore, Jesus' creative power is seen in the fact that his followers are spiritually recreated (Eph 2:10; 2Cor 5:17) and that Jesus has created his church (Eph 2:15). In Rev 21-22 we even hear

about a new heaven and a new earth. None of these creative processes which depend on Christ's sacrifice on the cross requires an evolutionary process.

On the other hand, if it is true that Jesus is the Creator, he should know by which process he has accomplished creation. His words carry a weight that surpasses all human knowledge. Since Jesus is the Creator, we cannot talk about the topic of creation and the problems related to faith and science without focusing on him and taking him seriously.

III. Application

1. Make a Decision

Where to we go from here?

On February 3, 2009, The University of Wisconsin-Madison published an article containing an interview on reason or faith with Ronald Numbers. Here is an excerpt: "Ronald Numbers, Hilldale Professor of the History of Science and Medicine

... , is one of the world's leading authorities on the responses to ... Charles Darwin's theory of evolution versus creationism. ...”

He is “the son of a Seventh-day Adventist minister, ... was educated in Adventist schools and grew up firmly believing in creationism and his church's literal reading of the Bible ... Then, while a graduate student at the University of California, Berkeley, he attended a lecture on the fossil forests of Yellowstone National Park. What he heard that evening sparked a crisis of faith that shook the foundation of his understanding of the world and his place in it. ‘That was the crack in the dam. I accepted that night the possibility that life had been on earth for 30,000 years,’ says Numbers. ‘Once I decided to accept scientific evidence against inspired claims, there was no stopping. I kind of knew it that night. I started questioning everything.’”

Explaining the belief in creation, which he obviously no longer shares, he says: “For creationists, history is based on the Bible and the belief that God created the world 6,000-10,000 ago. . .

. We humans were perfect because we were created in the image of God. And then there was the fall. Death appears and the whole account [in the Bible] becomes one of deterioration and degeneration. So we then have Jesus in the New Testament, who promises redemption. Evolution completely flips that. With evolution, you don't start out with anything perfect, you start with primitive little wiggly things, which evolve into apes and, finally, humans. There's no perfect state from which to fall. This makes the whole plan of salvation silly because there never was a fall.”[13]

Without question we have to make a decision whether (1) to accept the biblical teaching on creation or (2) to reinterpret it or (3) to give it up completely. For some of us it may be a tough decision, especially those involved with the scientific community. It seems that one has to choose between faith and science and yet would not like to let go of either. However, it is also a decision for or against Jesus, because he is both the Creator and Savior according to the biblical testimony.

I still remember the Bible studies I had with a gifted lady, a biologist who had been privileged to be on one of the expeditions to the Antarctic organized by the German government. Studying plankton she had decided to believe in creation. I invited her to address the university students of our churches, and we had an excellent meeting.

A decision to follow the biblical witness and the example of Jesus may mean to swim against the stream. In addition, it will mean to live with a number of questions-as other do too-because we do not have all the answers to the riddles of origin. Therefore, it would be a decision based on faith, trusting God's self-revelation in his Word.

2. Consider the Consequences

Personally, I consider acceptance of this option the better alternative. Why?

(1) Because I trust Jesus and Scripture more than "philosophy" and "human tradition" (Col 2:8; 3:16).
Writes Cornelius Hunter: "If it true that to err is

human then science is very human. From alchemy to radium tablets, science has a long history of blunders. But science learns from its mistakes . . . Scientists are taught that nothing is sacred—even the most popular theories may well be a mistake.”[14]

(2) I accept it because accepting creation allows me to gain a consistent picture of the Godhead and its plan of salvation.

God’s omnipotence is not questioned (Col 1:11,16-17). It possibly would, if we would assign to him an evolutionary approach to bring about life. Can’t he do better? The biblical God speaks and it happens.

Neither is his fairness and justice questioned (Col 3:24-25). If God/Jesus is able to create life by speaking it into existence, but would use an approach that causes immense pain, suffering, and death for multitudes of organisms, God could be perceived as a cruel and unfair God.

Bringing about living beings by the process of creation as described in Gen 1 attests God’s care and

love for his creatures. He takes personal interest in his created beings and in their welfare (Col 1:12-14,22; 2:13; 3:4). This is consistent with his self-sacrifice on the cross.

A creationist perspective allows me also to see God as a being of the highest intelligence (Col 2:2-3) and as a God of beauty who uses the best possible process to create a paradise untouched by sin and evil.

(3) I accept it because I believe that accepting the biblical concept of creation benefits humanity.

We do not have to live with split personalities and do not have to separate artificially the realm of faith from everyday life.

Humans have self-worth and dignity (Col 1:2, 12). They are not a product of chance in a tedious process but came directly into existence through the mind and the hand of God.

This allows for a consistent relationship with God from the very beginning of earth's history on

humanity's part. On the other hand, it is God who in his omnipotence establishes this relationship. This includes among others mutual sharing, God's caring interventions, and his attention to the prayers of his children (Jer 33:2-3).

Those who know that they were created by God have the opportunity to find real meaning in life and detect God's great plan not only for the individual but also for the universe (Col 1:19-20, 25-27). They live their lives by following the example of Jesus in love, an ethically sound lifestyle, service to others, and witness (Col 1:10,23,28; 2:2;3:14) .

They live with the hope of eternal life in God's kingdom (Col 1:5.12-14,27; 2:13).

They experience peace (Col 1:2,19; 3:15) because they can rest in God and can turn over to God their worries, burdens, and anxiety.

Conclusion

I pray that all of us will make the decision to accept Jesus as both Creator and Savior or/and hold

on to it, even during challenging times. May we all experience the joy that comes from following him.

“... by him [Jesus] all things were created: things in heaven and on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or powers or rulers or authorities; all things were created by him and for him. He is before all things, and in him all things hold together. . . God was pleased to have all his fullness dwell in him, and through him to reconcile to himself all things, whether things on earth or things in heaven, by making peace through his blood, shed on the cross.”

[1]Francisco J. Ayala, Darwin and Intelligent Design (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2006), x.

[2]Ibid., 73.

[3]Ibid., 19.

[4]Cornelius G. Hunter, Darwin's Proof: The Triumph of Religion over Science (Grand Rapids: Brazos Press, 2003), 10

[5]Ibid., 11.

[6]Arthur Peacocke, Theology for a Scientific Age: Being and Becoming-Natural, Divine and Human, enlarged ed. (Oxford: Blackwell, 1993), 222-223.

[7]Ibid., 132.

[8]Christopher Southgate, The Groaning of Creation: God, Evolution, and the Problem of Evil (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2008), 29.

[9]Peter T. O'Brien, Colossians, Philemon, Word Biblical Commentary 44 (Waco: Word Books, Publisher, 1982), 47.

[10] N. T. Wright, Colossians and Philemon, Tyndale New Testament Commentaries, revised edition (Grand Rapids: Wm B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1991), 73.

[11]Wright, 74

[12]Talbert, 197.

[13]<http://www.news.wisc.edu/16176>

[14]Hunter, 7.