

Mixing Darwin and the Bible damages ecological theology

Ask the Beasts: Darwin and the God of Love

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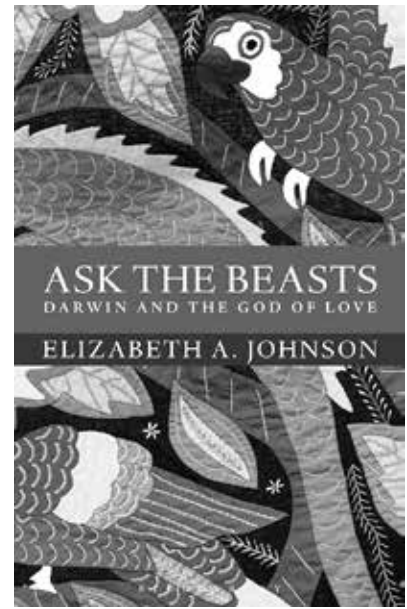
The environmental debate is a hot topic and has suffered somewhat under the ‘coercive consensus’ mentality that is so familiar to biblical creationists in the origins debate. This book brings together those two worlds as it tries to triangulate them with the Bible to provide what we might call an ‘evolutionary ecological theology’. In light of the continued debate among biblical creationists on the nature and urgency of our ecological task,¹ I will generally refrain from entering that debate. Rather, I will pay special attention to the role of evolution in this attempted triangulation of evolution, ecology, and the Bible. Evolution is the weak link that, as is well known to biblical creationists, undermines biblical theology, but I will argue that it also damages the Christian ecological vocation regardless of how one views the nature and urgency of the ecological task.

The author Elizabeth Johnson (b. 1941), is a member of the Sisters of St Joseph, a Distinguished Professor of Theology at the Jesuit Fordham University (NY), and a well-known feminist theologian.² The book’s title comes from Job 12:7: “Ask the beasts and they will teach you.”

Ode to Darwin

The early chapters are devoted to an ‘exposition’ of Darwin and Darwinian evolution, though a more fitting description may be ‘celebration’. First recounting his life with fervent appreciation, Johnson documents Darwin’s descent from Christianity into agnosticism. But the main value she sees in Darwin is his ‘ascetic’ devotion to the study of nature (p. 42). There is little note of warning in her recounting of Darwin’s saddening ideological trajectory through life (motivated more by the death of his loved ones than by his study of nature). For Johnson, Darwin is basically a ‘friend on a parallel road’ who can even act as a moral exemplar for *Christians!* However, there is nothing exemplar about Darwin’s rejection of Christianity. Moreover, even his practically idolatrous appreciation of nature, which Johnson is at pains to praise Darwin for, seemed to be stifled by his agnosticism in later life: “In later years, sadly, he wrote that even the beauty of the natural world ceased any more to awaken his admiration” (pp. 39–40).

Second, Johnson offers a eucharistic summary of Darwin’s *magnum opus* *On the Origin of the Species*. There is little to say about it that hasn’t been said in *Journal of Creation* (and plenty of other creationist venues) before. We see the standard depictions—natural selection as a quasi-omnipotent hypo-stated force capable of bending biology in almost any way conceivable; an unwarranted *a fortiori* argument from selective breeding to natural selection; the little blind watchmaker



that could ... given enough time; and, the evolutionary ‘tree of life’. Johnson does however inadvertently point out that Darwin never tried rebutting biblical biology. Darwin’s main foil was not Moses but Lyell—who held to a type of intermittent creationism trapped in a notion of fixity of species that flew in the face of simple biogeography.

Johnson’s final task in ‘celebrating Darwin’ is to trace the history of evolutionary thought subsequent to the publication of *On the Origin of Species*. All she really does is present a reasonably shallow apologetic for neo-Darwinism. She extols the explanatory virtues of neo-Darwinism as filling in the ambiguities and fixing the deficiencies of Darwin’s basic idea. It’s interesting to see the way modern discoveries have ‘updated’ Darwin’s ideas to the point where Darwin is now basically irrelevant. Darwin’s ‘slow and steady’ changes has been replaced with a ‘sporadic, speedy, and mostly static’ model driven by catastrophes—punctuated equilibrium. It’s also interesting to see how this ‘update’ to Darwin’s ideas is soberly propounded as true alongside the notion that palaeontologists have filled in many

gaps in the fossil record of evolution. Punctuated equilibrium is based on the paleontological fact we *don't* see such a plethora of missing links in the fossils.³ This doesn't demonstrate the success of Darwin's ideas; it demonstrates how malleable the core idea of naturalism applied to biology really is.⁴

Johnson then places biological evolution in its broader context—the big bang history of the universe. Again she waxes liturgical—she extols the beauty of this open-ended picture. For her, evolution is the drumbeat of the cosmos—intensely situational, yet with a seemingly innate tendency to complexify. It seems that someone forgot to tell her that we've never observed tornadoes in junkyards smash together 747s—nature does not spontaneously self-complexify in the way she needs it to.⁵

Theological issues

Where is the Father?

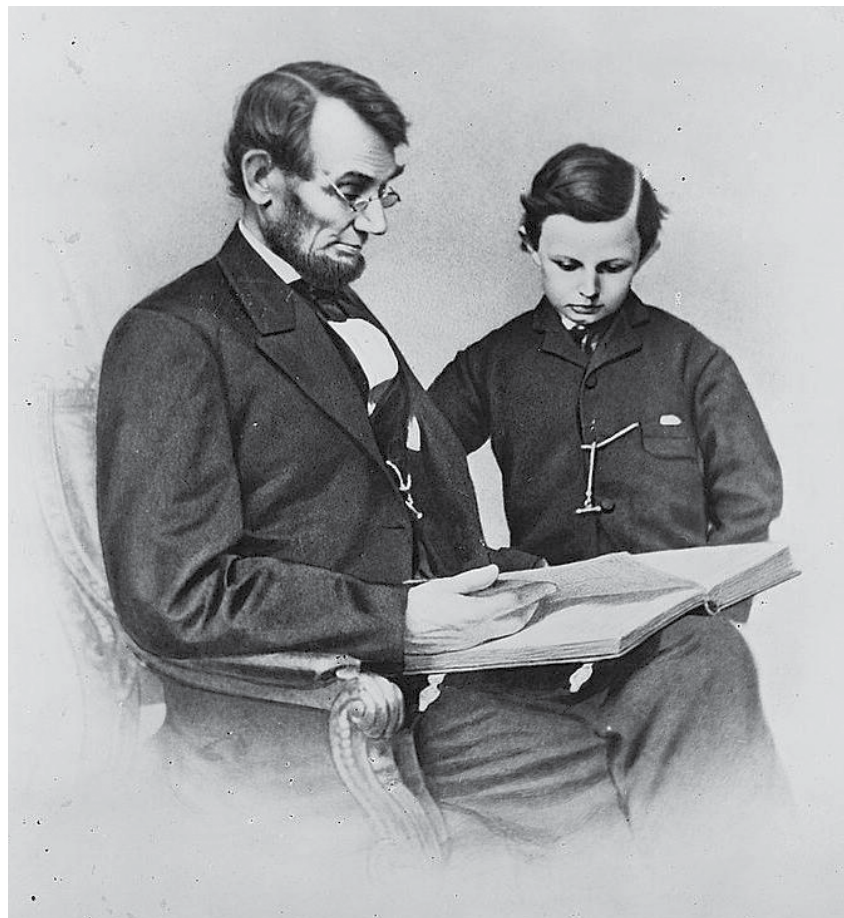
Johnson has a very strong disdain for 'patriarchal androcentrism'. It is one of the three main 'obstacles' she sees to building a 'healthy' eco-evolutionary theology (the other two being different forms of hierarchical substance dualism; pp. 125–128). She accuses it of working in concert with hierarchical substance dualism by associating men with 'spirit' and women with 'matter', thus making men more valuable than women. This patriarchalism apparently "can turn violent and exploitative with little compunction" (p. 126).

We can indeed agree that man-centred patriarchy has caused many problems. For the sake of argument, let's even grant that patriarchal androcentrism has been as bad for environment and society as Johnson says. Nevertheless, this still says little about paternity or patriarchalism *per se*. Moreover, the Bible clearly rejects

the notion that *all* forms of patriarchy are bad, since one of the most dominant positive theological motifs of the New Testament is patriarchal *theocentrism* (cf. e.g. John 12:28, Philippians 2:11, Ephesians 3:14–15, and James 1:18). What does Johnson have to say about this? How might we reform and reformulate the notions of patriarchy and paternity along biblical lines to provide us with rich theological impetus for the ecological task?

Despite being so vocal about the problems patriarchy has caused, she offers *nothing* on how to reconceptualize patriarchy as part of the solution. The references to Jesus and the Spirit run into the hundreds throughout the book but there are only nine references specifically to the

Father. She develops a rich and nuanced ecological theologies of Christ and the Spirit but offers nothing towards a positive ecological theology of the Father. She frequently discusses 'God', and where a specific divine person is the intended reference, it would most naturally refer to the Father. But there is a world of semantic difference between calling the first person of the Trinity 'God' and calling *him* 'Father' when patriarchy is a major target for criticism. For instance, she glosses over a rich picture of *paternal* care in Luke 12:6 for a more generic focus on *theological* care, and one that focuses on the care of Jesus and the Spirit when the explicit subject of the passage is the Father (pp. 233–234)!



Johnson's dismissal of patriarchy mirrors her silence on the Father in her 'Trinitarian' ecological theology, and thus lacks any notion that *paternal* care could contribute positively to our understanding of the ecological task."

It's hard not to be left with the impression that Johnson thinks patriarchy is irredeemable; it can only be part of the problem and can't offer anything to the solution. This is to be expected from someone who was described as "one of those hard feminists who think that the use of that label [patriarchal] is enough to settle a debate".⁶ Thus the absence of the Father from her positive theologizing is a massive lacuna, especially in light of the strident denunciation of patriarchy as manifested among men. After all, if anyone can offer a theological impetus to our ecological behaviour, surely the Father can, since not even a single sparrow is forgotten by Him (Luke 12:6).

Panentheism?

Another theological problem is Johnson's 'panentheism'. Classically defined, 'panentheism' means that the world is a part of God, such as is found in neo-Platonism and process theology. This blurs the ontological distinction between God and the world (figure 2), and is a blatant denial of God's transcendence and *creatio ex nihilo*. But is this what Johnson means? She defines 'panentheism' as 'all is in God', but this is vague; both classical theists (Acts 17:28, cf. Acts 17:24–25) and classical pantheists can use this

language. She tries to clarify what she means by taking 'in' in an 'ontological sense', which sounds like classical pantheism. However, she actually *affirms creatio ex nihilo!*

"... 'out of nothing' means that God creates but not *from* anything else. ... God's creative act ... presupposes nothing except the power of divine love which brings into existence something to be worked on in the first place" (p. 216).⁷

What's with this conceptual confusion? Olson believes 'panentheism' is being extended beyond its classical definition.⁸ He notes a number of self-styled 'Christian pantheists' who are using the term 'panentheism' as a cipher to emphasize the intimacy of relation between God and the world. As such, Olson rightly argues, they are emptying the term of any meaningful theological content.

Suffering evolution

Johnson also accepts that pain,⁹ suffering, and death are integral to the evolutionary process, and that any Adamic explanation for the origin of death and suffering in the world is inconsistent with theistic evolution (pp. 184–185). Instead, Johnson appeals to the 'freedom' of creation to

essentially get God 'off the hook' for the evils of evolution:

"Affliction arose from below, so to speak, rather than being imposed from above by direct divine will. Theologians are wont to call this the 'free process' position. Similar to discussions of free will, which is given to human beings by God yet used at times to oppose the divine will, free process in nature works in ways not necessarily always according to divine design" (p. 191).

But what does this 'freedom' actually entail? Dembski eloquently points out an irony in such 'free process' ideas:

"How can the freedom of creation, which results from a freely acting God who freely bestows freedom on creation, *force* us to become sinners and *force* the world to be a dangerous place full of natural evil? Shouldn't the freedom of creation rather give us freedom *not* to sin? And shouldn't it be possible for God to create a world whose freedom is not destructive and does not entail natural evil? Such theodicies of freedom require, at crucial points, the sacrifice of freedom."¹⁰

But worse, this free process view makes God weak, ignorant, or sadistic. Johnson clearly wants to avoid a sadistic or indifferent God:

"What John Paul II calls 'the pain of God in Christ crucified' places the living God in solidarity with all creatures that suffer in the struggle of life's evolution. This unfathomable divine presence means they are not alone but accompanied in their anguish and dying with a love that does not snap off just because they are in trouble. Biologically speaking, new life continuously comes from death, over time. Theologically speaking, the cross gives grounds to hope that the presence of the living God

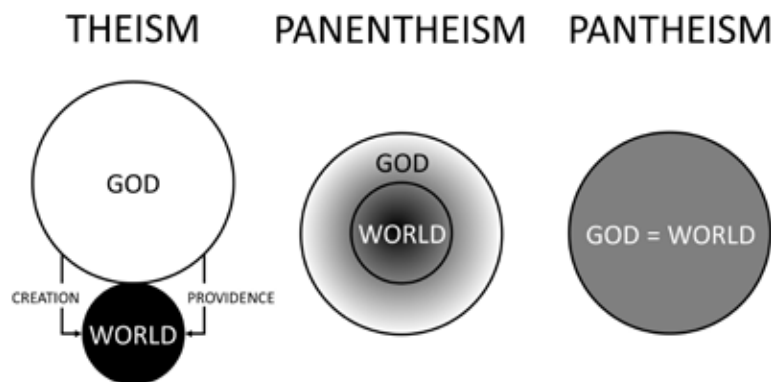


Figure 1. Classical panentheism locates the world ontologically inside God and blurs the distinction between the two. In contrast, in theism God is distinct from the world but remains in contact with it (in order to sustain it and interact with it), and pantheism equates God and the world.

in the midst of pain bears creation forward with an unimaginable promise” (p. 210).

And rightfully so. However, that leaves us with a weak and/or ignorant God, given theistic evolution. Didn’t God know that these natural laws, left to their own devices, would produce billions of years of death and suffering? It’s not hard for us to notice, so surely God would’ve picked up on it! Or is God incapable of controlling the beast he unleashed on us? Then why would he have unleashed it in the first place? Remember that, according to theistic evolution, the world was *made to be* a death-filled place; it was not *subjected* to futility as a result of sin (Romans 8:20–22). As such, even Jesus’ death and resurrection don’t provide any comfort, because not even that guarantees that God can set everything right. Sure, he can save his Son, but what about the rest of us? If the world does things outside of God’s control, then there’s no guarantee that God can overcome the evil in the world.

But Johnson does indeed want to affirm an ecological eschatology of hope: “To my way of thinking, a case can be made that for God to love the whole means to love every part. Hence to save the whole means to save every individual, every bear” (p. 230). But she also said: “To be created is to be finite and mortal. Such limitation is not evil but simply the condition of being a creature” (p. 219). This is contradictory; if death is intrinsic to created being, then we cannot hope for a deathless future. We will always be creatures, and as long as “To be created is to be ... mortal”, then we *must* be mortal.¹¹ Moreover, this not only presumes that theistic evolution is true but that God *had* to use evolution to create, which is absurd. God was free to specially create creatures that could live forever.

Nonetheless, Johnson’s ‘ecological eschatology’ may strike many as overly sentimental but the general picture she paints is not without

support in church history. She rightly castigates a trajectory of thought that devalues the redemptive value of the non-human living world, taking e.g. Thomas Aquinas¹² to task for excluding animals and plants from the new heavens and earth (p. 229). And she draws support for her view from John Wesley (commenting on Romans 8:19–22) that all individual creatures will be redeemed:

“In the new earth, as well as the new heavens, there will be nothing to give pain, but everything that the wisdom and goodness of God can create to give happiness. As a recompense for what they once suffered while under ‘the bondage of corruption’ ... they shall enjoy happiness suited to their state, without alloy, without interruption, and without end” (p. 232).¹³

However, note the crucial phrase for Wesley’s belief in the final redemption of all animals: “As a recompense for what they once suffered while under ‘the bondage of corruption’”. For Wesley, this was *not* a condition animals were created in, as theistic evolution maintains, but was a consequence of the Fall:

“As all the blessings of God in paradise flowed through man to the inferior creatures; as man was the great channel of communication, between the Creator and the whole brute creation; *so when man made himself incapable of transmitting those blessings*, that communication was necessarily cut off [emphasis added].”¹³

A rebellious world for rebellious man. The world reflects the state of its steward. The Bible is clear that human mortality and creaturely corruption resulted from Adam’s sin and thus were not necessary (Genesis 3:19, Romans 5:12, Romans 8:19–23, and 1 Corinthians 15:20–22). Theistic evolution *cannot* operate under such a rubric because death and suffering are *intrinsic* to evolutionary process but this is quite clearly contradicts the rubric of

Romans 8:19–22.¹⁴ As such, Johnson finds herself agreeing with Wesley’s ‘eco-eschatology’ while jettisoning the only framework able to justify it from Scripture—biblical creation.

Evolutionary ecotheology?

So how does Johnson try to draw evolution and biblical theism together to reform our thinking about ecology? Her first notion is a ‘conversion to the Earth’: “Facing these evils in a spirit of repentance, we need the grace to be converted to the patterns established by the Spirit in the giving of life itself. We need a deep spiritual conversion to the Earth” (p. 258). To do that, Johnson says we need a new paradigm to view the Earth through—the community of creation paradigm, which “positions humans not above but within the living world which has its own relationship to God accompanied by a divinely-given mandate to thrive” (p. 267). She says that the old ‘dominion paradigm’ of Genesis 1:28 and Psalm 8 apparently ended up facilitating all the sins that have brought about the ‘ecological crisis’. She applauds attempts to reform the paradigm along the lines of stewardship (p. 266), but they’re apparently still not enough:

“The strong hubris entailed in the effective history of this paradigm needs to be remedied by a different conceptuality of the human place in the world, religiously speaking” (p. 267).

This is too hasty. We can turn this back on Johnson’s ‘community’ paradigm just as harshly—since community members can be lazy freeloaders, perhaps we should abandon the community paradigm altogether! If there is any problem with the dominion paradigm, it’s not that it’s inherently flawed, it’s that it’s *incomplete*. But so too is the ‘community of creation’ paradigm. The fundamental lack in the community of creation paradigm is that, in itself, it doesn’t delineate what role we should have in that

paradigm. There are many different roles in a community, but in a *human* community most of those roles come with *responsibilities* concomitant with our moral abilities. However, in the ‘community of creation’ *only humans* have any real responsibilities within the ‘community’; the rest of the biosphere just does what it will.

She struck a better balance earlier in the chapter: “When interpreted as a whole, the Bible situates the function of dominion within a broader vision of a community of all living creatures centered on God” (p. 262). And yet, one still gets the distinct impression that the notion of *authority* does not sit well with Johnson. This would explain the lack of attention to the Father alongside the vehement denunciation of patriarchy, and it would also explain her ambivalent approach to the dominion paradigm—it’s clearly in the Bible, so she can’t just jettison it, but she clearly doesn’t like it either. But again, there are biblical resources that would’ve allowed her to reformulate the notion of authority rather than ignoring it, e.g. Mark 10:35–45, John 10:1–18, and 1 Peter 5:1–4. Just because authority and paternity can be abused doesn’t mean they can’t be properly used, even for the ecological task.

At any rate, where does evolution figure into this discussion? The main positive contribution Johnson sees it having is the extended notion of ‘family’ that evolution entails: “we are all kin in the evolving community of life now under siege” (p. 285). But that is not fundamental to even Johnson’s picture: “When parsed to its most basic element, the relational pattern of the community of creation is founded on the belief that all beings are in fact creatures, sustained in life by the Creator of all that is” (p. 268). And why do we need evolution to convince us that all beings are God’s creatures? If history teaches us anything, it’s that evolution *obscures* this belief because it attributes the origin of creatures purely to natural processes—a ruthless struggle for

existence that eliminates the unfit. As such, any benefits that might come from the ‘familial’ rubric of evolution are more than offset by how it obscures the doctrine of creation. At any rate, the discussion of ecological vocation can proceed completely without reference to evolution, as shown by the very same sorts of discussions taking place among biblical creationists!¹ Evolution is at best irrelevant and at worst positively detrimental to the ecological discussion.

Conclusions

Evolution doesn’t help either theology or ecology. The most it can ever achieve is to provide us with a cheap sentiment of ‘family’. However, that doesn’t even compare to the theological power of the doctrine of creation, a doctrine which evolution *obscures*. It gives rise to either a harsh deism where God doesn’t care, or a sentimental pantheism where God cares so much but can’t do anything about it. Both are but a hair’s breadth from atheism. Johnson is definitely closer to the pantheistic road, which fits our zeitgeist. It tells in her sentimental ‘pantheism’, but perhaps most poignantly (and ironically) in the absence of the Father from her theological picture. The Father is transcendent and the source of all authority; two things Johnson does not give much attention to, and even denigrates, in the case of authority. We need the Father’s care as much for the ecological vocation as anything else, but Johnson ignores His particular voice. Evolution also blunts our emotive response to the suffering of creation; evolution has creation suffering because God made it to suffer, rather than as a result of *our* sin. If creation’s plight is our fault *in toto*, then it provides a great emotional impetus to do what we can to alleviate its suffering. If it’s not, our hearts can become calloused toward God *and* creation, regardless of how else we

might describe them. The fundamental problem? Evolution is *false*; framing our vocations around false ideas and ideals will distort and destroy any good we hope to achieve.

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3. Batten, D., Punctuated equilibrium: come of age? *J. Creation* 8(2):131–137, 1994.
4. ReMine, W., *The Biotic Message: Evolution versus Message Theory*, St Paul Science, St Paul, MN, p. 350, 1993.
5. Carter, R., Can mutations create new information? *J. Creation* 25(2):92–98, 2011.
6. Greeley, A.M., *The Catholic Revolution: New Wine, Old Wineskins, and the Second Vatican Council*, University of California Press, p. 83, 2004. Andrew Greeley (1928–2013) was a Roman Catholic priest, sociology professor, and novelist.
7. Johnson follows Thomas Aquinas in allowing that *creatio ex nihilo* is consistent with an eternal universe (p. 217), which is a disputed position in church history, but orthodox. But unlike Thomas, she rests her views squarely on ‘science’ (big bang theory) rather than Scripture (Genesis 1:1, John 1:1–3, etc.).
8. Olson, R.E., A postconservative evangelical response to pantheism, *Evangelical Quarterly* 85(4):328–337, 2013.
9. It’s important to note that our physical pain sensory system did *not* arise as a result of the Fall, but we were created with it. For more information, see Speck, P.L., Pain and the Adam bomb; in: Ivey, R.L. Jr, (Ed.), *Proceedings of the Fifth International Conference on Creationism*, Creation Science Fellowship, Pittsburgh, PA, pp. 457–464, 2003.
10. Dembski, W.A., *The End of Christianity*, B&H Publishing, Nashville, TN, p. 31, 2009.
11. Theistic evolutionists typically won’t accept this, mostly because (if they believe in the historical Incarnation, death, and resurrection of Jesus) they usually want some sort of traditional eschatology. But if resurrection and eternal life are our future, then mortality is clearly not intrinsic to creatureliness. This also raises the question: why would God create us bound in mortality when Genesis 3:17, 3:19, and 3:22 together portray *physical* death as a consequence of sin?
12. Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologica* III (Supplement), q. 91, a. 5. Johnson rightly notes: “while this part of the *Summa* was composed after Aquinas’ death by students who drew on his teaching to complete the work, it is taken to be a fair representation of his thinking” (p. 301).
13. Wesley, J., The Sermons of John Wesley—Sermon 60: The General Deliverance; wesley.nnu.edu, accessed 27 February 2015.
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