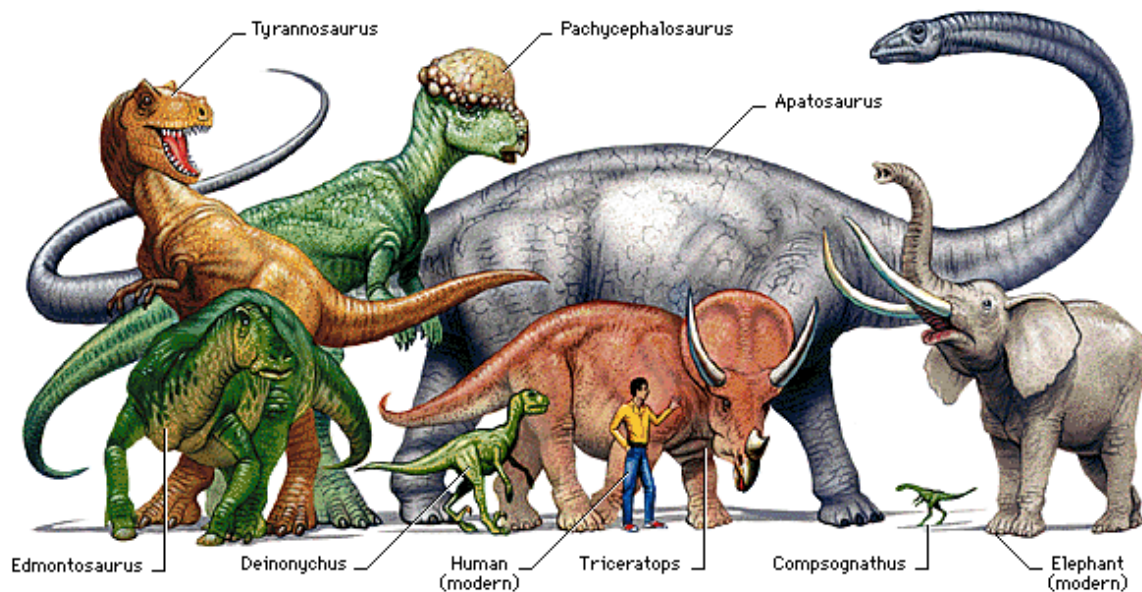


Evolution and the character of God

Dr Michael Jarvis

Some Christians have stated that belief in an ancient universe containing long evolutionary processes conflicts with the character of God. In particular, belief in biological evolution, spread over millions of years, conflicts with God's goodness. We also face questions, such as why did God create creatures like dinosaurs and then later bring them to extinction?



Each creative period, recorded in the Bible book of Genesis, has the words '*And God saw that it was GOOD*'. However, right at the start of this article we need to keep in mind that the Hebrew word 'tob', translated in the Bible as 'good', can also legitimately be translated as 'better'. In fact it is translated as better in at least 71 places in the Bible. It is legitimate to translate its use in Genesis chapter one as '*And God saw that it was better*'. In other words each new phase in his creative acts made the Earth 'better than before'.

Why was each creative period better than the ones before? I suggest it was because God's ultimate goal was the creation of mankind and all the preceding stages on Earth were steps towards fulfilment of that goal. Mankind are so important to God because, as revealed in the Bible, there is an eternal destiny that he intends people to be part of.

So, in addition to each creative stage being better than the preceding stages, it was also good because all that God does is well done and perfectly designed to fulfil his purposes.

Returning now to a consideration of evolutionary processes (changes over long time-scales), if we are people who believe that God is the creator and sustainer of all things, it is logical to conclude that aspects of his character should be seen through how he created and how his creation has changed over billions of years of its history.



The Bible states that aspects of his character can be seen through what he has made. For instance King David wrote in Psalm 19, *The heavens declare the glory of God; the skies proclaim the work of his hands. Day after day they pour forth speech; night after night they display knowledge.*

Paul wrote, *'For since the creation of the world God's invisible qualities – his eternal power and divine nature – have*

been clearly seen, being understood from what has been made... (Romans 1:20).

Those of you who have previously visited my webpage www.factandfaith.co.za and have read my previous update articles, will know that I have accepted what I consider to be overwhelming scientific evidence saying that we live in an ancient universe containing long processes and containing death from the dawn of life, as revealed by the fossils in ancient rocks. However, I have also accepted the evidence for the Creator being intimately involved in every event and process, and have experienced this intimate involvement in my own life (see *'Personal journey of discovery'*). This is freely downloadable from my webpage.

I often refer to myself as a **theistic evolutionist**. A theist is someone who believes that God is intimately and continually involved in every event and process. In order for him to be involved in this way he has to be much greater than the human mind can fully imagine. To remove chance from his agendas he has to be the unseen designer and upholder of all the events and processes that were needed, in order to achieve his pre-determined goals.

To better understand how I visualise this awesome Creator, may I suggest that you look at the four short DVD extracts that are freely available from my webpage. Click on 'Free Downloads'. This will expose the four DVD segments, as shown below. I suggest you initially watch:

'Size and age of the universe',
 'Quantum physics and Timelessness'
 'Creator'.

To see a detailed account of how I personally reconcile the Bible Genesis account with discoveries of science, please read the webpage 'updates' article *'Reconciling the Bible creation account with science'*.

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To see how an acceptance of an ancient earth, containing evolutionary processes, can be reconciled with the Christian Gospel message, see my 'Updates' article: *The gospel of Jesus Christ in our ancient and evolving universe*'.

To open the above articles:

When you enter the webpage www.factandfaith.co.za , click on 'Free Downloads' and then click on 'PDF Updates'. Click on the listed article and it will open up into a pdf. format

I am personally convinced, from the intricate designs and processes in nature, that biological evolution has been guided in minute detail by the hand of the Creator. However, we can also wonder why he decided to create in this way, spread over millions of years and involving events that caused pain and death.

- **Why did God bring into existence a vast array of life in the Cambrian period of Earth's history, some 600 million years back, and then later bring many of them to extinction?**
- Why did he bring into existence over 200 species of dinosaurs and then bring them into extinction?
- Why did he create a world with earthquakes as a fundamental part of geology, or weather systems that periodically create storms or tornados?

From a scientific point of view we can see that the laws and processes of nature are intricately interlinked and form essential parts of an overall balance in nature. Earthquakes and tornados are an inevitable result of the laws of physics and geology.



We can also see that earth has gone through great changes over millions of years. For instance, **it started out with very little oxygen in the atmosphere.**

Therefore, the first life forms were unicellular creatures with the ability to convert atmospheric CO² into products that included oxygen.

This depended on the very complex process of photosynthesis. These unicellular organisms were later followed by a variety of land plants that further increased the oxygen production.

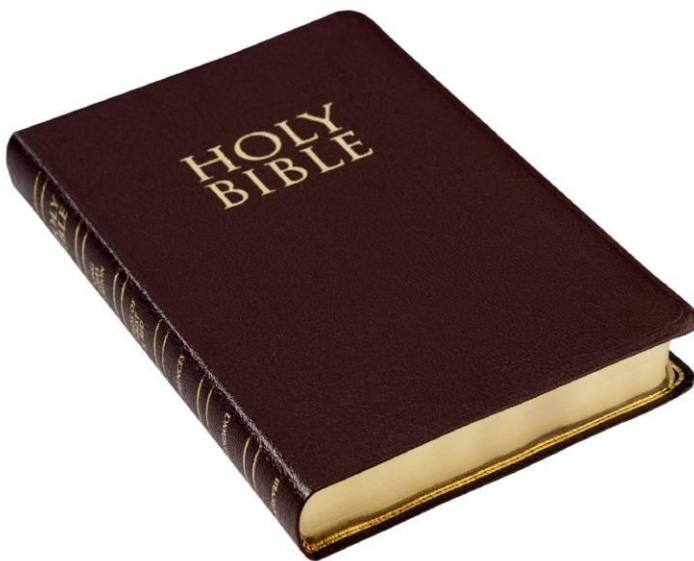
The early life forms were essential before air breathing animals could survive on earth. As vegetation increased there was a need for plant-eating creatures to keep the vegetation from becoming too abundant. The dinosaurs were an essential part of this process.

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However, in order to allow mammals to dominate the earth, and finally mankind to fulfil God's purposes on earth, it was later necessary to take the dinosaurs out of the way.

In other words, from a study of the earth's history we can deduce that God's long-term goals justified the means to achieve them. There were stages and long processes required before the earth was suitable for mankind. **Does this in any way lead us to conclude that God is not good?**

Are we entitled to tell God that he should have brought about his creation in a different way? **Are we entitled to tell God that it was not good to bring into being a system of living creatures that relied on predators and prey in order to maintain a balance in nature?**



If you are someone who questions whether these realities, exposed by science, cause us to question the character of God, then we now need to look at his character as revealed to us through the Bible.

Is God's character, as revealed to us through the Bible, any different to what we can deduce about his character from a study of his creation?

The history of God's dealings with humanity reveal very similar events to those involved in his earlier creative actions. **We see clear examples where his long-term agendas were only reached after long time-scales and after he sometimes brought judgments upon rebellious people.**

Just as the dinosaurs were pushed aside and eliminated from Earth when God's long-term agendas made this desirable, in like manner we have Bible records of similar events within human history. **For instance, the enormous flood in the Middle East that wiped out the first major civilisation in Noah's time.** For a detailed study of this event and the evidence that it was NOT a world-wide flood I suggest you look at the 'Updates' article '**Evidence against a world-wide flood**'.

We should ask ourselves whether such events tell us that God is not good, just or loving? We can quote the Bible as saying that he decided to do this because this civilisation had become corrupt and violent. However, those who died included children who were still innocent of such behaviours. Furthermore, elsewhere in the Bible there are cases where a corrupted society was transformed through preaching, such as Jonah going to Nineveh. So, we may ask why the people of Noah's time could not have been treated differently?

Most Christians manage to reconcile such events with God's revealed character of goodness, mercy, justice and love. They do this by comparing seemingly harsh actions with other Bible passages where it is made clear that **God has two major agendas during recorded human history.**

There are short term agendas. These are important stages towards greater agendas. For instance, the interactions of God with Abraham and his descendants were all stages leading to the greatest event of all time, namely when God became man and brought about a way of reconciliation between a rebellious mankind and a holy God.

This human history, leading up to Calvary, included many events where thousands of people died from plagues, wars, earthquakes and other events allowed by God, and these included the death of young children. Was God just, loving, merciful and good, not only to allow such things but actually to use them as judgments? The Bible specifically says that some of these things were allowed by God to guide a rebellious Israelite nation back to righteous living.

There are long term agendas. **The Bible makes it clear that the events taking place in our lives are only part of the whole picture.** Even those who died when the city of Sodom was destroyed will still face the final Judgment Day. It is only then that mankind will be in a position to fully experience the mercy, justice, goodness and love of God. The Bible says that Jesus Christ will be the judge on that great day. It is therefore very significant that he has already indicated some principles regarding how he will judge.

As an example, he spoke to people of the Israelite city of Capernaum who had seen many of his amazing miracles but still did not believe in him or repent of their evil ways. He told them that it will be far worse for them on Judgment Day, in spite of their superficial religiosity, than the people of Sodom who were destroyed by God because of their wickedness. He explained that God knew that, if those people of Sodom had seen the miracles that Jesus performed *'They would have repented in sackcloth and ashes* (Matthew 11:21-24).

In Bible passages such as the above, Jesus is saying that **a day is coming when the 'balances will be balanced'**. We will be judged according to the record of our actions. However, what we have done will be judged in the light of what we knew was right and in the light of the opportunities we had or did not have. We will at last be able see the full character of God in action and I believe all of us will then conclude that he really is good, merciful, just and loving.

Since our recorded actions will be judged in the light of what we knew was right, then those of us who have heard the Gospel message about Jesus Christ will be judged first and foremost on how we have responded to this greatest revelation ever given to mankind. However, **the justice of God will also be revealed when he judges those who have never heard the Gospel message or have only heard it in a distorted way.** Many of these will be judged much more leniently than many seemingly 'religious' people who may have led hypocritical lives.

Jesus will take into account how they would have reacted if they had been given the chance to hear the Gospel message in its pure and undistorted form. He will also judge people in the context of how much truth they had received and how they reacted to that truth. He will also take into account the opportunities they had in life or did not have in life.

For a much fuller discussion of God's justice, mercy and love, I have written a book **'Big Bang Christianity'**. This is freely downloadable from my webpage and contains, amongst other things, chapters on 'God of love', 'God of Justice' and the 'Gospel of Jesus Christ'.

So, what is the difference between the character of God, as revealed through the Bible, and the character of God as revealed through the millions of years of creation and through the evolutionary processes? I suggest there is no fundamental difference.

In both cases God's long-term goals justify his shorter term actions. His long-term goal through creation was the creation of mankind. All that happened on Earth was determined with that end-goal in mind. In similar manner, his long-term goals within human history involved events that were leading to other goals. The most important event that human history was directed towards was the coming of Jesus Christ and his opening up of a way for forgiveness and reconciliation between mankind and their Creator.

There is now another long-term goal that is determining shorter-term events. God is directing human history towards the return of Jesus and the initiating of his final plans for the Earth and also for the full realisation of our eternal destinies.

If we just look at the short-term events we can easily arrive at the wrong conclusions regarding God's character.

If we only look at evolutionary events, such as the destruction of the dinosaurs, we will obtain a distorted view of God's character. However, if we realise that these short-term events were leading the Earth towards a goal of surpassing value, namely the arrival of humanity, then we can better understand why the dinosaurs had to go.

In like manner, if we only look at the short-term events, such as Noah's flood or the destruction of Sodom, we can easily arrive at a distorted view of God's character. However, when we realise that he has been directing human history towards goals that are eternal goals involving humanity, then we can better understand the short-term events.

In addition, the Bible makes it clear that all of the Judgments of God are essentially redemptive. By this we mean that he was judging wrong behaviour because he loved humanity and wanted the best for them. Various Bible passages make it clear that while he was judging the evil he was still loving humanity. His judgments were designed to draw people away from self-destructive evil so as to discover his love, mercy and justice in their own experience.

When we look at the events around Jesus and what he taught, we obtain the much fuller picture of God's character. Perhaps it was best summarised by Jesus when he told the Jewish scholar Nicodemus, *"For God SO LOVED the world, that he gave his only begotten Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life. For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but to save the world through him"* (John 3:16-17).

So, the theistic evolution understanding, that God used long periods of time and evolutionary processes to bring about his creation, in no way conflicts with his character, as revealed in the Bible.

His actions during evolution are very similar to his actions within human history. In both cases his long-term goals dictated the short-term actions that he knew needed to take place before the final goals were reached.

I still have questions in my mind that are not fully answered. However, God's promise of eternal life after physical death puts all such questions into the background. Why does he not let us feeble creatures of flesh and mortality simply vanish into the dust of history? To my mind, his offer of relationship and lasting destiny is so amazing that I will gratefully reach out for it in spite of unresolved questions. After all, who am I, with my limited human intellect, to pronounce judgment on this awesome Creator or to try and dictate to him how I think he should operate within our space/time universe?

I have been enormously privileged to have had real life experiences that totally convinced me that God does exist. These experiences led me to seek more seriously for answers to my many intellectual questions. I believe a conviction that God is real is possible for everyone, if we meet a basic requirement. This was explained by Jesus Christ when he said, *Ask (keep asking) and it will be given to you; seek (keep seeking) and you will find; knock (keep knocking) and the door will be opened to you. For everyone who asks receives; he who seeks finds; and to him who knocks, the door will be opened* (Matthew 7:7).

From an early age it has been my desire to discover the reality of God in personal experience. I believe this desire resulted in the events that I outline in 'My Personal journey of discovery'. Similar events continue to unfold and reinforce the conviction that God is real.

It is this conviction that has motivated the creation of my webpage and to spending much time and resources researching the sort of questions that are keeping some people from taking the Creator seriously.

I trust that my own journey of discovery may help others to answer their own questions and in the process find that the Creator is not only awesomely great but is also good, just, merciful and loving.

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