



VERN S. POYTHRESS

# Evaluating the Claims of Scientists

**N**ews media report confident claims about human origins. Science, it is said, has shown that the human race had a gradual, evolutionary origin—not a single ancestor, Adam. If we are followers of Christ, how do we treat such claims?

The world around us largely follows the way of human autonomy. It says, “Think for yourself.” It regards the Bible as an ancient, merely human book, with primitive ideas. So it advises us that we should just accept what scientists tell us.

It is ironic, then, to find autonomous thinking described in the biblical account of the Fall. The serpent casts doubts on God’s word (“You will not surely die,” Gen. 3:4) and advocates making up one’s mind independently of God’s instruction. That is, the serpent advocates autonomy. Genesis 3 shows that Adam’s and Eve’s choice to be autonomous leads to death, spiritually and then physically. The stakes are high.

Christ teaches us that the Old Testament is the very word of God (John 10:35; Matt. 5:17–18; 19:4–5). If we follow him, we should have an outlook different from that of the world. Other articles in this issue directly address the Bible’s teaching about Adam and human origins. But in addition, our Christian outlook should encompass our attitude toward science more broadly.

Science is a human endeavor, and human beings are sinners. So we need to be careful. Human beings are still made in the image of God, so we should respect and value human achievements. But sin generates distortions in human thinking, distortions that God overcomes by Christ’s redemption. And Christ’s redemptive provision for us includes the words in the Bible, which have God’s authority and lead us into the path of godly thinking and godly action (Ps. 119:105).

## SCIENTIFIC LAW

So what does the Bible have to say? It indicates that God created the world by speaking: “And God *said*, ‘Let there be light,’ and there was light” (Gen. 1:3). God also governs the

world providentially by speaking: “He sends out *his word*, and melts them [snow and ice]” (Ps. 147:18). God’s word determines both exceptional, miraculous events (such as Jesus’ miracles, often accomplished by speaking) and the regularities: “And God *said*, ‘Let there be lights in the expanse of the heavens to separate the day from the night. And let them be for signs and for seasons, and for days and years’” (Gen. 1:14).

The law governing the world is God’s speech. God’s speech expresses his personal power and wisdom; it is not an impersonal mechanism. Modern science, in seeking to understand “the laws of nature,” is really seeking to understand how the word of God governs the world.

But many modern scientists have strayed from the truth. They think of law as an impersonal mechanism. This kind of thinking is a form of idolatry, conforming to the Bible’s description in Romans 1:22–23: “Claiming to be wise, they became fools, and *exchanged* the glory of the immortal God for images resembling mortal man. . . .” In ancient times, people made physical statues to represent false gods. Now, people often exchange God for a substitute in the form of an allegedly impersonal, mechanical law. This kind of substitution is still a form of idolatry.

Idolatry involves foolishness (Rom. 1:21–22), and foolishness leads to misjudgments. We must therefore be prepared to sift pronouncements made in the name of science, rather than merely submitting to them.

Does it really make a difference whether we believe that the laws of the universe are God’s speech rather than an impersonal mechanism? It does. The regularities that modern scientists discover approximate God’s word or God’s law governing the present providential order of things. But the Bible

distinguishes the present providential order from the way things were during the time when God created the world, as described in Genesis 1–2. So God may have acted differently during that time. Indeed, he may still act differently later on in history, when he responds personally to the personal needs of his people. He can work miracles, as he did with Noah’s flood and with the plagues in Egypt. God is not restricted in his actions by allegedly impersonal, natural law.

When Christ returns, the present order of the universe will be transformed (Rom. 8:21–22; 2 Pet. 3:10–13). Hence, we know that the present order will not last forever. By contrast, non-Christian scientists extrapolate the present order to an infinite future, because they believe in an impersonal law.

Christian and non-Christian scientists can to some extent work together on many modern scientific projects, because they both live in God’s world and they both rely on God’s providential control. But non-Christian scientists do not acknowledge God. They rely on him, but they suppress the truth about him (Rom. 1:18). And in our time many Christians are also partly compromised by the same idolatry, because the prevailing atmosphere in the practice of science is that of impersonal law. The differences come to the fore the most when we deal with miracles, which may involve exceptions to the normal pattern of God’s providential rule.

## BIOLOGICAL ORIGINS

We can illustrate this by considering the issue of biological descent. God’s present providential order, established by his word in Genesis 1, includes the pattern that trees and plants reproduce according to their kinds (Gen. 1:11–12) and animals likewise (Gen. 1:21–22, 24–25). Israelite herdsman relied on God’s faithfulness when they kept sheep and goats, and we rely on him today when we breed dogs. Human beings also reproduce according to their kind (Gen. 5:1–3).

Scientists who believe in an impersonal law extrapolate what they see today into the past, with no room for any exceptional activity of God. Mindless, purposeless evolution—the dominant Darwinist view—is the inevitable result. And this result *must*, by a relentless logic, extend to human beings, who are allegedly subject to the same impersonal laws as the rest of life. Given these assumptions, the conclusion follows: human beings originated by gradual evolution. The evidence has to be fitted into this overall picture, because there is no real alternative, once one accepts the fundamental presupposition that law is impersonal.

A biblically grounded view is quite different: God could create Adam and Eve by miraculous action. There is no impersonal law. There is only God’s personal control over all things, both the regularities and the exceptions. God could also have originated the very first life and the major groups of plants and animals by miraculous acts of creation.

## DNA MATCHES

When scientists first compared the DNA sequence in human chromosomes to the sequence for chimpanzees, they announced that the sequences were 98 percent identical. Similarities of this kind extend through the entire realm of living things. With minor variations, DNA in all living things uses a common code. Similar proteins are found in different species, as are similar DNA codings for the proteins. To Darwinists, these similarities confirm the common ancestry of all living things and the Darwinian model of gradualistic, unguided evolution. How else would we account scientifically for this impressive array of evidence?

But, in this reasoning, Darwinists rely on several assumptions. (1) Not evidence, but rather a philosophical presupposition, has excluded God from the process. Genesis 1 indicates that God’s speech has specified the pattern in which animals and plants reproduce according to their kinds. God is the source. Up to this day, every single new animal or plant comes into being through his action: “When you [God] send forth your Spirit, they [new individual animals] are created, and you renew the face of the ground [with new plants]” (Ps. 104:30). (2) Standard Darwinian thinking assumes a picture of *impersonal* law that can admit no exceptions. But God may have acted in exceptional ways in the creation of new kinds. (3) Darwinism does not consider alternative explanations involving personal divine purposes.

Might there be some alternative explanations for the striking similarities? The term “intelligent design” belongs to an approach that stresses that similarities between living things may be due to common design features. For instance, it is no wonder that proteins manufactured by distinct kinds of animals would be alike, if the proteins are designed to perform similar chemical and physiological functions within the cells of the animals.

The Bible does not enter into technical details about cells or proteins. God did not write it for that purpose. But the Bible indicates on the level of ordinary observation that human beings, animals, and plants all have reproductive processes. God created mankind, male and female (Gen. 1:27). Larger animals are also male and female (Gen. 6:19). Starting from these fundamental observations, even ancient people could observe many striking similarities.

## IMAGING AND ANALOGY

Behind the obvious similarities lies a more fundamental theme, namely the theme of imaging. God created man in his image (Gen. 1:26–27). Adam fathered a son Seth in his image: “When Adam had lived 130 years, he fathered a son in his own likeness, after *his image*, and named him Seth” (Gen. 5:3). We also know that Christ is the original image of God: “Christ,

who is the *image of God*” (2 Cor. 4:4; compare Col. 1:15; Heb. 1:3). God is the original Father in relation to his eternal Son. Adam is a derivative father. And human fatherhood includes an imaging relationship between father and son. Animals and plants are not made in the image of God, and yet they do reproduce according to their kinds. So we can infer that they dimly reflect or image the pattern with Adam, a pattern that originates in God’s Trinitarian nature. Animal reproduction is therefore analogous to human reproduction, according to God’s design. And the analogy originates with God himself, in the relation of God the Father to God the Son. The Father loves the Son, so it should not be surprising that, in honor of the Son, the Father as Creator designs many analogies within the created order.

Seth is an image of Adam, an analogy to him, because Adam fathered him. This father-son relationship included a biological aspect and even a chemical aspect, as we can confirm today by comparing DNA between biological fathers and sons. Yet there is also an imaging relation or analogical relation between God and Adam that is the product of God’s creative will. So when we see analogies between human beings and chimpanzees, the presence of analogies does not tell us what generated them. An analogy can originate either from biological descent, as it does when Seth is born, or from direct divine will, as with the creation of Adam in the image of God.

So the analogies between different kinds of animals have two possible explanations, not just one. Standard Darwinian theory allows for only one, namely a materialistic one, because it leaves out of its account the character of God as the personal ruler of the world.

We have always known that we look somewhat like monkeys. Now we know that our DNA is like monkeys’ DNA. So what? Quantitatively, we have much more evidence of a relationship. But we still have the same fundamental question, namely, what *kind* of relationship is evidenced? The evidence has to be interpreted. And the interpretation always takes place within a framework of many assumptions about the nature of the world and the nature of scientific investigation. If a scientist assumes a Darwinist framework of impersonal law, he is going to infer confidently that humans and monkeys have a common ancestor and that gradualistic, purposeless evolution is the explanation for the analogies. But a Christian not already committed to such a framework should contemplate another possibility, namely, that all of life reflects not only common design from God, the supernatural Designer, but also a pattern of analogies reflecting on earth the original pattern of God the Son as the image of the Father.

## WHAT SCIENTISTS OBSERVE

Science focuses on the quantitative analysis of material composition. So it becomes natural to focus on DNA. But

people are personal, not merely material. Quantitative analysis of DNA can never capture what is unique about being in the image of God.

We should also recognize that news reports have emphasized evidence that fits expectations. Early reports about DNA matches of more than 98 percent between humans and chimpanzees compared only those regions of DNA that code for proteins, because at the time those regions were thought to be the most significant. But these regions account for only about 2 percent of the total DNA. The rest was termed “junk,” and Darwinists explained it as an evolutionary accumulation of broken pieces. However, further investigation is revealing more and more positive functions involving this “junk.” Some of it regulates the expression of protein-coding DNA. When human DNA and chimpanzee DNA are compared in these regions, the extent of the match goes down to about 90 percent, or even as low as 70 percent, if we include regions where no firm correlations have yet been established. Scientists have found some regions in human DNA that apparently do not correspond to any known region in another primate. Where did these regions come from? This kind of information tends to be underreported in major media, because it is still largely a puzzle for Darwinists.

In fact, the sheer amount of information about DNA continues to increase, and much remains to be sifted. Christians would be well advised to wait patiently. We should believe that God, who gave us the Scriptures, is the same God who rules over the biological world. Scripture is in harmony with the facts of biology, but it may or may not be easy to obtain a full understanding of the complexity of this harmony.

## CONCLUSION

The world around us tells us to accept the latest scientific pronouncements as the product of experts who know much better than we do. As Christians, we must not overestimate our knowledge or our expertise. But we have in the Bible a divine message that we can trust. We ought to use its guidance. The Bible criticizes modern science for its idolatry. Assumptions about the nature of law and assumptions about what counts as an explanation or what counts as relevant evidence play a major role in science. □

*The author, a PCA teaching elder, teaches at Westminster Theological Seminary and is the author of Redeeming Science: A God-Centered Approach (Crossway, 2006). He quotes the ESV.*

