

# Reviews

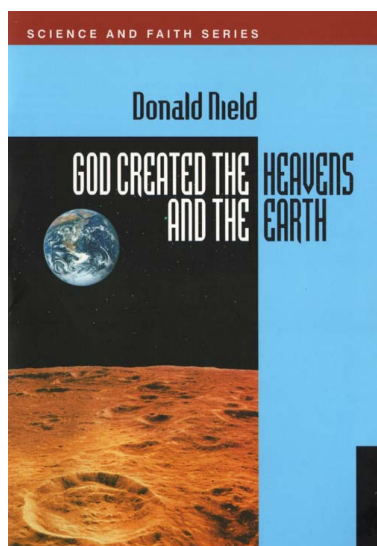
TELOS Books, Science and Faith Series, Auckland 2004

Reviewer: Dr Jennifer M. Hay (June 2005)

## GOD CREATED THE HEAVENS AND THE EARTH: SCIENCE FROM A CHRISTIAN PERSPECTIVE

Donald Nield

This booklet is written for Christians concerned about the place and implications of science in school and university education, and in relation to their faith. Nield offers a perspective of a practising



scientist and a practising Christian concerned about the spurious but damaging conflict that often arises between the two. His main point is that there need be no conflict, even in the often contentious issue of evolution.

In making this point, Nield addresses the extreme positions of science materialism and anti-science creationism respectively. He examines directly some of the claims made by specific people on both sides that are widely read and received. In doing so, Nield examines some specific examples used by both anti-creation and anti-evolution proponents.

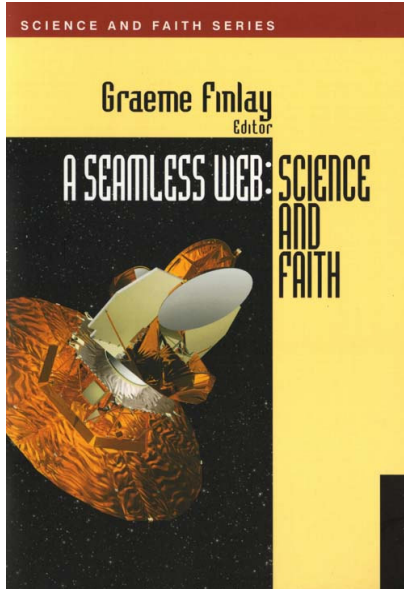
One position is exemplified by the popular writings of atheist evolutionist Richard Dawkins. Nield is not concerned that his science is conducted from an atheist point of view, but that he presents his faith beliefs of materialism (that all there is to know about the universe can be elucidated by material science) as if they are unbiased science facts. Nield says that, "God is excluded from science not because he is unobservable, but because he is the author of the natural processes rather than a part of them" (p. 14). By its own limitations, science must operate in the realm of 'methodological naturalism' which tries to understand how physical life and the universe operates by solely materialistic arguments without invoking supernatural elements. But this does not need to lead to 'metaphysical naturalism' that believes that *all* knowledge can be obtained in this way. Nield disputes the assertions of some Christians that methodological naturalism *inevitably* leads to metaphysical naturalism. He critiques, not only seven-day-creationism that denies any scientific evidence for evolution, but also the popular Intelligent Design movement (ID). He is concerned that ID is fighting the wrong battles. He says ID is vulnerable to the God-of-the-gaps fallacy, and lacks explanations of both mechanism and the nature of the Intelligent Designer. Many Christians who

have found an intellectual middle-ground in ID may disagree with Nield here. But the challenges he raises are worth being addressed. The positions perhaps are not as opposite as presented; he does note that the remarkable coincidence of extremely precise conditions of a myriad of both cosmological and biological factors that allow for intelligent life on earth is coherent with the presence of an omnipotent creator God. He concludes that there is no 'knock down' design argument to *prove* the existence of God, but that all the evidence is *consistent* with God as presented in the Christian Bible.

Don Nield's booklet is a good place to start in the TELOS Books Science and Faith Series. It is eminently readable and touches on creation and evolution issues as presented in the popular secular and Christian media. It does not go into great depth on any of the areas touched on, but distils their most important essences and critical issues. Donald Nield deliberately does not overwhelm by continual referencing, but he lists his main sources for those wanting to read further. In the same series, more in depth contributions on these issues are provided by Graeme Finlay's 'Evolving Creation' and 'God's Books Genetics and Genesis'. For broader perspectives into other areas of science and theology, try 'A Seamless Web: Science and Faith', in the TELOS series. I have reviewed these separately.

# A SEAMLESS WEB: SCIENCE AND FAITH

Graeme Finlay (Ed)



This booklet is a compilation of short essays by 13 reputable New Zealand and Australian Christian scientists, theologians and historians on their personal perceptions of the interface between science and theology. Perhaps the most remarkable contribution to this ongoing dialogue is the overall (although not complete) concordance of the authors from their varied perspectives and backgrounds. Their uniting basis is a comprehensive statement of belief of baseline Christian and scientific principles (presented on pp. 56—57). As introduced by **Brian Edgar**, the contributors start on the premise that scientists and theologians both seek after truth, and as we understand more, there can ultimately be no conflict.

The strength of this booklet is the wide range of topics and disciplines covered. Depending on our own backgrounds and biases we may have considered one or two aspects of faith and science. Most readers will find a broader spectrum of approaches here than they themselves have studied. As such, each chapter is an introduction rather than a comprehensive argument, but all provide references and further reading. There is a list of 'reliable' websites at the back of the book. Many of the contributors are quite personal in explaining the professional context of their understanding. Historian **John Stenhouse** refutes the notion that science and religion have always been at war and proposes that, only out of Christian culture could the depth of science we have today arise. Theologian **Nicola Hoggard Creegan** takes a philosophical view that theology is actually enhanced by an evolutionary understanding of the world. From a linguistic point of view **Stephen Pattemore** examines how everyday human communication interprets words in context and rarely takes each word or sentence as literal. This validates a similar approach to understanding the Bible – not to explain away the difficult bits we don't like, but to try to understand the meaning and intentions of the Biblical authors and Author. Psychologist **John McClure** touches on issues sometimes used against Christian belief, such as whether there is a soul, evolutionary and humanistic psychology, and Freud's theory that Christianity is unhealthy for individuals and society. **Gareth Jones** challenges Christians to engage thoughtfully in the difficult bioethical issues facing modern society, (particularly) with respect to reproductive technologies. **Andrew Shelling** offers both an explanation and defence of the appropriate use of genetic engineering in research and medicine and also calls for Christians to be informed and involved in the dialogue. A challenge is also emitted by **David Given** for Christians to take seriously our God-given role as stewards of the earth, and to be involved in conservation and environmental issues. He reminds those of us in the western world of our greater responsibility to

others, as we are the greatest consumers of resources. Similarly, geologist **Jonathan Clarke** sees Earth as a gift, but also our responsibility. Both he and **Ian Hore-Lacy** address young earth creationism as “lack(ing) both scientific and theological support” (p. 21), or, less tactfully, “shonky science (which ultimately) is as much of a problem as shonky theology” (p. 37). Physicists **Jeffery Tallon** and **Geoff Stedman** ask whether their Christian faith is compatible with science, whether faith can contribute to science, and if there is any hint of God in the study of science. In doing so, they affirm both orthodox science and orthodox Christianity. **Graeme Finlay** establishes the common biological roots of humans and other primates, while reinforcing our unique relationship to God, and the sacrifice of God himself in Jesus to make us into the likeness of Christ.

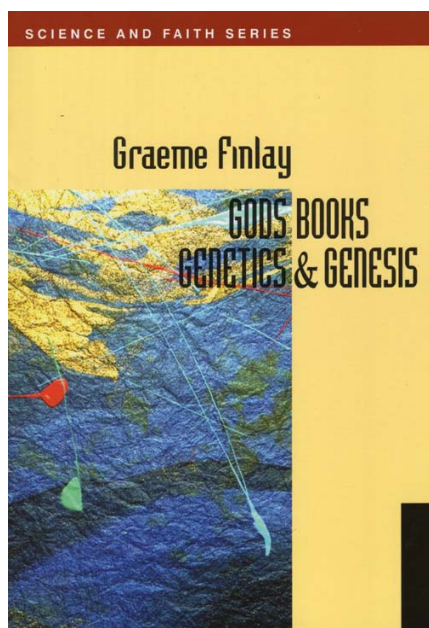
No doubt I have done each author an injustice above in highlighting just a smattering of their thoughts. Nonetheless, you can see that these issues are not merely abstract musings for a rainy day, but have real applications and challenges to our lives in the twenty first century. You may have had some of your own ideas confronted already, as did I. We may never agree 100% with all views proffered. However, read their offerings for yourself as a starting point for thinking more deeply about the relationships in theology and science. There are no easy answers for these complex issues in which we stretch our finite minds to comprehend the infinite God and his intricate creation. But I believe He glories in our honest searching.

# EVOLVING CREATION

and

## GODS BOOKS GENETICS AND GENESIS

Graeme Finlay



“Evolution” and “Creation” have been inflammatory words for some Christians and biologists for decades, evoking frustration and even contempt for the blindness of The Other Side. In Graeme Finlay’s contributions to the TELOS Books Science and Faith series of booklets the two are not only united, but the extreme positions of both sides addressed with both depth and breadth of argument. Don’t be fooled by the small size of these booklets. They are packed with insights and a concise distillation of the scholarship of innumerable scientists and theologians which he conscientiously credits, presented in the rigorous manner of a scientist prepared for the most piercing peer-review. In addition to the extensive references (as up to date as 2004), he lists other contacts and websites for further study. Finlay himself is an active molecular cell biologist leading internationally recognised research in molecular medicine, as well as having a degree in

theology and obviously being a committed Christian.

The overriding thesis of the booklets is that science and theology – most specifically evolution and creation – are neither opponents nor mutually exclusive. In his own words, “evolution is an aspect of God’s creation... the created order has evolved... Science and theology offer alternative and equally valid (that is, complementary) perspectives on reality... Natural science explores mechanism, Christian theology reflects on meaning.”

In *Evolving Creation* Finlay explores the history and origin of the evolution-creation conflict, and common sources of confusion. He differentiates between science and scientism, evolution and evolutionism, creation and creationism. In each case the former is a valid entity, the latter an extreme worldview based on that entity that disallows the validity of other forms of knowledge. Finlay examines how science has contributed to theology and vice versa, while not allowing one to prescribe the other. On the one hand, “no scientific fact can say anything for or against the sovereignty of God over evolution” (p. 10). On the other hand, “to the theist, God is the cause of everything, but scientifically the explanation of nothing” (p. 7). *Evolving Creation* is an excellent examination of science and theology generally.

In *God's Books Genetics and Genesis* Finlay gets to the nitty gritty details of evidence for biological evolution – especially human evolution within the primates. He surveys theological acceptance of evolution both in the late nineteenth century and more recently. He suggests how to read and understand Genesis on the basis of its cultural context, audience, and purpose for writing, and exams the theme of the continual ongoing nature of creation throughout the rest of the Bible. Finally Finlay asks whether evolution is compatible with the nature of God as revealed in the Bible, as many would dispute. In case you thought Finlay's work was 'merely' a concise compilation of the ideas of innumerable scientists and theologians, he introduces his own insightful comparison of features common to biological and Biblical stories, seemingly obvious once pointed out, but most not expressed before.

On a personal note, for myself as a practising evolutionary biologist who is a 'born-again-Spirit-filled-Christian' with an evangelical background, I found these booklets something of a revelation and a revolution. Initially I approached the booklets with some misgiving as I had dispiritedly stopped reading creationist literature many years ago; those I was previously exposed to either misunderstood or (I hope not deliberately) misrepresented evolutionary thought and gave facile arguments to prospective students that would make them and their faith appear ludicrous. As Finlay says, "if Christians have the reputation of believing fantasies about the physical world, they will be credited also with fantasies when they speak of God's self-disclosure in Christ" (p. 10). Similarly I cringed at the narrow-mindedness of some evolutionary biologists who saw increasing scientific knowledge as somehow invalidating the possibility of a non-material world. I saw science and theology as having the same goal – a search for truth (if of different kinds), yet I still retained some uneasiness of the dichotomy as presented by both sides. These booklets are for both Christians and scientists, for students and their parents afraid their children will lose their faith upon exposure to 'evil-ution'. There will still be those whose *a priori* faith in the non-existence of God will deride those who follow Christ, and those whose desire to remain faithful to God by taking Genesis 1 and 2 as a geological and biological text will be unable to receive the scholarly wisdom presented here. God no doubt understands the sincerity and integrity of both. But for those seeking both physical and metaphysical reality these booklets are a fresh breath of reason and reconciliation.

## THE REVIEWER

### Dr Jennifer Hay

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#### Education

- PhD (Pennsylvania State University, 1998)
- BSc (Hons) (Victoria University, Wellington, 1988)

#### Research Interests

- Genetic diversity and history of tuatara populations
- Biogeography of New Zealand tuatara and skinks
- Conservation genetics & Molecular systematics

