

BOOK REVIEWS

Chenoweth, Ben. *The Ephesus Scroll* (Melbourne: MST Press), 2016 (repr.) and *The Corinth Letters* (Melbourne: MST Press), 2015.

The Ephesus Scroll is an historical novel that forges two horizons. The first is set in the late first-century AD, when a courier is entrusted with a scroll containing the Book of Revelation to be read in the seven churches of Asia Minor. These churches were facing bitter persecution from the Roman empire. The novel shows how the text of Revelation, with its ominous warnings and great encouragements, related directly to the experiences of these early Christian communities.

The second is set in the early twenty-first century AD when a young Russian couple come across a stone box discovered some time ago in Ephesus, and which contains an early copy of the Book of Revelation. It portrays the efforts of these twenty-first century believers to make sense of Revelation in their own day. As the book moves between the two horizons, it provides an explanation of the contents of the book of Revelation that is rooted in the historical context and reflects sound New Testament scholarship.

The Corinth Letters is also an historical novel that forges two horizons, that of tensions existing in the Corinthian church of the mid first-century on the one hand, and the work of young people assisting with an archaeological dig at ancient Corinth in the early twenty-first century on the other. It provides a very readable account of the historical background to Paul's letters to the Corinthians and the complex relationship that existed between the Corinthian church and its founding apostle. It also reflects sound New Testament scholarship, and will be helpful to all seeking to understand Paul's letters.

Both these books can be read simply for the enjoyment of well-written historian novels, as well as for an appreciation of the historical background to these New Testament books. People will find both hard to put down, not something that can be said about most New Testament textbooks. Both books remind me, in some ways, of Gerd Theissen's book, *The Shadow of the Galilean*, which is likewise an historical novel, informed by New Testament

scholarship, providing helpful and readable background material for the study of the Gospels. I warmly commend Ben Chenoweth's books to all interested readers of the New Testament.

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Crysdale, Cynthia S. W., and Neil Ormerod. *Creator God, Evolving World* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2013).

I didn't really know what to expect from this book, which I picked off a bookshelf on spec about a year ago both out of interest and because it was on the discount shelf, and I love a bargain. So often the good stuff, that people ought to read but don't, is found there. And I noticed that one of the authors, Neil Ormerod, is an Aussie, and teaches at the Australian Catholic University in Sydney, while Crysdale is based at the University of the South in Sewanee, Tennessee, USA. The perspective of the book is Catholic, with an appreciation for the deep tradition of Christian thought back through influential figures such as Thomas Aquinas, as well as what looks to me, as one not scientifically trained, like a solid feel for the sciences (e.g. biology, physics) and the philosophy of science.

As the title suggests, biological evolution is taken for granted in this book, and for some evangelical readers that may be a deal-breaker. I personally see Neo-Darwinism as another knowledge paradigm, like so many composed by humans over the years to make sense of their world. One day it will give way to a replacement paradigm, though many of its composing elements will be carried over into whatever follows. So a further century or two of history will give its verdict on which parts of the Neo-Darwinian synthesis deserve to be retained and which ones are no longer persuasive. So this was not something that stopped me reading.

What I liked about the book was the depth of thinking it displayed in the philosophy of science, or you might say, theology of science. The authors are influenced by twentieth-century Catholic thinker Bernard Lonergan, and after reading the book, I feel more inclined to explore Lonergan's thought, too. Another clear influence to go with Lonergan in modern times and Aquinas in medieval ones is

Augustine, and the authors' most interesting contribution builds on Augustine's thought.

If you have ever read Augustine's *Confessions*, an essential item on anyone's bucket list, you might remember Augustine's meditations on the relationship of God to time. The critics of the day were lambasting Christian belief in creation by asking what God had been occupied with for all those aeons of eternity past prior to the apparently impromptu decision to create a world, as if to alleviate His boredom. Augustine makes the very wise philosophical reply that we ought to think of time as part of creation. If God creates time with the world and as part of the world, the question of what God was doing before creation with all that spare previous eternity becomes null. There was no 'before' as such.¹

This entails believing that God transcends time as readily as He transcends universal space. Just as He cannot be found in a certain location in our physical universe, He is not embedded in any of our 'nows'; He is above time. I think this is the right way to think, and solves some theological dilemmas, but let me tell you why Crysdale and Ormerod hold to this.

They are concerned about the trend in science and religion circles to treat God as if He is travelling through time as humans do, immersed in a 'present', looking back at a 'past', anticipating and planning for a 'future'. And rather than knowing the future infallibly, God has to adapt to it as it comes. The future in this scheme is fundamentally unknowable, since it isn't out there somewhere, pre-programmed. The present comes into being, as it were, right out of the blue. So even God can't know precisely what's about to happen. It is by definition unknowable.

In what I think is a brilliant, though somewhat obvious move, our authors point out that in the context of relativity theory, there is no single, fixed 'present' that is a universal reference point for all observers. Time may dilate dependent on the influence of gravity or differential rates of travel in comparison with the speed of light. It can in fact tick over faster for one observer than another. So whose 'now' is to be the authoritative 'now' that is occupied by God? No, it is a mistake to pin God to a certain point of time. God is outside of the flow in which we are immersed and in which we must, as it were, ride downstream to where the current is taking us.

¹ *Confessions* 11.13.15–14.17; *City of God* 11.6.

Here's the surprising place to which this leads. I sometimes wonder about the seeming distance and/or silence of God. The two seem closely related. But the authors point out that ironically, it is in admitting that God is *not* embedded in our time and space that makes it possible to understand how God can be near to us. If God were somewhere in space, it would require a spacecraft odyssey to go and find God, or we would be limited to awaiting His next visit from some impossible distance, if we wished to experience His presence. (If this is wrong, and theologically I think it is, we must think carefully how we are going to put words to the continued 'embodiedness' of the risen Christ!) If God were somewhere in time, we might well feel that that time was 2,000 years ago when Christ walked the earth, and that the subsequent millennia have been marked more by His absence, and a lot of churchy business, than by His presence.

But if God transcends time, then every moment of history is equally real and equally present to God. The moment of our birth, and the moment of our death. The birth of civilization on some Mesopotamian waterway, and the birth of the first Mars colony. And, for that matter, the birth of Jesus, his crucifixion, death, and resurrection. Every moment equally and eternally present to God, and God in turn able to be equally present in our every personal moment.

While God's response *to us* is itself eternal and unchanging, it unfolds *for us* in the fullness of time.²

My appreciation to the authors for reminding me of this. They say a lot of other things besides, and the reader might wish for a more robust doctrine of sin, or a fuller Christology to go with their thinking about the being of God. But this book crept up on me and made me think, and unlike most books I read, left me encouraged in spirit.

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² Cynthia S. W. Crysdale and Neil Ormerod. *Creator God, Evolving World* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2013), 128.

Mason, Karen. *Preventing Suicide: A Handbook for Pastors, Chaplains and Pastoral Counselors* (Downers Grove, IL: Inter Varsity Press), 2014.

As a committed educator in the Christian community on suicide prevention, intervention, and postvention care of those bereaved by suicide, to equip caregivers to minister into this challenging area, Mason's book is considered a worthy addition to any minister's library.

Mason, a psychologist, and associate professor of counseling and psychology at Gordon-Conwell Theological Seminary having worked in the mental health field for twenty-six years brings her expertise to this complex discussion to show practically how pastoral caregivers can be agents of hope to people at-risk to suicide. The book first addresses foundational issues in discussions and approaches to suicide before progressing to the more practical component where Mason then shares numerous anecdotes from not only her experience with suicidal people but also those of Christian caregivers in a variety of ministry settings.

The first four chapters are vital for caregivers to explore before engaging practically. Chapter one addresses commonly held preconceived ideas as to who dies by suicide. Here Mason explores what role race, gender, and factors such as biology and mental health play in predicting whether someone will die by suicide. Chapter two shatters ten suicide myths with a primary focus on people within the Christian community evidencing suicidal-ideations (*someone who thinks about suicide, has a plan and the means to carry it out*), which can tragically end in death. These myths are debunked in the "light of Bible and science." Chapter three flows on from the examination of myths about Christians experiencing suicidal-ideations to a theological discussion about Christians who sadly take their life and the historical responses from the church as to their future hope. These three chapters are critical for caregivers to explore, as preconceived ideas and a minister's operating theology can be a hindrance to offering people with suicidal-ideations help, and their readiness to extend comfort to those bereaved by suicide. Self-examination precedes practical engagement. Chapter four then offers an understanding of the historical and contemporary theories to suicide and the importance of a bio-psycho-social-spiritual approach in caring for at-risk people in the Christian community.

Chapters five through to nine immerse the reader in anecdotes and a multitude of valuable practical strategies in caring for the following five people groups: someone in a suicide crisis (chapter 5); a survivor of a suicide attempt (chapter 6); a caregiver (chapter 7); those bereaved by suicide (chapter 8); and the faith community (chapter 9). While some strategies overlap, each group have needs specific to them, which merit understanding when engaging care.

Mason writes in language easily understood by any caregiver with or without prior knowledge on this topic. People with prior understanding or working in this field will no doubt find amongst the strategies offered something that will contribute to their existing repertoire of approaches. Each chapter is equipped with discussion questions that can be used either in a group setting or for personal reflection. Additional resources are also offered for the reader to refer to if needed. Whilst noting many websites as avenues for referring people in crisis, this will not benefit those located outside of the United States. Caregivers will need to identify appropriate resources from within their community or from country specific websites committed to suicide prevention.

With an increasing number of people struggling with suicidal-ideations, tragically even within the Christian community, it is needful for caregivers to equip themselves with the relevant tools to be able to intervene when they find themselves confronted with someone in crisis. This book is certainly a step in that direction.

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Rau, Gerald. *Mapping the Origins Debate* (Leicester: InterVarsity, 2012).

I dare anyone to read all the books available on creation, evolution, the book of Genesis, or science and religion. There would hardly be time if you did nothing else. So it isn't uncommon to get that "I've heard all this before" feeling.

However, this approachable book by Gerald Rau, past adjunct professor teaching biology at Wheaton College in the US, with a

doctorate from Cornell University, stood out for its clarity on the topic of origins. I suppose it should; his current role is “founder and chief editor at Professional English International, Inc., a team providing high quality editing services in English academic writing, based at National Chung Cheng University in Chiayi, Taiwan.”³

Rau lays out the state of play in creation-evolution discussions using six categories that prove quite helpful:

1. *Naturalistic evolution*, or atheistic evolution, the Richard Dawkins style of evolution that just happens to have happened, with no-one intending it. Our world is an accidental freak of nature, and here we are scratching our heads wondering what happened.
2. *Non-teleological evolution*, which is a kind of deistic version amenable to process theologians. God is responsible for creation, but more or less just lit the fuse that set off the Big Bang. He didn't set the course for where it would end up, other than, says Rau at one point, that he wanted sentient life to appear.
3. *Planned evolution* holds that God has set up the universe from the start to lead to the outcomes he sought, including the appearance of humans. So this is a teleological version, one with an intended outcome, but the system is so well designed that God need not, and does not, intervene subsequently.
4. *Directed evolution* is interventionist as well as teleological, permitting that God actively directs the evolutionary process.
5. *Old-earth creationism* effectively breaks the links, or better, finds significant missing links, in the evolutionary chain. The earth is indeed old on this scheme, but major new stages such as the Cambrian explosion, and in particular, the first humans, reflect the direct creative work of God. There is no true evolutionary tree.
6. Finally, *young-earth creationism* holds to a literal Genesis creation week and would connect the various Old Testament genealogies to come up with quite a short world

³ https://www.ivpress.com/cgi-ivpress/author.pl/author_id=6583.

chronology. We might say that earth history is not any older than human history in any real sense here.

Rau proves this schema to be quite workable as he explains what the general evidence is, and then what each model has to say, about four areas of inquiry:

- The origin of the universe
- The origin of life
- The origin of species
- The origin of humans.

Rau says that he is pitching this book at late high schoolers and college students, so I was a little worried that it might come across as simplistic. But my sense is that Rau is quite competent to speak on a range of areas; I learned a lot about such things as recent developments in comparisons between the recently-sequenced genomes of chimpanzees and humans. To put the outcome of that point very briefly, the two sets of code (3 billion base pairs in the human genome v. 2.7 billion base pairs for the chimp) have quite a range of variations from one another, yet are still alike enough that it makes sense to speak of which sequences are the same and where the differences lie. Rau offers many intriguing and often readily accessible references for follow-up on such points.

Let me close with one group out of many apt quotes I might have chosen, suitable because it reflects my own thinking so well:

The question of origins is a puzzle, and it is clear that no model has put the whole puzzle together yet... We are all working on the same puzzle and must eventually work together if it is to be completed... There would not be a debate unless there were reasonable arguments on each side.⁴

I often find myself wanting to concede to each end of the spectrum, strict creation and the evolutionary paradigm, that I am convinced on some points and not at all persuaded by others. I see various pieces that look as though they belong in the puzzle, but I haven't seen anyone properly solve the puzzle yet. That's a hard sell for others, because our hearers are sometimes expecting that, while they haven't themselves figured out the puzzle of origins yet, there must be an expert who has, and maybe it's us. As a theological educator, I have certainly learned a few things about the issue, but I

⁴ Gerald Rau, *Mapping the Origins Debate* (Leicester: InterVarsity, 2012), 153–155.

don't have that ready-to-order solution that is often sought. Perhaps a little healthy humility is in order here – to let God be God, the One who knows the answers, and not presume to know too much. Rau complains late in the book that it's chiefly hubris (i.e. pride) that fuels the fights that thrive in this area, and I wonder if he might be right.

What Rau made me feel that perhaps this cautious, piecemeal approach to the discovery of the truth about origins has some legitimacy.

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