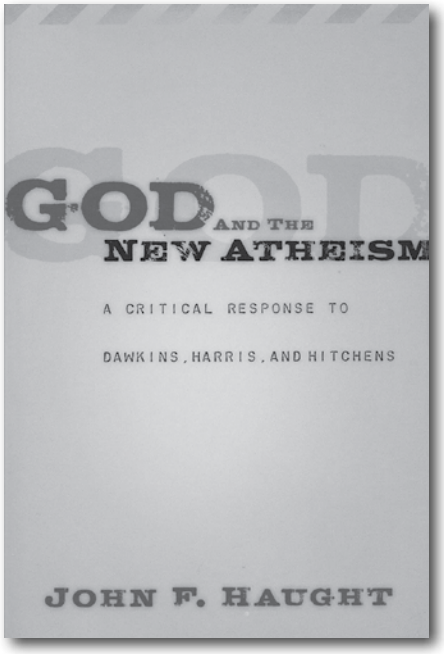
# The god of evolution

A review of
*God and the New Atheism: A Critical Response to Dawkins, Harris, and Hitchens:*
*by John F. Haught*
Westminster John Knox Press, Louisville, KY, 2008




*Brian Thomas*

Professor Haught is described on the back cover as 'one of the world's leading thinkers in the field of theology and science.' With that distinction, he has attempted to offer considered critiques of the bestselling writings from the 'new atheists'. The 107-page book is well written and non-technical. The author has succeeded in pointing out several flaws in the latest atheistic arguments. However, he stops short of the quantity and quality of critiques that could be formed in a book of this length. Instead, much of the text is devoted to false characterization of the young-earth creation (YEC) view, and this seems incommensurate with the stated purpose of the book.

At the very outset, Haught's position as a theistic evolutionist becomes evident, but here also begins a diatribe of misdirected condescension toward YEC. 'However, even though the new atheists reject the God of creationists, fundamentalists, terrorists, and intelligent design (ID) advocates, it is not without interest that they have decided to debate with these extremists rather than with any major theologians' (p. xv). Perhaps it has not occurred to Haught that the reason new atheists have debated defenders of the plain understanding of Scriptures is not so they can find an easier target. Rather, it is because atheists rightly understand that every Christian doctrine has its origin in plainly understood biblical history. However, the author's evolutionary philosophy ('… I fully embrace Darwinian biology' (p. 50)) requires him to marginalize creationists as extremists, rather than deal with their substantive scientific arguments against evolution and for a plain hermeneutic.

## Everyone *ought* to be athiests?

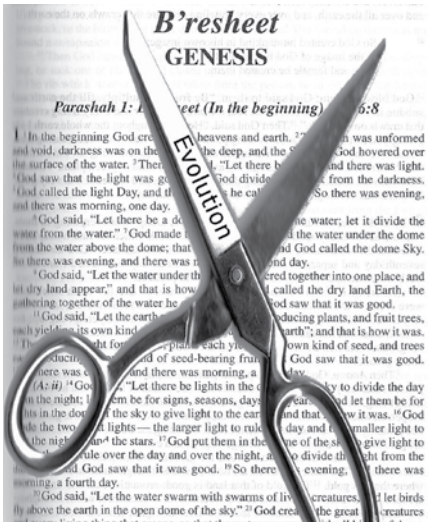
The first chapter contains a good summary of new atheist's axioms. First, these atheists assert that we all suffer and fall short of happiness. Second, religious faith is the cause of that suffering. Further, 'faith' to the new atheist is defined as 'belief without evidence', and 'evidence' is restricted to empirical science. Then a third claim distinguishes new atheism from the older varieties: To end suffering, we must abolish faith from the face of the earth. Dawkins corroborates this with, '… I do everything in my power to warn people against faith itself' (quoted on p. 9). Finally, following the path of science will lead to true enlightenment.

Haught insightfully compares these new atheists with the older, braver ones like Fauerbach, Marx and Freud who were willing to conceptualize atheism to its logical conclusions. These new atheists seem to be oblivious to the actual unlivability of atheism. 'Before you get too comfortable with the godless world you long for, you will be required by the logic of any consistent skepticism to pass through the disorienting wilderness of nihilism' (p. 22). Haught skillfully identifies how the old hard-core atheists like Sartre were never quite able to eradicate transcendent moral values from all of life, but *they* at least tried. He then rightly outlines that the highly moral, vociferously righteous tone of the new (soft-core) atheists is grounded in a universal 'rightness' that should not be possible unless there is a God. New atheists do not even address this inconsistency: if there is no Prescriber, then how can anyone assert any universal moral prescription?

'Their hatred of religious faith is so palpable that the pages of their books fairly quiver in our hands. Such outrage, however, can arise only from a sense of being deeply grounded in an unmovable realm of "rightness"' states Haught (p. 25). However, without God, there is no such unmovable realm. Further, '… if you are Darwinian, how can your moral values ultimately be anything more than blind contrivances of evolutionary selection?' (p. 26). Therefore, since the moral indignation characteristic of new atheism is itself not a logical product of a consistent atheistic worldview, it must have been borrowed from the theistic worldview, otherwise known as reality.

## 'Scientism' is self-refuting

Another flaw of new (and old) atheism that Haught easily exposes is the leaky epistemology he calls 'scientism'. This is the claim that only empirical science (use of the scientific method) can lead us to true knowledge. This is self-refuting. To expose it, one need only ask, 'What experiment demonstrated that science is the only way to know something?' Since there is no such experiment, these atheists must take scientism on faith. This being the case, their demands that God reveal Himself solely through experimentation are based on a faulty epistemology, do not have to be met, and should not be met. 'But if faith




Complete Jewish Bible, Translation by David H. Stern. Clarksville, MD., Jewish New Testament Publications (1998), p. 1.

Every essential doctrine of Christianity is rooted in the history of Genesis. Christian scholars like Haught replace Genesis history with that of evolution, confident that science has proven evolution and that God oversaw it. This approach, aside from being scientifically inaccurate, results in a flimsy shell of Christianity, supported by the rhetoric of man rather than the Words of God Himself.

in God requires independent scientific confirmation, what about the colossal faith our new atheists place in science itself?' (p. 45).

Though it may be 'silly for anyone to maintain that science can decide the question of God', (p. 18) and it is true that there is no repeatable experiment one can perform whereby God Himself oozes out of a test tube to greet us, Haught takes the extreme position that science has nothing to say whatever about God. '… Revelation has nothing to do with the communication of scientific information, … therefore a Biblical theology of origins does not contradict Darwinian science' (p. 32). If this is the case, then one wonders what we are to do with texts that have scientific implications, like kinds reproducing 'after their kind', or the explicit descriptions of a worldwide flood. If we would favour exploration of 'deeper levels' (p. 32) of meaning beneath the plain understanding of the text, then who is to say when the deeper meaning stops, or which deeper meaning is correct, or what, therefore, the point would be in having a plainly understandable text which is not to be plainly understood? Of course, Haught falsely accuses creationists of exercising a wooden literal hermeneutic instead of the grammatical-historical hermeneutic that actually characterizes YEC literature.[1] In this, the author is just as guilty as the new atheists of ignorance of the real positions of those they are critiquing.

## Shame on creationists

According to Haught, creationists can be characterized as 'rejecting evolution without ever having taken a course in biology' (p. 29), ignoring the many Ph.D. biologists who reject it, including those who work for CMI and ICR. These creationists of his own imagination believe 'there is nothing beneath the surface of the texts they are reading', and 'there is no reason to look beneath the literal sense … when circumstances change dramatically from one age to the next,' (p. 30) and having an 'anachronistic exegesis' wherein 'creationists are wrong to read the creation stories as science' (p. 35), although we actually read them as *history*.

Also, creationists 'consider it pointless to expose their own beliefs to open dialogue' (p. 39), 'are too willing to think of God as a "hypothesis"', and he maintains that 'the universe they want would have to have been finished to perfection on the first day of creation' (p. 105). It is apparently fortunate for Haught that he is not one of the 'few theologians today [who] … would take seriously … the scientific creationism from which [Christopher] Hitchens[2] seems to have picked up his own exegetical style' (p. 32). Some of these harsh characterizations may accurately describe fringe creationists, and we would benefit from examining each of them. However, comparison with mainstream creationist literature reveals them as largely false. Rather than labouring to collate already existing refutations of these allegations, we will leave the burden of proof with the accuser.

In contrast to the ignorance that supposedly characterizes YEC, our author admonishes us to 'delight in these factually irreconcilable accounts of Jesus' birth (from Matthew and Luke)' (p. 31), and to 'take contradictions in stride' (p. 33). However, a god who cannot write without contradictions may not be worthy of our devotion. Also, the apparent contradictions like the differing geneologies in the gospels have been solved (a fact available to any willing learner with fifteen minutes on the internet).[3] When it is revealed that there are no real contradictions to be found in the Bible after all, one wonders from whence Haught will derive his delight.

Haught points out that the new atheists share with religious fundamentalists an inflated attraction to an 'uncomplicated worldview', and throughout the text he revels in his more sophisticated, multi-layered and therefore superior sensitivity.

This gnosticism itself turns out to be self-refuting. Haught seems to imply that either we foolishly and naïvely take the plain understanding of the text, or we more wisely accept that true truth comes only through 'the deepest and most hidden recesses of our consciousness, at a level of depth that we can never bring into clear focus'(p. 51). Does he want us to take the plain meaning of *his* text when he insists that we take a non-plain meaning of the biblical text? Haught claims that, 'we cannot grasp meaning and truth in an absolute and final way.' Are we to actually grasp the truth that we cannot grasp the truth?

Haught has concluded that it is pitiable for atheists and creationists alike to think that there is 'no more than one explanatory slot' (p. 90). He claims that he is not going 'to exchange the richly textured understanding of the world for shallowness of single level explanation' (p. 90). But are we to take his claim at the single level at which it is presented to us, or does it carry a richly textured set of alternate meanings? Again, he conclusively asserts, 'Humanity's religious search, including that of Christians, is never conclusive' (p. 98). In sum, then, Haught's philosophy has been more influenced by evolutionary and postmodern thought than biblical.

## Illogical history

In later chapters, *God and the New Atheists* restates its same arguments about new atheists having no legitimate moral ground to launch their vitriol, and about their self-refuting implicit faith in science. Also, the author repeatedly draws the picture that atheists and creationists are both radical extremists for reading the Bible plainly. After 80 pages there appears a substantive justification for rejecting creation, but it turns out to be the tired old NOMA (Non-Overlapping Magisteria): 'Evolutionary and theological accounts lie on logically different levels, and hence they are noncompeting.'

First, what is a 'theological account'? Perhaps it consists of the rich and nuanced layers of understanding; the undertones of meaning, and the contradictions that Haught revels in. If so, 'theological accounts' amount to reflections of gnosticism, not the historical biblical account. Certainly, there are many and wonderful mysteries, and there is undoubtedly more meaning to be found the deeper we dig in the Word. However, any deeper meanings we glean first of all mean something recognizable, and do not conflict with, negate, or contradict the plainly, most easily understood meaning of the text. Deeper insights complement the plain text and underscore the brilliance of the Author, but neither these insights, nor the 'insights' of godless scientists ought to not supplant the Message.

Second, how can evolutionary and biblical histories lie on different levels? Haught certainly needed to provide more substance to bolster the claim that 'the various accounts do not compete with one another' (p. 84). Given that there was only one actual series of past events, it would seem that the only way to reconcile contradictory accounts is to concede one history as true and the other as false. It is sad that the author, along with perhaps the majority of what he refers to as mainstream Christian theologians, has chosen to disbelieve the words of the One who was actually there in favour of the words of those who claim that empirical science has proven certain past events, despite the fact that empirical science has no such power. Evolution maintains that death has always existed and was even critical to the origin of species. The plain history of the Bible tells that death intruded on a once perfect creation, and it did so as a penalty for our sin.[4,5] If evolution is true, and death preceded sin, then Christ's work has no meaning and Christianity is a twisted farce (as new atheists agree).[6] How these accounts are 'noncompeting', and how Haught, a theologian, misses the theological import of this are both great mysteries.

## Evolution is proven, so God must be behind it

Haught is totally convinced that evolution is science, despite the large body of evidence against it being so. If molecules-to-man evolution were science, then why can it not be demonstrated in the laboratory? Barring that, why can it not be demonstrated by hundreds of clear examples of fossilized transitional forms? Other than imaginative fairy tales, why is there not even a realistic model to calculate or demonstrate how evolution could even occur? As 'one of the world's leading thinkers in the field of theology and science', Haught is surprisingly ignorant of the most critically important deficiencies of both evolution and of a less-than-historically-accurate estimation of the biblical history which even Jesus referred to.

In the end, Haught admits that his is 'the God of evolution … who embraces ambiguity' (pp. 107, 102) Since scientific observation has not produced evidence that demands an evolutionary interpretation, but has instead produced evidence directly supporting special and recent creation; and since the Bible nowhere has hint or even space in its timeline to incorporate evolution, Haught's god must be quite different than the God of the Bible. Not that any of us has whole knowledge of Him, but without the ability to take him at His Word, how can we have anything but rudimentary knowledge of Him?

Though providing a handful of valid critiques of new atheism, *God and the New Atheism* falls far short of its potential to equip Christians to defend good theology or good science against the myriad of falsehoods that permeate almost every page of the new atheist literature. Why not address atheists' false notions of what or who God is?[7] Why not address the logical loopholes applied by new atheists when discussing God or intelligent design? Why not examine the selective science, history or philosophy they use? Instead, Haught tries to appease atheists by conceding their charge that Christians were indeed responsible for past evils that new atheists accuse them of having committed (which is largely historically false). He also appeases them by agreeing that evolution is true and scientific, but this is only possible if Genesis is not to be understood as written. *God and the New Atheists* is better suited for equipping the reader to understand the current status of mainstream theology than it is for equipping the reader to understand the new atheists or defend Christianity.

## References


1. See Kulikovsky, A., The Bible and hermeneutics, *J. Creation* (*TJ*) **19**(3):14–20, 2005.
2. See Sarfati, J., Christopher Hitchens—blind to salamander reality: A well-known atheist's 'eureka moment' shows the desperation of evolutionists, 26 July 2008, <creationontheweb.com/hitchens>.
3. E.g. Sarfati, J., The Virginal Conception of Christ, A*pologia* **3**(2):4–11, 1994; <creationontheweb.com/virgin>
4. Smith, H.B., Cosmic and universal death from Adam's Fall: An exegesis of Romans 8:19–23a, *J. Creation* **21**(1):75–85, 2007; <creationontheweb.com/romans8>.
5. Gurney, R.J.M., The carnivorous nature and suffering of animals, *J. Creation (TJ)* **18**(3):70–75, 2004.
6. E.g. Richard Dawkins, 'Oh but of course the story of Adam and Eve was only ever symbolic, wasn't it? Symbolic?! Jesus had himself tortured and executed for a symbolic sin by a non-existent individual. Nobody not brought up in the faith could reach any verdict other than barking mad!' *The root of all evil?* broadcast on Channel 4, 16 January 2006.
7. E.g. see D'Souza, D., *What's So Great About Christianity?*; see review by Cosner, L., *J. Creation* **22**(2):32–35, 2008.