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Evolution

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Table of Contents [Show](#)

Early Responses

Origins of Species and Biblical Literalism

Human Evolution

Creation Science and Later Developments

Conclusion

Other theories of evolution had been proposed before Charles Darwin's *Origins of Species* but its publication 1859 meant that evolution would come to take a preeminent place in the so-called conflict between Religion and Science. The widespread interest in natural selection as the primary mechanism for how species change over time presented a radical challenge that could not be ignored by Jewish and Christian thinkers. In large part this was largely because of Darwin's insistence upon the chance processes, the cruelty, and the wastage of life that appeared inherent to the "struggle for life", which appeared to call into serious question the claims of natural theology concerning divine providence and the beauty, order and harmony of God's creation. The newly enhanced scientific credibility of the challenge to the origins story of Genesis made more pressing than ever the question of how to relate materialistic science to the sacred scriptures. Debates would rage over issues including the age of the world, whether lifeforms had changed over time or had remained static since creation, how the claim that humankind reflected the divine image sat with the alleged animal origins of humans, and whether the roots of morality lay in the Garden of Eden and at Mount Sinai or whether morality was also an evolved phenomenon. For those who sought to reconcile their theology with the science, theistic interpretations of evolution (i.e. that the natural laws of evolution were directed by God) were *de rigueur*, although panentheistic conceptions (i.e. the idea that the cosmos was not distinct from the divine but encompassed within it) were also offered at first by a few Jews and Christians in the 19th cent., and then by more Christians in the post World War Two period. In terms of Jewish-Christian interaction, Jews were much more likely to engage with Christian writings than vice versa, although, in reality, liberal Christians shared more in common

with liberal Jews than either did with their more conservative co-religionists.

Early Responses

At first the Catholic Church made no comment regarding Darwinism. But during the papacy of Pius IX, the First Vatican Council (1869-70) affirmed God as creator of all things, denounced a purely materialistic view of the world, and argued that knowledge of God could be obtained from observing his Creation. By the end of the 19th cent., the Church appeared orientated against Darwinian evolutionary theory, as evidenced by the treatment of George Jackson Mivart (1827-1900), a Catholic biologist who, after initially supporting the theory of natural selection, offered a rival theory of the mechanism of evolution in *The Genesis of the Species* (1871), which among other things denied the evolution of humankind; such concessions made little difference for five of his articles were put on the Index of Prohibited Books and he was excommunicated. The Anglican Church and other Protestants predictably adopted a wider variety of positions on the subject, so that the legendary debate between Bishop Samuel Wilberforce and the biologist Thomas Huxley in 1860 (when Wilberforce asked whether it was through Huxley's grandfather or grandmother that he claimed his descent from a monkey, to which Huxley replied he would not be ashamed to have a monkey for his ancestor but would be ashamed to be a man who obscured the truth), was by no means typical. The North American biologist and Presbyterian Asa Gray (1810-88) in *Darwinia: Essays and Reviews* (1876) denied that Darwinism should be regarded as atheistic and promoted instead a theistic form of evolution. While he readily admitted that natural selection was ostensibly a naturalistic, materialistic theory, Gray pointed out that no-one had regarded Isaac Newton as atheistic in his discovery of the naturalistic, materialistic laws of motion and gravity, and used the analogy of the billiard ball to demonstrate that both "design" and "natural law" determined the motion of the ball. Thus for Gray, as for many other Protestants, God could be understood to direct evolution and had even introduced adaptive variations to meet the future needs of the species. Arguably, the most influential Christian theist as far as North American Jewish thinkers was concerned was Henry Ward Beecher (1813-87). Beecher, a high-profile Congregationalist clergyman, wrote a two-volume collection of sermons entitled *Evolution and Religion* (1885), in which he argued that not only could the world be viewed as a marvelous machine that had "by inherent laws gradually builded itself," but that evolution offered an analogy for understanding the progressive development of both religion and human intellectual history. Beecher espoused a kind of panentheism (he explicitly condemned pantheism) when he presented the world as emanating from God, i.e. in some sense to be regarded as divine in nature, and life as the product of divine natural laws.

Jewish responses were similarly varied at this early stage, and, whether religious or non-religious, they often engaged directly with Christian views. Thus in 1872 the UK's Chief Rabbi Nathan Adler (1803-90) addressed Darwinism in the national weekly newspaper *The Jewish Chronicle* by promoting the rationality of Judaism against the irrationality of Christianity, arguing that "Judaism has nothing to fear from the advancement of science, but everything to gain." In contrast to the battle between Christianity and science, he went on, "such a contest must be slight or superficial in Judaism, where faith and reason go hand in hand [...] There is only one theology in existence which is not antagonistic to science – this is Jewish theology." And the first translator of Darwin into Hebrew, the

Polish Orthodox writer Naphtali Levy (1840–94), argued in his *Toldot Adam (Origins of Man, 1874)* that Darwinism could be traced not only in rabbinic sources but in the *Torah* itself, so that even “those who are not children of our covenant”, i.e. Christians, could be persuaded that Moses had “taught from the observation of nature the evolution of creation, [and] in particular from among animals, the evolution of man.” Darwin himself indicated his pleasure in the idea of Jewish engagement with his ideas in correspondence with Levy, in conversations with Christian friends, and in his *Autobiography*, in which he exclaimed that “Even an essay in Hebrew [by Levy] has appeared on it [*The Origin of Species*], showing that the theory is contained in the Old Testament!” Typical of Levy’s philological approach was to argue that creation should be regarded as a process of continual transformation, as indicated by the fact that the word “formed” in Gen 2:7 was not *bri’ah*, suggesting creation from nothing, but *yetzer*, which could be understood to imply the exchange of forms and the repeating change in the nature of the world. Likewise, the biblical phrase *Bara Elohim la’asot*, literally, “God created to make” (Gen 2:3), was suggestive of the ongoing, continuous divine action, resonant of Darwinian gradualism. This is not to say all traditionalists were comfortable, but most remained openminded and thoughtful about how to engage with the new science. In Germany the father of neo-Orthodoxy, Samson Raphael Hirsch (1808–88), made it clear in an essay entitled “The Educational Value of Judaism” (1874) that he was dubious about Darwinian theory. Nevertheless, he maintained that there was nothing inherently problematic for Judaism in allowing that God had created life through the natural law of evolution, bringing forth order from apparent chaos. If indeed “the infinite species that we know today” had its origins in a combination of a single life form and “one single law of adaptation and heredity”, then that would only further glorify the Creator. As Hirsch saw it, the early chapters of Genesis could readily accommodate the theory, which he viewed as a paraphrasing of the ancient Jewish law of “le-mino”, or the law of species, whereby each species was understood to transmit its distinguishing traits to the next, “each according to its kind.”

Reform or Progressive Jewish thinkers were even more likely than the Orthodox to support Darwinism, even to the extent of privileging it over tradition; as one of the most influential Reform declarations made clear: “modern discoveries of scientific researches in the domain of nature and history are not antagonistic [...] [to Judaism since] the Bible reflect[ed] the primitive ideas of its own age” (Pittsburgh Platform, 1885). Among the more radical reformers in the United States was Joseph Krauskopf (1858–1923), whose commitment to evolutionary science in *Evolution and Judaism* (1887) resulted in him refuting attempts to harmonize ancient texts with modern science. For example, he argued that there was no need to try to “twist the Hebrew word *barah* (‘to create,’ Gen 2:3) into meaning ‘gradual unfolding,’” or to “patch up the Bible into teaching universal solar systems, when it plainly means that the earth is the All.” For Krauskopf, such an approach was intellectually dishonest and was not much better than the anti-rational, anti-evolutionary stance of popular Christianity; one had rather to privilege scientific discovery over the limited, primitive human beliefs that characterized the scriptural worldview when these clashed. Krauskopf – along with other Reform Jews – was influenced by Beecher’s conception of God as “the life Universal”, which became in Krauskopf’s mind the conception of God as “the Universal life”, that is, the ubiquitous life force behind evolution of life and even the cosmos. As for Jews coming from non-religious perspectives, such as the British biologist and entomologist, Raphael Meldola (1849–1915), who was a friend of both Darwin and Huxley, the problem was the set of assumptions of natural theology. In

writing against a tract by the Catholic Truth Society in 1873 Meldola argued that with Darwinism the scientist dealt with secondary causes rather than a First Cause and that there was no need for divine providence when discussing natural biological laws, so that, in so far as the Catholic author's attacks asserted the contrary, "his weapon is as a bladder of air against the hide of a hippopotamus."

Origins of Species and Biblical Literalism

From early on, debates about the extent to which Darwinism challenged tradition have tended to revolve around discussions of Genesis, in particular chapters 1-3, which in effect contains two accounts of creation. The first in 1:1-2:3 explains the origins of the material world, of time, of living things in general, and of human beings in particular. The second in 2:4-3:24 outlines the special creation of Adam in the "image" and "likeness" of God and of his helpmate Eve, their placement in the Garden of Eden, their disobedience with regard to the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, and their punishments and expulsion from the Garden. These two stories are very different and modern scholarship assigns them to different documentary sources, but historically the Jewish and Christian traditions have regarded them as compatible and have sought to harmonize them.

Despite this, few Christians and fewer Jews have read the origin myths literally and have assumed rather allegorical or moralistic readings; for example, the idea of a six day creation did not become mainstream among US protestants until the 1960s, with exceptions such as Seventh Day Adventists like George McCready-Price (1870-1963). As the authority and influence of what became known as the modern evolutionary synthesis increased, which combined the views of geneticists, field naturalists and palaeontologists, religious thinkers found themselves having to draw the lines in ways that did not cause violence to their beliefs and their approach to reading scriptures. In 1909 the Catholic Church's position began to thaw with the Pontifical Biblical Commission decree ratified by Pius X, entitled "Concerning the Historical Character of the First Three Chapters of Genesis". This authoritative statement asserted that "special creation" applied only to humankind, but offered no specifics on how God created the world and its lifeforms. As a result, evolutionary hypotheses for the origins and development non-human life were widely understood to be acceptable to the Catholic Church.

Early 20th cent. Protestantism in the US, however, took a different tack that would have profound implications for future debate. Largely in reaction to the growth of liberalism and the inroads of science within the school curriculum, the 1920s saw the emergence of the "fundamentals movement" which stressed the importance of biblical literalism and the inerrancy of scripture. The famous Scopes "Monkey Trial" of July 1925 saw a high school teacher from Dayton, Tennessee, named John Scopes charged with violating the Butler Act of the same year, which had sought to outlaw the teaching of evolutionary theory in the classroom. The debates between the high-profile lawyers Clarence Darrow (defending Scopes) and a former presidential candidate William Jennings Bryan on how to relate science and scripture proved internationally sensational. At one point, the defense team (which included the Jewish lawyer Arthur Garfield Hayes) telegrammed the Reform Jewish training college, Hebrew Union College in Cincinnati, for an authoritative view on the translation of specific biblical passages; this resulted in the collaboration of Rabbi Jerome Mark of Temple Beth El, Knoxville, who happened to be in attendance at the trial. Another

Jewish observer commented in private correspondence during the trial that he had never seen “such a prejudiced crowd of people as Dayton” for whom “Bryan is their idol and as he sits there looks like a Spanish inquisitor” and as someone who regarded anything other than biblical literalism as “heresy” and the defense lawyers as “infidels”.

Of the many examples of Jewish reluctance to adopt a literal approach to the scriptures from around that time, one of the most interesting was Abraham Isaac Kook (1865–1935), the first Ashkenazic Chief Rabbi of Israel, a position he held during the pre-State Mandate period 1919–1935. Kook is one of the best-known Orthodox Jewish religious authorities to have engaged positively with evolution. From as early as 1910, it is clear from his writings that while maintaining the higher authority of Torah over science, Kook nevertheless refuted any claim that evolutionary science threatened a traditionalist reading of the Torah, especially with regard to the alleged challenge of deep geological time versus biblical time. For him, the Genesis account of creation was in harmony with the findings of modern science since the six days could be justifiably understood to refer to vast periods of time. He readily admitted that millions of years separated humanity’s origins and the moment when humans realized that they were separate from the rest of the animal kingdom with the emergence of family life and, ultimately, civilization itself. For Kook, the Genesis account was focused on the idea of the development of humanity’s self-understanding of its special nature and inter-relationships, and not the specifics of the timeframe of creation or a literalist reading.

Human Evolution

A key dividing line in the religion–science debates vis-à-vis evolution has been the question of human evolution. Even scientists such as Alfred Wallace (1823–1913), an agnostic at the time of his co-discovery of the theory of natural selection in parallel to Darwin, struggled to understand how human intelligence might have evolved naturally and he rejected a purely materialistic conception of evolution. Thus theistic formulations of evolution, whereby God had used the natural laws to bring about humanity as the zenith of the created world, were regarded as much more plausible than the alternative, and proliferated. Someone who spoke as much to Christian concerns as to Jewish concerns, sensitive as he was to the views of Christian commentators, was the father of American Reform Judaism, Isaac Mayer Wise (1819–1900). As early as 1876, Wise had argued in *The Cosmic God* that all life had evolved except for humankind and as such he was dismissive of what he called Darwin’s theory of “homo-brutalism”, for the human mind and morality obviously lay beyond the reaches of material biology. But others came to shift their position over time. A case in point was the Italian rabbi and philosopher Elijah Benamozegh (1823–1900), whose interest in Christian writings led to charges of heresy at one point, and who came to believe that biological evolution was only a subset of a more universal or cosmic evolution. Regarding the question of human evolution, his initial position in the 1860s had been that while biological evolution was plausible in general terms, it could not apply to humankind since a close reading of the Genesis account of creation showed that *leminah* (“according to its kind/species”) was applied only to plants and animals and not to humans. But over time, and after re-reading Darwin, his position shifted and by 1877 he had come to accept at least the possibility of human evolution and even of its corollary, the evolution of human morality. The Anglo-Orthodox Chief Rabbi Joseph Hertz (1872–1946) would write in a commentary on Genesis in 1929 that “While the

fact of creation has to this day remained the first of the articles of the Jewish creed, there is no uniform and binding belief as to the manner of creation.” He went on to argue that there was “nothing inherently un-Jewish in the evolutionary conception of the origin and growth of forms of existence from the simple to the complex”, as long as it was understood that each stage represented an act of Divine Will rather than being the result of chance. And while he preferred to speak of the ascent of humanity in its “spiritual kinship with God”, he acknowledged the descent of human as “cousin to the anthropoid ape”. Such views became commonplace among progressive Jewish thinkers and by the 1930s and 1940s Mordecai Kaplan (1881-1983), whose teachings led to Reconstructionist Judaism in the US, could write about evolution as the method by which God had brought order out of chaos. While he insisted that humans could themselves shape the evolution of social ethics, an ability that was reflected in the claim in Genesis that human were made in the image of God, he entirely accepted the fact of the evolution of the human animal.

One corollary of the idea of human evolution was that of eugenics, an idea that found widespread support throughout Europe and the United States in the first half of the 20th cent., despite the fact that in hindsight it was clearly a misapplication of a biological theory (Darwinism) to human society and policy (Social Darwinism). Proponents claimed that human evolution could be helped along by deliberate intervention to ensure successful breeding among the healthy or eugenic individuals (positive eugenics) and to prevent breeding among the unhealthy or dysgenic individuals (negative eugenics) – to the extent of sterilization or worse. The goal of eugenicists was to eradicate hereditary disorders and ensure racial hygiene and purity. So widespread were such ideas that many Episcopalian Churches in the US offered eugenic licenses for marriage purposes, and there were even examples of Jewish eugenicists in Palestine in the 1930s, concerned to improve the Jewish stock as part of Zionism’s nation-building exercise; these latter included Abraham Matmon (n.d.) who published articles and pamphlets with titles such as “Racial Improvement and Control of Marriage” (1933) and “The Racial Improvement of the Human Species and Its Value for Our Nation” (1933), and Yisrael Rubin (b.1890) who wrote an article entitled “The Ingathering of the Exiles from a Eugenic Point of View” (1934). The notorious culmination of the eugenics movement lay in the Nazi program to eradicate the Jewish people as sub-humans, and while the Catholic Church in particular publicly opposed the German T4 program for euthanating physically and mentally disabled people, and protested the disappearance of Jewish converts to Christianity, traditional Christian anti-Judaism undoubtedly undermined the Churches’ opposition to racial antisemitism in the guise of its eugenic program. After the War the eugenics movement was widely discredited.

Despite its clear opposition to materialistic philosophies, the post-War period also saw a softening of the Catholic Church’s suspicion of the idea of human evolution. Pope Pius XII’s encyclical “Of Mankind” (1950) accepted (or, more accurately, did not forbid) that the origin of the human body was a legitimate area of research for the natural sciences, although the Church maintained that the human soul was created by God, and that through common descent from Adam all people had inherited original sin. Effectively, the Church removed any impediment to evolutionary biological research of humans by Catholics and, to some extent at least, recognized the authority of evolutionary sciences as contributing towards our understanding of “the origin of the human body as coming from pre-existent and living matter.” This encyclical appeared to suggest that, despite doubts about some scientific claims on the subject of evolution, the Church retained special teaching authority

only with regard to the non-materialistic, spiritual aspects of human life.

Creation Science and Later Developments

At the same time, US Protestants turned in more on themselves with the emergence of the Creation Science movement which would in its basic claims eventually become mainstream among American Evangelical Christians. A key player was Henry Morris (1918-2006) a committed Evangelical and believer in the inerrancy of the Bible who along with the theologian, John Whitcomb (1924-2020), authored *The Genesis Flood* (1961) to argue that the scientific evidence (involving fossils and geology) supported the biblical claims about Noah's worldwide flood and the idea that the earth was less than 10,000 years old. They also argued that evolutionary biology promoted a particular philosophical worldview, and that unbiased science supported the biblical account of creation. The enormous popularity of the book led to the establishment of the Institute for Creation Research in 1972, which, as a publishing house, generated creationist biology textbooks and led to some legislative successes in the 1980s, 1990s and early 2000s for "equal time" being given to the teaching of biblical and biological origins accounts. The claims of Scientific Creationism have been much more successful among Christians than Jews, regardless of whether they were committed to an old or young earth theology, and among the wider public whose relativism inclines them to regard all perspectives as equally valid. On the other hand, it generated a response from civil liberties groups, scientists and liberal churches and synagogues arguing that such anti-evolutionist laws were deemed unconstitutional, with the 1987 high-profile ruling of the US Supreme Court against the "Balanced Treatment Act" of Louisiana, arguing that it was indeed promoting religion.

By the 1950s and 60s there was much less interest in attempting to reconcile Judaism with scientific theories. But interest picked up again in the 1980s when Reform Judaism could be found opposing (Christian) Scientific Creationism, albeit this was motivated primarily by the potential violation of the boundaries between Church and State. Without espousing the pre-War confidence that evolutionary theory and Judaism could be readily integrated, and without making any comments on the type of evolution envisaged (whether naturalistic, theistic or panentheistic), the progressive Central Conference of American Rabbis had no difficulty taking a stance in 1984 and asserting that "the principles and concepts of biological evolution are basic to understanding science" and calling upon educators to exclude "scientific creationism," which referred to the young-earth, biblical literalism that was common within Evangelical Christianity. Likewise, despite some vocal voices of opposition within modern Orthodoxy, the Orthodox Rabbinical Council of America felt obliged to issue a statement entitled *Creation, Evolution, and Intelligent Design* (2005) that pointed out the diversity of Jewish approaches to the understanding of the biblical account of creation, and argued that "properly understood, evolutionary theory was not incompatible with belief in a Divine Creator, nor with the first two chapters of Genesis." While significant pockets of anti-evolutionist creationism remain within the Jewish world, including the majority of the ultra-Orthodox *Charedi*, the positions of Reform and to a lesser extent modern Orthodox Judaism have become ever more accepting of the evolutionary science and critical of Intelligent Design, which is widely regarded as a Christian phenomenon.

In the century or so since the controversies began, the Catholic Church in particular had

moved a long way. The 1994 *Catechism of the Catholic Church* insisted that scientific and theological truth are never actually in conflict, that science enriches our appreciation for God's creation, and that the meaning of the origin of life goes beyond the remit of science and remains the purview of the Church, while in 1996 Pope Jean Paul II made an address in which he stated that "evolution is more than a hypothesis" even if the gospel "can shed a higher light on the horizon of research into the origins and unfolding of living matter." And among mainstream Protestants, the Anglican Church has been more explicit still, with the Archbishop of Canterbury, Rowan Williams, on record saying that "creationism" should not be taught at school, and with the publication of official statements such as *A Catechism of Creation: An Episcopal Understanding* (2005) supporting the idea of an evolving creation, encompassing humankind.

Conclusion

In the history of the creationist-evolutionist debate, Christian debates concerning evolution have been conducted largely in ignorance of Jewish views, despite the fact that they constitute in essence a debate about the meaning of the shared scripture, that is, the first three books of Genesis. The Catholic Church has shifted from principled antagonism of materialistic evolutionary science to practical acceptance, while the Anglican Church, which tended to be more tolerant of theistic evolutionary views from early on, in recent years has been quite enthusiastic in its theologizing about theistic evolution. Among Jews, both progressives and traditionalists, there has been a strong desire to align with the mainstream scientific-evolutionary worldview whenever possible, and to harmonize its beliefs with evolutionary theory, even among the Orthodox. Jewish commentators have shown great interest in Christian views and have frequently borrowed from them or treated them as foils; especially early on, they adopted deliberate strategy to demonstrate the rationality of Judaism over the irrationality of Christianity. It appears that a greater proportion of Jewish rather than Christian commentators were prepared to define God's relation to nature and to natural laws by weaving the divine into the workings of the natural world, or by emphasizing divine immanence to a degree that some found disconcerting and suspicious; arguably, this panentheistic emphasis among Jewish thinkers is distinctive.

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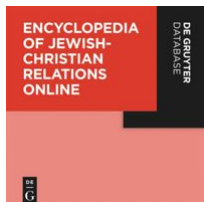
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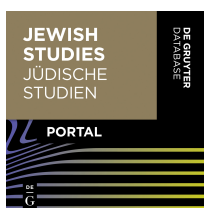
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