

Faith + Science Book Review Series

## ***ORIGINS: CHRISTIAN PERSPECTIVES ON CREATION, EVOLUTION, AND INTELLIGENT DESIGN***

Deborah B. Haarsma and Loren D. Haarsma | Faith Alive Christian Resources, Rev. Edition, 2011 | 315 pages

Synopsis and review written by Zac Boswell

### **OVERVIEW**

*Origins* is a thorough and insightful book that treats Christian perspectives on creation, evolution, and intelligent design. The book tackles, with gusto and remarkable clarity, the many challenges Christians face in taking seriously both what the Bible teaches and what science has discovered about the history of the universe.

The authors, a physicist and an astronomer who teach at Calvin College, begin with the assertion that we don't have to choose between science and Christian faith. The book's purpose, they say, "is to lay out a wider variety of options and to examine what both the Bible and the natural world can teach us" (p. 14).

The authors explore and explain both the discoveries of science and the theological and philosophical issues surrounding the science, all while staying grounded in their Christian faith. They spell out areas where Christians generally agree with one another and where they disagree, and present the strengths and weaknesses of various positions. The authors do not hesitate to express their reasoned opinions, beliefs, and positions, based on their expertise and knowledge. Yet, from start to finish, they engage these issues in a biblical and deeply Christian way that fosters healthy, enriching conversation.

For some, this book will be challenging—it might present them with evidence and ideas that upend positions thought to be true and irrefutable. Other readers will find the book to be a clarifying affirmation of beliefs or notions for which they were seeking additional scientific or theological backing. *Origins* will stretch all readers, regardless of their present views, forcing them to look closely at many of their presupposed ideas and beliefs.

### **LAYING THE FRAMEWORK**

*Origins* spends the first few chapters looking at the big picture, framing the questions. It examines the relationship between God's Word and God's world and celebrates our ability, as image-bearers of God, to study and know God's creation. Scientific exploration, the authors argue, is not a replacement for the truth of God's Word, nor do the truths found in God's Word automatically negate the findings of scientific study. The authors claim that the Bible "is not merely a book of moral lessons or a simple list of instructions and factual statements" (p. 83). We are reminded that human interpretations of Scripture and

nature are fallible—that we, and our pastors and professors and traditions, might be quite wrong about some things. Rather than allowing this to be disheartening, the authors encourage us to continue studying both Scripture and creation “with the hope that ultimately we might grasp the underlying truths that God has revealed” (p. 94). Faithful understanding of God and his creation requires paying heed to both God’s Word and world.

## COSMOLOGY, GEOLOGY, AND EVOLUTION

At the heart of the book, the authors walk us through the history of the universe and the world we know. The first contentious issue involves the various interpretations of Genesis. Interpretations come in two basic varieties—concordist and non-concordist. Concordist interpretations claim some sort of agreement between the order of events in Genesis 1 properly understood and science properly understood; so concordists look at Genesis 1 as a sequential account of creation. The most well-known concordist interpretations are Young Earth and the Day-Age. The Young Earth Interpretation takes the term “day” literally and claims that God created the world roughly six thousand ago years within a very short time period—less than a week (and so rejects most of contemporary science as proper). The Day-Age Interpretation takes “day” as referring to “ages” or indefinite periods, and so claims that Genesis 1 describes the major developmental periods of the universe over the billions of years implied by modern science. Non-concordist interpretations, however, claim that the purposes of Genesis 1 were theological and did not include an attempt to describe creation events in a scientific or pre-scientific historical way; thus, there is no need to find agreement between the order of events in Genesis 1 and contemporary science.

The authors describe several independent lines of evidence pointing to the earth’s great age—including geologic evidence, layering, and radiometric dating—which raise difficulties for Young Earth interpretations. They give their reasons for favoring non-concordist interpretations, which look to the first chapters of Genesis not for scientific information but for theological truth—that God is Creator of the world and every created thing is not God. They temper this position with a warning to avoid interpreting any statement in Scripture that lacks scientific evidence as merely figurative. In the end, readers are reminded of all the theological points on which concordist and non-concordist interpretations do agree, and encouraged to remember a sustaining, central belief: Our world belongs to God.

The authors’ excitement about the universe becomes infectious as they discuss in chapter 7 how vast, amazing, ancient, and dynamic it is. The chapter contains a clear explanation of the scientific discoveries leading to their belief in an ancient and dynamic universe.

What follows is a discussion of evolution, which claims, at its core, that all living species share common ancestry and have changed and adapted over long periods of time. This admittedly hot-button subject is given two helpful chapters, which include an examination of five distinct definitions of evolution. While the authors accept and defend divine creation through evolutionary processes, they reject evolutionism, defined as the “[attempt] to use the theory of evolution to support atheistic claims that there is no Creator and no purpose to human existence” (p. 180). Evolutionism is a religious belief that some atheists add onto science, but it is not required by the science, and the scientific theory of evolution can be understood just as well from a Christian religious viewpoint. This distinction allows for a more fruitful investigation of the science of evolu-

tion. The authors contend that scientific evidence points clearly toward some sort of evolution, yet they maintain that there is no reason to think that God is not deeply involved in every facet of evolution.

*Origins* also considers Intelligent Design, clarifying common misunderstandings of the term and its applications. Intelligent Design theory (the philosophical and scientific claim that there is evidence of design in nature that can't be explained by evolution) is distinguished from the religion-influenced Intelligent Design movement, which has political and cultural goals. The focus of the chapter is two arguments for Intelligent Design: fine-tuning and biological complexity. The fine-tuning argument relies on three claims: scientific, philosophical, and religious. All three hinge on the observation that the physics and makeup of our world fall within a very small range of parameters that allow life to exist. This is a scientific claim that is widely accepted. However, the philosophical and religious claims that no natural explanation exists for such fine-tuning—and thus the best explanation is that God designed the laws that hold the world together—are disputed. The biological complexity argument claims that the complexity of biological life is not possible through evolution alone, but needed God's intervention at specific points; this is the more controversial claim of Intelligent Design, and is not widely accepted scientifically. While Intelligent Design theory is often presented as an alternative to evolution, the authors warn us to be careful of this—there might be ways in which both claims are true, depending on how the Intelligent Design theory is framed.

## HUMAN ORIGINS

In the final third of the book, the writing shifts in tone, with the authors deviating from their primary fields of expertise to shed light on questions of human origins. It is essential for the reader to have fully digested the preceding chapters before tackling chapters 11 and following. The authors raise many scientific issues raised by the fossil record and human genetics, and theological issues, including what it means for humans to be created in God's image, the soul, and original sin. The authors acknowledge our limited human understanding and the hope they place in God's sovereignty and character.

When it comes to Adam and Eve and interpretations of Genesis 2-3, things become even more complex. The authors lay out various lines of thinking, again outlining where it is easy for Christians to agree and where agreement is difficult. Were Adam and Eve recent ancestors? Were they recent representatives who chose to sin, affecting all humans? Or were they a pair of ancient ancestors or ancient representatives? Or are they perhaps merely symbolic, with many events over the past 150,000 years having led humans into a state of sin? Were humans physically immortal at some point? And if we are to believe in an ancient world full of an evolving population of animals, how do we account for those animals perishing, when death is presented as a consequence of sin?

Unlike previous chapters, where the authors make clear where they stand, here they don't endorse a single explanation. Not fully satisfied with any interpretation, they challenge us to continue wrestling with these questions, employing both science and biblical interpretation to expand our understanding of God's glory and power as presented in Scripture and in creation.

*Origins* asserts throughout that we should not use the debates and disagreements concerning faith and science to create false dichotomies, that we cannot approach everything with an either/or mindset. The authors bring a calm, reasoned voice to

an emotionally charged subject. They even offer suggestions for how readers might respond to family members or church friends who hold different views, or who might be threatened or angered by the exploration of new, nontraditional understandings of the world and Scripture.

At the same time, even those who are comfortable with the exploration of challenging ideas might come face to face with fear or doubt. *Origins* does not shy away from controversy. It recognizes the difficult nature of these topics, and asks us to approach them with an open heart and open mind, always remembering God's sovereignty and love.

## STUDY QUESTIONS

*Origins* is designed for individual or small group study, so each chapter ends with a series of helpful discussion questions and further reading resources.