

The Current Status of Creationism

An Interview by

Marnix Medema and Remico Muis

with

Mart-Jan Paul and Tom Zoutewelle¹

Note by Sophie editor: During the previous half century, Creationism was an influential movement among Christians in the Netherlands, especially among Evangelicals as represented by the Evangelical Theological Seminary and the Evangelical Radio Broadcasters.² The past decade especially was a restless period during which many Christian scientists emphatically distanced themselves from Creationism. Simultaneously, that led to a renewed impulse in this movement to express their perspectives more clearly. This article is an interview by Marnix Medema and Remico Muis of two strong advocates of Creationism, namely geologist Tom Zoutewelle and theologian Mart-Jan Paul.

What kind of movement is Creationism in the Netherlands?

PAUL: In a certain sense it is both a theological and scientific movement. In the Netherlands little happens in this movement on the science side: There is not a single institute that co-ordinates research and publications or pays for them. It is more like a group of scientists who hold a specific conviction in their heart. In Germany, the UK, America and Australia there are centrums where real scientific research is carried on and from which publications emerge. Even the term “Creationism” is an import. You would not hear this term before the 1970s. And as is the case with every “-ism,” you have to handle the term carefully and with a healthy degree of mistrust. As soon as a movement or trend becomes an “-ism,” certain theories begin to lead their own lives. Some time ago in the Netherlands, in the journal *Bijbel en Wetenschap*,³ warnings were issued against

¹*Sophie*, 4 / 2013, pp. 16-19. Original title: “Hoe staat het ervoor met het creationisme?” All the footnotes in this article are from the Translator.

²Original names: “Evangelische Hogeschool” and “Evangelische Omroep.”

³An English title might be “Bible and Scholarship” or “Bible and Science.”

fundamentalist Creationism that would insist on a literal interpretation of the Bible that totally disregarded whatever was known scientifically. It was like: This is how it is, period. In such an environment, scientific theories are handled too carelessly and irresponsibly. Therefore I personally prefer to use the term “creation paradigm” instead of “Creationism.”

Why is there a need for such a creation paradigm?

PAUL: The established theory that there has been evolution means that one species has developed into another and that the human race was not created at once by God but emerged from a certain form of animal life. That appears to me to contradict various pronouncements in the Bible. Adam was made from dust and received his breath in a special way (Genesis 2:7). Eve came out of Adam. There are eastern myths that would have humans descend from gods or animals, but here in the Bible it is depicted differently. Furthermore, the human race descended from a single married couple and did not spring into being in various places (Acts 17:26). Such pronouncements are not merely primitive metaphorical language, but a summary description of our origin.

Every scholar conducts his research from a specific perspective. A paradigm is a theoretical framework. He who assumes divine creation looks at nature differently from her who leaves God out of consideration. From the evolutionary paradigm dinosaurs had to become extinct before humans arrived on the scene; from a creation paradigm they would have been contemporaries, existing at the same time. Such a point of departure determines partially how the facts are interpreted. However, it is wrong to claim that Creationism can prove creation. Only the consequences of the models can be checked with practical reality.

ZOUTEWELLE: We all subscribe to Hebrew 11:3—The perceptible emerged from the imperceptible. Therefore there will always be an antithesis between a believing Christian and an unbelieving scientist:⁴ The believer insists that ultimately, at its deepest, the perceptible, that which we now see, is not amenable to scientific explanation. I have observed with rising amazement how in

⁴ Translator's comment: Also between a believing and unbelieving scientist. Actually, of course, there is no such thing as an “unbelieving scientist;” such a scientist just believes different things.

recent years Christian scientists and theologians claim that evolution from ape to human is well documented and is thus a certain and unchangeable fact. Let us be honest: That is absolutely not clear. I think that an honest professional researcher would admit that he does not have the slightest idea how life originated, or what the result will be of the current genome sequencing, or what the underlying mechanisms are of plate tectonic or of magnetic pole reversal.

In other words you are pleading for caution, not to just go along with provisional scientific conclusions, partially because you see serious problems in harmonizing evolution with Scriptural data.

PAUL: I have been occupied with all these things for 45 years and I have always read up on different perspectives. I have especially immersed myself in astronomy, geology, and biology in order to see how strong all those arguments for evolution really are. I do not pretend to have the expertise to be able to assess all this, but I do see how weak many theses are, especially the underlying assumptions. And indeed, there are a number of clear points which prevent me from bringing the Bible and evolution together. These include the goodness of creation over against the evil in evolution; the structure of the book of Genesis; the ten commands by which the creation is established in six days; but also, speaking in terms of the New Testament, that Christ is the mediator of creation; God has established the creation through Christ, and His message is contrary to the entire evolution theory. In the evolution model, death, destruction and cruelty are per definition embedded. And Jesus does not teach the survival of the fittest. To the contrary, Jesus protects the weak against the strong. He does not even extinguish a smoking candle.

The Scripture teaches that God has created the world through Christ (Colossians 1:16; Hebrews 1:2). Thus He was involved in the act of creating. His attitude conforms much better to the good creation of Genesis 1 than to the cruelties of the cursed earth (Genesis 3). Why would God use a cruel evolutionary mechanism in creating that deviates so far from Christ's attitude? It is much more acceptable that the current processes of selection and the "natural balance" made their entrée after the earth was cursed. Jesus declared the poor and weak blessed

(Matthew 5). He fulfilled Psalm 72, where the king looks after the miserable and the poor and rescues them. Jesus identified Himself several times in a specific relationship with the poor, the stranger, the naked and the sick (Matthew 25:35-36). Our Saviour has also revealed the Father to us (John 14:9). The unity of the Father and the Son leads us to expect that the Son images the character and the normal working ways of the Father. All of this is difficult to harmonize with the mechanism of evolution that casts out the marginalized, the weak and sick organisms via its selection process and assumes the survival of the fittest. Here our images of God collide.

In other words, you reject evolution from within a moral standpoint.

PAUL: The principle of evolution fits neither God nor humans. That we accept everything in our society, whether sick or healthy, strong or weak, included or marginalized, is in my thinking an important Christian influence. Christianity owes that morality to the conviction that the creation was good and at one time without sin, as Theo Boer⁵ indicated in an interview in the daily *Nederlands Dagblad* (June 5, 2009). According to Boer—and I agree with him—brings in the moral problem in order to disarm evolutionary thinking. Don't we resist that same evolutionary thinking with the love commandment? From the evolutionary perspective it is much more natural to cast out the weak than to care for him.

Even Darwin himself struggled with this dilemma of a cruel nature versus a gracious God. In a letter to Asa Grey (May 22, 1860), he wonders whether a gracious and almighty God intentionally created a parasitic wasp that sponges off caterpillars or intentionally a cat that plays with mice (See

<http://www.darwinproject.ac.uk/entry-2814>).

It appears that recently a greater openness has developed among Dutch theologians towards other interpretations of the creation story. An example is the recent book on dogmatics by Gijsbert van den Brink en Kees van der Kooi. They claim that you have to read the creation story especially as a confession that

⁵No known relation to translator Boer.

contradicts the creation myths of the neighbouring Pagan nations. How do you regard that development?

PAUL: Van den Brink has many friends in the exact sciences, who have convinced him of the truth of evolution theory. That is why he is ready to adjust his theology. He acknowledges that problems remain which must still be resolved. My reaction to this is: People have searched for that already for 150 years and have still not found it! Therefore, I do not expect that they will be found in the future either. These are not just problems but contradictions. Besides, there is not a single indication of polemics to be found in Genesis 1-3. Genesis is not polemical; it is thetic⁶ and can be traced to the oldest revelation that preceded other perspectives.

Does Genesis then really offer a precise historical insight into the origin of this world?

PAUL: Yes, that is how it has always been understood in church history with rejection of all sorts of other perspectives. True, the Bible is not a scientific report, but it *is* a factual commentary. Of course, I recognize a difference in genre between Genesis 1 on the one hand and Genesis 2-3 on the other. But the bottom line is that it is a question of faith: How did this information come into being? No human being was present to witness Genesis 1. Where does that then come from? Many claim that it was given this form to distinguish itself over against other religions, but I see it as a straight-forward direct revelation from God.

Some creationists are very sure of their interpretation of scientific data. Do you find that it is indeed always possible to harmonize these completely and easily with the interpretation of the Biblical data that you promote?

ZOUTEWELLE: The interpretation of the large outlines in science on basis of details is never easy or simple. Take, for example, the marsupials⁷ that exist only in Australia. How did they get there? That is an enormous problem for

⁶According to Merriam-Webster's Collegiate Dictionary, Tenth Edition: "constituting or beginning with a poetic thesis."

⁷Animals that do not develop "true" placentas and usually have a pouch on the abdomen of the female, such as the kangaroo.

evolutionary theory, for the continents were allegedly adjacent to each other for 15,000,000 years, according to standard chronology, but these animal species never mixed. But, it must be admitted, it is also a problem for Creationism if you were to interpret that situation in the framework of “flood geology.” Might Noah have had some kind of airborne (“skymobile”?) unit? On basis of the data I can come to only one conclusion, namely that there must have been a refuge somewhere in the southern part of the earth during the flood. For fundamentalists this would naturally be considered blasphemy in the church, but I think that a creationist cannot deny such a thesis if he is to be honest in his dealing with the data. Whatever happened, such a problematic should keep every scholar humble.

I try to go into the field together with students interested in this story to regularly organize excursions in the direction of the Ardennes. When you see nature in petrified form, you become very humble, for it is only then that you begin to realize how difficult it is to really recognize all those theoretical petrified “poured-in-cement” models. There are many stages in the development between the rough data and the abstractions of those data into models. As scientists it is our task to make that clear. Failure to do so can lead to an artificial way of thinking. Ultimately you have to return to nature and ask the question: “What do I observe or see?”

What is the current status of Creationism?

PAUL: A new creationist phase has developed in which many more peer-reviewed articles are published while its practitioners distance themselves from the mistakes of fifty years ago. A degree of maturity has been reached, I believe. And there is more modesty; the weight of a creationist theory is no longer so easily equated with that of the Bible. In the past, sometimes major claims were made that subsequently would be deflated. But I do not find that a reason now to throw the whole endeavour overboard.

You come across as modest and nuanced. Nevertheless, much creationist publicity sounds like mere screaming polemics. Do you regret that?

ZOUTEWELLE: Indeed, most Dutch creationists are rather activistic. They are fantastic people, but they are not experts. Once you've had academic training, you know how to deal with the data in a nuanced way, and that is something that is lacking with amateur creationists. The conflict remains between the supporting grassroots, which tends to be more conservative, and the Christian academician. That's why I feel there is need for a platform on which we as Christians can dialogue with each other in good faith. ForumC was to be such a platform, but then more space has to be left for divergent opinions.

What should the man in the pew do with these issues? Most of them do not have the expertise to assess who is right when they hear your point of view on the one hand and that of people like Cees Dekker on the other. But they really would just like to know how all this fits together.

ZOUTEWELLE: As a matter of fact, outsiders hardly have any reasonable input. I think that as Christian you have to be very honest. When you claim "This is what we believe," some aspects of it will have a scientific basis, but others won't. The moment you make the suggestion that there are scientific data to support everything, you are playing a very dangerous game.

The issue around creation and evolution is a divisive one that runs straight across all denominations here in our country. Do you foresee any possibilities for arriving at greater unity?

ZOUTEWELLE: Let us make sure that those Christians and those churches that have a living relationship with Jesus, that from that disposition they engage in the search together and that we stop denouncing each other as heretics. But that does require expertise, something that has clearly been lacking up till now. And we would love to function as bridge builders in this context.