

The Plan

BACK IN THE 1970S, I learned to love university life. I eventually became a professor of history. I started out a Bible-trusting Christian and have not lost my faith. This book is about the reasonableness of biblical Christianity in universities. By reasonableness, I mean the warranted credibility, if not the persuasiveness, of Christian claims about ancient history. This book is also about Darwinism and natural history. Darwin seems to have lost whatever Christian faith he might have once had, and his ideas about distant natural history are often pitted in classrooms against the more recent ancient history of Christianity. There are many ways people in universities try to get at the tensions between Christianity and Darwinism. Here I want to sidestep most of them. I want to think about two histories, two types of history that can stand side by side even if they are contradictory in many ways. I especially want to sidestep any notions that science is about facts and Christianity about values. Here I treat both as sophisticated systems based on evidence, facts, and inferences. Both use reasonable methods standing within long academic traditions. Both make assertions about what happened in the past.

For Christianity, history is primal. At universities, the struggle with Darwinism is best dealt with at the primal level of history. Darwin was a natural historian proposing that long ago certain things happened—species evolved by a mechanism of variation and selection. He then inferred that since the creation of new species did not need God, then it is best to assume that God was not involved.

Christianity is founded on events in human history. St. Paul in 1 Corinthians 15 stakes the truth of Christianity three times on a historical event reported by eyewitnesses. “If Christ has not been raised, our preaching is useless and so is your faith.” Again, “If Christ has not been raised your faith is futile.” Paul further declares, “You have believed in vain,” if

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you do not believe what is “of first importance: that Christ died for our sins according to the scriptures, that he was buried, that he was raised on the third day according to the scriptures.” The evidential base upon which to “hold firm” and “stand firm” is the testimony of eyewitnesses: first Peter, then the twelve, then five hundred, then James, then the apostles, then to Paul himself. Peter reminded a group of eyewitnesses in Acts 2 about events as the foundation to Christian revelation: “Listen to this: Jesus of Nazareth was a man accredited by God to you by miracles, wonders and signs, which God did among you through him.”

University culture is a Greek culture. “Greeks look for wisdom,” Paul noted, “but we preach Christ crucified.”¹ What Paul was getting at here is that Greekish philosophy, theology, science, and natural history look for order and try to make sense of things by organizing. Paul wanted to make it clear that God was not to be put in a Greek box. On the other hand, Paul was probably not criticizing Greek historical methods that have affinities with Christianity. Herodotus and Thucydides, the founding fathers of Greek historical writing, were models for Luke and Paul. When it comes to evangelism, Greek methods of history help establish Christ crucified. Greek history accepts the disorderliness of human history in ways that support the disorderliness of history presented in the Bible. In the Bible, God does not create like an engineer. God is not portrayed as a logician whose logic cannot be defeated. God’s ways and thoughts are not like the orderly expectations of academic philosophy, theology, science, or natural history. The preacher says: “Who can straighten what God has made crooked?”² The academic study of human history is the study of crookedness, of things not going as logic would demand. Jesus is part of that crookedness.

I here apologize for the rest of this book. The goal is grand but the framework is small. Polybius, one of the Greek founders of the discipline of writing human history, ridiculed historians who only haunt libraries and are unwilling to travel to where they can survey the scene of events.³ I had read Darwin’s books, but wanted to survey the scene of Darwin’s life. I would have liked to have gone to Darwin’s house and to have seen his desk and garden. Better yet, I would have liked to have sailed through

1. 1 Cor 1:15–20.

2. Eccl 7:13.

3. Polybius, *Rise of the Roman Empire*, XII, 25e–i.

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the Beagle Strait at the tip of South America north to the Galapagos. But, given the confines of my life, I decided that the best I could do was visit the High Sierra where there is a region dedicated to his theory and where his memory prevails: the Evolution Range above Evolution Valley.

This is a weekend book about a weekend trip. I write it out of a classroom obligation to be Greek and Christian, to help students be reasonable, rational, and honest about their faith in an age when universities have a powerful role in defining what is reasonable. I write with the hope that students will, in various ways, learn that the academic life is a journey and not a destination, that academic disciplines are divergent paths not all leading to one place, and that, in universities, it is reasonable to believe the history of Jesus along with the natural history proposed by Charles Darwin.

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