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A Biblical Framework for Biology

A response to Jitse van der Meer

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My response to Dr. van der Meer's presentation is one of cautious enthusiasm. It is cautious, first of all, because his approach is fairly new and more of the details have to be spelled out. And secondly, the term "hierarchical" conjures up thoughts about medieval ideas. But his alternative of "discontinuous" disavows such connections to medievalism.

I respond positively because his position points us back to the Creator who holds everything in his hand, and it points us away from those who would explain the origin of living things on the basis of the creaturely properties which we have come to understand in the last few hundred years. Many scientists and theoreticians in the Christian community blur the distinction between the supernatural creative acts of God and his faithful upholding activity throughout time, which we call Providence. Van der Meer correctly distinguishes between discontinuous beginnings and historical development.

He bases his approach to the problems before us on the discontinuity (or hierarchy) of the cosmos. This is crucial if we are to avoid the pitfalls of the secular view that historical development is a com-

pletely continuous, natural process from time zero to the present. That secular view does not really leave room for a genuine Creator, i.e., for Jehovah, the only true God, who called into being a functional universe, by the Word of his power.

Most people sense that the conflict between evolution and creation theories is indeed a very real one. At least we all get very attentive when these issues come up. In fact, most of us get quite defensive about our position, because we know intuitively that so much hangs on this. But much of our view depends on where we start, with either Scripture's story about beginnings, or with the created structures and their present behavior.

While many think the conflict is between the Bible and science, van der Meer clearly points out that the real conflict is "not between objective empirical science and the Bible, but between two kinds of religious knowledge." It is not uncommon for authors and speakers to use phrases such as "science says" or "scientific knowledge" or "scientific view." But what they really mean is: *scientists say, and claims by scientists, and a view commonly accepted by secular scientists.* Too often the true meaning of "scientific" is forgotten. Something is

scientific when it can be demonstrated to be true to the created structure which we observe and try to understand. In other words, "scientific" does not necessarily mean true to nature, but may refer to something that a majority of scientists assumes to be true. Unfortunately, most of these scientists do not have a heart commitment to biblical principles.

Professor van der Meer also notes that the scientific evidence for evolution is sorely lacking, even though secular evolutionists have for some 125 years tried their best to demonstrate the correctness of their theory. In my career as biologist for more than two decades, I have diligently searched for the evidences for evolution. I felt that if the theory of evolution were correct and factual, then I certainly did not want to be left in ignorance. I can not speak for all disciplines in natural science, of course, but in the areas where I have looked the hardest and where I have had the most training, I, too, find the evidence lacking.

I have looked for evidence of evolution in embryology, and it is not there; in genetics, and it is not there; in comparative anatomy, and it is not there. And later I also looked in the area of molecular homologies, and I did not find it there either. Does not Blackwelder, a confirmed evolutionist, in his book *Taxonomy* firmly state that "No single fact of phylogeny is definitely known for any species in nature" (360)? Could it then have been in the area of paleontology, as many claim? But even secular evolutionists assert that the gaps between taxonomic groups at various levels are systematic. Witness the conflict among evolutionists regarding gradualism and saltationism! The prediction of the theory of evolution, that many intermediate forms would be discovered in the fossil record, has simply not come true over the years.

We must recognize with van der Meer that "higher level properties do not arise spontaneously." Evolutionists know full well that their theory needs this concept of a lower level of existence spontaneously giving rise to higher levels. But no theory of a natural origin of life can bridge the gap between the inorganic molecules, or even laboratory-produced organic molecules, on the one hand, and, on the other hand, the complex system of living cells with their macromolecules and organelles, with their protoplasmic properties and metabolic pathways, and with their dynamic organization. It is not for nothing that secular scien-

tists have gone to fantastic alternatives to explain the origin of living cells. Crick and Orgel, for example, do so in their book on *transpermia*, where they suggest that "life" (whatever that means) was seeded in from outer space. They know that the best available naturalistic theories are inadequate and unscientific. So they pose their *transpermia* theory which can neither be investigated nor proven wrong (or right). They have thus taken a "safe" position where nobody can touch them, but in doing so they have left the scientific domain as well.

This also raises an interesting question: when there is this strong, positive, empirical indication that life has arisen discontinuously, why should anyone have to assume that the cosmos had to arise through a continuous process?

The reductionism of evolutionism is plainly inadequate to account for boundary conditions as the origin of the first living cell, the origin of backboneed animals from invertebrate animals, and the origin of man from some ancestral primate. These are strong indications that the theory will not hold up.

Eventually the theory of organic evolution will have to be abandoned, just like Aristotle's theory of spontaneous generation of living forms had to be abandoned after some twenty centuries. And it may just take that long before the secular evolutionists come to the honest realization that their theory has to be chucked because of lack of scientific evidence and because of too many contradictory data. Its demise, I believe, is sure to come.

Many believe that the theory of organic evolution is the only unifying concept in biology. But we must not overlook the fact that evolution can not be demonstrated to *have* occurred or to *be* occurring today. On the other hand, in my teaching I use the concept of common plan, to which van der Meer also alludes, which ties together many aspects of biology. We know that in Christ "all things hold together" (Col. 1:17) or cohere. So what is it that testifies to that coherence, that unity, as we *do* our natural science? In biology it is the concept of the common plan.

A neat thing about this unifying concept of the common plan is that it can be demonstrated to be true to the creaturely things. It is not a mere theoretic construct. Even unbelieving biologists inadvertently point this out in their writings. For example, Bruce Carlson says in his embryology textbook (40): "The striking resemblance of the em-

bryos to one another is indicative of the *fundamental similarity* of the processes involved in their development'' (emph. added). He sees the common plan for the development of human, pig, reptile, and bird embryos. And who can deny that fact? It is plain as day for everyone to see. But he then goes on to ignore the true meaning of these embryonic similarities, and superimposes on them the not-demonstrable concept of evolution, thus trying to give credence to the recapitulation theory, which Ernst Haeckel so desperately tried to establish, but which has failed miserably.

I am also happy to see van der Meer contrast the principle of uniformity with uniformitarianism, which overextends that principle into ultimate origins. The principle of uniformity is demonstrable. It is easy to demonstrate the laws which hold for the behavior of matter regarding gravity, for example, or for the development of a chick's wing, or for the dictation of amino acid sequences in a protein by means of the universal genetic code. This uniformity demonstrates the constancy of the laws which God has laid down for his creatures to obey.

But uniformitarianism is stretching uniformity "beyond its limits," as van der Meer points out, and this makes both cosmic and biologic history thoroughly mechanistic, whether God is allowed to be "behind" it or not. If we extrapolate from the present, on the basis of what we now know of the created structure, and calculate without special constraints what must have happened in the past, all the way back to time zero, then the unfolding of the universe with all its inhabitants must have been purely mechanistic. For had there been anything supernatural in that unfolding at all, then we would not be able to calculate accurately back to the very beginnings. We would certainly miss the true zero point. But such a uniformitarianistic approach to origins is not compatible with the biblical concept of a supernatural, divine Creator, who according to His pleasure spoke into being a functional cosmos. You cannot have both a "natural," continuous unfolding and a supernatural, discontinuous beginning. Ultimately one has to choose between a human construct, such as the Big Bang theory, and a divine Creator. You cannot have both. Basically the choice is whether we take God's Word for it or the words of secular scientists.

In conclusion I want to make five observations.

First of all, van der Meer is making a positive contribution to the origins debate and is helping us to focus on the the correct principles.

Secondly, we must witness to the "world," i.e., to unbelievers, also *in* our science. But compromise is not a true witness and is spurned by the unbeliever (note the secular reaction to the ASA booklet, mentioned by Maatman). Although we must witness, the change of heart comes only through the working of the Holy Spirit. And compromise does not truly proclaim the majesty and power of Jehovah, the Creator.

Thirdly, we need peace in the Christian community, and Christian scientists have to and can work together. But it must not be peace at any price. We can have that peace if we all stand firmly on the same basic principles, based on the written Word of God, understood through obedient listening to that Word.

Fourthly, we must deal honestly and openly with each other regarding these admittedly difficult issues. When one asks, for example, whether we believe in a historical Adam, and we say "yes," what does that mean? The questioner may want to know whether we believe that God supernaturally created Adam from the literal dust of the ground, discontinuously, exactly as Genesis reads, with Eve being created later, separately, from a bone out of Adam's thorax. But the respondent may say "yes" to a historical Adam, but mean merely that at some time in primeval history there was a first true human being, or that God used organic dust in the form of a primate to make humans. This affirmation is in a way correct, because that is the way he understands "historical Adam." But in reality the message to the questioner is not the same as the content of the answer. Such an affirmation conveys false information and is in that sense misleading. In our debates and discussions as well as in our publications it is therefore imperative that we not only make propositional statements, but that we also specify *explicitly* what we mean.

Fifthly, where do we as a Dordt College community of teaching staff, administration, board, and constituency stand in regard to the creationist (i.e., theistic evolutionist) position? Now is the time for Dordt College to make a clear statement. If we as an institution endorse theistic evolution, then let us make that clear to everyone (although, I doubt sincerely that we do, or would). But if we do not,

then let us take a clear stand, and come out for a creationist position, and spell out what that means for the origin of man, for the origin of animals, plants, and micro-organisms, and for the origin of the inorganic world. Let us specify which basic biblical principles motivate us to take that specific position, and what these principles imply for doing rigorous natural science, as well as for related moral and ethical questions.

At this time in history it is not sufficient merely not to be in conflict with the confessions and creeds of the Christian Reformed Church. These confessions and creeds, after all, are documents generated before the days of Charles Darwin, and therefore

do not even speak to the problems of evolution. Today calls for a clear confessional statement about God's creative acts, about ultimate origins, and about non-negotiable principles.

Once we have come to that point we can truly claim to be in accord with our confessions and creeds. I hope we have the fortitude to proceed with that post haste.

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