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## A Proton's Pilgrimage: A Review of Dawn

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## A Proton's Pilgrimage: A Review of Dawn

### Abstract

"At every step along the way, Pro faithfully ties what he sees to the underlying plan of the Creator."

Posting about the book *Dawn* from *In All Things* - an online journal for critical reflection on faith, culture, art, and every ordinary-yet-graced square inch of God's creation.

<https://inallthings.org/a-protons-pilgrimage-a-review-of-dawn/>

### Keywords

In All Things, book review, Dawn, protons, tale, Cees Dekker, Corien Oranje, Gijsbert van den Brink

### Comments

*In All Things* is a publication of the [Andreas Center for Reformed Scholarship and Service](#) at Dordt University.

# A Proton's Pilgrimage: A Review of *Dawn*

Jason Ho

June 22, 2023

**Title:** *Dawn: A Proton's Tale of All That Came to Be*

**Author:** Cees Dekker, Corien Oranje, and Gijsbert van den Brink

**Publisher:** IVP Academic

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**Pages:** 176 (Paperback)

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As a child, I was captivated by nature. I loved poking around our backyard in the temperate Pacific Northwest, turning rocks over and searching for bugs, or heading down to the creek at the end of our road to watch the ducks float by without a care in the world. I was mesmerized in 1997 watching the Hale-Bopp comet brightly streak across the night sky. What other extraordinary things might we find out there in our vast universe?

Naturally, my wonder and the questions I asked about what I saw drew me to science at a young age. Our local science fair became a key part of my education, and each year I'd take a question or a passion I had throughout the year and present it amidst a sea of baking soda volcanos and potato batteries. One year, I raised caterpillars through their metamorphosis into butterflies, carefully sketching each stage along the way. Another year, I spent *hours* searching rotting logs and mulch in the park at the end of our street, trying to find the perfect example of a slime mold protist. I devoured books about nature, space, geology, and all aspects of the natural world.

As I grew up and moved onto high school, I slowly began to pay attention to the diversity of voices around me. Some encouraged me further in my curiosity of the natural world. Others warned me of the dangers that science held, and how our flawed human perception of nature may lead us astray from faithful obedience to God. I wasn't sure who to believe. For a long time, I was convinced that science and faith were on opposite sides of a battleground, and there could be nothing between the two. There weren't many accessible voices that I could draw on at the time as I tried to discern how to honor both my faith and my curiosity for creation.

*Dawn: A Proton's Tale of All that Came to Be* by Dekker, Oranje, and van den Brink is an imaginative story written collaboratively by a distinguished professor of biophysics, an award-winning novelist & theologian, and a scholar on the boundary of faith and science respectively. The story imagines the history of the universe, framed by the creation-fall-redemption story of

the Christian faith, as told from the perspective of one of the only things that could claim to have seen it all—a lowly, common, proton.

As a particle physicist, I enjoyed the imaginative narrative woven together with scientific terminology. The book starts not *quite* at the beginning, but close to it, with the chaotic birth of protons (after the temperature of the universe cooled sufficiently to permit hadronization). Our protagonist, Proton (or “Pro” for short), has just been born and is thrown into the high-temperature tempest of the early universe as particles are created and combined. The authors inject snippets of physics terminology throughout as they refer to the fundamental forces of nature and the family of particle building blocks that will form matter as we know it—what physicists call the Standard Model. Finally, *light* is given a place of significance in the story, at least from the perception of the Proton, lending weight to the creation account in Genesis and God’s first recorded words, “Let there be light”.

Once the particle building blocks of the universe are formed, Pro moves through a series of transformations, first becoming atomic hydrogen, and then finally turning into a carbon atom through the help of nuclear fusion inside of a star. It’s here where the words of scientific communicator Carl Sagan came to my mind:

*Our Sun is a second-or third-generation star. All of the rocky and metallic material we stand on, the iron in our blood, the calcium in our teeth, the carbon in our genes were produced billions of years ago in the interior of a red giant star. We are made of star-stuff.*

That last line was made famous by Sagan, and (in my experience) cautiously eschewed by faithful Christians worried about materialistic naturalism. Here, the same process is framed in terms of the generosity and creativity of a God of abundance—building magnificent elemental factories in order to create something even more complex and more beautiful.

The story goes on to imagine how creation may have unfolded through a lens of evolutionary creationism. There are tidbits of scientific hypothesis sprinkled throughout the book; for example the possibility that ribose, one of the building blocks for life, may have arrived on Earth through a meteor collision.<sup>1</sup> Pro goes on to witness the development of single-celled organisms, and later more complex life forms, finally culminating in the arrival of *homo sapien*. At every step along the way, Pro faithfully ties what he sees to the underlying plan of the Creator.

At this point, the authors move into telling the biblical story of Genesis, presenting it in a way that seems to follow the ideas presented in Dennis Venema and Scot McKnight’s work *Adam and the Genome*.<sup>2</sup> Evidence from genomic science seems to indicate that *Homo sapiens* appear to emerge as communities of many, as opposed to an original pair. Two individuals are singled out however, and God reveals himself to them—it’s here that the story seems to indicate that *personhood* is predicated on the knowledge of God, with the revelation of God elevating *homo sapien* to what Pro calls *homo divinus*: human beings that have been addressed

by God. And it's here that we see the fallen nature of humanity play out, and the disobedience of this tribe of people lead to the separation of God from *homo divinus*.

Pro continues to journey throughout Biblical history as part of sheepskins in Abraham's tent, strings on David's harp, and later in a walking stick that Jesus carries with him through his life and ministry. The grand biblical narrative of creation-fall-redemption plays out, with Pro witnessing the birth, crucifixion, and resurrection of Jesus. Later, Pro follows the ministry of the apostles, and finally glimpses a vision of the future. The authors stay true to the "big story" of the Bible, while finding ways to incorporate a modern scientific understanding of the natural world.

The story that *Dawn* presents is an imagining of what creation *could* have looked like if one were to take both the biblical narrative and scientific observation seriously. Read as it's intended—as a fictional story interwoven with biblical and scientific truths, *Dawn* could be a catalyst for thoughtful questions and open conversations about the interactions between science and faith. As a curious child raised in a culture of suspicion towards science, I think this could have been a resource or a catalyst for conversation that would have kindled my theological imagination and drawn my faith and scientific passions closer together. I hope that it can be that book for today's curious children (and children at heart).

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1. <https://www.pnas.org/doi/10.1073/pnas.1907169116>
  2. <https://biologos.org/resources/adam-and-the-genome-reading-scripture-after-genetic-science>