

# THE PHILLIP E. JOHNSON PHENOMENON: ARE EVANGELICALS INHERITING THE WIND?

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Phillip E. Johnson is the most important evangelical anti-evolutionist in the world today. In his book *Defeating Darwinism*, he compares the modern evolution-creation controversy to the movie *Inherit the Wind*. The story is a fictionalized version of the Scopes Trial, which in 1925 convicted a school teacher for introducing the theory of evolution to his students. According to Johnson, "*Inherit the Wind* is a masterpiece of propaganda, promoting the stereotype of the public debate about creation and evolution that gives all the virtue and intelligence to the Darwinists."<sup>1</sup> He claims that those who succumb to this propaganda inherit the wind. But this can work two ways. Could it be that Johnson's anti-evolutionary books are "a masterpiece of propaganda, promoting the stereotype of the *evangelical Church's* debate about creation and evolution that gives all the virtue and intelligence to *him and his anti-evolutionist colleagues*?" More specifically, is the current popularity of Johnson's anti-evolutionism an example of evangelicals inheriting the wind?

This paper examines Johnson's foundational principles, rhetorical moves and theological assumptions. It closes with consideration to the pastoral implications of the origins debate and the answer to the question posed in the title

## I. Johnson's Foundation Principles

### *Principle #1: Pervasiveness of Naturalism and Materialism*

Johnson states that the "unofficial religion" of the modern world as reflected in science, law and education is *naturalism* or *materialism*. He uses these terms interchangeably and defines them as the world view which sees reality consisting of only "the fundamental particles that make up both matter and energy."<sup>2</sup> That is, in such a world there is no God. Johnson's exposition of naturalism and materialism is worth serious consideration. With science in modern society being upheld as an intellectual and cultural value, he correctly points to examples where it is effectively elevated to the status of a religion. But in fairness to those before Johnson, this is not an original observation because many others have recognized that science can be transformed into an atheistic world view often termed 'scientism' or 'scientific materialism.'

Johnson's claim of the pervasiveness of naturalism and materialism must be challenged. For example, is the scientific community as thoroughly naturalistic and materialistic as he declares? Regarding the origin of life, is Johnson correct in asserting that modern scientists and science educators are "*absolutely insistent*

that evolution is an unguided and mindless process, and that our existence is therefore a fluke rather than a planned outcome"?"<sup>3</sup> Evidence against Johnson's claim comes from Edward Larson and Larry Witham who report in the prestigious scientific journal *Nature* that 4 out of 10 leading American scientists believe in a *personal God*. More specifically, a random survey in 1996 of 1000 U.S. scientists reveals that 40% of them accept the following statement: "I believe in a God in intellectual and affective communication with humankind, i.e., a God to whom one may pray in expectation of receiving an answer. By 'answer' I mean more than the subjective, psychological effect of prayer."<sup>4</sup> As a result, with the theory of biological evolution held as the only paradigm for the origin of life in the scientific world, it follows in the light of the Larson and Witham study that a significant number of leading American scientists believe God created through a teleological evolutionary process.

Johnson then is correct in pointing out blatant examples where materialism and naturalism are injudiciously imposed on certain sectors of society. However, he overstates the case by painting a gloomy picture with conspiratorial tones of the pervasiveness of this philosophical view, and he is simply wrong in suggesting that materialism and naturalism are necessarily associated with the biological theory of evolution, or that this non-teleological world view is universally accepted by the modern scientific community.

### *Principle #2: Intelligent Design in the Universe*

Johnson correctly asserts that the complex design manifested in the universe is evidence for the existence of an Intelligent Designer. Evidence for the powerful impact that design in nature has on the human spirit is seen throughout the history of ideas. The notion that this design points to a designer is not a distinctly Christian idea, but one that transcends all cultures and times--from Hebrew psalmists to Greek philosophers to 20th century physicists. The "argument from design" is one of the most powerful and widely used defences for the existence of God. The Holy Scriptures clearly affirm this notion in Psalm 19 and Romans 1.

In the last ten years, a loosely defined group known as the Intelligent Design Theorists has appeared in American evangelical circles with Johnson as its leader. They introduce a unique twist to the notion of design--the concept of *irreducible complexity*. That is, Intelligent Design Theorists assert that certain biological structures are fashioned in such a way that it was not possible for these to develop through a natural process like evolution. To account for the existence of these irreducible complex structures, direct Divine intervention from outside the normal operation of the universe is claimed to have occurred at some point during the history of life. Therefore, Johnson and the design theorists are progressive creationists.

Such a position is another version of the "God-of-the-Gaps." The problem with this view is that once natural processes are discovered to account for the creation of a once acclaimed irreducibly complex structure, God's purported intervention is lost to the advancing light of scientific research. The consequence

of filling these gaps is that God appears to be forced further and further into the dark recesses of our ignorance.

Johnson then accurately affirms the time-honored notion that the universe reflects intelligent design. However, it is not logical necessary to insist that the existence of design requires direct Divine intervention because natural processes ordained and sustained by the Lord could account for the universe and life in its God glorifying splendor.

### *Principle #3: Failure of the Theory of Biological Evolution*

Johnson believes that the theory of biological evolution is hopelessly flawed with regard to both the evidence supporting the theory and the logic employed to argue for it. This third principle has gained Johnson international recognition.

As a professor of law who steps outside his field of expertise, Johnson justifies entering this scientific discussion by appealing to his academic qualifications:

I am not a scientist but an academic lawyer by profession, with a specialty in analysing the logic of arguments and identifying the assumptions that lie behind those arguments. This background is more appropriate than one might think, because what people believe about evolution and Darwinism depends very heavily on the kind of logic they employ and the kind of assumptions they make.<sup>5</sup>

Fair enough. But before Johnson can use his analytical tools, he must first have a grasp of the evidence for evolution.

Let's consider Johnson's knowledge of the vertebrate fossil record. He claims that evolutionists "proudly point to a small number of fossil finds that supposedly confirm the theory" and he concludes that "the fossil record overall is extremely disappointing to Darwinist expectations."<sup>6</sup> Stated this way, Johnson gives the impression he is familiar with the vertebrate fossil record. But is he? In *Darwin on Trial*, the book in which he claims to have "taken on the scientific evidence for Darwinian evolution," Johnson deals with the evolution of fish to amphibians in 1/2 a page, amphibians to reptiles in 1 paragraph, reptiles to birds in 1 1/2 pages, reptiles to mammals in 2 1/2 pages, and apes to humans in 4 1/2 pages. That is, in under 10 pages Johnson attempts to critique the vertebrate fossil record, a documented record that boasts well over 30,000 described species.<sup>7</sup> In total, Johnson uses 16 fossil vertebrates in an effort to discredit the fossil evidence for the evolution of this entire subphylum.

To further appreciate Johnson's grasp of evolutionary theory, consider his understanding of the evolution of whales. He asks:

By what Darwinian process did useful hind limbs wither away to vestigial proportions, and at what stage in the transformation from rodent to sea monster did this occur? Did rodent forelimbs transform themselves by gradual adaptive stages into whale flippers? We hear nothing of the difficulties because to Darwinists unsolvable problems are not important.<sup>8</sup>

Johnson's biology is displayed in this passage. First, no evolutionary biologist

has ever believed that whales descended from rodents. Rather, scholarly consensus suggests that whales evolved about 55 million years ago from mammals with hoofs--mesonychid ungulates. Quite remarkably, the recent discovery of *Ambulocetus natans* has strengthened the theory that whales evolved from hoofed animals because this whale had toes terminated by a "convex hoof."<sup>9</sup> Second, a basic knowledge of modern developmental biology solves the problem of the transformation of legs into flippers during the evolution of whales. Experimental manipulation of a region that controls the development of the limb can result in remarkable variation in limb anatomy.<sup>10</sup> Finally, it is interesting to note Johnson's last comment regarding "difficulties" and "unsolvable problems." He forgets that his admitted knowledge of the vertebrate fossil record is based primarily on Barbara Stahl's 1985 book, *Vertebrate History*, a work which is subtitled "Problems in Evolution."<sup>11</sup> Stahl's text is clear evidence that evolutionists openly acknowledge that there are difficulties with evolutionary theory (as there are with any scientific theory), and that they are interested in grappling with these publically in the literature.

To conclude, before Johnson can apply his analytical skills, he must first have a grasp of the evidence for evolution. This brief review is a biopsy revealing that he is simply not familiar with the issues. Johnson's conclusions about evolutionary biology must be deemed suspicious at best, if not unacceptable.

## **II. Johnson's Rhetorical Moves**

A significant factor in the acceptance of Johnson's views in the evangelical community relates directly to the way he presents his arguments. First, his three foundational principles are so tightly interwoven throughout his writings that it becomes nearly impossible for readers to distinguish them, and this opens the way for the problem of the *conflation of ideas*. When this happens a poorly rationalized idea can be "justified" simply by being placed along side a powerful truth. As affirmed earlier with qualification, Johnson's first two principles are powerful: (1) his criticism of naturalism and materialism, and (2) his support for intelligent design in the universe. However, it is important not to conflate these two powerful truths with Johnson's third foundational principle--the failure of the theory of biological evolution.

A second rhetorical move by Johnson is his use of *ad hominem* arguments, which he himself correctly defines "attack the person making the argument instead of the argument itself."<sup>12</sup> He claims that scientists are "notoriously easy to fool," "confused," pretenders, story tellers, pressured by pride and professional security.<sup>13</sup> This type of argument is even launched at fellow believers. According to Johnson, it seems that Christian theologians share with scientists in being "pretenders" led by professional success and intellectual fashion.<sup>14</sup> Johnson's use of *ad hominem* arguments is disappointing. Most will agree that this method of arguing only inflames an already volatile situation and discourages open dialogue.

### III. Johnson's Theological Assumptions

Two theological assumptions direct Johnson's view of origins. Specifically, interventionism in creation and Biblical concordism. These operate at a deep level in his thinking, and only occasionally do they openly appear in his writings.

Johnson claims that "a Creator who merely sets a process in motion and thereafter keeps hands off is easily ignored."<sup>15</sup> He contends that the only God worthy of praise and worship is one who actively intervenes in the creative process over time. Acceptance of this "God-of-the-Gaps" explains his enthusiasm for reporting the difficulties in determining pre-biological evolution, the speed at which organisms appeared in the Cambrian explosion, and the gaps in the fossil record. Johnson claims these are evidence for God's intermittent intervention in creation. However, history has shown that the "God-of-the-Gaps" position has consistently fallen short. Instead of the "gaps" getting "wider" with the advance of science, they have "closed." Before the discovery of the theory of gravity, many early scientists believed that God or angels moved planets along their irregular paths. Similarly, only 200 years ago the best minds in Europe and America interpreted earth history with numerous catastrophic floods due to Divine intervention, but this was all before the principles of geology were discovered.<sup>16</sup>

The second theological assumption that directs Johnson's view of origins is Biblical concordism. He claims that scientific truths are present in the first chapters of the Bible which have later been confirmed by science.

Evolution within species is as much a biblical doctrine as a scientific one, for the Bible taught us (long before modern science) that all different races of man descend from a common human ancestor. Finch-beak variation in no way denies that only God can make a bird.<sup>17</sup>

To be sure, Johnson is cautious not to bring the Word of God into the origins debate, and this is one of the rare occasions where it is clear that theological categories are a factor in his understanding of science. However, Church history reveals the consistent failure of concordist interpretations of the Scriptures.<sup>18</sup> Most Christians agree that the Bible should not be used in constructing scientific theories on astronomy (*eg*, an earth-centred universe) or reproductive biology (*eg*, infertility limited to 'barren' women.). Similarly, the use of Genesis 1 to justify a view of biology is every bit as precarious.

### IV. Pastoral Implications

I consider that the most important issue for Christians in the origins debate regard the pastoral implications. To be sure, the topic of origins is indeed an important discussion in theology, but not so important as to become the central issue of faith. Three important relationships that the origins debate can affect involves those with (1) other Christians, (2) our children, and (3) non-Christians.

First, how are Christians with different views of origins going to relate to one another? Is one's orthodoxy and love for Jesus determined by how one conceives His method of creation? Is this issue important enough to cause *division* between Christians? Or is it only a *difference* between Christians that, in the light of St.

Paul's admonishment in 1 Cor 11:18-19, we should be able to live with? Clearly, one's position on origins should never inhibit the passing or receiving of the communion cup. Unfortunately, Johnson's open and direct attack against Christian theologians and educators only inflames an already tense situation in the Body of Christ.

Second, what should our children be taught concerning origins? Imagine for a moment that the Lord did indeed use an evolutionary process in creation. What happens to the child who is taught Johnson's progressive creationism in a Christian school or a Church Sunday school, and then he or she sees the scientific data for evolution first hand in the paleontological museum at the university? I, like others, have seen this scenario actually unfold with the disastrous spiritual consequences.

Finally, what are Christians going to tell non-Christians about the origin of life? In 2 Cor 6:3, St. Paul admonishes us not to be a stumbling block to the on looking world. Again, assume that the Lord did indeed use an evolutionary process in creating the universe and life. Can one imagine how much of a stumbling block Johnson's progressive creationism is to those who see the scientific data for evolution daily? Many Christians like Johnson weld their anti-evolutionism to the Cross of Christ. But too often in the university environment such a conflation has non-believers disregard the Cross as they angrily mock scientific misunderstandings of the anti-evolutionists.

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To summarize, after Johnson incisively exposes the imposition of scientism on certain sectors of society, and then correctly underlines the powerful reality of intelligent design reflected in nature, he gives the impression that Christians are left with only one option--the acceptance of his anti-evolutionary biology. However, it is logically possible that all the design in the universe, which so powerfully testifies to the work of a Creator, could have come about through a God ordained and sustained evolutionary process--*ie*, a teleological evolution. In other words, the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit could well have employed physical laws and processes to create all the glorious life seen today in a manner similar to when God used physical laws and processes to craft us in our mother's wombs.

Phillip E. Johnson has a plan to correct what he deems is science's ideological commitment to materialism and naturalism. He calls his strategy "the wedge." Johnson boasts, "My own books represent the sharp edge of the wedge" that will split the "log" of materialism, naturalism and evolutionary theory, which he predicts "will collapse with astonishing swiftness."<sup>19</sup> However, Johnson is not sufficiently knowledgeable to evaluate evolutionary theory. To be sure, his anti-evolutionism will continue to be well received in the evangelical community simply because this body of believers in Christ has yet to come to terms with biological evolution. The only "wedge" that Johnson introduces is one between the evangelical Church and the scientific community.

To conclude, *the current popularity of Professor Johnson's anti-evolutionism in evangelicalism is a clear example of this Christian community inheriting the wind.*

## Endnotes

1. Phillip E. Johnson, *An Easy-To-Understand Guide For Defeating Darwinism by Opening Minds* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 1997), p. 25.
2. *Defeating Darwinism*, p. 15. Also see Phillip E. Johnson, *Reason in the Balance: The Case Against Naturalism in Science, Law and Education* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 1995), p. 38.
3. *Defeating Darwinism*, p. 15. My italics.
4. Edward J. Larson and Larry Witham, "Scientists Are Still Keeping the Faith" 386 *Nature* (3 April 1997), pp. 435-436.
5. Philip E. Johnson, *Darwin On Trial* (Downer's Grove: InterVarsity Press, 2nd edition, 1993 [1991]), p. 13.
6. *Defeating Darwinism*, pp. 59-60.
7. *Darwin On Trial*, pp. 74-84. For an introduction to the vast fossil record see Alfred Sherwood Romer's *Vertebrate Paleontology* (Chicago: University Press, 1966 [1933] 3rd edition), pp. 297-301 and Robert L. Carroll, *Vertebrate Paleontology and Evolution* (New York: Freedman, 1988), pp. 520-521.
8. *Darwin On Trial*, p. 87.
9. J.G.M. Thewissen, S.T. Hussain, and M. Arif, "Fossil Evidence for the Origin of Aquatic Locomotion in Archaeocete Whales," *Science* 263 (14 January 1994), pp.210-212. Also see Annalisa Berta, "What Is a Whale?" *Science* 263 (14 January 1994), pp. 180-181.
10. It appears that the timing of the expression of the Hox genes (termed 'the Hox combinatorial code') within a developmental field like the limb is a significant factor in determining morphology. For an introduction to the exciting and rapidly developing field of evolutionary developmental biology where these theories are being formulated see Rudolf A. Raff, *The Shape of Life: Genes, Development, and the Evolution of Animal Form* (Chicago: University Press, 1996). Primary developmental literature with evolutionary implications for the limb includes: *Journal of Embryology and Experimental Morphology* (1985) 87: 163-174; *Developmental Biology* (1985) 109: 82-95; *Nature* (1989) 342: 767-772; *Nature* (1992) 358: 236-239; *Development* (1992) 116: 289-296; *Nature* (1993) 361: 692-693.
11. Johnson openly admits in *Darwin on Trial* that "[t]he primary source for the information about the vertebrate fossil record in this chapter [i.e., Chapter 6: The Vertebrate Sequence] is Barbara J. Stahl's comprehensive text *Vertebrate History: Problems in Evolution* (Dover, 1985), especially Chapters Five and Nine." *Darwin On Trial*, pp. 189-190.
12. *Defeating Darwinism*, p. 40.
13. *Ibid.*, pp. 11, 62, 77, 115.
14. *Ibid.*, pp. 15-16, 91. Also see Tim Stafford, "The Making of a Revolution," *Christianity Today* (8 December 1997), p. 21.
15. *Reason in the Balance*, p. 77.
16. For an excellent review see Davis A. Young, *The Biblical Flood* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1995).
17. *Defeating Darwinism*, p. 87.
18. For an excellent review of the many failed concordist attempts, see Stanley L. Jaki, *Genesis 1: Through the Ages* (London: Thomas Moore, 1992).
19. *Defeating Darwinism*, pp. 92, 114.