Book Reviews

The End of Christianity: Finding a Good God in an Evil World. By William A. Dembski. Nashville: B&H, 2009, xviii + 238 pp., $22.99.

I heard of a man that spanked his children soundly every Sunday evening without regard to anything that they had done during the day. His explanation was that he knew they would do things worthy of punishment during the week and he just wanted to go ahead and get it over with and let them know the cost of disobedience. William Dembski has presented an elaborate defense of such parental anticipation by defending his theory of God's creation of the world in a fallen state, the punishment for sin at a cosmological level being instituted retroactively. "I will argue," the author states, "that we should understand the corrupting effects of the Fall *retroactively* (in other words, the consequences of the Fall can also act backward into the past)" (50). Dembski adds later, "An omniscient and omnipotent God, by anticipating human actions, can respond in advance to humanity's Fall" (138).

He states this same idea differently, and strangely, later by writing, "In focusing on divine anticipation as God's way of controlling the Fall's damage, I have stressed the active role God played in bringing about natural evil prior to the Fall" (175). How the creation of a fallen world actually serves to control the Fall's damage may seem counterintuitive, but he points to a human immune system able to cope, to some degree, with pathogenic microbes (175f.) as an evidence of gracious "divine anticipation." It must be noted, however, that a gracious divine anticipation and the creation of a fallen world are two very different things, one of which rests on firm biblical exposition and the other only asserted.

In the unending challenge presented by naturalism and materialism to the Christian view that the world was created by an infinite, and thus infinitely intelligent, deity, the arguments presented by the proponents of intelligent design (ID) have been immensely helpful. Their reasoning from several different disciplines (e.g., mathematics, biochemistry, and paleontology) has succeeded in showing the much more likely probability that the world in all its teleologically related parts, as a conglomerate and as individuals, came into being as a result of a plan rather than chance. William Dembski has been no small part of this movement and is to be appreciated for his relentless pursuit of putting an intelligent designer (God!) in the middle of some very sophisticated scientific discussions.

The ID method of operation has been to elicit conclusions by drawing inferences only from scientific data. Supposedly, religious presuppositions

are kept at bay while proponents of the view argue that the body of scientific facts points to design and mindful purpose, or, as Dembski states, "an intelligence that structures and directs the world" (74). Other conclusions that may follow this singular conclusion are left, or should be left, to the various theologians and apologists of the respective theistic religions. Thus a Christian, if so inclined to incorporate such data, may use the prolegomena of intelligent design to argue that this designer is also a creating, revealing, and redeeming God. He may argue that the Bible is the place where we find the body of revelation that this God has given.

Because it is a revelation from God, the Christian apologist argues that the Bible is without error; its perspicuity means that we interpret other sources of revelation, such as general revelation in conscience and nature, in a manner consistent with the Bible. We recognize the possibility of error in our interpretation of Scripture, and we remain, therefore, in constant dialogue with the whole corpus of special revelation as well as with other interpreters so as to minimize our propensity to myopic and misleading readings of the text. We also recognize the possibility of errors in our interpretation of natural phenomena, an inferior source of knowledge of God, and thus do not canonize present scientific theories as equal to, or more compelling than, clear biblical exegesis.

In this book, William Dembski has become a theologian intent particularly on framing a theological argument that has powerful implications for apologetics and theodicy. In pursuit of this goal, moreover, Dembski has subdued the gown of theology to the lab robe of the scientist. He has given to natural revelation the task of tutor to special revelation. The result is an attempt to explain the problem of evil in light of some assumptions that Dembski considers a part of "scientific orthodoxy" derived from the "book of nature" (chapters 8 and 9).

He uses the term "orthodoxy" because he believes that these scientific assertions are so sure, so explicitly a part of the undeniable data, that any biblical idea or theological construction must take them into account and be shaped so as to accommodate them. This "orthodoxy" he derived from the disciplines of geological science and astrophysics. "In our current mental environment," Dembski writes, "informed as it is by modern astrophysics and geology, the scientific community as a whole regards young-earth creationism as untenable" (55). One undeniable conclusion that provides an infallible scientific framework for theological discussion is that the universe is 13 billion years old and the earth around 4.5 billion (49). A second scientifically orthodox parameter is that suffering, death, disease, parasitism, corruption, destruction, and catastrophe preceded the appearance of man on earth.

Dembski also is concerned about "theological orthodoxy." Along the way he rejects process theology and open theism, engages Trinitarian orthodoxy positively, criticizes some old-earth creationists for dealing inadequately with the problem of evil (78-81), and affirms the necessity of an exegetical foundation for theological formulations. Although he gives a fair amount of space to the cross and has some hints at penal substitution (18, 24), his interest seems more to be on divine suffering (18, 20) as a means of participating in the human condition, increasing our confidence in God's genuine sympathy for us, and restoring us to a relationship of love with him. His overall explanation of the cross has elements of A. H. Strong's immanentism and seems more attuned to moral influence and moral government than to propitiatory sacrifice. As a matter of biblical fidelity, he is particularly concerned to locate the origin of evil in this present world as the result of human sin. To that particular aspect of Christian theodicy he points his readers, and on that issue he believes he has made some original contribution. His perception of what he is about is stated in one paragraph:

> Much of my past work has been on intelligent design and the controversy over evolution. Nothing in this book, however, takes sides in that debate. In arguing that the Fall marks the entry of all evil into the world (both personal and natural evil), I make no assumptions about the age of the Earth, the extent of evolution, or the prevalence of design. The theodicy I develop here looks not to science but to the metaphysics of divine action and purpose. At the heart of this theodicy is the idea that the effects of the Fall can be retroactive as well as proactive (much as the saving effects of the Cross stretch not only forward in time but also backward, saving, for instance, the Old Testament saints) (9, 10).

While it is true that Dembski argues that an evolutionist, supposedly a theistic one, can receive his theodicy (146, 154f., chapter 21) (in my opinion a point not favorable to the credibility of his construction), I fail to see the benefit that derives from his supposed lack of assumptions about the age of the earth. He certainly maintains an extended criticism of young-earth advocates throughout the book, but, of course, not by his *assuming* it but because science has so incontestably proven it! The claim, therefore, that he does not look to science for support in his argument also rings hollow. Unless I am completely oblivious to his dominant argument, the age of the earth as supposedly demonstrated by the sciences of geology and astrophysics has everything to do with—is the very *raison d'etre* of—this book.

Dembski insists that the facts of scientific orthodoxy must somehow be made consistent with the point of theological orthodoxy that human sin is the immediate cause of all moral and natural evil. He cites Rom 5:12 as determinative of human sin as the immediate cause of natural and personal suffering and rightly criticizes viewpoints that dismiss this connection (27-31). The difficulty that drives the entire book is making millions of years of creature suffering the direct result of human sin prior even to the appearance of humanity. "For hundreds of millions of years," in fact, "multicelled animals have been emerging, competing, fighting, killing, parasitizing, torturing, suffering, and going extinct," all prior to human sin (49).

So sure is Dembski of his leading features of scientific orthodoxy that he contends that the virtually universal Christian understanding of Genesis 1-3 may be dismissed in light of the demands of science. "Indeed, the history of biblical interpretation until the rise of modern science in the seventeenth century overwhelmingly supports a young earth view," but science, in light of its discovery of "momentous new truths"—that is, data that require an old earth—"trumps the most natural reading of Genesis and the overwhelming consensus of theologians up through the Reformation" (52, 54). Compare this with Dembski's assertion on page 35 where a straightforward reading of Genesis 1-3 gives way to the caveat, "Today this traditional reading of Genesis seems less reasonable." Not only is it less reasonable, it is impossible if one is committed to the scientific orthodoxy of an old earth. That curse followed fall is not at all necessary chronologically, according to Dembski, if one sees creation as incorporating judgment from the beginning.

Surely one must concede some difficulty in Dembski's view that "God wills the disordering of creation, *making it defective on purpose*" (his italics, 145). He believes that such action is justified on the basis of "humanity's covenant headship in creation." On the other hand, he takes great care to describe how the first fully God-conscious humans must not experience the "effects of the Fall while they were still, literally, innocent" (155). Why it is more justifiable for the creation to experience the curse with all its horrendous suffering described so aptly by Dembski when its covenant head still is innocent and uncursed is a mystery. He works to make it seem philosophically plausible and psychologically satisfying, but there is no positive exegetical foundation for such an arrangement. Dembski is driven solely

by his commitment to old-earth scientific orthodoxy. Among the many places where this scientific orthodoxy drives the entire discussion is in his opening paragraph on "The Trinitarian Mode of Creation."

> Contemporary science holds that the Earth and universe are not thousands but billions of years old, that humans have been around only a miniscule portion of that time, and that prior to their arrival natural evils abounded. To see how natural evil could precede the first human sin and yet be a consequence of it, we need to explore what it means for God to create and then act within creation (84).

The default assumption is that what science presently holds on the age of the earth must be accepted and theology must be fit into that assumption. When Dembski's resistance to the naturalistic assumptions of biological evolution is so high, it seems incongruous that he unquestioningly accepts those of geology and astrophysics on the earth's age (chapter 7), and hardly stops short of ridicule, and misrepresentation, of the work of young-earth creationists on these issues (chapters 6 and 7). To Henry Morris's interpretation of the relation of created light to the light observed in stars, Dembski responds, "It is difficult, in my view, to reconcile such a God with a God of truth" (67). That would be a very appropriate response to his interpretation of Genesis 1-3, to be mentioned below.

While it is true that God acts redemptively in history prior to actual fulfillment of redemption in the historic work of Christ, one comes to this conclusion on the basis of clear revelation with an explanation of how God could be just in doing so (see especially Rom 3:21-26; Eph 3:4-13; Heb 1:1-4, 11:39-40). No such exegetical foundation exists for God's making the curse imposed for sin retroactive. The theological life of Dembski's proposal hangs by a slender exegetical thread. All of it depends on Dembski's success in reinterpreting Genesis 1-3. He prepares the way for this by discussing theories of communication, the transcendent and independent character of information, and applying concepts of two types of time and two types of logic.

According to Dembski, time is seen in terms of *chronos* and *kairos*. Logic is described as causal-temporal and intentional-semantic. *Chronos*, which speaks of the sequence of events in history, is aligned with causal-temporal logic. *Kairos*, which deals with particularly meaningful events in the purpose of God, is tied to intentional-semantic logic. In this way Dembski is able to disrupt chronology, or the appearance of it, in biblical narrative by shifting some passages into the category of *kairos* to be understood in terms of intentional-semantic logic. Genesis 1 is not to be interpreted as "ordinary chronological time (*chronos*) but rather as time from the vantage of God's purposes (*kairos*)" (142). Genesis 1 becomes a narrative of how God sees the world ideally, but has never yet actualized (144f.). His saying, his seeing, his making, and his pronouncing of it as "good," all recorded in Genesis 1, never actually took place. The originally intended world (the first creation) as described in Genesis 1 was never made, but God settled for an imperfect world (the second creation) due to his anticipation of human sin. Genesis 1 employs intentional-semantic logic and thus sees the days, not as chronology or even as having any palpable existence, but as a statement of the basic spiritual order of importance and fitness in the relation of created things to each other. Dembski writes, "Genesis 1 summarizes the order of creation viewed kairologically" (144).

Dembski seeks to justify this odd reading by saying that he is following "the common scriptural practice of employing physical realities to illuminate spiritual truths" (142). If there is no creation such as Genesis 1 described, to what physical reality does it refer? Is it like real bread symbolizing the real broken body of Christ or real wine symbolizing the real flowing blood of Christ? In one case the symbols are both familiar and palpable, but in Dembski's attempt at spiri-

tualizing, such a "physical reality" intended to evoke a spiritual correspondent never existed. What spiritual truth does this non-existent physical reality teach us? An ideal future state? Plenty of Scripture addresses that issue directly without being clouded with this picture of an original creation that never existed.

For Dembski the "spiritual reality" is an original intention that was set aside in light of the anticipation of human sin. That which the Bible represents God as calling "good" has never, in fact, existed; God never created it. God never brought the animals to Adam to name, for they already were wild and vicious, predatory, and blood-thirsty. Contrary to Dembski, Adam understood the curse God pronounced on the ground to be immediately related to his sin, as did subsequent generations. When Lamech, the father of Noah, was 126 years old, Adam died. Fifty-six years after Adam died, when Lamech fathered Noah, Lamech said, "Out of the ground that the Lord has cursed this one shall bring us relief from our work and from the painful toil of our hands" (Gen 5:29). Adam had told every generation of the descendants of Seth, who lived fifty-six years beyond the birth of Noah, of the curse on the ground. He believed that even that ground out of Eden into which Lamech had poured so much sweat and pain had not always been cursed but had become so as a result of, and subsequent to, his sin. Now with the death of Adam, perhaps Lamech reasoned, a generation was arising in which the curse no longer would be operative. Both Adam and Lamech would be surprised at the reasoning of Dembski.

To be sure, in the intentional-semantic logic by which God creates and organizes the world—not chronologically but kairologically—evil is always logically downstream. In that logic God creates a good world, it becomes even better once humans are created, and then it goes haywire once humans sin. Seen chronologically, however, the world has always been haywire—hence the need for a new heaven and a new earth (172).

Dembski purposely borrowed the *kairos/chronos* distinction from Paul Tillich (125). For the sake of his own theological purposes, Tillich exaggerated the distinction. In fact, such a clear distinction simply does not hold true. The words are often used interchangeably in Scripture. For example such an important event as the incarnation is spoken of as *chronos* in Galatians: "When the fullness of *time* was come" (4:4). This same word is used to denominate the time of the birth of Jesus in Luke 1:57, while *kairos* is used concerning the birth of Moses in Acts 7:20. One of the most striking uses of *kairos* as synonymous with *chronos* occurs in Luke 18:29, 30 when Jesus refers to this present age, emphasizing its temporary character, as *kairos*: "There is no one who has left house or wife or brothers or parents or children, for the sake of the kingdom of God, who will not receive many times more in *this time*, and in the age to come eternal life." In short an investigation of the actual occurrences in the New Testament indicates very little difference in the use of *kairos* and *chronos* in the New Testament, while Paul Tillich's exaggeration of the difference arose only as an apologetic for his radical ontological existentialism and treatment of biblical categories as symbols of self-actualization. In that way, it seems entirely appropriate that Dembski employ the Tillichian distinction, for he indicates no more assent to the historical nature of the creation narrative than Tillich does of the particular, personal, and unique character of the incarnation.

In fact, the biblical history always embeds God's purposive action in the real chronology of the world. Everything in Scripture is a picture of how God is in every event, controlling each for his own purposes. The Bible has no *kairos* that is distinct from its *chronos*, but every critical action of God in pursuit of his eternally ordained purpose becomes manifest as the irresistible flow of events in real time and space. "The Word became flesh and dwelt among us" (John 1:12). "He himself bore our sins in his own body on the tree" (1 Pet 2:24). "In the days of Jesus' life on earth he offered

up prayers.... He learned obedience.... And being made perfect he became the author of eternal salvation" (Heb 5:7-9). These events of such powerful and infinite redemptive importance occurred in chronological time and within finite space. The words and the narrative, even if called intentional-semantic logic of *kairological* importance, nevertheless occurred as narrated in the biblical record and would have no meaning if not real historical events. So stands the biblical narrative of creation, fall, and curse and its subsequent importance in the redemptive history.

Dembski's exegetical difficulties extend far beyond Genesis 1-3. He describes virtually every event of Genesis 4-11 under the phrase "highly dubious claims" (170). This comes from his capitulation to "the current mental environment" that makes a "face-value reading of Genesis 4-11 and the chronology presented there difficult." He is quite a bit happier with Genesis 12-50 for it "can be confirmed through independent archeological and anthropological evidence" (170). As a result of his intellectual discomfort in the absence of a present day science to confirm what appears to be written with meticulous clarity and purpose, he cannot accept the biblical dating of the flood, the adequacy of the ark to provide all that it was intended to provide, or that Noah and his wife and children populated the world, though the text says with utter clarity, "These were the sons of Noah and from these the people of the whole earth were dispersed" (Gen 9:19). He finds it difficult to believe that Abraham arose a mere 200 years subsequent to the Tower of Babel. In addition he states, "Noah's flood, though presented as a global event, is probably best understood as historically rooted in a local event" (170). This he prefers to the Mosaic testimony that the waters prevailed more than twenty-two feet above the tops of the mountains and that God "blotted out every living thing that was on the face of the ground, man and animals and creeping things and birds of the heavens. They were blotted out from the earth. Only Noah was left, and those who were with him in the ark" (Gen 7:23f.). He also prefers his consent to the "current mental judgment" to the testimony of Peter that "the world that then existed was deluged with water and perished" (2 Pet 3:6).

In short, Dembski has demonstrated anew that Genesis remains the battleground of Christian thinking. Science has challenged Christian thinkers to develop a variety of circumlocutions in treating Genesis 1-11. So it was with the C. H. Toy controversy, the evolution controversy of the 1920s, the controversy over Ralph Elliott's *The Message of Genesis* in the early 1960s, and the Broadman Commentary controversy in the early 1970s. Dembski now has developed his own way of handling the apparent historical narrative of creation, Fall, pre-flood development, and Flood. The old earth demanded by the naturalistic assumptions of contemporary astrophysics and geology must be honored and the ancient text must give way. Even if hidden in the verbal haze of intentional-semantic logic, Genesis 1 simply did not happen; even though the Bible presents it as having happened, Dembski says that it did not. His theodicy is necessary only because he has created a massive theological and exegetical difficulty by denying that the creation was ever "very good" (Gen 1:31) in chronological time and squeezing millions, if not billions, of years of suffering and death into the world prior to the curse pronounced in Genesis 3. Whereas Paul sees the creation "subjected to futility" and concurrent with human bondage until the redemption of the body (Rom 8:20-23), Dembski sees the subjection to futility as an act of creation.

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