

Reformed View of Origins? Book fails to deliver promise of the title

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Review of *Origins: A Reformed Look at Creation, Design, & Evolution*
by Deborah B. Haarsma & Loren D. Haarsma.

I am always interested to see a book advertising itself as “a Reformed perspective”; hence, my desire to read *Origins: A Reformed Look at Creation, Design, & Evolution*. The authors, husband and wife, Deborah B. and Loren D. Haarsma, appear to be uniquely qualified to write a book on origins from a Reformed perspective, since they both teach physics at a Reformed Christian college.

My initial interest only intensified my disappointment. There is little that is “Reformed” about their perspective, and the range of scientific options offered is weighted in favor of evolution. In my opinion, the book is not a Reformed view of origins, but a thinly disguised apologetic for theistic evolution that is exegetically and confessionally flawed.

The authors’ purpose is to establish that there is no conflict between old-earth science and the Bible (p. 9). In the first four chapters, the authors lay the foundation for their approach. Chapter one deals with the relation of the Bible and science. They assert that God reveals Himself both in the Bible and in the world; the Bible helps us understand the world, and science (the investigation of God’s creation) helps us to understand the Bible.

In chapter two, they discuss worldviews and their relationships to science, asserting that the “world view beliefs” needed to do science are consistent with a biblical worldview. In chapter three, they explain the methods of scientific investigation: experimental science, observational science, and historical science, claiming that all three methods work together in the study of origins.

Chapter four covers the relationship between the study of the world and the study of the Bible. They point out that, although both revelations are infallible, the interpreter of either must guard against subjective error. When one interprets properly the Bible and the world, there will be no conflict between the two.

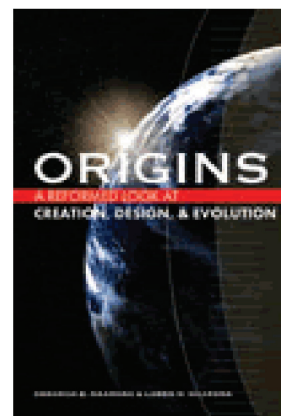
The next section, chapters five and six, examines the two approaches to relating the biblical account and the claims of modern science with respect to origins: concordists (harmonizes the Genesis account with claims of science) and non-concordists (rejects the sequential interpretation of Genesis 1 in favor of the theories of scientific sequence). They state that the approach of concordists fails because the order of Genesis 1 does not match the order of modern scientific theory. They adopt a non-concordists approach (p. 111), apparently jettisoning a sequential account of Genesis 1 for an evolutionary scheme.

In chapters seven—nine, they offer “scientific evidence” for an old earth and a form of evolution. Chapter 10 is a discussion of Intelligent Design, which they seem to reject as a scientific method, although they believe that God in some way is behind creation.

In chapters 11 and 12, they discuss the scientific and theological issues on the origin of man, Adam and Eve, the soul, immortality, and the rise of sin. These chapters allow a broad range of interpretations from a literal Adam and Eve created directly by God to mankind’s evolving. They offer as a possibility the metaphorical interpretation of the account of the fall of Adam and Eve in order to explain sin in the world. In the final chapter, they anticipate and answer some questions the book raises.

There are numerous methodological problems in their approach. Although they claim to be neutral chroniclers (p. 255), early on they evidence a bias against a literal/historical interpretation of Genesis 1 and a universal Flood while asserting an old earth that began with the “big bang” and life-forms developing by macro-evolution.

Here are two examples of their bias. First, they manifest a bias in their treatment of scientists who are operating from a young-earth presupposition. Although the Haarsmas admit that many scientists do not make some of the errors found in earlier creation science research, they spend lengthy time exposing the older work



at the expense of modern creation science research. They also neglect to discuss the models being offered by Ph.D.-level scientists operating on the basis of Genesis 1 being a historical, sequential account of a literal, six-day creation (p.98ff.).

A second manifestation of their bias is their dismissal of a universal Flood (pp.87ff.). They assume uniformitarianism and offer no exegesis of Genesis 7.

They make many erroneous, sweeping generalizations. They assert that the literal reading of Genesis 1 teaches that God made all rocks at creation. No six-day creationist claims that God made all rocks or mountains on day three, no more than He made all the trees or all people on days three and six. Moreover, they assert that Genesis 2 is a second account of creation and that the Bible is ambiguous on sequence (p.84). No conservative exegetes interpret Genesis 2:4ff in this manner.

More serious though are their theological errors. Little in their approach is Reformed. One of the foundational Reformed tenets is the primacy of Scripture in interpreting general revelation. John Calvin said that one could not rightly understand the world apart from the spectacles of Scripture (*Institutes* I.vi.1). Paul argues that the natural man suppresses God's revelation of creation (Romans 1:18–23). The authors naively assume that non-converted scientists can approach origins without any bias. I am not denying that the non-Christian scientist can discover true things through scientific investigation, but one cannot separate the study of origins from spiritual “blindness” that can mar the conclusions. The Haarsmas' failure to understand this distinction is seen in the chart on page 34. They rightly point out the worldview needed to do science, but fail to show that such a worldview can only be derived from Scripture. Without a sovereign Creator, there could be no order in the universe.

Many of their positions contradict their own confessional standards: the *Canons of Dordt*, the *Heidelberg Catechism*, and the *Belgic Confession*, as well as the *Westminster Confession of Faith* and *Catechisms*. The list of some ideas they maintain as acceptable shows complete ignorance of the Reformed standards: Adam and Eve might be one human pair that evolved or a representative or symbolic group; the soul and image of God might simply be man's ability to receive and respond to commands from God; the Fall might not be a one-time historical event; the physical realm was not greatly affected by the Fall; the possibility of human death before the Fall; the allowance that God did not necessarily foreordain all details, but left things to work out randomly; and the suggestion that God accommodated Himself to erroneous views of His people when communicating the message that He is creator. For the Reformed positions on these issues see the *Belgic Confession*,¹ Articles 2, 3, 7, 12, 13, 14, and 17; *Heidelberg Catechism*,² Questions 6, 7, 26, and 27. See as well the *Westminster Confession of Faith*,³ I, III, and IV; *Larger Catechism*, 12, 15, 17 and 26-29; *Shorter Catechism*, 7, 9, 10, 11, 18, and 19.

The larger problem, however, is their failure to exegete Scripture properly. For the authors, Scripture does not drive science, but science, Scripture. They are marketing the assumption that since there are competing interpretations of Genesis 1 and other verses, the “findings” of modern science can help decide the exegetical issues. “Science should not cause us to throw out part of the Bible or to interpret it in a way that conflicts with the rest of the Bible. On the other hand, if a passage can be interpreted in several ways that are consistent with the rest of the Bible, then God might use science to help us reach a better understanding of that passage. God created the world, and God inspired Scripture. Our goal should be to listen to what God is telling us from both sources” (p.25). The Haarsmas grant an improper role to science in interpreting Scripture. Their methodology ignores the principles that Scripture is the primary interpreter of Scripture.

They ignore the plain grammatical meaning of Genesis 1. To accomplish their purpose, they assert that Genesis 1 is not historical narrative, yet offer no exegetical proof for the claim. In fact, they ignore the significant details that say otherwise. They fail to deal with the unique meaning of the Hebrew word *create* (*barah*), Genesis 1:1, 21, 27, 2:3. When God is the subject of this verb, it always refers to a divine supernatural act performed directly by God. The term is used often in the remainder of the Old Testament to refer to God's creation of all things and of specific acts of various days of creation (Psalm 148:1–6; Isaiah 40:26, 42:5, 45:12, 45:7, 45:18). The Greek word used to translate *barah* in the Greek version of the Old Testament is *ktizo*. This term is used in the New Testament to describe God's work of creation (Mark 13:19; Ephesians 3:9; Colossians 1:16, 3:10; and 1 Timothy 4). John offers a good summary of the New Testament's theology of creation in Revelation 10:6 when the angel swears by God “who lives forever and ever, who created heaven and the things in it, and the earth and the things in it, and the sea and the things in it.” In other words, everything in the creation is a result of God's original supernatural creative activity.

They also ignore Christ's combining the term *create* with the phrase *from the beginning* to refer to the institution of marriage (Matthew 19:4–6; Mark 10:6–7). The phrase *from the beginning* refers to Genesis 1:1. Therefore, in the mind of Christ there was no long period of time between the first act of creation and the institution of marriage.

Moreover, they fail to note the linguistic and grammatical signs that Genesis 1 is a record of sequential acts: the use of the ordinal number (first, second, third, etc.) with the word *day* (*yom*), which always signifies sequence; the grammatical structure with the use of the conjunction *and* (*vav*), which means “and the next thing that happened was”; or the divine statement after each act, “it was so.”

We see the same failure to allow Scripture to speak for itself with respect to a universal Flood. The Bible treats the Flood as a universal phenomenon. Moses heaps up universal terms in Genesis 7:18–24, and Peter interprets the Flood as the destruction of the entire world (2 Peter 3:6–7). Moses also teaches that the Flood was accompanied by great geological upheavals (Genesis 7:11). Yet they reject a universal Flood because it is incompatible with the “findings” of one school of science. In their model, science trumps Scripture.

There is a better model for scientific research on origins. It is found in the work of Christian scientists that begin with the scriptural accounts of creation and the Flood and constructs scientific models compatible with God’s revelation. Do scientists working within this framework have all the answers? No; no more than any scientists have accurate models for many things they observe today in the world. They labor, however, to develop models consistent with a straightforward interpretation of Genesis 1 and the biblical record of the Flood.

Footnotes

1. Retrieved from, <http://www.reformed.org/documents/index.html?mainframe=http://www.reformed.org/documents/BelgicConfession.html>
2. Retrieved from, <http://www.reformed.org/documents/index.html?mainframe=http://www.reformed.org/documents/heidelberg.html>
3. Retrieved from, http://www.reformed.org/documents/wcf_with_proofs/