

Parallel Thinking Part 22: Evolution I

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The Theory of Evolution was one of the most important and defining ideas of the 20th century. When Charles Darwin (d. 1882) took his famous voyage on HMS Beagle around the world, he collected animal specimens from a variety of locations of biological interest. Yet it was his visit to one of the Galapagos Islands in September 1835 which sparked his new line of thinking.

In his notes from the voyage, he observed the differences in body size, plumage and beak shape of the same species of mocking bird. This led him to conclude that these birds had adapted to the unique environment on each of the different islands in order to maximise their ability to locate food and protect themselves from predators.

Darwin wrote in his notes that: “If there is the slightest foundation for these remarks, the zoology of archipelagos will be well worth examining; for such facts would undermine the stability of species”. In other words, plants and animals can evolve and even diverge into different species through natural selection, as a process of adapting to their local environment. Darwin’s next stage was to propose that all life came from a common ancestor; this eventually evolved into all of the species of animals and plants we see today.

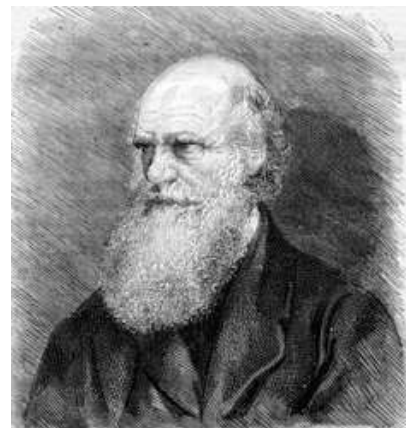
The threat that Darwinian evolution posed to religious doctrine was readily apparent. Even though the biological mechanism of evolution was not yet understood, Darwin had the evidence to suggest that life had formed in gradual stages, over long periods of time and not, as our story of creation implies, in discrete creative bursts.

Yet while Christian scholars were grappling with the implications of Darwin’s idea, the

commentary of Rabbi Meir Leibush ben Yechiel Michel Wisser (known as the Malbim, d. 1879) noted that the language used in Bereishit differentiates between the creation of something from nothing (which uses the Hebrew verb ברא), and the formation of something from pre-existing physical matter. Only the beginning of creation (Bereishit 1:1), the creation of animal life (ibid. 1:21) and the creation of man (ibid. 1:27) use the verb ברא and can be considered creations from nothing. All other acts of creation involved forming what was already there, using the verb עשה, meaning ‘to make’ (ibid. 25) or describing life being ‘brought forth’ (ibid. 1:11, 12, 20).

The Malbim stated explicitly that the process of creation was through gradual stages. He wrote: “Creation progressed from level to level; inanimate matter, plants, animals, and man. Everything that came earlier was a preparation for that which came later”.

Another perspective is found in the writings of Rabbi Avraham Yitzchak Kook (d. 1935) who saw Darwinian evolution as a way of learning deep Jewish theological truths. The idea that life had advanced from simple to more complex creatures, reflected God’s desire for our own spiritual development. He wrote: “For evolution itself, moving upwards ... from the lowest to the highest demonstrates a clear pre-vision from afar – a preset purpose for all creation”.



Charles Darwin (d. 1882)