

The Genesis enigma: How DID the Bible describe the evolution of life 3,000 years before Darwin?

By Christopher Hart

The revelation came to Professor Andrew Parker during a visit to [Rome](#). He was in the Sistine Chapel, gazing up at Michelangelo's awesome ceiling paintings, when a realisation struck him with dizzying force.

'A Biblical enigma exists that is on the one hand so cryptic it has remained camouflaged for millennia, and on the other so obvious one cannot miss it.'

The enigma is that the order of Creation as described in the Book of Genesis, and so powerfully depicted in the Sistine Chapel by the greatest artist of the Renaissance, has been precisely, eerily confirmed by modern evolutionary science.¹

Myth or divine inspiration: Was the book of Genesis a gateway into the evolution of life?

Yet how on earth could this be possible? And why had nobody noticed it before?

Such was the starting point of Parker's jaw-dropping new book, *The Genesis Enigma*: an astounding work which seeks to prove that the ancient Hebrew writers of the Book of Genesis knew all about evolution — 3,000 years before Darwin.

It takes a journey back through aeons of geological time, and also into the minds and imaginations of the ancient Israelites.

Andrew Parker is a leading scientist in his field: a research fellow at [Oxford University](#), research leader at the [Natural History Museum](#), and as if that weren't enough, a professor at Shanghai's Jiao Tong University.

As a scientist he never paid much heed to the Book of Genesis, assuming, like most of his colleagues, that such primitive mythology — which is believed to have been compiled from several sources between 950 and 500 BC — has long since been 'disproved' by hard scientific fact.

But after his Sistine Chapel moment, he went back to look at Genesis in more detail. And what he read astonished him. It was even, he says, 'slightly scary'.

Somehow — God alone knew how — the writer or writers of that ancient text had described how the evolution of life on earth took place in precise detail and perfect order.

Our ancestors possessed a truly timeless wisdom

It is always disturbing and haunting to encounter an ancient wisdom that seems to anticipate or even exceed our own.

More fanciful writers immediately start to theorise wildly: that those who built the pyramids, or [Stonehenge](#),² must have been guided by super-intelligent aliens, that sort of thing.

¹ *The Genesis Enigma: Why The Bible Is Scientifically Accurate* by Dr Andrew Parker, published by Doubleday, July 2009.

² Stonehenge is a prehistoric monument located in the English county of Wiltshire, north of Salisbury. One of the most famous sites in the world, Stonehenge is composed of earthworks surrounding a circular setting of large standing stones; at the centre of the densest complex of Neolithic and Bronze Age monuments in England, including hundreds

Andrew Parker, a scientist and proud of it, has no time for such twaddle. But he does gradually come to understand, in the course of his investigations, that our ancestors of thousands of years ago, though they may not have had iPods and plasma-screen televisions, nevertheless possessed a wisdom that was, quite literally, timeless: as true now as it was then.

In the Book of Genesis, God first and most famously creates heaven and earth, but 'without form', and commands: 'Let there be light.' A perfect description of the Big Bang, that founding moment of our universe some 13 billion years ago, an unimaginable explosion of pure energy and matter 'without form' out of nothing — the primordial Biblical 'void'.

He then creates the dry land out of the waters, but it is the water that comes first. As Parker points out, scientists today understand very similarly that water is indeed crucial for life.

When 'astrobiologists' look into space for signs of life on other planets, the first thing they look for is the possible presence of water.

On the third day, we are told: 'God said, "Let the earth bring forth grass, the herb yielding seed, and the fruit tree yielding fruit after his kind, whose seed is in itself, upon the earth: and it was so."'

Now factually speaking, grass didn't evolve until much later. In the Triassic and Jurassic epochs, the dinosaurs knew only plants such as giant conifers and tree ferns. But since grass did not in fact evolve until much later, a sternly literal-minded scientist would declare the Bible wrong, and consign it to the nearest wheelie bin.

But wait a minute, says Parker. If you take 'grass, herb and tree' to mean photosynthesising life in general, then this is, once again, spot on.

The very life forms on earth were single-celled bacteria, but the first truly viable bacteria were the 'cyanobacteria' — those that had learned to photosynthesise.

As a result, they began to expire oxygen, creating an atmosphere that could go on to support more and more life. They were the key to life on earth.

Naturally, says Parker, 'the ancient Israelites would have been oblivious to any single-celled life form, let alone cyanobacteria', but 'grass' as a loose description of life forms that photosynthesise?

Breathtaking: The enigma that the order of Creation as described in the Book of Genesis, and so powerfully depicted in the Sistine Chapel has been precisely, eerily confirmed by modern evolutionary science

On the fourth day, Genesis famously becomes confusing. On the first day, remember, God has already created light, and made Day and Night. But it isn't until day four that he makes the lights in heaven, the greater light to rule the day and the lesser the night.

Hang on — so he made 'Day' three days before he made the Sun? Houston, I think we have a problem.

Yet the writers of Genesis were just as well aware as us, surely, that the sunrise causes the day. You don't need a degree in astronomy to work that one out. What on earth did they mean?

Here, *The Genesis Enigma* comes up with a stunningly ingenious answer. For Parker argues that day four refers to the evolution of vision.

burial mounds. Archaeologists believe that the iconic stone monument was erected between 2500 and 3000 before the common era. (Editor's note — cf. Wikipedia),

Until the first creatures on earth evolved eyes, in a sense, the sun and moon didn't exist. There was no creature on earth to see them, nor the light they cast.

When Genesis says: 'Let there be lights... To divide the day from the night,' it is talking about eyes.

'The very first eye on earth effectively turned on the lights for animal behaviour,' writes Professor Parker, 'and consequently for further rapid evolution.'

Almost overnight, life suddenly grew vastly more complex. Predators were able to hunt far more efficiently, and so prey had to evolve fast too — or get eaten.

The moment that there were 'lights', or eyes, then life exploded into all its infinite variety.

And yet again, that's what Genesis says happened, and in the correct environment too. In the sea.

For on the very next day of Creation, the fifth day: 'God said, "Let the waters bring forth abundantly the moving creature that hath life."'

That is exactly what happened. Life that had hitherto been lived in the dark, by simple, slow-moving, worm-like creatures, erupted into dazzling diversity. We know all about it from the world famous Burgess Shale fossils.

They were discovered in the summer of 1909 by one Charles Doolittle Walcott, on holiday with his family in the Canadian Rockies. Walcott began to chip away at the shale with his geological hammer, and quite by chance stumbled upon one of the greatest finds in all science.

For the shale records what happened on our planet around 508 million years ago, long before the first dinosaurs: the 'Cambrian explosion,' which most scientists now think was indeed the direct result of the evolution of vision.

Life on earth exploded in all its infinite variety

The life-forms discovered look like nothing else: fabulous, phantasmagoric, alien beings. One had five eyes, and a long wavy snout with jaws on the end. Another looked like an octopus with its head stuck in a beaker, and another can only be described as 'a swimming pea with a pair of beady eyes, bull's horns, a pair of "hands" and a fish's tail.'

Others resemble balls of spines, vase-shaped pin-cushions, or badminton shuttlecocks with chameleon-like tongues. Anyone who doubts the power of evolution by natural selection only has to look at the Burgess Shale fossils.

How does Genesis describe the teeming aquatic life of the Cambrian explosion? 'And God said, "Let the waters bring forth abundantly the moving creature that hath life." ' Immediately following the creation of vision.

How did the writer/writers know that life suddenly diversified into this rich and staggering variety, under the oceans, not on land? Why would a very much land-based people, pastoralists and shepherds, even think like this?

After the Cambrian come the Ordovician, Silurian and Devonian periods — or the appearance of 'great whales', as Genesis succinctly puts it.

How better to describe those epochs which gave us such monsters of the deep as Dunkleosteus, a carnivorous armoured fish whose appearance, says Parker, was 'simply terrifying'. Some 35ft long, 'the size of a small coach', with massive, bone-crunching jaws, even its eyes were armoured.

And after the sea monsters come the birds, the animals, cattle, and finally, homo sapiens. All present and correct, and all still in the right order. Once again, 'In describing how the planet and life around us came to be, the writer of the Genesis narrative got it disturbingly right'.

So what should we make of the extraordinary findings of *The Genesis Enigma*?

Professor Parker is clear on this subject. 'It would be a great shame if my findings were either misused in an attempt to suggest that scientists themselves are unsure about science, or pounded out of all recognition into support of the seven-day creation premise.'

There is no doubt that literal-minded Creationists do a disservice to the triumphant achievements of modern science, and to the beauty and poetry of the Bible. Evolution is taking place around us all the time. It's why the MRSA³ superbug has become so dangerously immune to antibiotics, why the race is on to beat the swine flu virus.

Nevertheless, when Parker comes to explaining how the writers of Genesis knew what they knew, he can only conclude that it was due to 'divine intervention', or 'a lucky guess'. Since the odds of the latter seem fantastically remote, Parker tentatively suggests the former.

The writers of Genesis didn't possess scientific knowledge, they didn't have Darwin or Victorian geology: so how did they know?

Parker clearly demonstrates what an extraordinary text the Bible is — and even more so, not less so, in the light of modern science. But he is surely wrong to think that the only way of coming by knowledge is either through science or 'divine intervention'.

A vast amount of what we know, and how we behave, is based upon much less clear-cut kinds of knowledge and awareness of the world around us: intuition, gut feeling and imagination.

Imagination isn't simply 'making up stuff that isn't true'. The Sistine Chapel itself is a towering work of imagination, but you'd have to be pretty Philistine and unfeeling to stare up at it, shake your head and dismiss it as nothing but a pack of lies.

There are different kinds of truth. A novel like *Anna Karenina*⁴ is certainly fiction. There is not a single hard scientific or verifiable fact in it. Yet it's one of the most profoundly true books ever written about how humans think and feel and love.

I believe this relates closely to the so-called *Genesis Enigma*. The writers of Genesis didn't possess scientific knowledge, they didn't have Darwin, or the earth-shattering findings of Victorian geology. They didn't, as Parker himself says, have 'so much as a magnifying lens'.

But that doesn't prove divine intervention either. Instead, they possessed an ancient, intuitive wisdom of great poetry and beauty.

One could compare this with the wisdom of other, pre-scientific cultures, which often turns out to correspond closely to the findings of modern science.

Darwinian evolution teaches us that all life on earth is related. We human beings are 99 per cent genetically identical to chimpanzees and orang-utans. But as the great Professor [Steve Jones](#)⁵ always loves to point out, we are also 90 per cent mice, and even 50 per cent banana.

³ MRSA (sometimes referred to as the "superbug") stands for methicillin-resistant *Staphylococcus aureus*, an infectious bacteria. (Editor's note).

⁴ *Anna Karenina*, the great novel by the Russian writer Leo Tolstoy (1828-1910), first published in serial installments from 1873 to 1877. (Editor's note).

⁵ Steve Jones is a professor of genetics and head of the biology department at University College London. (Editor's note).

Don't worry, Jones adds reassuringly. This doesn't actually make you half-banana — nor for that matter does it make bananas half-human, or the ethics of eating banoffee pie would just get too complicated.

But the surreal comedy of this science aside, there is serious matter here. For just as Darwinian evolution confirms much of the Book of Genesis, it also confirms other, supposedly 'primitive' ways of looking at the natural world.

The American Indians, for instance, poetically talked of 'Brother Eagle' or 'Brother Wolf'. But wasn't this also a deep, intuitive recognition of a primal truth, now confirmed by the hard science of DNA analysis? Wolves really are related to us.

To appreciate the power of pre-scientific wisdom is not for a moment to downgrade the achievements of modern science. But it does emphasise incredible power and, more surprising still, the accuracy of more ancient, 'poetic' ways of seeing. As an ancient proverb has it: 'The mountain has only one summit, but many paths up.'

And the Bible, that sublime portrait of humanity in all its wonder, violence and 'divine discontent', and its restless search for something we call 'God', will live on. It will continue to haunt our imaginations as it haunted Michelangelo's.

For as the author of *The Genesis Enigma* says, it remains 'that most illustrious and mysterious book of all'.

This article was first published by the *Dailay Mail* on Saturday July 18 2009. It is reprinted with gratitude and translated here into Chinese by special permission of its author.

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