

FROM THE EDITOR

Scientists and Literalists

By Daniel Born

(This is the second essay in a two-part series.)

LATE LAST YEAR, a federal judge told the proponents of intelligent design in the Dover, Pennsylvania, school district that their viewpoint could not be presented in biology classes as an alternative to evolutionary theory because they advocated religion, not science. Judge John E. Jones III stated in his ruling that “Repeatedly in this trial, plaintiffs’ scientific experts testified that the theory of evolution represents good science, is overwhelmingly accepted by the scientific community, and that it in no way conflicts with, nor does it deny, the existence of a divine creator.”

So the judge opposed not the *belief* in divine creation, but rather the efforts to present such a belief—“an untestable alternative hypothesis grounded in religion”—as *science*. To put it another way, the judge affirmed the autonomy of different ways of knowing, and argued that failure to maintain such distinctions would mean robbing the word *science* of its very meaning.

It is highly doubtful that the ruling will convince the judge’s opponents, or that it will end a controversy which has boiled for nearly 150 years, since the publication of Charles Darwin’s *On the Origin of Species* (1859). What ultimately lies at the heart of the matter is *the way people read*, and the ways in which a certain notion of literalism has fueled the debate, particularly when applied to a much old-

er text than Darwin’s, Genesis 1 and 2. And to understand how readers have chosen to interpret the opening of the West’s most famous sacred book, it is first useful to voyage back to third-century North Africa, where one of the founding fathers of modern biblical scholarship and literary criticism did his work.

According to the biographer Eusebius, in the third century CE a biblical scholar known as Origen took a knife and castrated himself after contemplating a particularly gnarly verse in the gospel of Matthew (19:12). In that passage, Jesus is reported to have said “there are eunuchs who have made themselves eunuchs for the kingdom of heaven. Let anyone accept this who can.” If we are to believe Eusebius’s account, apparently Origen could accept it, and in the most literal possible way. Though Eusebius is arguably a hostile and unreliable source, the story nonetheless serves as a useful cautionary tale of how literalist readings can do serious harm. One thinks of the more sweeping damage that literalistic and selective interpretation of the Bible has done over the centuries. It’s a long, unsavory list that includes the defense of slavery, the hatred of Jews, the killing of witches, the persecution of homosexuals, and a hostility toward science. The Bible, like the Koran, is a text that might best come packaged with a caution-

ary label reading PERIL: DANGEROUS CONTENTS WITHIN.

Yet Origen, a man with a subtle mind, was hardly a one-note scholar; he did not champion literal interpretations all the time. And in the big historical picture, what he had to say about the act of reading is of greater importance than the wound he possibly dealt himself. Long before it became common wisdom to say so, Origen pointed out that *there is more than one way to read a book*. If learned rabbis had been arguing for centuries over the multiple meanings of particular passages, and recording their insights in the Talmud and other commentaries, it was Origen who helped to codify distinctly different ways of reading sacred texts: the literal, the moral, and the allegorical. In sketching out these different approaches, Origen multiplied rather than narrowed the interpretive possibilities.

We take such interpretive latitude for granted now, following the scholarship of the mid-twentieth century in which, first, the New Critics taught us how to prize works of literature exhibiting “ambiguity.” The poststructuralists followed, with a slightly different vocabulary that emphasized textual indeterminacy and undecidability. It was while wrestling with this problem of textual variation and multiplicity that Origen hit upon a brilliant idea: He put different versions of the Hebrew Bible side

by side, including manuscripts in the original language as well as Greek translations circulating throughout Mediterranean culture. He did this to better see the variations. Textual scholars of every kind today are indebted to that method.

Which brings us to one of the most disputed and fought-over pieces of writing ever, that always looms in the background of debate between evolutionary theorists and creationists: the narrative of Genesis chapters 1 and 2. And here a paradox rudely intrudes. If literalistic readings have the potential to do great harm, they can also, if carried out with scrupulous discipline, sometimes illuminate a great deal. An unflinchingly *literal* reading of these two chapters discloses that there are actually two creation stories told here, not one—and the order of creation changes from story one (1:1–2:4) to story two (2:4b–2:24). Male and female are created together in the first story, whereas in the second story the female is created last (after all the other creatures, when Adam finds himself desperately alone); in the first story, the creation of the garden precedes Adam and Eve, whereas in the second, Adam’s creation precedes the garden, which precedes Eve.

Putting the two stories side by side brings the contrasts into sharp relief, as generations of scholars have pointed out; each story is wonderful in its own way, but attempts to harmonize the stories into a unitary whole will fall short. (It’s no surprise that the second story, with its unforgettable, luscious details, is the one that Milton favored.) The stories, likely coming out of different ancient Jewish traditions, demand that we learn to live with complexity and ambiguity, and not rudely force the text into the mold of single-minded dogma.

But it is instructive to note that the appearance of two creation accounts in Genesis is anathema to fundamentalist readers, who above all else want to keep the scriptures simple, straightforward, and in need of almost no interpretation whatsoever. Scores of Web sites attempt to explain, with elaborate verbal contortions, how the two different accounts are really a single account.

For anyone who seeks to understand the workings of the fundamentalist mind, this is the best starting point I know, and if one wonders why the interpretation of an ancient Hebrew text should matter so much, all I can say is that reading badly—in other words, incompetent interpretation—can be blamed for a considerable sum of human cruelty and misery. Reading, in the end, is seldom a benign parlor game without consequences. Fundamentalism, whether emerging from the Islamic, Jewish, or Christian traditions, is a sick mutation that occurs when the quest for a single truth overtakes one’s ability to read well. If it often claims the mantle of literalistic interpretation, sometimes even that ability is trumped by a desire for the single monist truth. And so it is not a surprise that fundamentalist mania is usually accompanied by shrill appeals to holy writ—but holy writ read badly. As fundamentalism erupts globally, it repeats certain key markers: certainty that one’s own religious path is the *only* religious path; a disposition to view tolerance as a weakness and not a virtue; a sense that hierarchy is divinely ordained, with men on top and women submissive and subordinated; and a conviction not only that the deity hates evildoers but that the elect carry out his judgment.

Self-proclaimed literalists are usually dogmatists first and

readers second. At critical moments, the obsession with the single truth forces readers to hear a text say what they want it to say rather than hear the myriad voices and possibilities that percolate through it. This is true for most writing, but especially relevant with the Bible, which is not really a single book but a collection of many books, written by different authors across different times and cultures.

F. Scott Fitzgerald once observed that “The test of a first-rate intelligence is the ability to hold two opposed ideas in the mind at the same time and still retain the ability to function.” Let me suggest that the ability to recognize plural possibilities in a text is closely related to the conceptual grasp of distinctions between different kinds of knowledge. And such an ability is a prerequisite for understanding the debate that came to a head in Dover, Pennsylvania. Religion and science constitute two different ways of knowing, and intelligent people, regardless of their metaphysical predispositions, generally recognize that. Good readers, following Origen, understand that the act of reading calls for patience, an awareness of the choices we have before us and are able to make, and most of all, an ability to handle complexity and multiplicity without ceasing to function.

To read competently is difficult, and to read with interpretive skill and understanding is nearly impossible. If we are to negotiate the debate between intelligent design and evolutionary theory, we will have to work harder to become better readers. In ruling against the doctrine of intelligent design as a legitimate form of science, the judge in Pennsylvania counted on the reading intelligence of citizens in this land. I hope he didn’t overestimate his audience. ●