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2014

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Recommended Citation

Stanze, Jessica, "Evolution, Snakes, and God: A Brief Argument for Agreement" (2014). *A with Honors Projects*. 123.
<http://spark.parkland.edu/ah/123>

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Anthropology 105
December 5, 2014

Honors Project
*Evolution, Snakes, and God:
A Brief Argument for Agreement*

On a mild day in September of 2014, a rather large python was observed through the glass at the Scovill Zoo in Decatur, Illinois. Weighing in at approximately twenty pounds, this creature evokes a deeply rooted sense of disquiet. If you have been raised in a Christian home, the anxiety almost certainly comes from an old tale of the first woman being seduced by an evil tree serpent, with legs. A terrifying tale that has upheld Christianity's doctrine may also embody one the strongest and simplest examples of how the theory of evolution and the Bible are not as conflicting as they may first appear. In this brief essay I wish to present the idea that evolutionists and creationists, while passionately arguing for their sides of the issue, actually have much ground in common a fact they would verify if only they attempted to collaborate and communicate with each other to find answers to the mysteries of how humankind emerged.

Evolution places the age of Earth at around 4.4 to 4.6 billion years old. That specific number has been calculated by a method that uses radioactive decay in rocks to conclude their approximant age. Scientists have used samples from both the moon and meteorites to strengthen this assessment as these specimens are considered to be even more accurate than earth's crust because they haven't been subjected to the same elements and forces that our ever changing planet has (PBS.org). The Christian Bible on the other hand places

the earth at 4 to 6,000 years old. This number is based on interpretations of timelines that are presented in the beginning of the Old Testament. These discrepancies are the foundation for an ongoing debate that exacerbates emotions on both sides.

While there is no real scientific evidence that points to a young earth, those who are convinced of such base their belief in the Bible itself, perceiving its contents to be absolute truth. You could argue the content of this work and point out several discrepancies within the various versions but in the end there's really no argument that can hold up against someone's personal conviction. Those who believe evolution to be completely valid can become very passionate when defending the topic because they actually have scientific evidence that supports their claims. Communication between the two parties is often a very difficult process because the language in which arguments are being presented on the creationist's side is not consistent with that which is used on the evolutionist's side. This frustration is perhaps best expressed in the late Stephen Jay Gould's book *Hen's Teeth and Horse's Toes: Reflections in Natural History*. In it Gould states "First, they (creationists) play upon a vernacular misunderstanding of the word "theory" to convey the false impression that we evolutionists are covering up the rotten core of our edifice. Second. They misuse a popular philosophy of science to argue that they are behaving scientifically in attacking evolution" (Gould, page xxx).

But what if both sides could find a common core? This is the question that *theistic evolution* explores. In his book *Evolutionary Creation in Biblical and Theological Perspective*, Dan Liroy provides extensive research that shows how the Bible and evolutionary theory work together. One of his strongest arguments to this thesis is a

detailed explanation of how the account of the earth being created in seven days is grossly misinterpreted; that upon researching the vocabulary used in the original texts of the Bible you will find that “day and night” are not synonymous of a 24 hour time period which puts to rest the debate of the earth being so young, a belief that directly conflicts with scientific evidence. While this information is nothing short of illuminating, it is not readily available or digestible to those who don’t have excessive amounts of time to do research. Much of what we base our own personal beliefs on begins with the education we receive as either children or at milestones in our life. Which leaves us to ask, what is a tangible example of evolution and creationism working together?

Consider the snake. Today’s serpent is best identified among the other reptilian because of the unique movement of its belly. This curious and agile creature is first among the animal kingdom to be directly discussed in the Bible and the context is not too favorable. Genesis 3: 1 – 4 states: *Now the serpent was more crafty than any of the wild animals the LORD God had made. He said to the woman, “Did God really say, ‘You must not eat from any tree in the garden?’”* ² *The woman said to the serpent, “We may eat fruit from the trees in the garden,* ³ *but God did say, ‘You must not eat fruit from the tree that is in the middle of the garden, and you must not touch it, or you will die.’”* ⁴ *“You will not certainly die,” the serpent said to the woman.* ⁵ *“For God knows that when you eat from it your eyes will be opened, and you will be like God, knowing good and evil.”* (NIV) This chapter goes on to describe the fall of man, and the serpent’s fate is bestowed upon him in verse 14: *So the LORD God said to the serpent, “Because you have done this, “Cursed are you above all livestock and all wild animals You will crawl on your belly and you will eat dust all the days of your life.* (NIV) What’s interesting is that

evolution tells a similar story. Recent studies have shown that snakes show a remarkable amount of intelligence when compared to others in the animal kingdom. As Peter Kareiva, a professor of zoology at the University of Washington noted in the journal *Integrative Biology*; “Snakes exhibit spatial learning that rivals the learning abilities of birds and rodents.” Research also now indicates that snakes methodically kill their prey, as noted in *Discovery.com News* “Snakes are capable of more complex behaviors typically reserved for “higher” vertebrates”. It seems as if the “crafty” reputation has held up over the years and the research also points to why we, as humans, might be so frightened of snakes. There is no doubt that our ancient ancestors observed the behavior of a snake *methodically* killing its prey and began a natural distrust of the creature. Brain patterns and methodology aside, the snake’s biggest link to its Biblical story come from its bones. When we observe the skeletal remains of a snake we find tiny leg and pelvic bones which indicate that the snake once had legs. While climate and environmental changes are no doubt responsible for this change, the physical evidence backs the accounts of the serpent losing its legs in the Bible. Both creationism and evolution find a common ground in this example which can only leave one wondering if both sides were to objectively take a look at their own materials, how many more agreements would they find?

Faith is not a bad thing. In fact, it is a facet of our existence that makes us uniquely human. We cannot deny the facts that science gives us but we should always be sensitive to matters of faith because the collective belief in a creator God is part of our own evolution as a species. Instead of working so hard to disprove the other side, we should be searching for answers together. As I show in this brief reflection on disagreement

between creationists and evolutionists, this task may just be as simple as observing a snake on a fall day.

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