

INERRANCY, ADAM & EVE, AND B. B. WARFIELD (1851–1921)

by
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In their joint *Isis* article published in 2000, David Livingstone and Mark Noll begin with a provocative thesis that subsequently gained near canonical acceptance. Their opening line reads, “One of the best-kept secrets in American intellectual history is that B. B. Warfield, the foremost modern defender of the theologically conservative doctrine of the inerrancy of the Bible, was also an evolutionist.”²

I have argued elsewhere that the Livingstone-Noll thesis is not true, even though it has gone virtually unquestioned.³ And I will seek below to demonstrate that the evidence they presented is too selective. But as I have also remarked, considerable blame for the confusion on the question lies with Warfield himself. Warfield often expressed a qualified openness to the idea of evolutionary development. These qualified expressions of openness fall short of affirmation, however, and they must not be read in isolation from his repeated and sometimes scathing critiques of evolution. Late in his life Warfield remarked expressly that he had abandoned evolutionary theories around the age of thirty, and a full reading of his works reveals a theoretical openness to evolution only, never a clear acceptance, always a critical suspicion, and a consistent affirmation of biblical doctrines that are incompatible with any evolutionary theory.

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²David N. Livingstone and Mark A. Noll, “B. B. Warfield (1851–1921): A Biblical Inerrantist as Evolutionist,” *Isis* 91 (June 2000), 283–304. See also, B. B. Warfield, *B. B. Warfield: Evolution, Science, and Scripture: Selected Writings*, ed. Mark Noll & David Livingstone (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2000) [hereafter *ESS*], for their selected Warfield writings regarding evolution.

³Fred G. Zaspel, *The Theology of B. B. Warfield: A Systematic Summary* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2010): 369–94. See also “B. B. Warfield on Creation and Evolution,” *Themelios* 35 (2010): 198–211; “B. B. Warfield on Creation and Evolution,” *The Confessional Presbyterian* 6 (2010): 50–59; “Additional Note: B. B. Warfield Did Not Endorse Theistic Evolution as It Is Understood Today,” in *A Biblical Case Against Theistic Evolution*, ed. Wayne Grudem (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2022): 155–76.

reason to doubt him.⁴ This brief article, then, will challenge the Livingstone-Noll thesis that Warfield the inerrantist was an evolutionist.

Warfield on Inerrancy

Warfield's voluminous championing of biblical inerrancy is of course well known, constituting a watershed moment in the history of this doctrine. He demonstrated at length that his doctrine was that of the whole church from the beginning, but he gave that doctrine a more thorough exposition and defense than anyone before or since.

We do not have the space to trace out Warfield's exposition of the doctrines of inspiration and inerrancy here. But it is important to note that his doctrine of inerrancy is grounded in Scripture's divine origin. Warfield emphasized this repeatedly. Scripture is "God's Word written" and is therefore altogether reliable in all its affirmations and declarations. God's Word has indeed come to us through men, but because these men were inspired, carried along by God for the task, because God cannot err, and because Scripture is God's Word, Scripture is utterly reliable. In fact, although Warfield did use the terminology of "inerrancy," his preferred terminology was that of Scripture's "trustworthiness" and "authority." This, he seemed to think, was more to the point: because Scripture is the very Word of God it is utterly trustworthy and is to be received as such at every point. In all of Scripture's affirmations and declarations—whether in matters of history, faith, or practice—we hear God speaking and are obliged therefore to embrace it as true and receive it in submission, trust, and obedience.

Warfield's Criticisms of Evolutionary Theories

Warfield did concede that if some form of evolutionary theory could be proven, Scripture would be shown to accommodate it. But it is vital to note that 1) this "if proven" remained characteristic of Warfield's position. He was always skeptical of it. And 2) it was evolution's seeming incompatibility with Scripture that gave Warfield such pause. I will return to this latter point shortly.

Warfield's earlier academic interests were in the field of science, and he maintained this interest throughout his career, keeping abreast of the scientific literature related to Darwinism and all forms of evolutionary theories. His critiques were very often expressed in this context. He complained frequently of the scanty scientific evidence and faulty logic on which the theories rest. He considered evolution as unproven, a theory still on trial.

The problems Warfield saw on the level of scientific evidence are multiple. He insisted that the geological record was "irreconcilable with the theory of development by descent."⁵ The limitless demands that

⁴"Personal Recollections of Princeton Undergraduate Life IV—The Coming of Dr. McCosh," *Princeton Alumni Weekly* 16 (April 19, 1916): 652.

⁵ESS, 122.

evolution places on time seemed impossible to him; he considered this its “Waterloo.”⁶ The limitation of possible variation to which any organism seemed to him a great problem also. Throughout his career he repeatedly insisted that real evidence for evolutionary development was lacking. He quipped that if the facts are with the evolutionist, they “have themselves to thank for the impression of unreality and fancifulness which they make on the earnest inquirer.”⁷ In brief Warfield commented that when we hear that a theory of evolution has been demonstrated as fact, “we cannot but think that enthusiasm has run away with good judgment.”⁸

Given this lack of scientific evidence Warfield often highlighted the logical instability of evolutionary theories. His comments on this score often took a mocking tone. In 1895 he wrote that “students of logic might obtain some very entertaining examples of fallacy by following the processes of reasoning by which evolutionists sometimes commend their findings to a docile world.”⁹ In 1898, he said of evolutionists that “if their writers did not put evolution into their premises, they would hardly find so much of it in their conclusions.”¹⁰ In 1908 he wrote, “The next thing that most strongly impresses the lay reader is the amazing zeal which is exhibited by our biological workers for these speculative theories.... [It] looks amazingly like basing facts on theory rather than theory on facts.”¹¹ And in 1916 he wrote,

Evolution is, then, if a fact, not a triumph of the scientist but one of his toughest problems. He does not know how it has taken place; every guess he makes as to how it has taken place proves inadequate to account for it. His main theories have to be supported by subsidiary theories to make them work at all, and these subsidiary theories by yet more far-reaching subsidiary theories of the second rank—until the whole chart is, like the Ptolemaic chart of the heavens, written over with cycle and epicycle and appears ready to break down by its own weight.¹²

In their *Evolution, Science, and Scripture*, Noll and Livingstone’s collection of Warfield’s writings on evolution, they argue that Warfield over the years grew increasingly to accept evolution. My purpose here so far has been to highlight evidence to the contrary, climaxing in Warfield’s own 1916 affirmation that he had abandoned evolution by age thirty. The evidence Noll and Livingstone proposed was too

⁶ESS, 124.

⁷ESS, 143.

⁸ESS, 167.

⁹ESS, 168.

¹⁰ESS, 184–85.

¹¹ESS, 246.

¹²ESS, 319–20.

narrowly selected and their conclusions were too hastily drawn. Throughout his entire career Warfield remained critical of theories of evolutionary development on scientific and philosophical grounds. It is true that he expressed an openness to the idea *if it could be proven*. But it is just this proof that he insisted was lacking, and this criticism persists from beginning to end of the Warfield corpus.

Evolution & Scripture

This skepticism regarding evolution appears more pronounced when we come to a consideration of Warfield's understanding of biblical teachings related to creation, much of which precludes any evolutionary theory. I have presented this evidence in more detail elsewhere; here I can just highlight it briefly.¹³

Beginning broadly, Warfield was suspicious of the naturalism inherent in evolutionary theories which stands in such stark contrast to the Scripture's robust supernaturalism. "The fundamental assertion of the biblical doctrine of the origin of man," he wrote, "is that he owes his being to a creative act of God."¹⁴

"In the beginning God created the heaven and the earth." That is the first sentence in the Christian revelation. That God alone is the first and the last, who changes not; that all that exists is the work of his hands and depends on his power for both its existence and its continuance in existence—this is the unvarying teaching of the whole Bible. It is part of the very essence of Christianity, therefore, that the explanation of the universe is found in God; and its fundamental word is, accordingly, "creation." Over against the Christian conception there has arisen in our day, however, a movement which has undertaken to explain the world and all that it contains without God, without any reference to any unseen, supernatural, spiritual element. The watchword of this movement is "evolution." And its confession of faith runs, "I believe in an eternal flux and the production of all things out of their precedent conditions through the natural inter-workings of the forces intrinsic to the changing material."¹⁵

Warfield acknowledged that an affirmation of evolution could be consistent with theism, particularly given the notion of teleology or design that is inherent in the very idea of evolutionary development. But he was quick to caution that consistency with the idea of theism and consistency with Scripture are two different things. And it is the Christian responsibility to examine what God has said concerning his creation.

In an 1897 review of a book by Methodist theologian Luther Tracy Townsend (1838–1922), Warfield enthusiastically commended the

¹³Zaspel, *Theology of B. B. Warfield*, 369–94.

¹⁴Benjamin Breckinridge Warfield, *Studies in Theology*, in *The Works of Benjamin Warfield*, 10 vols. (repr. ed.; Grand Rapids: Baker, 2000), 9:235.

¹⁵ESS, 198.

author for rejecting “not merely the naturalistic but also the timidly supernaturalistic answers” as to the origin of man and for insisting “that man came into the world just as the Bible says he did. Prof. Townsend has his feet planted here on the rock.” Warfield explained his support further: “When it is as question of scriptural declaration versus human conjecture dignified by any name, whether that of philosophy or that of science, the Christian man will know where his belief is due.... [Prof. Townsend’s] trust in the affirmations of the Word of God as the end of all strife will commend itself to every Christian heart.”¹⁶

More to the point, Warfield explicitly affirmed biblical teachings related to creation as traditionally understood that are incompatible with any theory of evolution. In his classroom lectures he warned of evolution as “modern speculation” that “runs athwart” Scripture, and he pointed repeatedly to Adam’s creation by God, in his image, from the dust of the ground, and to God’s inbreathing to him the breath of life.¹⁷ Very importantly, he specifically denied the idea of primitive man prior to Adam and affirmed that Adam was the first man, created “mature and without defect,” physically and morally—with “a fully developed moral sense” and in “moral perfection.” Warfield also maintained that in Adam the human race stood on probation and fell into sin, and he reasoned that an evolutionary model reverses this biblical order of original perfection followed by sinfulness.¹⁸ He also affirmed that God rested on the seventh day of the creation week.¹⁹

Similarly in Warfield’s 1906 review of James Orr’s *God’s Image in Man*, he enthusiastically endorsed Orr’s “courage to recognize and assert the irreconcilableness of [Scripture and evolutionary theory] and the impossibility of a compromise between them.” Warfield went on to assert that Orr “also undertakes the task of showing that the Christian view is the only tenable one in the forum of science itself.” Then he offered his evaluative comment: “That he accomplishes this task with distinguished success is the significance of the volume.”²⁰ He even went so far as to offer Orr a further argument against evolutionary theory based on animal death, reasoning that such entered only through Adam’s sin. Warfield explicitly traced the fallenness and hostility of this present world to Adam’s sin and the consequent curse (Gen 3): “the

¹⁶ESS, 177–78. The book under review was Luther Tracy Townsend’s *Evolution or Creation: A Critical Review of the Scientific and Scriptural Theories of Creation and Certain Related Subjects* (New York: Revell, 1896).

¹⁷Unpublished class notes of N. W. Harkness, Jr., from Warfield’s Princeton Seminary course on Systematic Theology (1898), 1–5; Princeton Theological Seminary Archives. These student notes, taken from Warfield’s lectures, follow closely Warfield’s own lecture notes, prepared originally in 1888.

¹⁸ESS, 128–30.

¹⁹B. B. Warfield, “The Foundations of the Sabbath in the Word of God,” in *Selected Shorter Writings of Benjamin B. Warfield*, ed. John E. Meeter, 2 vols. (Phillipsburg, NJ: Presbyterian & Reformed, 1980), 1:309, 318.

²⁰ESS, 231–33.

reign of death in that creation which was cursed for man's sake." That is to say, as late as 1906 Warfield affirmed that not just human death but death in the created order also came by Adam, the first man.²¹ He argued the same in a 1902 article, where he wrote of "the sin and misery of the whole world, plunged by the fall of Adam into every kind of evil."²² And he argued the same again in 1908, asserting that if Adam had not sinned, there would be no calamity in the world today.²³ In fact, in 1916, in one of his last publications, Warfield affirmed once again that the struggles of humanity find their origin in Adam's fall.²⁴ For Warfield, struggle for existence did not precede Adam; it followed Adam, resulting from his sin.

In summary, Warfield not only expressed doubts regarding evolution; he also maintained biblical teachings as traditionally understood that disallow it. Warfield scorned the idea of "primitive man." He affirmed the historicity of Adam and Eve. He affirmed that Adam was "the first man." He affirmed that Adam was created from the dust of the ground by the direct act of God. He insisted that Eve was created from Adam's side, something he explicitly described as a barrier to evolutionary theory. He affirmed that Adam and Eve were the original human pair from whom all humanity descended. He affirmed that Adam and Eve were "created perfect" and sinless. He affirmed the original perfection of creation and that Adam's rebellion was the cause and origin of death and all calamity and "natural" evil in the created world. He affirmed that it was by Adam that sin first entered humanity. He consistently took the creation narrative of Genesis 1–2 at face value, and he affirmed that God "rested" on the seventh day of the creation week.

All of this is incompatible with any theory of evolutionary development. Given all this, we can only conclude that the Livingstone-Noll thesis overlooks too much of Warfield.

Warfield's Primary Commitments

Elsewhere I have highlighted the reception of and responses to evolutionary theory at Princeton and in Warfield.²⁵ Here I have not surveyed Warfield's expressions of openness to the possibility of some kind of evolutionary development; all sides acknowledge this. Much has been made of his allowance that *if* evolution were to be proven, Scripture would be shown to accommodate it. This theoretical allowance "if" has

²¹ *ESS*, 236.

²² *The Bible Student* (September 1902): 177.

²³ "A Symposium on the Problem of Natural Evils," *Biblical World* 31 (January–June 1908): 123–24.

²⁴ *Faith and Life* (Carlisle, PA: Banner of Truth, 1974), 330–32.

²⁵ In addition to the sources mentioned above in n. 3, see Fred G. Zaspel, "Princeton and Evolution." *The Confessional Presbyterian* 8 (2012): 91–98.

often been mistaken as acceptance, but this overly-hasty conclusion overlooks Warfield's repeated and consistent criticisms of the theory on both scientific and biblical grounds, and his own statement late in life that he had abandoned the theory by the age of thirty.

Evolutionary theory was on the unimpeded advance, and the pressure to accept it in some form was immense. Yet Warfield could not go along, and we would do well to consider just why. The answer is an obvious one, and it runs through Warfield's works everywhere. Warfield leveled objections to evolution on both scientific and logical grounds, but fundamentally, his reticence to accept evolution seems clearly to have stemmed from his commitment to the trustworthiness of Scripture. All throughout his consideration of contrary evidence he confidently affirmed that the biblical account of creation cannot be overthrown. In other words, contrary to the Livingstone-Noll thesis, it was in fact Warfield's commitment to the inerrancy of Scripture that gave him such pause regarding a theory of origins that was being pressed with near overwhelming force. For him, God's Word was trustworthy, and he could not reconcile evolution with the frank supernaturalism of the Genesis account or, for example, its narrative of the creation of Eve from Adam.

A Final Reflection

Fresh out of seminary in the summer of 1876 Warfield served as stated supply for the First Presbyterian Church in Dayton, Ohio. The editor of *The Daily Dayton Democrat*, the local newspaper, attended at least one service early in Warfield's time there, and much of the sermon was recorded in print, presumably by a stenographer. The editor of the paper was not sympathetic toward Warfield's commitment to historic Christian doctrines or his confidence in holding them, and he even spoke mockingly of it. But he published the sermon at rather full length.²⁶

In this his earliest known sermon, Warfield took as his text Romans 3:4, "Let God be true, but every man a liar" (KJV). The sermon consisted of a passionate affirmation of the truthfulness of the Christian faith in all its biblical affirmations, and this against all that contradicts it. Theological liberalism was on the rise, and the truthfulness of Scripture was the issue of the day. And here at the outset of his famous career we hear the famous Princetonian sounding a note that would mark his career for the following decades.

Interestingly, in one of his very last books published, he included a sermon that stressed the same theme.²⁷ The sermon is titled, "The Inviolable Deposit," and 1 Timothy 6:20–21 is his text: "O Timothy, keep that which is committed to thy trust, avoiding profane and vain babblings, and oppositions of science falsely so called: Which some

²⁶*The Daily Dayton Democrat*, July 25, 1876, 4.

²⁷*Faith and Life*, 385–92.

professing have erred concerning the faith” (KJV). In this message he exhorted his seminary students pointedly to keep this apostolic command in view: the Christian minister is to preserve and proclaim the faith that has been once for all delivered to the church. Warfield stressed that the minister must not preach anything new—only what has been given to him in God’s Word, and nothing that contradicts it.

This championing of the trustworthiness of God’s written revelation marked Warfield’s entire career, and it is for this he is most remembered today. More importantly, this conviction carried Warfield in his work. In his day of endless assaults on the trustworthiness of Scripture he was deeply convinced that all contradictions of Scripture are in error and will be shown to be so. They are “lies” (Rom 3:4) and “false knowledge” (1 Tim 6:20). God cannot err, and, thus, his Word can never be overthrown. Warfield was willing to be shown that his understanding of Scripture at any given point was in error. And in his day the new doctrine of evolution was taking the world by storm. The pressure to concede was great. And so he expressed a degree of openness. He affirmed that if evolution could be proven Scripture would be shown to accommodate it. But Scripture seemed to him to stand in the way. The problems with evolution seemed to him to contradict the written Word, and thus, he could not accept it.