



# One More Elephant

**Evolution  
Versus the  
Text of Scripture**

Robert J. Koester

**GWA**  
Books

ONE MORE ELEPHANT  
EVOLUTION VERSUS THE TEXT OF SCRIPTURE

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(Clichés are statements often found in theistic evolutionary writings. Additional clichés and responses to them are included in the first book of this set: *Elephants in the Room: Evolution Versus the Message of Scripture*.)

## Introduction

Theistic evolutionists hail from denominations across the religious world. Some are more liberal. Others are more conservative. In *Elephants in the Room: Evolution Versus the Message of Scripture*, the first volume of this two-volume set, we explored the impact of evolution on the basic truths of the Christian faith. We saw that no part of Scripture's message was left unchallenged and unaffected. In this book we look at the affect of evolution on the *text* of Scripture.

What might be surprising is that authors from historically conservative backgrounds are using Scripture in much the same way as liberal authors use it. Books by conservative authors may not have the heavy philosophical feel that books by liberal authors have. But neither do their authors have much sympathy for a straightforward reading of Scripture, which we might expect them to have. These authors claim to be interpreting Scripture literally, but there is something not quite right about their definition of *literal*.

As recently as the 1950s, all instructors at major Evangelical seminaries like Wheaton College, Westminster Seminary, and Fuller Theological Seminary would have championed historic Reformation principles of Bible interpretation. Today, however, many if not most teachers at these institutions accept what is called "historical criticism," a way of approaching Scripture that until recently had been used primarily in liberal seminaries. I think it is fair to say that acceptance of evolution has entered Evangelical Christianity through the door of historical criticism.

Those deciding on whether or not to merge evolution and Scripture will first have to decide whether or not they want to accept historical-critical methods of interpreting Scripture. Unless we understand this way of reading the text of Scripture, we will be forced to evaluate theistic evolutionary arguments with one arm tied behind our back.

In the first book of this set, we identified some "elephants in the room." These elephants undermine the message of Scripture, how God's Son substituted himself in life and in death to overcome sin and restore us to God's family. This volume identifies one more elephant that lumbers into the room when evolution tries to find a place in Scripture. This is the elephant of historical criticism, a method of interpreting Scripture that replaces reading Scripture in a literal or straightforward way.<sup>1</sup>

We will start with a careful look at Scripture and ask: "How does Scripture want to be interpreted?" We will especially want to discover: "How did Jesus and

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the New Testament writers interpret and use the Scriptures, namely, the books of the Old Testament?”

Then we will offer a primer on historical criticism—what it is and how it entered the Christian church. We will do this in enough detail so you are able to spot historical criticism when theistic evolutionists use it in their books. You will understand historical criticism well enough to be able to evaluate theistic evolutionary claims for its validity.

The last three chapters treat what is perhaps the most powerful historical-critical argument. Theistic evolutionists claim that Scripture is another piece of ancient Near Eastern literature. Ancient Near Eastern literature contains various national myths about how the world came into being. Scripture merely reveals the Hebrew version of the same themes and should be read accordingly. The argument leads to this conclusion: Just as modern science has helped us dismiss Egyptian and Babylonian creation myths, so it has helped us see that the creation account in Genesis 1 and 2 is merely the Hebrew version of those myths and can also be dismissed.

May the Lord bless this study of how *He* teaches us to read his Word.

**Part One**

**Scripture**



## Chapter 1

# What the Bible Says About Itself

### Introduction

We can't evaluate theistic evolution without first evaluating what Scripture says about itself—what it is and how it wants to be interpreted. It is good for every Christian to understand this even apart from the challenge of historical criticism. After all, we confess that our eternal salvation is based on what *Scripture* reveals to us.

What spiritual posture should we have when we open our Bible and read it? How do we become competent to understand the words of Scripture? To answer those questions, we must pay attention to another question: “What did Jesus and the Bible writers understand the Bible to be and how did they use it?” Especially important for the subject of this book is the question: “How did they interpret and use the early chapters of Genesis?”

In this chapter we will look at Scripture like a young lady might look at her engagement diamond, turning it over in her hand and looking at each of its facets to get an overall impression of its beauty.

### The Old Testament was considered to be a single book

#### *“The Scriptures”*

In English translations of the Bible, the Hebrew collection of sacred scrolls writing in the Old Testament are referred to as “the Scriptures.” The Greek word used for this Old Testament collection literally means “the writings.” The English word *Scripture* comes from the Latin translation of that Greek word, and means the same thing, “the writings.”

At times Jesus and the New Testament writers referred to this body of writings in the singular, “the Scripture.” Today it is easy for us to think of the Bible as a unit because all the content is included between the covers of a single book. But the Hebrew Scriptures were written on a number of separate scrolls, which could be stored in any order. Even so, they were viewed as a unit. For example, John tells us that when Jesus was raised from the dead, “his disciples remembered that he had said this, and they believed the Scripture and the word that Jesus had spoken” (John 2:22).

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At other times the New Testament writers referred to the collection in the plural: “the Scriptures,” referring to the individual writings that made up the whole. Luke tells us that Paul went into the synagogue in Thessalonica “and on three Sabbath days he reasoned with them from the Scriptures” (Acts 17:2).

Sometimes the writers use the word Scripture in reference to individual verses in the Old Testament. John recorded the soldiers’ act of dividing up Jesus’ clothing: “Let us not tear it, but cast lots for it to see whose it shall be.’ This was to fulfill the Scripture which says, ‘They divided my garments among them, and for my clothing they cast lots’” (John 19:24).

### *The Scriptures were divided into major sections*

Jesus and the New Testament writers identified two or three major groups into which the 39 Old Testament writings were organized. For example, in the account of Lazarus and the rich man, Jesus said to the rich man in hell, “If they do not hear Moses and the Prophets, neither will they be convinced if someone should rise from the dead” (Luke 16:31). When discussing the importance of keeping all of God’s Law, Jesus said, “Do not think that I have come to abolish the Law or the Prophets; I have not come to abolish them but to fulfill them” (Matthew 5:17). When he ascended into heaven, Jesus told his followers: “These are my words that I spoke to you while I was still with you, that everything written about me in the Law of Moses and the Prophets and the Psalms must be fulfilled” (Luke 24:44).

Regardless of which division a scroll fell into, all the books in the Hebrew Scriptures were written by “prophets.” Paul referred to the entire Old Testament as the word of the prophets: “Paul, a servant of Christ Jesus, called to be an apostle, set apart for the gospel of God, which he promised beforehand through his prophets in the holy Scriptures” (Romans 1:1,2).

## **The New Testament writers on the Old Testament**

### *The Old Testament was “contemporary” to the New Testament writers*

The Old Testament was written over some 15 centuries before Jesus was born, but Jesus and the New Testament writers never give us the impression that the Old Testament was comprised of documents from the past. They give no hint that it was written for different people, living in a different culture, with a different way of reading literature, and with different questions that needed to be answered. Quite the opposite. Jesus and the New Testament writers reference the Old Testament as if it had been written yesterday for people they were serving.

The New Testament writers often proved they were telling the truth, or they established their point, by citing the Old Testament. In Christ the new era foretold by the prophets had arrived.

For example, after describing the “heroes of faith” found in the Old Testament, the writer of Hebrews equates their faith with his own: “These were all commended for their faith, yet none of them received what had been promised. God had planned something better for us so that only together with us would they be made perfect” (Hebrews 11:39,40 NIV84). The earthly needs of those Old Testament believers might have been different from those of the readers of the Book of Hebrews. But both Old Testament and New Testament believers shared the hope of eternal life through God’s promises given in the past and fulfilled in Christ. God had promised the Old Testament believers “something better” than the temporary blessings he gave people like Abraham in the years before Christ. The New Testament believers were enjoying these blessings, but the Old Testament believers were commended for their faith in what the future would bring.

The apostle Paul also considered the Old Testament to be a contemporary book, absolutely relevant for New Testament believers. In Romans 15 he wrote, “For whatever was written in former days was written for our instruction, that *through endurance and through the encouragement of the Scriptures* we might have hope” (verse 4). Interestingly, in the very next sentence (verse 5), Paul linked God and his Word, calling God “the God of endurance and encouragement.” Endurance and encouragement come from God through his Word.

After pointing out the Israelites’ sins and how God had punished them, Paul warned the Corinthians, “Now these things happened to them as an example, but they were written down for our instruction, on whom the end of the ages has come” (1 Corinthians 10:11). The writer of Hebrews warned his readers not to despise God’s blessings and become like Esau “who sold his birthright for a single meal” (Hebrews 12:16). James urged his readers to learn from the example of “Job’s perseverance” and take to heart “what the Lord finally brought about” for him (James 5:11 NIV84). Jesus encouraged those who doubted him by holding up the example of Abraham: “Your father Abraham rejoiced that he would see my day. He saw it and was glad” (John 8:56).

### *Jesus and the New Testament writers and the canon of Scripture*

The canon of Scripture (the set group of writings that made up the Scriptures) was gradually assembled over the centuries as scrolls were written, and they were made into a permanent and closed collection. Jesus and the New Testament

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writers considered the collection of books that in their day formed the Jewish “canon,” to be “the Scriptures.”

There was some dispute among Jewish scholars in the early New Testament years about which books should be included in the canon of the Old Testament. It is fair to say that the apostles and early church leaders were aware of these disputes. Paul had received the best training a Jewish scholar could receive, and he certainly would have understood that some ancient books had been selected for inclusion in the canon while others had not. Also, he would have known that variant readings—caused largely by copyist errors—had crept into the manuscripts. Variant readings refer to differences in the text of the manuscripts scholars had at their disposal. Paul would have been familiar with those variants through his scholarly work on the manuscripts he had at his disposal. And he would also have known that the Greek translation of the Old Testament he used, called the Septuagint, differed in places from the Hebrew text.

This is important for the current debate about evolution. The “problems” associated with the ancient texts are often given as reasons why the Scripture is unreliable. But Jesus, Paul, and the other New Testament writers did not see it that way. They did not express concern about the human element in the assembly of the canon, about the fact that God used human beings to write down and copy his Word, or about the presence of variant readings.

### *“It is written”*

Often Jesus and the New Testament writers gave no indication that they were quoting from the Old Testament writings. They simply said, “It is written.” For example, Jesus rebuked his opponents like this: “But he looked directly at them and said, ‘What then is this that is written: “The stone that the builders rejected has become the cornerstone?”’” (Luke 20:17). And Paul wrote, “It is written, ‘Those who have never been told of him will see, and those who have never heard will understand’” (Romans 15:21).

“It is written” is shorthand for, “We all know there is an authoritative body of writings that we simply assume are true because they come from God. If we quote from them to make a point, no matter from which of the scrolls our quotation is taken, we have established our point.” It would be like a person learning car mechanics hearing his teacher say, “Tighten the lug nut with this amount of torque, for it is written ‘you must not use more than 75 foot-pounds.’” After the student hears that phrase a number of times, he asks the teacher what book he is referring to. The teacher points to a book on the shelf called the *Bible of Car Mechanics*.