

# Terence Keel's Divine Variations: A Symposium

with Terence D. Keel, "The Religious Preconditions for the Race Concept in Modern Science"; Yiftach Fehige, "In What Sense Exactly Did Christianity Give Us Racial Science?"; Ernie Hamm, "Christian Thought, Race, Blumenbach, and Historicizing"; Jonathan Marks, "The Coevolution of Human Origins, Human Variation, and Their Meaning in the Nineteenth Century"; Elizabeth Neswald, "Racial Science and 'Absolute Questions': Reoccupations and Repositions"; and Terence D. Keel, "Response to My Critics: The Life of Christian Racial Forms in Modern Science."

## THE COEVOLUTION OF HUMAN ORIGINS, HUMAN VARIATION, AND THEIR MEANING IN THE NINETEENTH CENTURY

by Jonathan Marks

*Abstract.* Ideas about biology, race, and theology were bound up together in nineteenth-century scholarship, although they are rarely, if ever, considered together today. Nevertheless, the new genealogical way of thinking about the history of life arose alongside a new way of thinking about the Bible, and a new way of thinking about people. They connected with one another in subtle ways, and modern scholarly boundaries do not map well on to nineteenth-century scholarship.

*Keywords:* biblical studies; evolution; Ernst Haeckel; scientific racism; Alfred Russel Wallace

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The U.S. Civil War was not fought over evolution.<sup>1</sup> Nevertheless, as any biology textbook will tell you, the publication of *The Origin of Species* in 1859 was a fantastically important event.

One of the principal effects that Terence Keel's *Divine Variations* has had on me as a modern biological (physical) anthropologist involves seeing the intertwined histories of biology, race, and theology over the course of the nineteenth century. Historians of science have tended to be so transfixed by Darwin that they lose sight of the crucially relevant scholarly fields of biblical studies and human differences (itself coalescing into anthropology from ethnology, craniology, and prehistoric archaeology) that were maturing at the same time as evolutionary biology. Moreover, we have tended

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to bracket these intellectual histories of science apart from the political and the religious—in short, apart from the actual cultural history of the nineteenth century. Terence Keel, along with other contemporary historians, such as Marianne Sommer (2016) and David Livingstone (2008)—is working to challenge that traditional approach.

To bracket the intellectual history of biology and Darwinism apart from other aspects of nineteenth century Euro-American culture has always seemed strange to me—as if scholars of the age cared more about giraffe necks than about slavery. The interlacing of biology (origins) and human variation (race) and its meaning (theology) comes out clearly in the biopolitics of, say, 1850.

In 1850, the opponents of Josiah Nott, the anatomist from Alabama, were the monogenists, who held that all people had a common origin, which was a position well rooted in biblical scripture. In denying that people shared a common origin, Nott challenged scriptural authority—although not too sharply, for he did not challenge the foundations of Christianity, but merely the number of creative acts on Day 6. Nott's infamous conclusion was that we are *not* all brothers and sisters under the skin, and as Keel notes, there did not seem to be any known way that white people could become black people, or vice versa, especially given the six thousand-year biblical chronology.

Consequently, the intellectual community of 1850 is retrospectively something of a paradox. For the abolitionist, scriptural authority counted as evidence for the common origin of all people, yet necessitated a theory of biological change to account for the facts of human diversity. Even the sons of Noah—Ham, Shem, and Japheth, the putative continental progenitors—were all brothers. Thus the earliest microevolutionary speculations were necessitated by biblical literalism, and the intellectual poles of 1850 reflected an alignment of ideas that are unfamiliar to modern sensibilities. On one side were the social progressives, biblical literalists, and evolutionists. (This is a broad-brush portrait; actual biopolitical views were often more nuanced; see Haller 1970.) And on the other hand, embodied by Nott, there was (1) a defense of slavery; (2) an interpretationist approach to the Bible; and (3) the basic creationist tenet of the immutability of type. These cross-cut modern ideologies in ways that show students how politically unfamiliar even the fairly recent past can actually be.

There are in fact several intellectual historical strands here, brocaded in complex ways, although only partially independent of one another. The famous Darwin story is the one we take for granted in biology, and in considerable detail: the Beagle in the 1830s; the delay in publishing his ideas on transmutation; the manuscript from Alfred Russel Wallace; *The Origin of Species* in 1859 and its aftermath. But actually the 1830s also saw the publication of David Strauss's radical *Das Leben Jesu*, then its translation into English in 1846 by Mary Anne Evans (George Eliot). This was not

about natural history, but about the meaning of the Bible as a repository of meaningful stories, rather than as histories, the relevant story here being the demiraclized life of Christ.

Strauss directly challenged the veracity of scripture in ways that Darwin only hinted at. Thus, reviewing the genealogies of Jesus given in Matthew 1 and Luke 3, he explains:

A consideration of the insurmountable difficulties, which unavoidably embarrass every attempt to bring these two genealogies into harmony with one another, will lead us to despair of reconciling them, and will incline us to acknowledge, with the more free-thinking class of critics, that they are mutually contradictory. Consequently they cannot both be true. . . (Strauss 1846, 137–38)

This is certainly far more threatening to a pious mid-nineteenth century Christian's sensibilities than anything anyone could say about bird beaks or glyptodont fossils. Indeed, to bracket off natural history from the overall intellectual experience within just the single year 1863 would be very myopic. Certainly fundamental scientific works appeared in that year: Thomas Huxley's *Man's Place in Nature* (documenting the close relationship between human and ape) and Charles Lyell's *Antiquity of Man* (documenting the coexistence of ancient people and extinct species). But at least as significant was the popularity of Ernest Renan's *La Vie de Jésus*, which famously presented Jesus as an Aryan sage, rather than as a Mediterranean demigod. And 1863 was also bracketed by Abraham Lincoln's Emancipation Proclamation (January 1) and Gettysburg Address (November 19)—signaling ideas that were also on educated people's minds.

One important lesson that can be seen in taking these strands together is the imperviousness of scientific racism to Darwinism. Although Darwin settled the origins question in favor of monogenism, there was still considerable latitude in reconstructing the histories of the races. These histories could never be value-neutral, and here the entwined intellectual strands are indeed evident as alternative scientific explanations to a single biopolitical question: Why are there savages?

Savagery—that is to say, preagricultural life—has no scriptural basis at all. Adam tends a garden from the very outset; a life without domestic plants and animals was literally inconceivable to the authors of Genesis. And yet, such peoples were becoming increasingly familiar both archaeologically (in Europe) and ethnographically (in the rest of the world). The most obvious reconciliation between these facts and the Bible would be that savages represent post-Adamic degeneration, from a primordially agricultural status. This, however, did not harmonize well with either the metaphysical doctrine of progress, nor with the empirical evidence for it. The primordial human state was premetallic, nonagricultural, primitive, and savage (Lubbock 1865).

Even so, what differentiated the contemporary backward savages from the civilized peoples? Three different scientific answers were ventured, in rapid succession. The German Darwinian Ernst Haeckel explained it naturalistically in his *Natürliche Schöpfungsgeschichte* (1868). The civilized and savage peoples were zoologically distinct species, and the savage species were closer to the apes.

They are on the whole at a much lower stage of development, and more like apes, than most of the . . . straight-haired men. [They] are incapable of a true inner culture and of a higher mental development, even under the favourable conditions of adaptation now offered to them in the United States of North America. No woolly-haired nation has ever had an important "history." (Haeckel 1876, 307–10)<sup>2</sup>

While the Darwinians perceived Haeckel as an ally, they nevertheless had reservations about the zoological explanation, and Charles Lyell ([1868] 1881) privately politely criticized Haeckel's appalling racial caricatures (which did not appear in the subsequent English translation of the work). But if not a naturalistic, zoological explanation for the difference between the savage and citizen, then where else might the answer lie? Alfred Russel Wallace denied the savage's biological inferiority, and offered an alternative explanation the following year.

In the brain of the lowest savages, and, as far as we yet know, of the prehistoric races, we have an organ so little inferior in size and complexity to that of the highest types (such as the average European), that we must believe it capable . . . of producing equal average results. But the mental requirements of the lowest savages, such as the Australians or the Andaman islanders, are very little above those of many animals. The higher moral faculties and those of pure intellect and refined emotion are useless to them, are rarely if ever manifested, and have no relation to their wants, desires, or well-being. How, then, was an organ developed so far beyond the needs of its possessor? Natural selection could only have endowed the savage with a brain a little superior to that of an ape, whereas he actually possesses one but very little inferior to that of the average members of our learned societies . . .

[W]e must therefore admit the possibility, that in the development of the human race, a Higher Intelligence has guided the same laws for nobler ends. (Wallace 1869, 391–94)

Rejecting Haeckel's explanation for the savage in terms of the natural, Wallace sought it in the realm of the supernatural. Of all the creatures on Earth, only savages had received a bit of heavenly help, in the form of large modern brains that they did not really need (Gould 1980). On hearing of Wallace's essay, Darwin wrote him, "I hope you have not murdered too completely your own & my child."<sup>3</sup>

And finally, if not in the domain of Haeckel's (1868) zoology or Wallace's (1869) theology, then how might we satisfactorily and scientifically explain the savage? According to E. B. Tylor (1871), in the realm of neither nature

nor supernature, but of culture. As Wallace defended the savage's essential humanity from the racist biological evolution of Haeckel, so too Tylor defends the savage's moral, intellectual, and social life from the divinely assisted evolution of Wallace. The true scientific explanation lies in a new ontological domain, cultural evolution. To be sure, this is not the relativistic "culture" of a generation later—the savage's culture is inferior, indeed, but it is culture nonetheless: "that complex whole which includes knowledge, belief, art, morals, law, custom, and any other capabilities and habits acquired by man as a member of society" (Tylor 1871,1).

In universalizing culture, Tylor not only humanized the savage, but exoticized his readers' behaviors, for their own knowledge, beliefs, art, morals law, and customs could now be examined and contrasted alongside the savage's (Stocking 1987). Indeed, Wallace (1872) took personal offense at Tylor's representation of contemporary spiritualism as a survival, or an intellectual relic from a more primitive mode of thought. Today of course we spurn Haeckel's racist naturalism and Wallace's divine interventionism, leaving us with Tylor's anthropology as the normative scientific explanation for human mental and behavioral diversity. Nevertheless, for a brief period, circa 1870, they all coincided and vied with one another as the study of nature, religion, and culture all developed in rough synchrony.

By century's end, Josiah Nott and his polygenism had been rendered irrelevant, as had Bible-based history. James Frazer's (1890) *The Golden Bough* could take for granted that a proper understanding of the gospel narrative would involve situating it among the myths and practices of the ancient world, and would proceed to do so. Scientific racism will be equally at home in evolutionary biology as in creationist biology, and accommodate itself in more varied forms than Haeckel's. Notably, Arthur de Gobineau's (pre-Darwinian) *Essai sur l'Inégalité des Races Humaines* was quickly translated into English with an appendix by Josiah Nott (1856) himself, but had little impact until it was retranslated for a post-Darwinian audience (1915), and its ideas repackaged by the evolutionary racist Madison Grant (1916).

The mid-nineteenth century was formative and foundational for modern science, but not simply for the emergence of a theory of the transformation of species. Darwinism emerged entangled with revolutionary scholarly approaches to human diversity and to the Bible itself, as nineteenth-century biology, anthropology, and theology all wrestled with their newly emerging paradigms.

## NOTES

1. Although trivia buffs know that Lincoln and Darwin were born on the same day.
2. This particular passage actually first appears in Haeckel's second German edition of 1870. "Im Allgemeinen stehen sie auf einer viel tieferen Entwicklungsstufe und den Affen viel

näher, als die meisten Lissotrichen oder Schlichthaarigen. Einer wahren inneren Cultur und einer höheren geistigen Durchbildung sind die Ulotrichen unfähig, auch unter so günstigen Anpassungs-Bedingungen, wie sie ihnen jetzt in den vereinigten Staaten Nordamerikas geboten werden. Kein kraushaariges Volk hat jemals eine bedeutende 'Geschichte' gehabt." The English translation is from Ray Lankester (1876), based on Haeckel's slightly variant fourth edition.

3. Darwin Correspondence Project, "Letter no. 6684," accessed on 2 June 2018, <http://www.darwinproject.ac.uk/DCP-LETT-6684>

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