

# Review of Collins, *The Language of God: A Scientist Presents Evidence for Belief*

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Collins FS 2006. *The language of God: a scientist presents evidence for belief*. New York: Simon and Schuster.

## Introduction

Undoubtedly, the credentials of Francis Collins are impressive. As the former head of the Human Genome Project, he is one of the world's leading geneticists. He is also a Christian with strong convictions that theistic evolution is the best explanation of the creation aspects of the Bible. Notwithstanding my critique of a number of Collins' claims, *The Language of God* will certainly challenge the intellectually honest reader.

Although Collins deals with many issues throughout his book, especially on the human genome, I felt that it would be more pertinent to deal briefly with issues that are important, particularly those with regard to God and humanity.

## 1. Humanity

In his book, Collins attempts to answer many questions on humanity's roots, and its relation to the scriptural account of life. He endeavours to reconcile some of the many difficult aspects of scripture with biological research, such as the creation of Adam, Cain's wife; the successfully

integration of Darwin's idea of evolution with the scriptural account of creation, and so on. I gleaned much from his book, but I was somewhat disappointed by some of the claims he makes (e.g. his idea that we were created from pre-existent hominids, rather than a special creation by God, and that Genesis is poetic, rather than literal).

Nevertheless, his book is well laid out, starting with his impressive conversion to Christianity, and the subsequent results. He then moves on to the origin of the universe, culminating in a brief discourse on some of the ethical and moral sides of biological issues, and a review of his conversion.

## 2. Genesis

One must commend Collins for his effort to make sense of difficult issues surrounding the *science and theology* debate. However, many of his ideas fail closer academic scrutiny, which is a pity, since he has made a bold attempt to answer questions, specifically on the origin of humanity through his study and head of the Human Genome Project. In fact, one tends to have an uneasy feeling when reading how he strives to reconcile the so-called 'scriptural conundrums', especially around Adam and the creation acts of Genesis. On certain theological issues, it seems that his work tends to border on heresy. For example, when referring to the book of Genesis, he states that, 'Unquestionably the language is poetic' rather than literal (83). In this instance, Collins seems to disregard the interpretations and conclusions of scholars—better qualified to conduct Old Testament exegesis—who suggest that Genesis cannot but be seen as a historical account. A thorough discussion of the numerous interpretative models for the book of Genesis is missing. In all probability, including such discussions would have opened up other avenues of exploration, leading to different

conclusions. Therefore, his ability to correctly exegete the scriptural teaching on such difficult issues is, therefore, questionable.

### 3. Adam and Eve

Collins addresses the subject of Adam's creation, by presupposing that Adam and Eve were the continuation of some pre-Adamic race—an idea compelled by his strong belief in evolution, and probably based on his work around gene similarities. This, however, flies in the face of the scriptural account, teaching that Adam was a direct and unique creation of God, formed from the dust of the earth. Adam was not a by-product of some hominid or ape-like creature. In any case, Collins argues that human genes are not uniquely human—other animals have the same genes—thus strongly implying common descent (124–138). However, many in the scientific community have subsequently questioned his ideas, such as leading biologists, Hopi E Hoekstra and Jerry Coyne. The genome data does not present an overwhelming challenge to the view that God engaged in multiple creative acts at various points (*ex nihilo*), combined with evolution.

Collins further states that God probably 'supplied' Cain's wife from one of these (*hominoid* or ape-like) creatures. For example, he states 'Some biblical literalists insist the wives of Cain and Seth must have been their own sisters, but that is both in serious conflict with subsequent prohibitions against incest, and incompatible with a straightforward reading of the text (207).' This is a strange statement coming from someone, who is an expert on genes and gene mutation, since he would know the gene was free from mutation at that time of history. Moreover, the children of Adam and Eve merely followed God's mandate to replenish the earth.

## 4. The Moral Code

On the topic of ethics, it is clear from his writings that the moral code is important to Collins, dedicating a notable amount of space explaining it from the perspective of evil, bioethics, and atheism. His conclusions are theistic in nature (22–30; 36–37). However, his idea of stem cells and the moral code is a little problematical. For example, he states that although human embryos deserve moral status (he is big on this), there are hundreds of thousands of these embryos currently frozen away in in-vitro fertilization clinics. His view is that, instead of throwing them away, they should rather be used for good. Although he has a point, it leaves one with the idea of double standards. This is especially evident in his explanation of the way in which God infuses a soul into an embryo (249–259). He states: ‘No theologian would argue that identical twins lack souls, or that they share a single soul. In these cases, therefore, the insistence that the spiritual nature of a person is uniquely defined at the very moment of conception encounters difficulty’. The problem with this statement is that Collins supplies no scholarly references. His lack of the biblical data regarding the issues of the origin of the soul is problematic, and leads to confusion rather than clarity. In fact, his statements clearly reveal a non-Reformed or evangelical view of the scriptures, a view that would not only be considered unacceptable by most evangelical scholars, but also, contrary to many evangelical statements of faith.

In my view, Collins should have considered the biblical data carefully on this and engaged theologians who have written extensively on traducianism and creationism, two theories that, in my view, better explain the process.

## 5. The Fossil Record

One of the most important facets against an evolutionary process or common descent is the gaps found in the fossil records—especially after the Cambrian Explosion. Collins glosses over this important aspect of the evolutionary process (93–96), which probably leads to his views on Adam and Eve (i.e. descending from some previous evolutionary race of hominids). Unfortunately, Collins does not provide a careful study of the fossil record (perhaps because it is not his area of expertise). This is a serious weakness in his argument for common descent. One gets the impression throughout his writings that he may be a passionate supporter of a Darwinian type evolutionary process (as previously implied), especially since he strongly advocates a common descent theory.

## 6. Young Earth Creationists

Collins tends to make a few peculiar comments, especially around Young Earth Creationists. For instance, he states, ‘Some YEC advocates have more recently taken the tack of arguing that all of this evidence *for evolution* (emphasis mine) has been designed by God to mislead us, and therefore test our faith’ (176). Unfortunately, Collins does not supply references for this statement, thus, leaving the door open for speculation. Collins does, however, attempt to tidy up such sentiments by stating that theistic evolution (or *biologos* as he prefers to call it) is an important theory. He infers that it explains more about creation than other similar views do, and he vigorously defends it by dedicating an entire chapter to the subject (ch. 10).

Clearly, Collins is an unashamed theistic evolutionist, and he seemingly wrote his book from that philosophical perspective. Therefore, it will

certainly appeal to those who share similar ideas. The book will also appeal to those who would like a fairly detailed overview of the interaction between science and theology, and the evolution and biology debate. Moreover, his intentions are clear, thus successfully reconciling contemporary scientific advances with scripture. For this, I commend him.

## Conclusion

Although the book, *The Language of God*, is an interesting read, I would be reticent to recommend this book to ‘new’ Christians. My concern is rooted in the fear that uninformed readers, honestly seeking answers to touch questions on the topic of creation, may be persuaded to believe some of the extra-biblical claims made by Collins.

## Reference List

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