

## PATRONISING THE ANCIENTS

by Michael Giffin

*The Genesis Enigma,*

by Andrew Parker;

Vintage Books, 2009, 320 pages, \$34.95.

**T**HIS BOOK WAS written by a research fellow who admits that the account of creation in Genesis is scientifically accurate and accords with everything currently known about astronomy, evolution, biology, zoology, and other non-religious disciplines. While this scripture-agreeing-with-science territory isn't new, it's new to Andrew Parker, who doesn't have a religious background and isn't a religious believer. He didn't begin investigating the corroboration between scripture and science until his attention was drawn to it by readers of his previous book, *In the Blink of an Eye*, an exposition of his "light switch theory", according to which the sudden introduction of vision on earth triggered the Cambrian explosion.

But in spite of its title, *The Genesis Enigma* is less about the enigma of ancient wisdom and more about promoting the twin cults of scientism and rationalism. Parker sincerely hopes his book doesn't fall into the wrong hands and isn't used for purposes he doesn't intend: for example, religious hands may use it to demonstrate the veracity of intelligent design. Parker believes there are no wrong hands in the sciences. How could there be, since scientists are all rational?

Chapter 1, "Truth", summarises what's taught to first-year undergraduates, to establish the Jewish Bible as a historical record, by explaining the complicated process through which it was written, and by presenting the extra-biblical evidence that corroborates it. Many will be startled to hear Parker's observation—"The Old Testament accepted as canonical today by Christians consists of thirty-nine books; the Jewish Bible contains only twenty-four"—since that's only half-true and it wouldn't have taken much to tell the whole truth. The only new corroboration of the extra-biblical evidence appears to be Jursa's recent discovery that a Babylonian tablet of a commercial transaction, written in cuneiform script in 595 BC, refers to an official named Nebo-Sarsechim, whom Jeremiah 39 identifies as Nebuchadnezzar's chief eunuch during the siege of Jerusalem in 587 BC.

Chapter 2, "Sun", explains God's creative act "Let there be light", beginning with the Big Bang, which lasted one-millionth of a second but still generated all the matter and energy the universe will ever contain. Parker then goes on to describe the universe's gradual expansion and cooling and the emergence of the basic

forces of nature: first gravity, then the forces that hold the nuclei of atoms together, then weaker electromagnetic forces. Gravity made some regions of the primordial gas denser, igniting stars and groups of stars within them, and concentrated a giant cloud of hydrogen gas in the spiral arm of the Milky Way. This concentration rotated faster and faster around its axis and became our sun. "Phew!" Parker admits, clearly pleased with his summary, carefully pointing out that the ancients wouldn't have understood a word of it.

Chapter 3, "Seas", explains God's creative act "Let the waters under the heavens be gathered together into one place, and let the dry land appear". Parker starts with describing the earth's beginning as a clump of molten material from the sun. The sun was 70 per cent cooler then than now, which allowed the earth to cool and an atmosphere to form. Thanks to gravity, the earth kept its atmosphere, and when it had cooled sufficiently water vapour liquefied and hot acidic seas appeared in low-lying areas. The earth was a vast ball of energy that converted into many different elements which combined in just the right mixture to sustain life. Parker finds it interesting that the author of the Genesis account of creation should devote a whole stage to the seas as, according to Parker, he lived in a landlocked region.

Chapter 4, "Life Begins", explains God's creative act "Let the earth put forth vegetation, plants yielding seed, and fruit trees bearing fruit in which is their seed, each according to its kind". Parker begins with Erasmus Darwin's *The Temple of Nature* (1803) before moving on to Charles Darwin's *On the Origin of Species* (1859), Gregor Mendel's "Experiments on Plant Hybridization" (1866), Alfred Wallace's *The Malay Archipelago* (1869), Francis Crick's and James Watson's unravelling of the structure of DNA in 1953, Stanley Miller's work with amino acids and how they form proteins, further work on how those proteins became cells, and how an early bacterium evolved a molecule that allowed photosynthesis to occur. Parker concedes the appropriateness of the author of Genesis including plant life at this stage of his creation account.

Chapter 5, "Sight", explains God's creative act "Let there be lights in the firmament of the heavens to separate the day from the night, and let them be for signs and for seasons and for days and years". Parker begins with the late-twentieth-century discovery of the interactions between DNA (or RNA) and protein molecules, whose functions depend on the three-dimensional shapes into which they fold. The resultant combinations of single-celled forms joined together and evolved into animal species that reproduce. Here Parker introduces his discovery of how the first eye began to evolve in a trilobite around 521 million years ago, and the evolutionary advantage this process of bio-mineralisation gave the trilobites: the first of the modern animal body types to

appear.

Chapter 6, “Variety”, explains God’s creative act “Let the waters bring forth swarms of living creatures”. Just before the Cambrian explosion, vision was no more than a blurred light field. Once vision evolved, everything “exploded”; all was revealed in glorious detail and the light switch was turned on for animal communities. Also, for the only time in evolution, the switch has been left on: “With our eyes open we see the size, shape and colour of animals, and we also see how they behave—we can judge how fast they can move and whether we can catch them.” Parker finds the ancient author’s use of the term “bring forth” interesting here, as a possible analogy with natural selection: “To cry ‘bring forth’ is to summon a process that will lead to the diversity of animals. Evolution is such a process.” He’s careful to make the point, yet again, that the ancients couldn’t possibly have known this.

Chapter 7, “Life Unfolds”, explains the scientific meaning of “God created the great sea monsters and every living creature that moves, with which the waters swarm, according to their kind” by taking the reader on a tour of everything that happened in evolution between the Cambrian explosion and the present day. Two goals are important to Parker here: first, to trace how “some of the animal phyla scrambled for their places on the evolutionary tree; now that soft bodies were out and hard, skeletal parts were here to stay”; second, to consider how “this scientific knowledge penetrated the church’s defences”. For example, Parker mentions the sensible approach of the Schofield Reference Bible, in a footnote which caused a backlash in the United States for proposing a “gap theory” of creation: “This was the suggestion that millions of years could have passed between the moment when God created the heavens and the earth, and the subsequent six ‘days’ in Eden.”

Chapter 8, “Birds”, explains that in noticing how “God created ... every winged bird according to its kind” the author of Genesis was making yet another interesting zoological observation, after previously establishing most animals on earth. In evolutionary theory, birds are of particular interest because they are an exception to the rule of vision; they escaped the rules laid down 521 million years ago by the very first eye: “Birds can fly, and so evade the predatory eye ... they are largely free to flaunt themselves visually.” They do this with colour, and through incorporating transparent materials that reflect the same energy that first appeared the moment of the Cambrian explosion. According to Parker, this natural process has nothing to do with God and makes evolution “far simpler to explain: as a process, it is far less complex than once imagined, and no longer improbable”. Evolution works without the need for an intelligent force because it isn’t intelligent.

Chapter 9, “God”, considers the existence of God in

an environment that both adheres to science and raises a new idea for a “rational” religion that Parker feels other people should belong to, since he isn’t religious. He clearly isn’t a disinterested onlooker here. He’s committed to condemning intelligent design as a concocted theory: “Try as I do to be fair and open-minded, I can’t help but be struck by the flawed logic and forced theories found in the case studies of intelligent design.” Since the weight of evidence is crushing, Parker believes it’s important for religion to acknowledge that evolution is now fact rather than theory. However, Parker “must admit, rather nervously as a scientist averse to entertaining such an idea, that the evidence that the writer of the opening page of the Bible was divinely inspired is strong”. What’s Parker’s way forward, for other people who insist on believing in God because he still can’t? As neither creationism nor atheism is scientific theory or demonstrably true: “If we do not allow them to cloud our judgement then God can appear as a rational answer as to why we exist on earth.” Note: The answer has to be scientific and rational or it won’t be true. There can be nothing mysterious or hidden or unknown.

**T**HE ENDING OF this book should have been its beginning. The appendix “Who Wrote Genesis?” should have occupied a central position in Chapter 1. Here the reader is finally told about the different authors J and E and D and P, the different strands of history and tradition they represent, and how these different strands contributed to the final shape of Genesis in general and its interwoven accounts of creation in particular. Again, this information is neither new nor radical and is taught to first-year undergraduates. That Parker has hitherto spoken of a single author of Genesis, but now admits there were several authors, raises questions about when he discovered J and E and D and P and why they appear in an appendix as a kind of afterthought. More seriously, he never does grapple with what these different strands really mean: that is, what the existence of the J and E and D and P strata in Genesis tells us about the sophisticated and diplomatic and political way in which the ancients wove their creation stories into a single coherent cosmology. Why did the ancients have different narrative points of view? What do they represent? That’s an important subject with large implications.

There are many such missed opportunities in *The Genesis Enigma*. It’s hard work wondering why Parker wrote it, apart from a deeply felt desire to promote the twin cults of scientism and rationalism, and to intimidate readers with his immense learning. True, he’s obviously learned a lot over the last few years while researching this book but many readers with a background in the humanities or the sciences will already know most of what he repackages as something they need to be

taught. His tour through familiar territory would have been less tedious—and he would have sounded less patronising as a tour guide—had he stuck to telling his readers what his research adds to the subject and left out his self-important narrative of discovery. His endless please-don't-misunderstand-me-I'm-a-rational-scientist-not-an-irrational-believer qualifications are wearisome. His more-in-sorrow-than-in-anger assumption that the monotheistic religions are full of narrow-minded advocates of intelligent design who don't already know what he's just discovered—and are hostile

to anything scientific or rational—is tedious. By now one would have thought people who believe the Bible reveals God's dealing with creation are soft targets and less shadow-boxing with them would make his research more influential, as would fewer references to himself. In the Preface alone there are nearly sixty instances of *I* or *me* or *my*, an average of about ten a page.

*Dr Michael Giffin is a priest in the Anglican diocese of Sydney. He discussed Margaret Atwood's new novel **The Year of the Flood** in the April issue.*

## TITLE

by Iain Bamforth

*Islands: A Trip Through Space and Time*,  
by Peter Conrad;  
Thames & Hudson, 2009, 192 pages, \$45.

ISLANDS ARE PHILOSOPHICALLY odd things: they were central to Locke's bold moves against feudal tenure rights in the eighteenth century which made property transferable from the physical effort put into finding, cultivating and ultimately consuming its produce. Islands are more easily marked by such activities: that is why Shakespeare sets Prospero on one, and Defoe has Robinson Crusoe take possession of his. Islands were a new standard of independence in laying claim to the biggest parcel of land of all, the United States, which is manifestly no island. And they have their unbargained for "subtleties", as Prospero called them—the power of generating noises, apparitions and events on their own account. Their very names—Bermuda, St Kilda, Ceylon, Spitsbergen—are of great imaginative potency. Islands are subtle enough to become individuals. And not only that: they can become rafts of righteousness—close enough to the "world" for observations to be cast at it, and far enough away from it to evade responsibility for the effect of the said observations.

Peter Conrad was born on one (Tasmania) and has never entirely surmounted the experience, even though he has been an Oxford don for the best part of forty years now. Growing up on Tasmania (a rather large island even if it does lie at the end of things) "immediately determined the way I would see the world. I see that world from a distance, as if I do not belong to it—or has it perhaps expelled and ostracized me?" Exactly as for most of its penal inhabitants, who were banished rather than born there, Tasmania—"that small, morbid island"—fostered dreams of escape. Certainly islands are peripheral, but in these days of negotiable, imagined centres, it might be thought that growing up

as a skewed castaway offers something of a perspectival advantage. But solipsism is the subject: a good deal of this short book is taken up with a discussion of how Daniel Defoe seized on the story of Alexander Selkirk, abandoned for four years on Juan Fernandez Island (where he eventually lost the ability to speak), and turned it into the modern gospel story of Cartesian man with no option other than to use his wits and conquer a parcel of land he could call his own. But aren't some islands too big or historically important to be thought of as such? "The British Isles, for Defoe, were an extension of Crusoe's little kingdom," asserts Conrad—what of Japan, Greenland, Madagascar, even Australia itself?

Tasmania made Peter Conrad an introvert. But it would implausibly seem the entire cause of his intellectual and stylistic restlessness. And indeed, once the initial recollections subside, Conrad embarks, not on the huge ambitious journey offered by his subtitle but on a rather whimsical round of island-hopping. The island as imaginative construct is what gets him going.

Aside from the extended day with Crusoe, we pay fleeting visits to Marguerite Yourcenar on Mount Desert Island off the coast of Maine, Anton Chekhov taking the hard route across Siberia to Sakhalin and then sailing back via Hong Kong and Ceylon, Auden revolted by fish soup made with brilliantine in Iceland, Marlon Brando purchasing the atoll of Tetiaroa near Tahiti where he could pretend to be Fletcher Christian off screen too, Robert Louis Stevenson's brave and surprising attempt to stand up to the colonisers on behalf of the natives of Samoa. We go from the island as paradise—Calypso, Cythera, the Greek islands, Tyre, Goethe's Sicily—via such fabled islands as Atlantis and even Utopia to rather more purgatorial not to say sinister instances: Böcklin's Isle of the Dead, Stromboli, Pitcairn and Napoleon on St Helena.

Conrad being Conrad, we are apprised of the fascinating snippet that Ingmar Bergman chanced upon Fårö in 1959 while looking for a location to shoot *Through a Glass Darkly*, but had originally intended filming it in the Orkneys. And Defoe's Crusoe provides him with an opportunity to fast-forward not just to Michel