

BOOK REVIEW

of
Benjamin Breckinridge Warfield,
Evolution, Science, and Scripture: Selected Writings,
edited by Mark A. Noll & David N. Livingstone,
Baker Books, 2000.

This book is in the Evangel Library,
and this review is presented by Larry D. Paarmann.

Benjamin Breckinridge Warfield (B.B. Warfield) prior to his death in 1921 was considered to be one of the three outstanding living exponents of the Reformed Faith, the other two being Abraham Kuyper and Herman Bavinck. In 1886 he was called to succeed A.A. Hodge as professor of Systematic Theology at Princeton Theological Seminary, a position he held until his death. Warfield was a prolific writer and this volume contains the principal articles published by Warfield having to do with evolution and science. The book includes an excellent Introduction by Noll and Livingstone.

Warfield during his lifetime was a main-line Presbyterian theologian. Yet, due to his conservatism and evangelical style, he has long been a favorite of evangelical Christians. A simple search on Amazon.com shows that most of his books and collections of articles are still in print. However, it has been long known that he was a supporter of evolution, and a self-described “Darwinian of the purest water.” By today’s standards that seems like a contradiction; almost a denial of the Christian faith. How is this to be understood? First of all, he said this about himself when he was a sophomore student at Princeton at a mere 17 years old. “In later years”, Warfield wrote in 1916, “I fell away from this, his orthodoxy (Professor McCosh’s (McCosh was installed as president of Princeton the same year that Warfield was a sophomore there) orthodoxy of Darwinian evolution).” In the Introduction to the book under review, the editors write “Of key importance in Warfield’s thinking was his willingness throughout a long career to accept the possibility (at times, the probability) of evolution, while always denying Darwinism strictly defined.” By “strictly defined” they mean denying any role for God. One asset of this book, then, is that it reveals the development of Warfield’s thought about evolution.

Another thing that the book reveals, although apparently not the intention of the editors, at least they made no mention of it, is how Old Princeton Seminary was embracing ideas that many believe are contrary to the teachings of Scripture long before Old Princeton fell in the 1920s. It raises the question as to why evolution was so widely received by Christian theologians when it was a hypothesis with so little evidence to support it. Perhaps it was theologians wanting the acceptance and respect of scholars in other fields, and sensing that they must show respect and acceptance in order to get it. It was a time when the objectivity of the hard sciences was unquestioned. It is now much more appreciated that even in the sciences, one does not leave one’s biases and prejudices at home when entering the research laboratory. Christian scholars in the sciences seem much more ready to challenge evolution now than they did in Warfield’s day.

Warfield was very much dedicated to serious intellectual study, and he seemed to have a special interest in evolution and science. One of the longer and most interesting articles reproduced in the book is Warfield’s “Charles Darwin’s Religious Life: A Sketch in Spiritual Biography,” published in 1888. The article is an in-depth analysis of the religious life of Charles Darwin, and it reveals Warfield’s fascination with Darwin and a great deal of his sympathy, compassion and sensitivity for the modern-day tragedy that Darwin’s life was. Warfield traces Darwin’s life from studying for the ministry to a life ending in despair. “And thus he went out into the dark without God in all his thoughts, with no hope for immortality, and with no keenness of regret for all the high and noble aspirations and all the elevating imaginings which he had lost out of life.”

There are 40 reprinted articles in the book. The editors write: “We have tried to reprint all of Warfield’s writings of any significance on evolution, along with several of his more general reflections on science.” Only one article is explicitly on Scripture. Warfield wrote an entire book on Scripture (*The Inspiration and Authority of the Bible*) and that is not included in the volume under review. Perhaps including the word “Scripture” in the title of the book simply means that the book is about evolution and science from a Christian perspective, or understanding evolution and science in light of the Scripture. I think a fair summary statement for the book is that, in Warfield’s opinion, there is no conflict between true science and Christianity, nor can there be. However, for those who seek to exclude God from intellectual pursuits of any kind, including scientific, there will be errors at the outset leading to wrong conclusions.