

DARWIN'S LAST HOURS

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Some have stated that Charles Darwin, toward the close of his life, repudiated evolution and was enthusiastic for Christianity. In Christian charity, one could wish that this were true; but according to the evidence nothing of the sort happened. Some investigation into what Darwin wrote, and presumably believed, in the last two years or so of his life is described by the author.

About 10 years ago, a pamphlet entitled, "Darwin's Last Hours" came to my attention. Essentially it con-

tained the account that follows—

Last Days of Charles Darwin

(from *The Collapse of Evolution* by Luther Townsend)

Lady Hope, a consecrated English woman, speaking before a Northfield audience, August 15, 1915, on Mr. Darwin's religious life, gave the following account of a personal interview that subsequently was published in the *Watchman Examiner*. The article as published was written by her own hand, and this is what she says:

"It was on one of those glorious autumn afternoons that we sometimes enjoy in England when I was asked to go in and sit with the well known professor, Charles Darwin. He was almost bed-ridden for some months before he died. I used to feel when I saw him that his fine presence would make a grand picture for our Royal Academy, but never did I think so more strongly than on this particular occasion. He was sitting up in bed, wearing a soft embroidered dressing gown, of rather a rich purple shade. Propped up by pillows, he was gazing out on a far-stretching scene of woods and cornfields, which glowed in the light of one of those marvellous sunsets which are the beauty of Kent and Surrey. His noble forehead and fine features seemed to be lit up with pleasure as I entered the room. He waved his hand toward the window as he pointed out the scene beyond, while in the other hand he held an open Bible, which he was always studying.

"What are you reading now?" I asked, as I seated myself by his bedside. "Hebrews," he answered. "The Royal Book, I call it. Isn't it grand?" Then placing his finger on certain passages, he commented on them. I made some

Apparently the above account was published first in an American publication entitled, "The *Watchman Examiner*." After a search through available issues of that publication neither a history of the origin of this account nor the actual account have been found. Even a search for any information on Lady Hope has

allusion to the strong opinions expressed by many persons on the history of the creation, its grandeur, and then their treatment of the earlier chapters of the Book of Genesis. He seemed greatly distressed, his fingers twitched nervously, and a look of agony came over his face as he said, "I was a young man with unformed ideas. I threw out queries, suggestions, wondering all the time over everything, and to my astonishment the ideas took like wild fire. People made a religion of them" Then he paused, and after a few more sentences on the "holiness of God" and "the grandeur of this Book," looking at the Bible which he was holding tenderly all the time, he said, "I have a summerhouse in the garden, which holds about thirty people. It is over there. I know you read the Bible in the villages. Tomorrow afternoon I should like the servants on the place, some tenants, and a few of the neighbors to gather there. Will you speak to them?" "What shall I speak about?" I asked. "CHRIST JESUS" he replied in a clear, emphatic voice, adding in a lower tone, "AND HIS SALVATION." "Is not that the best theme?" And then I want you to sing some hymns with them. You lead on your small instrument, do you not?" The wonderful look of brightness and animation on his face as he said this I shall never forget, and he added: "If you take the meeting at 3 o'clock this window will be open, and you will know that I am joining in with the singing." Lady Hope closed the article with these words: "How I wished that I could have made a picture of the fine old man and his beautiful surroundings on that memorable day!"

ended in failure. Finally I have failed to find any other reference to the Townsend account.

Regrettably several other versions of this account have appeared recently, such as the following, which was received with accompanying homily:

Charles Darwin's Deathbed

In 1871 was published Charles Darwin's famous book, *The Descent of Man*, which created a furore in the religious world.

It presented his speculations on the probable ancestry of man. He traced the descent of the human race back to an ape-like creature, and still further back until he reached the speck of protoplasm containing in itself, as he supposed, all those evolutionary potentialities, which after centuries of advancement resulted in man. However, with strict honesty he pointed out that with all his research there was a "missing link."

Till every link was indisputably proved and the "missing link" discovered, the theory remained a speculation. Alas! the human heart is predisposed to believing anything put forward against the Word of God, and Darwinism became the popular thing. Tens of thousands were swept into skepticism. Hundreds of preachers proclaimed this doctrine from their pulpits, doing incredible harm.

Whilst this theory did not deny God as Creator—for who created the speck of protoplasm?—yet it brushed aside the truth of man's creation as set forth in Genesis i and ii. And if that account is mythical, what sure foundation have we for any statement in God's word? Darwinism also

denied the fall of man, and if that is denied where is the necessity of the atoning work of Christ?

Years have rolled by since *The Descent of Man* appeared, and today Darwinism is an exploded theory in the estimation of many who are competent to judge.

In 1882 Darwin, the apostle of evolution, died, and was buried in Westminster Abbey. We quote from an article in *The Gleaner*.

"Darwin is propped up in bed. Out of his window stretches a beautiful view. The sun is setting, lighting up with its soft radiance the face of nature. The dying man is reading—*The Bible!*"

Lady Hope, a well-known Christian worker, says: "I made some allusions to the strong opinions expressed by many persons on the history of the creation, its grandeur, and then their treatment of the earlier chapters of the Book of Genesis.

"He seemed greatly distressed, his fingers twitched nervously, and a look of agony came over his face as he said:

"I was a young man with unformed ideas. I threw out queries, suggestions, wondering all the time over everything; and to my astonishment the ideas took like wildfire. People made a religion of them."

True, his book appeared only eleven years before his death, but it contained the "unformed ideas" of his early manhood, as he himself confessed.

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Was there ever a more tragic scene? Darwin with Bible in hand, speaking with glowing enthusiasm about "the grandeur of this Book," deploring the modern evolutionary movement in theology which resulted in covering Protestant lands with the blight of scepticism; confessing that his "unformed ideas" as a young man were the basis of evolutionary theology.

What a challenge to every modernist! What a rebuke to all who neglect the Bible?

And, further, Darwin revealed his sense of the absolute necessity of the Lord Jesus to every man.

Right glad were we to read this account of Darwin's closing hours. He exalted the Bible and Christ. He could not have done better.

The Bible contains the revelation of God in Christ, and presents Christ as the only and all-sufficient Saviour.

Reader, suppose the death-bed had been yours. How would you have fared? Will your present views of the Bible and Christ stand the acid test of a death-chamber?

One day such a test will come upon you. A few years and your pleasure-loving, money-making opportunities will be over, and what then?

How glorious is the gospel. It presents God specially in two ways: as *love* — "God is love" (I John iv: 16) — as *righteous* — "to declare His righteousness" (Rom. iii: 25). If the gospel were founded on love, divorced from strict righteousness, there would be no solid foundation to rest

Apparently the second pamphlet is based on the first account. So I will deal with the former since it is more complete. If this account of Darwin's last days were true it has been thought that it might move some to reconsider acceptance of evolution.

Actually, I doubt its efficacy in conversion, since, as Norman Macbeth has so ably demonstrated, the world of evolution today has departed from almost all of Darwin's views on the origin of species. Therefore I doubt that his conversion would cause any of his adherents to change their position.

In addition, as Matthews points out in his preface to the new Everyman's Library edition of Darwin's *Origin of Species*,

Belief in the theory of evolution is thus exactly parallel to belief in special creation—both are concepts which believers know to be true but neither, up to the present, has been capable of proof.¹

Since support for evolution rests not on pure reason, I am sure those of evolutionary persuasion would continue to have faith regardless of any backsliding on the part of their "prophet."

Nevertheless, I regard the dissemination of this material purporting to record Darwin's last hours as highly dangerous when distributed to the youth, and to the scientific laity, at whom it seems aimed; and therefore I feel I must condemn these pamphlets. For one thing, creationists do inestimable harm when erroneous material is presented as factual. And I would brand this story as apocryphal and a figment of the imagination.

My first clue in reaching this conclusion came in reading that Darwin's meeting with Lady Hope took place "on one of those glorious autumn afternoons." She then says that "he was almost bed-ridden for some months before he died." Since reference is made to outside readings in a summer house, the season seems to have been early fall. Charles Darwin died April, 1882. This event, then, would have occurred in the early fall of 1881, a good half year before he died.

upon. If righteousness alone were carried out there could be no gospel, for "ALL have sinned, and come short of the glory of God" (Rom. iii: 23).

But the gospel tells us "God is love" so that we can trust His heart, His nature, and it tells us it is *righteous* love so that we feel assured of its immutable basis.

Man is a sinner, the worst of us, aye, the very best of us — hopeless, undone sinners. *Sin carries a penalty! The wages of sin is death.*

Hence the necessity of Calvary. If God is to pardon the sinner, and yet punish the sin, there must be a Substitute, and that Substitute must be voluntary and sufficient.

As to voluntariness Christ could say, "Lo, I come (in the volume of the book it is written of me) to do thy will, O God" (Heb. x: 7); as to sufficiency, it is enough to point out that He, who was God and became Man (and yet was One divine Person), exclaimed on the cross, "IT IS FINISHED" (John xix: 30) God raised Him from the dead, proof of His satisfaction in His work as meeting all the claims of His righteousness; that the apostles uniformly proclaimed that simple faith in the Lord Jesus as Saviour suffices for salvation.

Search and see, there is abundant proof of these statements in the scriptures.

"Believe on the Lord Jesus Christ, and thou shalt be saved" (Acts xvi: 31).

—Gospel Publications, Golden, Colorado

Thus verification of the story would be expected in correspondence by Darwin during that period.

Several individuals, Darwin's son among them, have compiled collections of Darwin's letters. When the first pamphlet was drawn to my attention, I went to the University of Michigan graduate library and searched the various collections of Darwin's correspondence. From these I selected a number of letters written by Darwin to various individuals in the last years of his life. The reader should note three letters were written from ten to seven weeks prior to Darwin's death. The pertinent excerpts reveal that the role assigned Darwin from the early fall of 1881 to his death in April, 1882, in the Hope account cannot in any way be reconciled with the tone and flat statements in his letters. The reader may make his own comparisons.

from *The Life and Letters of Charles Darwin*, edited by his son, Francis Darwin, Vol. I, New York: D. Appleton and Co., 1919.

I. I believe that his reticence arose from several causes. He felt strongly that a man's religion is an essentially private matter, and one concerning himself alone. This is indicated by the following extract[†] from a letter of 1879:

"What my own views may be is a question of no consequence to any one but myself. But, as you ask, I may state that my judgment often fluctuates . . . In my most extreme fluctuations I have never been an Atheist in the sense of denying the existence of a God. I think that generally (*and more and more as I grow older*), but not always, *that an Agnostic* would be the more correct description of my state of mind." (Emphasis added)

II. Thus in answer to a Dutch student he wrote (April 2, 1873):

"I am sure you will excuse my writing at

[†]Addressed to Mr. J. Fordyce, and published by him in his "Aspects of Scepticism," 1883.

length, when I tell you that I have long been much out of health, and am now staying away from my home for rest.

"It is impossible to answer your question briefly; and I am not sure that I could do so, even if I wrote at some length. But I may say that the impossibility of conceiving that this grand and wondrous universe, with our conscious selves, arose through chance, seems to me the chief argument for the existence of God; but whether this is an argument of real value, I have never been able to decide. I am aware that if we admit a first cause, the mind still craves to know whence it came, and how it arose. Nor can I overlook the difficulty from the immense amount of suffering through the world. I am, also, induced to defer to a certain extent to the judgment of the many able men who have fully believed in God; but here again I see how poor an argument this is. The safest conclusion seems to me that the whole subject is beyond the scope of man's intellect; but man can do his duty."

Again in 1879 he was applied to by a German student, in a similar manner. The letter was answered by a member of my father's family, who wrote:

III. This, however, did not satisfy the German youth, who again wrote to my father, and received from him the following reply:

"I am much engaged, an old man, and out of health, and I cannot spare time to answer your questions fully,—nor indeed can they be answered. Science has nothing to do with Christ, except in so far as the habit of scientific research makes a man cautious in admitting evidence. *For myself, I do not believe that there ever has been any revelation.* As for a future life, every man must judge for himself between conflicting vague probabilities." (Emphasis added)

IV. The passages which here follow are extracts, somewhat abbreviated, from a part of the Autobiography, written in 1876, in which my father gives the history of his religious views:

"During these two years² I was led to think much about religion. Whilst on board the *Beagle* I was quite orthodox, and I remember being heartily laughed at by several of the officers (though themselves orthodox) for quoting the Bible as an unanswerable authority on some point of morality. I suppose it was the novelty of the argument that amused them. But I had gradually come by this time, i.e. 1836 to 1839, to see that the *Old Testament* was no more to be trusted than the sacred books of the *Hindoos*. The question then continually rose before my mind and would not be banished,—is it credible that if God were now to make a revelation to the *Hindoos*, he would permit it to be connected with the belief in Vishnu, Siva, &c, as Christianity is connected with the *Old Testament*? This appeared to me utterly incredible. (Emphasis added)

V. Dr. Aveling has published an account of a conversation with my father. I think that the readers of this pamphlet (*The Religious Views of Charles Darwin*, Free Thought Publishing Company, 1883) may be misled into seeing more resemblance than really existed between the positions of my father and Dr. Aveling; and I say this in spite of my conviction that Dr. Aveling gives quite fairly his impressions of my father's views. Dr. Aveling tried to show that the terms "Agnostic" and "Atheist" were practically equivalent—that an atheist is one who, without denying the existence of God, is without God, inasmuch as he is unconvinced of the existence of a Deity. My father's replies implied his preference for the unaggressive attitude of an Agnostic. Dr. Aveling seems (p. 5) to regard the absence of aggressiveness in my father's views as distinguishing them in an unessential manner from his own. But, in my judgment, it is precisely differences of this kind which distinguish him so completely from the class of thinkers to which Dr. Aveling belongs.

from *More Letters of Charles Darwin*, Vol. I, edited by Francis Darwin (his son) and A. C. Seward. London: John Murray, Publisher, 1903.

VI. To W. Horsfall. Down, Feb. 8th, 1882

In the succession of the older Formations the species and genera of trilobites do change, and then they all die out. To any one who believes that geologists know the dawn of life (i.e. formations contemporaneous with the first appearance of living creatures on the earth) no doubt the sudden appearance of perfect trilobites and other organisms in the oldest known life-bearing strata *would be fatal to evolution.* But I for one and many others, utterly reject any such belief. Already three or four piles of unconformable strata are known beneath the Cambrian; and these are generally in a crystalline condition, and may once have been charged with organic remains. (Emphasis added)

from *More Letters of Charles Darwin*, Vol. II

VII. To D. Mackintosh. Down, Feb. 28th, 1882

Though no evidence worth anything has as yet, in my opinion, been advanced in favour of a living being, being developed from inorganic matter, yet I cannot avoid believing the possibility of this will be proved some day in accordance with the law of continuity. I remember the time, above fifty years ago, when it was said that no substance found in a living plant or animal could be produced without the aid of vital forces. As far as external form is concerned, Eozoon shows how difficult it is to distinguish between organised and inorganised bodies. If it is ever found that life can originate on this world, the vital phenomena will come under some general law of nature. *Whether the existence of a conscious God can be proved from the existence of the so-called laws of nature (i.e. fixed sequence of events) is a perplexing subject, on*

which I have often thought, but cannot see my way clearly. If you have not read W. Graham's Creed of Science, it would, I think, interest you, and he supports the view which you are inclined to uphold. (Emphasis added)

Certainly the whole tone of these various letters, which cover the last years of Darwin's life, completely rule out any conversion and resultant Christian faith of the type which the tracts report. Nowhere do you pick up any kind of tone or feeling in them that would harmonize with the picture of Darwin presented in "The Last Days."

In 1876 Darwin wrote (extract IV) that in 1836-1839 he had come to see that "the Old Testament was no more to be trusted than the sacred books of the Hindus." He still held that opinion in 1876, and nothing in the 1882 letters indicates any change in position. On February 28th, 1882, less than two months before his death, he wrote,

Though no evidence worth anything has as yet, in my opinion, been advanced in favour of a living being being developed from inorganic matter, yet I cannot avoid believing the possibility of this will be proved some day in accordance with the law of continuity" (part of evolutionary theory).

This statement is utterly incompatible with the picture drawn by Lady Hope. Hence we assume that she (or whoever is responsible for the account) offers a completely false story, very beautiful and moving but still false, although presented as factual and proposed as evidence for creation.

I would have to regard this story as unfortunate from another viewpoint. Those I have encountered in connection with the distribution of these tracts have proposed that they be widely distributed to young people of high school age. The hope is that the students will then stun their high school teachers with this information during a discussion of evolution. As graduate scientists, such teachers would undoubtedly do the same library research reported here. They would find the same documentation. What damage then would be done in terms of confidence in that

Christian pastor, teacher, or parent who had so misled young people into such a ridiculous position?

A question comes to mind: What is the origin of this tale? Or who wrote it originally and what did that individual have in mind? A possible clue lies in a footnote found on page 12 in *The Evolution of Life*, Vol. I, of the Darwin Centennial work, *Evolution After Darwin*, edited by Sol Tax and published by the University of Chicago Press in 1960. The entire footnote follows:

Mrs. Darwin was very antipathetic to the idea that all human morality has 'grown up by evolution' (see *Emma Darwin*, by Mrs. Litchfield [Privately printed edition; 1904] II, 360) and was anxious to avoid any suspicion that Darwin regarded spiritual beliefs as no 'higher' than their animal origins. She persuaded Francis Darwin to cut out various passages on the subject from the MS. of the autobiography which his father had left for posthumous publication (see *Nora Barlow*, *passim*, where the excised passages have been restored).

This may suggest the beginning of the story; the "last hours" account may be anchored in the efforts of Mrs. Darwin indicated. However, it should be remembered that Mrs. Darwin was a Unitarian, which makes one hesitant to claim that she had a direct connection with the presentation of Darwin as a Christian and therefore a Trinitarian.

A creationist scientist must be as accurate and thoroughgoing in his work as an evolutionist scientist. Both must report facts as found; there must be no embellishments, no wishful thinking. Theorizing should be plainly and clearly identified as such. Those who defend the creation account of origins must examine and study supportive material as rigorously and painstakingly as "evolutionary" material is examined. The cause of creation is not served by spurious reporting, nor by the dissemination of unfounded accounts.

References

- ¹Darwin, Charles. *Origin of species*. Edition published by E. P. Dutton and Company, New York, 1974. Dr. Matthew wrote the new introduction.
- ²From October 1836 to January 1839.

NEW BOOK ANNOUNCEMENT

Remember Thy Creator by G. Richard Culp, D.O., was published by Baker Book House, early in 1975, in paperback at \$3.95. Dividing his book into three parts, the author discusses evidence for divine creation, general refutation of evolution, and technical refutation of evolution in 16 well worded chapters, accompanied by illustrations and explanatory charts.

In addition to his refutations of evolution, the author relates many personal experiences with evolutionist professors and classmates. Theistic evolution and creation-evolutionism are carefully distinguished and discussed separately.

When the author began college in 1937, he was an evolutionist and a non-Christian. When he graduated from a large state university, he was a creationist and a Christian. Dr. Culp considers evolution a powerful force that unsettles Christians and turns non-Christians away from redemption through Christ.