

BOOK REVIEW

Andrew Davison, *Astrobiology and Christian Doctrine: Exploring the Implications of Life in the Universe*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2023, xiv + 408pp. \$27.99

Polling consistently shows that religious people are more sceptical of the existence of extraterrestrial intelligent life (ETI) than their secular peers. I do not think it would be inaccurate to say this is the predominant view, at least among laypeople today. But what is the challenge, exactly? And what explains the scepticism about ETI among the laity?

Andrew Davison's *Astrobiology and Christian Doctrine: Exploring the Implications of Life in the Universe* does not answer these questions. In fact, it makes them even more pointed; the thorough exploration of how we might make sense of ETI through an orthodox Christian lens turns up many entertaining curiosities (as fitting the subject!) but no serious conflicts. The historical record reflects this as well. When the prospect of ETI first arose, the church's intellectual leaders were 'unphased', 'unthreatened' and 'unruffled'. Their typical reaction, Davison summarizes, was to acknowledge the possibility, tersely note that there is no special problem, then move on to some other topic (pp. 7–8). Davison's book proves them correct at length: Intelligent life elsewhere in the universe would pose no special problem to any Christian doctrine. Theological and scientific considerations may even lead us to expect there to be ETI. The fact that the Bible is silent on the question should not trouble us. As Davison nicely puts it, 'there is no more reason to expect mention of exobiology in the historic revelation to Jews and Christians than to find mention of the duck-billed platypus, which is found only in Australia' (p. 99).

Davison considers ETI in light of an impressive range of topics in Christian theology (with an equally impressive amount of depth): creation and the size of the universe, angels, revelation, religious epistemology and language, the *imago Dei*, sin, the fall, incarnation, atonement, eschatology and more. But the topic that earns most of his attention, naturally, is the incarnation. Davison argues that God the Son becoming incarnate just once as a human on earth 'could generally quite easily stretch to take in and affect species elsewhere' (p. 223); multiple incarnations where he separately assumes different creatures' natures would be 'fitting'. This category of 'fittingness' to describe the rationale behind God's actions (as opposed to necessity) is especially important, being a kind of artful blending of means and ends where God's glory is displayed equally in

both. I found this and the application to multiple incarnations to be the most insightful and animated part of Davison's study. He concludes 'Incarnation is the form of communication supremely fitting for a particular nature, and therefore multiple Incarnations, into different natures, would seem to be the supremely fitting way to communicate most fittingly to such a range of natures' (p. 315).

The book closes with a discussion of ETI and the nature and timing of the final eschaton. As to the former, I was surprised, given Davison's clear fondness for the wider world of literature and poetry relevant to the topic, to see no reference to Mark Twain's *Extract From Captain Stormfield's Visit to Heaven*, which satirizes the common Christian view of heaven as absurdly anthropocentric. Interestingly, Davison thinks the timing of the final eschaton is 'the most disruptive challenge that astrobiology poses to the articles of Christian belief, indeed perhaps the only challenge that might call for serious revision, rather than simply expansion, on the part of the theological tradition' (p. 352–3). Unfortunately, Davison does not clearly articulate what the challenge is exactly, nor does he offer his own response to it. The challenge seems to be that there is a certain arbitrariness and anthropocentricity in identifying Christ's return to earth as the moment the cosmos as a whole, with its many other species of intelligent creatures, is wrapped up. His response seems to be that we should not identify Christ's return to earth as the cosmic conclusion and instead warm to 'the prospect of a post-human story for the Earth, and for the universe more widely' (p. 359). Expanding our understanding of God's story is certainly part of the answer (more on this below), but also relevant to this challenge in particular is that the measure and experience of time is notoriously counterintuitive in a relativistic universe. With every planet, solar system and galaxy of differing masses hurling through space at different speeds, it is not difficult to imagine God orchestrating fitting ends to them all that coincide in some absolute reference frame (God's perspective?).

This brings us to a final comment. All throughout the book Davison refers to the Christian 'story' and 'narrative' (e.g. 50, 210, 265–6, 298, 311–2, 346–8, 357, 359–60, 365) and even suggests, as just noted, the need to expand that story to accommodate ETI if necessary. This, in my estimation, is the fundamental challenge ETI poses to Christianity. Christianity is indeed a story – God's story – with a beginning, narrative structure and key characters and end. The reality of ETI would, in the minds of many, constitute a jarring plot twist (or worse, plot hole!) in the Christian story as we have come to understand it. It is not enough to show, as Davison so effectively does in this wonderful book, that the reality of ETI would not threaten the logical or metaphysical coherence of any particular Christian doctrine. Without a way of seeing how ETI fits into the Christian story as a whole that is natural and organic (fitting!), a kind of tension between the two remains. And apart from something like a New Testament that authoritatively resolves that tension for us in the real world, we will have to settle

for how good authors like C. S. Lewis and Orson Scott Card resolve the tension for us in their fantasy worlds.

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