

The Quran and its Message

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Salamun Alaikum (Peace be upon you)

THEORY OF EVOLUTION AND THE QURAN

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The purpose of this article is not to provide an in-depth analysis of the theory of evolution or its counter arguments. This is an area of research and debate which is well exhausted, documented and readers will find a plethora of information on this from various sources.

The purpose of the article is two-fold:

- To provide a brief historical context of the theory of evolution
- To briefly consider whether there is any support in the Quran for such a theory

Firstly, it should be fully appreciated that the theory of evolution has nothing to say about the existence of God or of the origins of life. Evolution is simply understood to be a **process** by which different kinds of organisms are thought to have developed and diversified through the passage of time from earlier forms to more complex forms.

Indeed, there are atheists that agree with the theory of evolution as there are theists that also accept this process as a reality. Within the scientific community, the process of evolution is overwhelmingly accepted as fact.

A more realistic dividing line between the 'atheist' and 'theist' position on evolution would be the mechanism by which the process occurs. The question at core would be whether evolution was a process that had been initiated and guided by God or not.

For the 'theist' it is perfectly acceptable to assert and argue that God has used the process of evolution for His creation. There is no direct scientific evidence nor can there arguably ever be any such evidence to deny this.

Furthermore, it should be appreciated that the 'theist' position will be influenced by the particular scripture consulted and the interpretation of its particular text.

A BRIEF HISTORICAL CONTEXT OF THE THEORY OF EVOLUTION

“One should then look at the world of creation. It started out from the minerals and progressed, in an ingenious, gradual manner, to plants and animals. The last stage (269) of minerals is connected with the first stage of plants, such as herbs and seedless plants. The last stage of plants, such as palms and vines, is connected with the first stage of animals, such as snails and shellfish which have only the power of touch. The word "connection" with regard to these created things means that the last stage of each group is fully prepared to become the first stage of the next group.

The animal world then widens, its species become numerous, and, in a gradual process of creation, it finally leads to man, who is able to think and to reflect. The higher stage of man is reached from the world of the monkeys, in which both sagacity and perception are found, but which has not reached the stage of actual reflection and thinking. At this point we come to the first stage of man after (the world of monkeys). This is as far as our (physical) observation extends” [1]

One may be forgiven to think that the above paragraph is taken from the works of Charles Robert Darwin (d.1882) and his 1859 book, ‘On the Origin of Species’. What may come as a surprise to many readers is that this paragraph is an excerpt from the works of a well known Muslim historian and philosopher called **Ibn Khaldun** who was born in 1332 CE and died in 1406 CE nearly 500 years before Charles Darwin.

In fact, the concept of evolution has been discussed by Muslim philosophers since the earliest periods of Islam and early ideas on evolution were even taught in Islamic schools.

John William Draper (1811-1882CE), the 19th century scientist, philosopher, chemist, historian, photographer, physician and a contemporary to Charles Darwin (1809-1882 CE) was well acquainted with Muslim thought on the theory of evolution.

“Theological authorities were therefore constrained to look with disfavour on any attempt to carry back the origin of the earth, to an epoch indefinitely remote, **and on the Mohammedan theory of the evolution** of man from lower forms, or his gradual development to his present condition in the long lapse of time” [2]

A deeper study of Islamic philosophy from the early Islamic Golden period (8th to 15th century CE) reveals evidence of classical discussions with regards theistic evolution (Evolution guided by God).

“The first thing that needs to be noted is that the idea of evolution is not an alien adversary vis-à-vis Islam and Muslims, but that it actually belongs to the forgotten legacy of our own ancestors. It was Allama Iqbal (1877- 1938) who first re-claimed this lost heritage by pointing out that it was actually Muslim scientists and scholars who had presented, for the first time in modern era, the idea of organic evolution, and they did so centuries before Lamarck or Darwin. Iqbal recalled that it was Al Jahiz (776-869 CE), the author of Kitab al-Haiwanat who first put forward the idea of evolution in the animal kingdom, and Ibn Maskawaih (942-1032 CE), the author of Fauz al-Asghar, who wrote about the evolution of man from inanimate

matter to plants and then to the animals, and mentioned the close relationship between man and ape. In addition, we find the idea of evolution expressed in various forms by Al-Mas'udi, Al-Bairuni, Jalaluddin Rumi, and Ibn Khaldun" [3]

Muslim thought has always had proponents who have considered the process of evolution as a reality guided by God. This is also true of traditional Muslim scholars from the modern era as demonstrated by the short videos below. (See in particular time 5:35 onwards in the first video). Please also note that this is not necessarily synonymous with 'Darwinian' evolution (See second video)

Dr Israr Ahmad (d.2010)

http://www.youtube.com/watch?feature=player_embedded&v=Kjw7lyltnQ

http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ewx2rC-8ZpE&feature=player_embedded

Furthermore, the ideas of evolution were not new to the classical Muslim theologians either, who were beaten to it earlier by the Greek philosophers.

"The idea of gradual and orderly change or evolution can be traced to the beginning of Greek philosophy, when Heraclitus said that everything moves and everything changes. Aristotle not only taught the idea of evolution, but also provided a theory of its causes" [4]

The Zoological natural history work completed by Aristotle that posited such ideas was called the 'History of Animals' (Latin: Historia Animalium)

"In the 11th century, al-Khatib al-Baghdadi accused al-Jahiz of having plagiarized parts of his work from the Kitāb al-Hayawān of Aristotle, (15) but modern scholars have noted that there was only a limited Aristotelian influence in al-Jahiz's work, and that al-Baghdadi may have been unacquainted with Aristotle's work on the subject. (16) In particular, there is no Aristotelian precedent for al-Jahiz's ideas on topics such as natural selection, environmental determinism and food chains" [5]

Therefore the process of evolution is not and should not be considered synonymous with Darwinism. It is not Darwin's theory or are his explanations widely accepted today in modern science. Fossil evidence has advanced a better understanding of the process of evolution. For example, in 1972, Stephen Gould and Niles Eldredge, two palaeontologists advanced the theory of punctuated equilibrium which addressed the anomaly of the fossil record which did not show a continuous process and could not be addressed by Darwin's theory. Rather, species tended to exhibit changes followed by long periods of stasis.

Darwin was neither the first nor the last to have a say on evolution.

IS THERE ANY QURANIC SUPPORT FOR EVOLUTION?

Many wrongly assume that evolution requires one to abandon belief in a supernatural Deity. This is certainly not the case and such an assumption could not be further from the truth. Furthermore, the mere mention of 'evolution' conjures up thoughts of man evolving from monkeys. Evolution does not argue that man has evolved from monkeys. Rather, it argues that both humans and monkeys (primates) share a 'common ancestor'. This is a rather different proposition than asserting that man has evolved from monkeys.

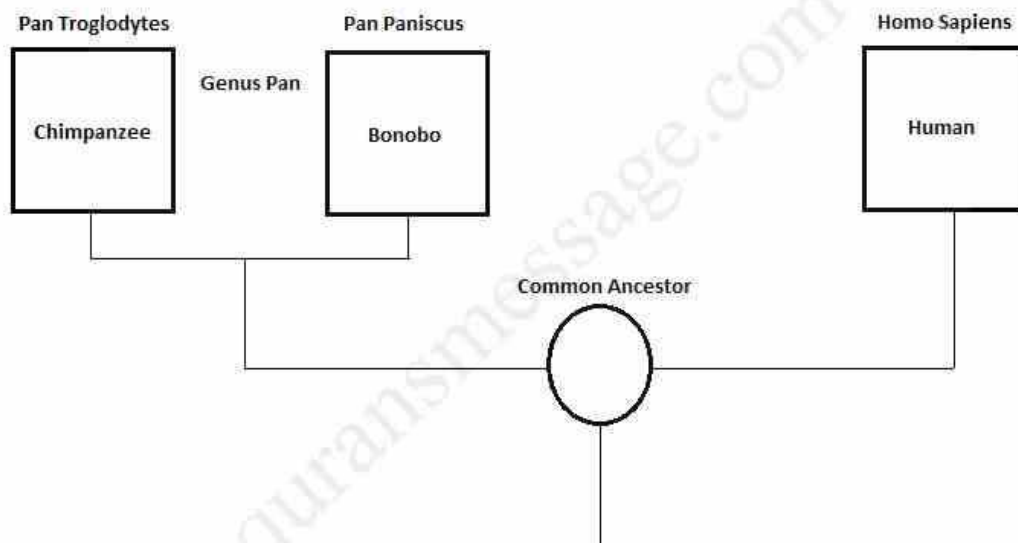


Illustration - Joseph Islam

The Quran clearly and repeatedly states that the Heavens and the Earth took 6 'ayyamin' (periods, epochs) to form (7:54; 10:3; 11:7; 25:59; 32:4; 50:38; 57:4).

Gods' command (Be, and it is - Arabic: kun fayakun) should not necessarily be seen as instantaneous or mutually exclusive from the concept of a periodic evolutionary cycle. It is merely a command that can be instituted as a precursor to a complete evolutionary process which may take aeons to complete. This is clear from the formation of the Heavens and the Earth.

002:117

"(The) Originator of the heavens and the Earth, and when He decrees an affair, He only says to it, Be, and it is (Arabic: Kun Fayakun)"

Furthermore, God is not bound by human concepts of time. A 'yau'm' or period can represent any number of years or earthly time.

022.047

"And they ask you to hasten on the punishment, and God will by no means fail in His promise, and surely a day with your Lord is as a thousand years of what you number" (See also 32:5)

070:004

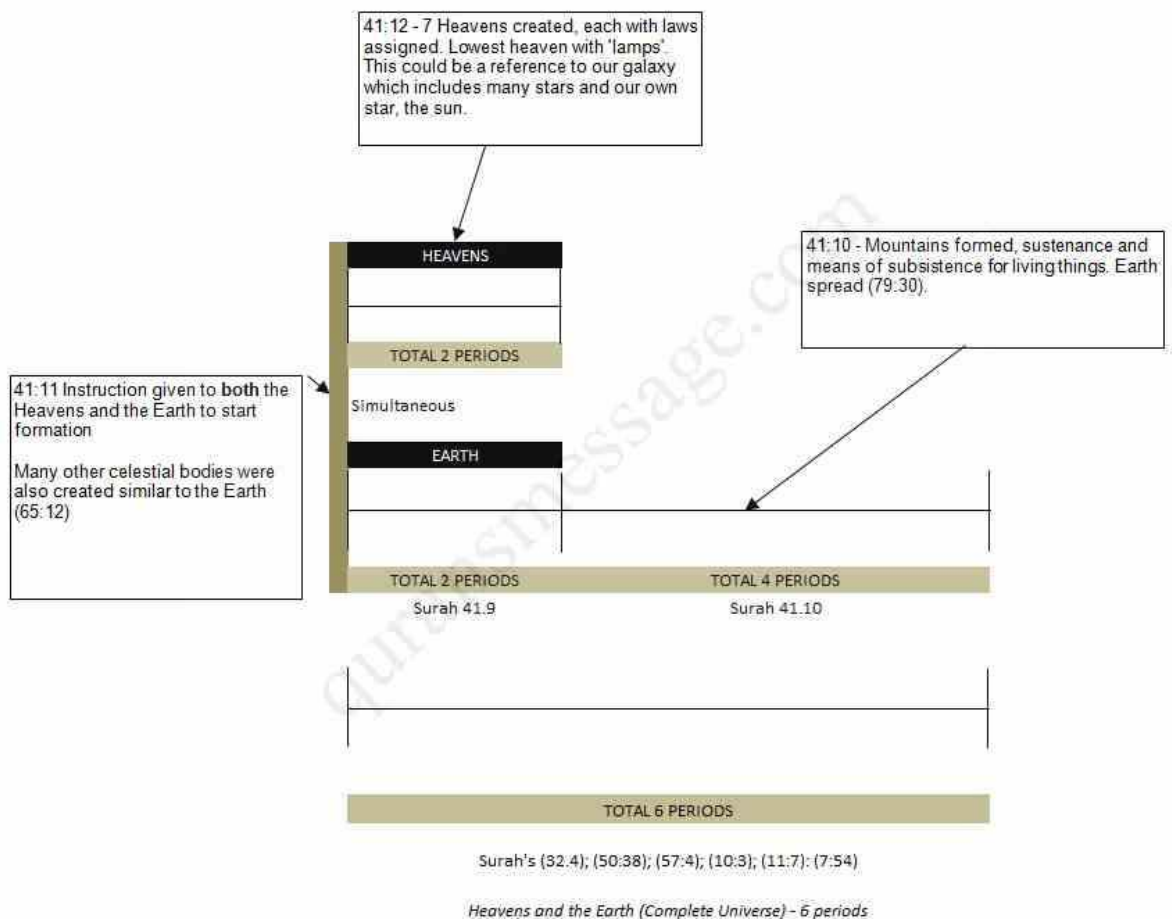
"To Him ascend the angels and the Spirit in a day the measure of which is fifty thousand years"
IT TOOK FOUR PERIODS TO CREATE EVERYTHING WITHIN THE EARTH

It is to be appreciated that out of a total of 6 periods (which could be any number of large epochs), it took four of them to create the Earth's contents. This clearly does not indicate an instantaneous creation.

041:010

"And He placed therein (Earth), mountains standing firm, high above it, and bestowed blessings therein (on the Earth), and measured therein its sustenance in four periods (Arabic: ayyamin), in accordance with (the needs of) those who seek (Sustenance)"

Please note in the above verse the mention of sustenance for all God's creatures of all kinds and complexities. It is important to remember that one creature in the food web is often a means of sustenance for another within the animal kingdom. This whole process to create them took 4 periods out of the total of the 6 periods to create the universe.



The food on one's table for which one thanks the Lord took a whole process to reach there. From the animal, to its growth, from its meat to the butcher, from the cook to one's plate. It did not arrive there suddenly. Everywhere around us humans are evolving from babies to toddlers, from children to teenagers, from young adults to very old age. Evolution surrounds us all the time.

THE DIFFERENCE BETWEEN 'BASHAR' AND 'INSAAN'

It is quite useful for the purposes of this article to understand the differences between the two terms which are usually understood to be synonymous.

Bashar

This word is formed from the root 'Ba-Shiin-Ra' and refers to the more physical, physiological attributes of a human being. It refers to the skin, complexion, beauty, elegance of form, physical intimate relationships, contact of the skin etc. It also takes meanings such as rejoicing and good tidings.

Insaan

This word is formed from the root word 'Ins' (Alif-Nun-Siin) and points to such attributes as faculties, perception and knowledge. It means to be companionable, or to show an inclination to have company or make conversation. It means sociable, conversable, amicable and cheerful.

For example, we note in 28:29, where Prophet Moses ^(pbuh) 'perceived' (Arabic: anasa) a fire. The Arabic word 'anasa' is formed from the same root 'Ins'. In another verse (4:6), orphans are told to be assessed for sound judgment and if one perceives (Arabic: 'anastum') them to be so, then their wealth is to be passed to them. Again, the same root is used.

There is clearly a difference between a 'bashar' and 'insaan' and the terms refer to different aspects of a human being. This point is useful to appreciate when studying how the Quran uses the word in particular contexts.

A TIME LAPSE IN THE CREATION OF MAN

015.026

"We created humankind from sounding clay (Arabic: salsalin) from black mud (Arabic: ham-in) altered (Arabic: masnun)"

Note the Arabic word used for altered as 'Masnun'.

Masnun is formed from the same root word (Siin-Nun-Nun) which forms other words such as 'sunnah'.

The root word means to follow a path, a line of conduct or mode of life, to establish the law, to form, to mould into shape, to polish. Therefore, a gradual altering seems to have been implied by the use of the word 'masnun'

We further read and note a possible time lapse in the next two verses between the fashioning of the mortal and the breathing of God's spirit.

015:028-29

"And when your Lord said to the angels: Surely I am going to create a mortal (Arabic: basharan) of the essence of black mud fashioned in shape. So when I have made him complete (fashioned him) and breathed into him of My spirit, fall down prostrating to him"

It is quite possible from the above verses that an 'insaan' is only complete once the spirit of God is blown into him. This is what would separate Adam (as a man and 'insaan') from his state as a 'bashar' or any physiological state that resembles a 'bashar'.

MAN CREATED IN DIVERSE STAGES

071.014

"And indeed, He created you in diverse stages"

It is possible to argue that this is a reference to man's short period in the mother's womb and its diverse stages during the gestation period and is not a reference to the prolonged evolutionary development of man.

This view is somewhat difficult to sustain if we note the very next verse which within context seems to be referring to a long evolutionary process where an analogy of the heavens is presented.

071.015

"Do you not see how God has created the seven heavens one above another (in layers)"?

One cannot simply overlook the comparison made with the heavens which elsewhere is given as 6 long stages (periods / aeons / epochs)

Then we read the following only a couple of verses later.

071.017

"And God has produced you from the earth growing (gradually) (Arabic: Anbatakum)"

The Arabic word 'anbatakum' is formed from the root word nun-ba-ta which means to grow, germinate, to sprout like a plant or to grow up like a child.

026:007

"Do they not see the earth, how many of every noble kind We have caused to grow in it (Arabic: Anbatna)"?

One cannot simply overlook the analogy that the Quran puts forth of the growth of a human being from the earth as that of a plant that also grows from the earth by using similar terms.

This is clearly a concept that even the people of Thamud were familiar with when their messenger Saleh ^(pbuh) spoke to them.

011:061

"To the Thamud People (We sent) Saleh, one of their own brethren. He said: "O my people! Worship God: you have no other god but Him. It is He Who has produced you from the earth and settled you

therein: then ask forgiveness of Him, and turn to Him (in repentance): for my Lord is (always) near, ready to answer"

Elsewhere, the Quran speaks of man being created like a potter creates earthen vessels.

055:014

"He created man from sounding clay like unto pottery"

This clearly hints at a gradual creation which was slowly perfected over a period of time. We note another verse which supports this.

064:003

"He created the heavens and the earth with truth, and He formed you, then made goodly your forms (shapes), and to Him is the ultimate resort"

021:030

"Do not those who disbelieve see that the heavens and the earth were closed up, but We have opened them; and We have made of water everything living, will they not then believe?"

WAS ADAM NOT CREATED IN JANNAH?

There is no direct support for this in the Quran. From the analysis briefly discussed in the article below, it appears that Adam's creation and initial abode was on Earth.

[Please see related article below]

WHAT ABOUT ADAM'S SPECIAL CREATION?

It is to be appreciated that 'man' became a special creation, not due to his physiology alone, but when God breathed His spirit into him and gave him volition, understanding, sense of mercy, justice, power of specialised communication and vicegerancy on the Earth. This has no bearing on what process God possibly used to create him be it via a process of evolution or otherwise.

FINAL THOUGHTS

As can be noted from the above article, one does indeed find support for an evolutionary process which God may have utilised to create mankind.

Whatever one's stance on this, it is important to note that this does not in any way undermine the existence of God.

Perhaps, the difficulty of many theists to accept evolution as a viable process which God utilised for His creation of man is the special status that is assigned to humans. However, it is also useful to

remember that the Quran consistently reminds man of his humble beginnings, whether it is from despised fluid (32:8) or the original creation from sounding clay (15:26).

Related Article:

- (1) [Adam \(pbuh\) and Jannah - An Earthly Abode or Paradise?](#)

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Bold black and highlights are my own insertions. They have no bearing on the original text other than they emphasise relevance to the topic at hand. These are merely illustrations and have solely been utilised for educational and explanatory purposes.

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[5] Note (15) PETERS, F. E., *Aristotle and the Arabs: The Aristotelian Tradition in Islam*, New York University Press, NY, 1968, Note (16) J. N. Mattock (1971). "Aristotle and the Arabs: The Aristotelian Tradition in Islam by F. E. Peters",

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