
Islam and Evolution: The Curious Case of David Solomon Jalajel

by Shoaib Malik

The field of Islam and Evolution has been steadily developing over the past few decades, and we are beginning to see a healthy spectrum of opinions on the matter. I wrote a brief review of the spectrum in the last Muslim 500 2020 edition,¹ but this isn't the only review of the topic that is available in the literature.² So I will not be reviewing that spectrum again. Instead I will be focusing on a particular proposal by David Solomon Jalajel. He wrote two works relevant to Islam and Evolution. One was a book that he published in 2009 by the name of *Islam and Biological Evolution: Exploring Classical Sources and Methodologies*.³ The second was an article he published with the *Yaqeen Institute* in 2018 with the title *Tawaqquf and Acceptance of Human Evolution*.⁴ The focus on Jalajel is due to two reasons. First, he brings forward a very unique proposal which marks him out in the vast array of opinions that Muslim thinkers have come up

with. Second, unfortunately, his proposal has been misunderstood and misrepresented by myself. In this article I seek to rectify and clarify his proposal.

The structure of this article is as follows. First, I shall briefly remind us what the general principles of evolution are and zoom in on the main contentions which irk Muslims. Second, I shall elucidate Jalajel's contribution as clearly as possible and highlight its novelty. Third, I shall clearly point out where I misunderstood Jalajel and clearly retract my earlier characterisation of his proposal.

WHAT IS EVOLUTION?

Paradoxically, evolution is a relatively simple idea but one that is sometimes difficult to explain because it requires a lot of careful elaboration and a lot to corroborate it. Suffice to say that I shall not be repeating

1 Shoaib Ahmed Malik. 2020. "Evolution and Islam - A Brief Review." In *The Muslim 500: The World's 500 Most Influential Muslims, 2020*, edited by Abdallah Schleifer, 207–12. Amman, Jordan: The Royal Islamic Strategic Studies Centre. You can find it online on the following link: https://www.academia.edu/40537232/Evolution_and_Islam_A_Brief_Review

2 Nidhal Guessoum. 2016. Islamic Theological Views on Darwinian Evolution. *Oxford Research Encyclopedia of Religion*. Accessed on the 1st of January 2020. <https://oxfordre.com/religion/view/10.1093/>

3 David Solomon Jalajel. 2009. *Islam and Biological Evolution: Exploring Classical Sources and Methodologies*. Western Cape, South Africa: University of the Western Cape.

4 David Solomon Jalajel. 2018. "Tawaqquf and Acceptance of Human Evolution." *Yaqeen Institute*. Accessed on the 8th of August 2020. <https://yaqeeninstitute.org/dr-david-solomon-jalajel/tawaqquf-and-acceptance-of-human-evolution/>

university textbook material here. Instead I will be offering a very brief sketch of what evolution is. The idea rests on three very simple proposals:⁵

1. Deep time
2. Common descent
3. Natural selection and random mutation

Let us review each in order.

Deep time is simply the idea that the age of the universe should be thought of in terms of millions or billions of years. By contrast, some Jewish and Christian theologians in history conceived the age of the Earth in terms of thousands of years. However, advances in geology forced a complete revision of the matter. The current understanding is that the universe is around 14.5 billion years old with the Earth being around 4.5 billion years old.

Common descent is pretty much an extension of our family tree to the entire biological kingdom. All of us come from a mother and a father who in turn have their own mother and father and so on. When we identify connections in the family we see them through a family tree. Common ancestry is the notion that we have a family tree of all the biological entities of the world, including humans. So humans came from a previous species, who in turn came from a previous species all the way back to the earliest life form(s). So humans are connected to the rest of the biological world.

Natural selection and random mutation are the engines of evolution. To explain this, we need to understand genes. All biological entities have genes. These are the basic building blocks that govern our physical manifestations. There are genes responsible for your eyes, your hair colour, your height, your aptitudes, etc. They are the blueprints of who we are. But notice that when parents have kids they sometimes look similar, sometimes very different, and sometimes in between. It varies from one kid to another. This is because when parents have kids, the genes of each one mix to produce the genes of the offspring, and this results in various combinations. With this in mind we can now proceed with explaining natural selection and random selection. Let's start with the latter. Random mutation is the idea that certain mutations occur in the genes which leads to changes in the physical manifestation of the entity. A crude example would be a gene mutation that changes your

eye colour. Now imagine at the very beginning of life on earth (billions of years ago). Those entities, whatever they were, started to reproduce and over time had offspring. However, over a large timespan we get so much *accumulative variation* that they end up becoming different. They might even change so radically that they become different species. So random mutation allows variation to arise, which results in creating different species. Natural selection is simply the idea that biological entities with traits better suited to their environment will have more offspring and pass on those traits. Other disadvantageous traits will not be passed on as much and may ultimately disappear altogether. The combination of natural selection and random mutation is what drives evolution. While much more can be said – and I apologise to the reader if this is too succinct – space prevents me from going further than this.

Generally, Muslims have three issues with evolution. First, Muslims have an issue with human evolution due to the story of Adam and Eve in the Qur'an. After all, the Qur'an and hadith give a clear impression that Adam was a miraculous creation. Second, Muslims have an issue with the idea of chance. Does God play dice? Third, evolution is automatically equated to atheism. I have co-authored a paper that thoroughly deals with the second and third concerns so I will not repeat that here.⁶ The real concern is the first one, and this will be the primary worry when reviewing Jalajel's proposal.

JALAJEL'S CONCEPT OF *TAWAQQUF*

To appreciate the proposal which Jalajel advances, it will help us to contextualise it against a background of pre-existing opinions. Some Muslims clearly reject evolution outright, i.e. the whole theory, because they see it as being at fundamental odds with Islam. This could be due to their seeing the science as flimsy or because of religious reasons. So they don't accept an iota of what evolution has to say. These are *creationists*. Then there's the other side of the spectrum with people who wholeheartedly accept evolution and believe the scriptures should be reinterpreted to accommodate an evolutionary reading. These are *committed evolutionists*. Then we have some people in between who provide some nuance. Sheikh Nuh

⁵ There are many books one can find on the topic of evolution. For the uninitiated reader I recommend Brian Charlesworth and Deborah Charlesworth. 2003. *Evolution: A Very Short Introduction*. Oxford: Oxford University Press. For a richer account see Thomas Fowler and Daniel Kuebler. 2007. *The Evolution Controversy: A Survey of Competing Theories*. Michigan: Baker Academic.

⁶ Shoab Ahmed Malik and Elvira Kulieva. 2020. "Does Belief in Evolution Entail *Kufr* (Disbelief)? Evaluating the Concerns of a Muslim Theologian." *Zygon*. <https://doi.org/10.1111/zygo.12620>.

Ha Mim Keller and Sheikh Yasir Qadhi make a useful distinction between non-human evolution and human evolution, which entails that everything is a product of evolution except for humans.⁷ So in other words they believe that humans are an exception to the process of evolution. Conveniently, let's call them *human exceptionalists*. Jalajel fits in none of these categories, but to see why, we need to unpack his ideas, which we shall now do.

Jalajel makes it very clear that he is advancing a proposal extrapolated from the methodology of the Sunni theological schools of Islam. These include Ash'arism, Maturidism, and Atharism. If these schools are taken as the prism through which the discussion is viewed, Jalajel argues we can arrive at an opinion that doesn't warrant such a harsh and frankly unnecessary rejection of evolution. But what about Adam? Jalajel determines that the Sunni hermeneutical methods he is examining cannot provide a reading of scripture with Adam having parents. In other words, Adam is a miraculous creation and was born without any parental agency. This is an uncontroversial position in the Sunni schools because such Muslims believe that miracles are possible. God can do whatever He pleases. But if Adam is born without a father and without a mother, then how can this be reconciled with evolution? It is at this juncture that Jalajel utilises the principle of *tawaqquf*, which is his novel contribution.

The term *tawaqquf* needs unpacking. Generally, this means suspension of belief. So, for example, when you are stuck on a question with multiple answers, and all of them seem plausible such that you don't decide to answer there and then, then you are doing *tawaqquf*. Now when it comes to Islamic scripture it should be made clear that the term *tawaqquf* has two usages: one in the field of Islamic Law and the other in the field of theology. The first usage is to refrain from making a judgement due to being unable



Adam and Eve being expelled from Paradise, from the Persian book, Falnama (Book of Omens)

to resolve conflicting evidence. It is a form of vacillating. It is temporary, while waiting for evidence or an argument that will tip the scales in favour of one possibility or another.⁸ An example of this is when we have two conflicting hadiths. A particular hadith scholar may not know how to do it so he reserves judgement. But this doesn't eliminate the possibility of another scholar coming along and being able to reconcile the two. So in this type of *tawaqquf* a solution is *determinable*. This should be contrasted with theological *tawaqquf*, which is an obligatory, permanent epistemological stance of declaring a matter unknowable, e.g. when the scriptures are totally silent about something.⁹ For instance, consider the case of dinosaurs. Islamic scripture makes no claim either for or against dinosaurs. So one cannot argue a case for or against dinosaurs *on behalf of scripture* since it is silent on this matter. Thus to argue for or against di-

⁷ Ibid, 6. Also see footnote 26.

⁸ Omar Farahat. 2019. *The Foundation of Norms in Islamic Jurisprudence and Theology*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 177.

⁹ Badr Ghamdi. 2016. *al-Tawaqquf fil- 'Aqidah*. London: Takween, 32.

nosaurus *through or by scripture* is erroneous and *haram* because you are claiming something on behalf of God, which He Himself hasn't said. To make the implications of this matter clearer, it is *haram* to say Islam denies dinosaurs but it is also *haram* to state that belief in dinosaurs is mandatory in Islam. Both are unwarranted scripturally. I have been using dinosaurs as an example in this instance but one can think of several variations, e.g. quantum mechanics, the colour of angels' wings, the periodic table, teleportation etc. In contrast to the first type of *tawaaquf*, this second kind is *indeterminable*.

So the obvious question at this stage is: now what? If Islamic scripture neither negates nor affirms dinosaurs, how do we as Muslims deal with them? According to this second kind of *tawaaquf*, since there is no defining answer, as we have nothing to go by, whether you accept dinosaurs, don't accept dinosaurs, or suspend making any judgement on the matter, makes no difference whatsoever. All are valid *possibilities* since they are all *compatible* with Islamic scripture! The same thing goes with the periodic table and other things not mentioned in the Qur'an and hadiths. The take-home message with the second kind of *tawaaquf* is that you cannot affirm nor negate some things using scripture because scripture itself isn't saying anything. If so, all options are *possible* to take up since all are *compatible* with Islamic scripture.

With these ideas in place, we can now understand how Jalajel advances his novel proposal. Generally, Muslims assume that Adam is the first human being. So the origin of humanity is generally thought to have started with Adam. Sheikh Keller and Sheikh Qadhi are examples of proponents of this opinion. They are human exceptionalists precisely because they believe Adam was the first human being and was born miraculously, and therefore humans can never be a product of evolution, i.e. human exceptionalism. Jalajel uniquely divorces the connection between the *creation of Adam* with the *start of humanity*. In this narrative, when Adam descended to Earth from heaven (as opined by the majority of scholars), the Qur'an doesn't affirm nor negate the idea of there being already existing humans on earth. In other words, the Qur'an is silent on there being humans on earth prior to Adam's descent. If this is the case, we have to adopt theological *tawaaquf* on this issue. This en-

tails that there is equally the possibility of there being humans prior to Adam's descent and there not being humans prior to Adam's descent. *Both are valid possibilities* since Islamic scripture is silent on the matter. If we go by this argument, then there is a plausible scenario of Adam descending to Earth while there are pre-existing humans on Earth who were created through the process of evolution! Adam and his family *could or couldn't have* (again, *tawaaquf*) mingled with these other humans, leading to established lineages right up to our time, with the former possibility allowing for all people thereafter to share in common descent with all life on Earth as well as a lineage going back to Adam. The point here is that Adam is a miracle beyond doubt because of scripture. *But scripture doesn't deny the possibility of co-existing humans at the moment of Adam's descent who could be a product of evolution.* So it would be incorrect to call Jalajel's account human exceptionalism, but it would also be incorrect to describe this position as evolutionism in the sense of rejecting the possibility of any miraculous occurrences altogether. I see his position as providing a new category in the spectrum, which I have termed *Adamic exceptionalism*.¹⁰ Jalajel, in an online interview¹¹ on my YouTube/FB series *Academic Access*¹², rejects this label, arguing that since "Adam" is not a point of scientific enquiry, but one of faith, he is not included in the theory of evolution, so he cannot be excepted from it. He says the term would only make sense if Adam had explanatory relevance to human origins or negated the possibility of common descent, which, due to *tawaaquf*, belief in Adam does not entail.

To make sure Jalajel's conclusions are understood, the following questions should help summarise it more clearly:

1. Does Jalajel's thesis reject Adam's miraculous creation?

No. He makes it very clear that this cannot be scripturally compromised.

2. Does Jalajel's thesis reject Adam as the first human?

It neither rejects nor affirms this. Islamic scripture makes it unclear whether he was the first human being. So it is possible that he was but it is also possible that he wasn't. We have to adopt theological *tawaaquf*.

10 Malik and Kulieva, "Does Belief in Human Evolution Entail *Kufr* (Disbelief)?" 16.

11 FEIISP. 2020. *Tawaaquf and Human Evolution with Dr. David Solomon Jalajel*. Available at: <https://youtu.be/9XpIz2T6Ql0> Accessed on the 8th of August 2020.

12 Academic Access is a live, YouTube show that is run by my institution, FEIISP. We host academics from all walks of life on various topics. To see our YouTube page you can go on the following link: <https://www.youtube.com/channel/UCZMAEq1au9Y8sfPyiMZv8nQY> You can also find us on Facebook: <https://www.facebook.com/FEIISP>

3. **Does Jalajel's thesis reject evolution, specifically common ancestry?**

No.

4. **Does Jalajel's thesis include Adam in the evolutionary process?**

No. But science is blind to miracles. So science isn't in the business of denying Adam's existence to begin with.

MY MISREADING

Having presented Jalajel's proposal I now wish to retract my statements in my earlier publications in which I grossly mischaracterise Jalajel's proposal. On two accounts I have called Jalajel a creationist (in table formulations) because I assumed that he rejected human evolution. I have said this in my previous

chapter in Muslim 500 2020 edition¹³ and my monograph with *Kalam Research and Media* on Islam and Atheism.¹⁴ As a point of interest to the reader, there are others who have also understood Jalajel's proposal in a similar manner.¹⁵ I want to make it explicitly clear that my attribution of creationism to Jalajel's proposal in both of these works was wrong.¹⁶ As part of academic integrity one must concede when one is mistaken which is why I happily retract my earlier statements. Having carefully re-read Jalajel's book, and having interviewed him on my show (*Academic Access*), I now believe that Jalajel has by far one of the most innovative proposals that safeguards both the Islamic narrative and respect for the natural sciences. It is right up there with the proposal developed by Sheikh Yasir Qadhi and Dr. Nazir Khan.¹⁷

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13 Malik. "Evolution and Islam - A Brief Review," 210.

14 Shoaib Ahmed Malik. *Islam and Atheism: A Contemporary Discourse*. Abu Dhabi: Kalam Research and Media. You can find it online on the following link: https://www.academia.edu/38565039/Atheism_and_Islam_A_Contemporary_Discourse

15 Nidhal Guessoum. 2011. "Islam and Biological Evolution: Exploring Classical Sources and Methodologies By David Solomon Jalajel." *Journal of Islamic Studies*, 22(3): 476–479; Anwer Suleman Mall. 2011. "Islam and Biological Evolution: Exploring Classical Sources and Methodologies, David Solomon Jalajel: Book Review." *Journal for Islamic Studies*, 30(1): 109-112; Guessoum. 2016. *Islamic Theological Views on Darwinian Evolution*, 7.

16 In my most recent publication I rectified my representation of Jalajel. See Malik and Kulieva, "Does Belief In Human Evolution Entail *Kufr* (Disbelief)?" 16.

17 Yasir Qadhi and Nazir Khan. 2018. "Human Origins: Theological Conclusions and Empirical Limitations." *Yaqeen Institute*. Accessed on 8th of August 2020. <https://yaqeeninstitute.org/nazir-khan/human-origins-theological-conclusions-and-empirical-limitations/>