

István Czachesz
University of Tromsø
istvan.czachesz@uit.no

The New Testament as a model Reading the Bible with Richard Dawkins

Published in P. von Gemünden, A. Merz, and H. Schwier (eds), *Resonanzen: Gerd Theißen zum 80. Geburtstag*, Gütersloh: Gütersloher Verlagshaus, 117-121.

The New Testament is a cultural canon that fundamentally shaped the development of Christian Europe and the entire Christian world. The Bible can be seen as a repository of ideas and behavioral rules that have been read and interpreted by many generations of (cultural) Christians. The ideas and behavioral rules that became part of the Bible, as well as their specific combinations and intertextual relationships, went through a long process of cultural selection and can be studied from the point of view of cultural evolution.

In this article, I will draw on the ideas of evolutionary theorist Richard Dawkins to outline a reading strategy of the New Testament as a model of the environments in which it evolved. As will become clear, Dawkins' recent suggestions about evolution offer, perhaps unexpectedly, some intriguing connections with the concept of resonance phenomena in human thought and behavior.

Natural selection: genes and memes

The history of life on earth as we know it depends on the passing on of information about the design of an organism to its offspring in the form of genes. The particular configuration of genes stored in the cells of any living organism resulted (mainly) from the process of natural selection, which we can summarize in a nutshell. The genes of the offspring are slightly different from the genes of the parent due to random mutations, with the additional effect of mixing both parents' genes in sexual reproduction. If a certain combination of genes results in traits and behaviors that help the organism leave more offspring (that in turn leave viable

offspring), the respective gene or genes will occur in higher frequency in subsequent generations.

Humans are a unique species in the history of life in that they pass on to their offspring not only genetic information but also a tremendous amount of cultural information, particularly in the form of symbolic communication. Cultural variation, as well, can lead to differences in the survival and reproduction of individuals and populations. The effects are especially clear on the level of the group. For example, better hunting technology will make a hunter-gatherer group healthier and more resilient. Other groups might perish under changing circumstances, might join the more successful groups, or adopt the successful technologies.

According to Richard Dawkins (1976; 1982), the equivalent of the gene in cultural evolution is the *meme*. In the fully elaborated version of his theory, memes are stored in the brain as memories and are blueprints for behavior (meme products). Note that such a blueprint does not need to be available for conscious reflection (that is, one does not have to be aware of it) for it to shape behavior. Building on Dawkins’ concept of the meme as a chunk of memory, we can think of memories represented in external forms as memes, too. For example, I can write down “I want to stop eating meat” on a piece of paper, find the paper a year later, and change my behavior according to my former decision. As I have argued elsewhere (Czachesz 2017; 2021), the Bible is a collection of ideas and behavioral rules that can be understood as memes. The memes of the Bible shape human behavior through interpretation, with systems of interpretation developing on the analogy of epigenetic mechanisms in genetic evolution that decide which gene is activated in an organism under certain circumstances (see Table 1).

Table 1. Genetic and cultural evolution

	Genetic evolution	Cultural evolution
Replicator	Genes in the DNA	Memes (in texts)
Product	Biological phenotype	Individual and group behavior
Regulation	Epigenetic markers	Hermeneutical conventions

As Dawkins (2016) suggested recently, natural selection results in the body of an organism being the model of the environment that it inhabits. A swift’s body models the viscosity of air, and a mole’s body the shape of an underground tunnel. Sometimes the animal

is a literal description of the environment, such as in the case of the stick insect, which is a sculpture of “a twig, leaf scars, buds and all” (p.240). Dawkins goes on to argue that genes offer a fuller and more precise model of the environment than bodies, which is, however, impossible to decipher with our current knowledge. He describes hypothetical projects for harnessing computers to analyze the genetic model of the environment in carefully selected species. Furthermore, genes model not only the current environment of a species but also the environment of its ancestors in evolutionary time. For example, the tube structure of a fish’s body is still reflected in the organization of the human body and the biochemistry of our blood possibly resembles the primeval salt sea in which the marine life forms of our remote ancestors evolved. As Dawkins puts it, “the species is a statistical averaging device” (p. 256).

Due to the evolutionary origins of the human mind and culture, our thoughts and cultural traditions model the world around us. Furthermore, humans use symbolic language to reason about their relationship with the world, developing traditions of philosophy and theology. In this sense, human thought and culture are resonant with the world, and philosophy and theology are rooted in such resonance.

The New Testament as a model of its environment

Accepting that the genome of a species provides a model of the environment of the organism as well as of its ancestors in evolutionary time, can we see a similar relationship between memes and environments? For example, many of the gospel parables (Matt 13:1-23,31-32; 18:10-14; 20:1-16; etc.) can be read as models of an ancient agrarian society and Jesus’ interaction with a Roman centurion (Mark 8:5-13; Luke 7:1-10) models aspects of the Roman occupation of the land of Israel. Our initial examples prompt a number of questions.

First, we obviously need a deeper discussion of what memes are in the context of biblical literature. Above we have roughly identified memes with synoptic pericopes. Perhaps the sentences and phrases making up the pericopes can be seen as memes, too. A hierarchical organization of memes would correspond to the organization of genes and seems a viable alternative that needs to be explored further. Second, we do not exactly know whose knowledge of agriculture and the Roman army, respectively, our memes reflect. However, this is not essential for the discussion of the biblical text as a complex of memes. Whether it is the historical Jesus or the gospel writer who knew about agriculture, or such knowledge is simply second-hand and taken from broader cultural memes, is interesting but not of special significance. What matters is that the memes reflect aspects of the environment in which they

evolved. Third, we have not established that the memes can be seen as adaptive responses to environmental challenges. This last question is of crucial importance and will be explored in some detail in the rest of the article.

An important objection to the meme-gene analogy is that bits of culture tend to spread and survive irrespective of their contribution to an individual's or group's reproductive fitness (e.g., Kundt 2015). The apparent dissimilarity between the respective behavior of genes and memes is partly solved by taking the "selfish" nature of genes seriously. As Dawkins suggested, what matters for the gene is that the organism passes it on. Responding to the criticism about the "individualistic" bias of his model he added that genes, of course, "collaborate" in achieving that goal (Dawkins 2016: 210-234). The point is that the actual health, wellbeing, and fitness of the organism beyond reproductive success does not matter from the gene's perspective. The same point can be made about memes: as long as a meme modifies the behavior of an organism such that it is passed on, the behavior is "adaptive" in evolutionary terms. A problem with such a broad definition of adaptation can be that genes of viruses hijacking an organism's cells would fit into the definition while they are not parts of the organism's genome. Indeed, the virus-like nature of cultural bits has been emphasized (Sperber 1996). The solution, which we cannot discuss in detail at this point, could be that some self-promoting memes are viruses, while others are part of the adaptive complex of memes or are closely attached to it. Thus, bad jokes do not seem to have any adaptive value for humans and can be regarded purely as mind viruses. Some jokes, however, are both catchy and get woven into the textual fabric of memes, such as the dialogue between Balaam and his ass (Num 22:22-35).

Meanwhile, other memes appear to have straightforward adaptive qualities. For example, a meme encouraging forgiveness in the community (Matt 18:12-22) helped to maintain the integrity of the group and contributed to its long-term survival. The New Testament includes a great deal of moral exhortation. Many of the respective memes had been borrowed from either Jewish or Hellenistic traditions. Thus, such memes witness the changing environments of human groups that carried, used, and transmitted them. Many parts of the Book of the Covenant (Exod 20:24-23:19, the oldest layer of biblical law) seem to respond to the environmental and socioeconomic challenges faced by a pastoralist and agrarian population in the land of Israel (see, e.g., Knight 2011: 115-224; Marshall 1993: 103-168). The deep connections of biblical laws to the legal literature of the Ancient Near East are well-known, including the problem of "law" as a genre without necessary (direct) connection to actual legislative practice. However, legal memes still model their ancestral environments as

well as they impact the behavior and survival of later generations and human groups even if they originally served as court propaganda or intellectual exercise.

When New Testament writings reinterpret legal memes of the Old Testament, they adjust them to the contemporary social environments of the Christ-followers (or a particular Christian group). Thus, Jesus' reinterpretation of the Torah in the Sermon on the Mount demands both virtually boundless altruism and extreme asceticism. Although it is very difficult to establish the exact date and place of origin of these sayings, they can be read as models of a new social environment to which they are adapted. While they would virtually be useless in hierarchically organized, agricultural societies with mostly local and patriarchal judicial systems, they are well-adapted to small groups with clear boundaries, whose members maintain strong solidarity and advertise their moral superiority as credible signals of commitment to missionize in their social environment.

Conclusion

As a biological and cultural model of its world, the human animal is conditioned to contemplate its own existence. In this article I argued that the memes contained in the Bible encode adaptive responses to challenges in the natural and cultural environments of the people who composed and transmitted the texts. Reading the New Testament through the lens of evolutionary theory provides a way of exploring the resonance of ancient humans with their world.

- I. Czachesz, Cultural Evolution and Biblical Studies, in: C. Gianotto/F. Sbardella (Eds.), *Tra pratiche e credenze*, Brescia 2017, 239-255.
- I. Czachesz, The Bible as a Product of Cultural Evolution, in: U.E. Eisen/H.E. Mader (Eds.), *Talking God in Society*, Vol. 1, Göttingen 2021, 115-132.
- R. Dawkins, *The Selfish Gene*, Oxford 1976.
- R. Dawkins, *The Extended Phenotype*, Oxford 1982.
- R. Dawkins, *Unweaving the Rainbow*, London 2016.
- D.A. Knight, *Law, Power, and Justice in Ancient Israel*, Louisville, KY 2011.
- R. Kundt, *Contemporary Evolutionary Theories of Culture and the Study of Religion*, London 2015.
- J.W. Marshall, *Israel and the Book of the Covenant*, Atlanta 1993.
- D. Sperber, *Explaining Culture*, Oxford 1996.