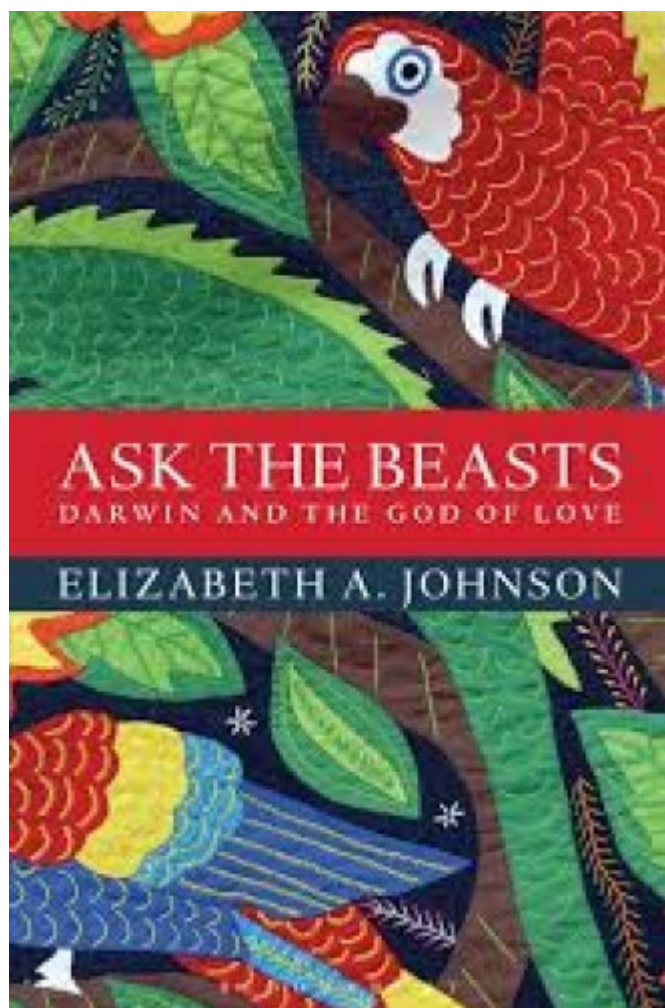


Ask the Beasts, by Elizabeth Johnson

reviewed by [John F. Haught](#) in the [April 30, 2014](#) issue

In Review



Ask the Beasts

By Elizabeth A. Johnson
Bloomsbury

Does science really matter to faith? The religious truths that Christians cherish came to expression long before Galileo, Darwin, Einstein, and Hawking, so what could science have to teach us about God, Christ, and the meaning of life that we don't

already know from meditation on the Bible and our creeds? What difference can science make to our devotional life and theological reflection?

A lot, says Elizabeth Johnson, one of the most highly regarded contemporary Christian theologians. Professor of theology at Fordham University, a member of the Sisters of St. Joseph, and a former president of the Catholic Theological Society of America, Johnson has authored many books skillfully connecting her deep Christian faith with a vibrant intellectual life. For a long time now she has been uncommonly sensitive to questions at the interface of science and religion, and her latest book solidifies her standing in the front ranks of laborers in this increasingly important field of interest.

Ask the Beasts is an original, learned, and compellingly readable enlargement of Christian theology after Darwin. The book's title is taken from Job 12: "But now ask the beasts to teach you." Johnson recruits this text as a wedge for opening wide the horizon of Christian theological inquiry to the world now being laid out so lavishly by the natural sciences, especially evolutionary biology.

The book takes the general form of a nuanced conversation between the Charles Darwin of *The Origin of Species* on the one hand and the Christian tradition of the Nicene Creed on the other. About half of the Christians in the United States would consider such an encounter inconceivable, but Johnson shows how a biblically informed faith can come alive, and hope can be renewed, when we look at the life-world through the lens of Darwin's *Origin*. A more careful and sensitive reading of that masterpiece would be hard to find anywhere, and not just among theologians.

If you take seriously Job's suggestion that you should interrogate the plants and animals of land, air, and sea, do not be surprised, says Johnson, that "their response will lead your mind and heart to the living God." However, Christian theology, typically and unfortunately, has focused on human beings almost exclusively. Theology "has seldom asked the beasts anything," much to its self-impoverishment. Johnson is aware of exceptions to the excessive anthropocentrism of Christian spirituality, but she is entirely correct that the natural world has functioned in Christian theology mainly as a backdrop to the human drama rather than as the creative matrix of life, complexity, and consciousness that science has shown it to be.

What would happen to our theologies, then, if we looked at life as closely and compassionately as Darwin does in the *Origin*, while keeping in mind simultaneously the genetically informed developments that have taken place in evolutionary biology since Darwin's day? The most vocal evolutionists think that biology has made theology superfluous. Natural selection, not God, they insist, is the author of life. But Johnson's theologically sophisticated view of divine action allows for no real competition between natural causation and divine creativity.

Johnson's purpose is not to defend her faith against the academically sponsored materialist interpretations of evolution that have squeezed the juice right out of Darwin's own narrative of life. She leaves the apologetic task largely to others. Instead, she takes advantage of her learned reading of Darwin's text to seize the offensive and outline a constructive theology of evolution. Grounding her theological vision systematically in the claims of the Nicene Creed, she asks what we should expect the life-world to look like if it is the creation of infinite, self-giving love. Might it not look very much like the extravagantly rich and self-creative drama of life that Darwin narrates so compellingly in the *Origin*?

Johnson proposes that a close study of Darwin's account of the development of life on earth can be a significant stimulus to theological development. Instead of leading to doubts about the creed in the age of science, a frank encounter between an appropriately Christian sense of God and the Darwinian portrait of life opens the possibility of reaffirming the fundamental tenets of faith in an enlivening new way.

Take, for example, the doctrines of creation, incarnation, and resurrection. First, in view of evolution it becomes clear that the world has not been created by the "direct divine agency" of a "monarchical" God. Rather, the Creator Spirit's loving presence endows the universe with the capacity "to evolve by its own natural powers, making it a free partner in its own creation."

Second, admitting our own current dependency on life systems whose emergence required billions of years of experimentation, adaptation, and selection can lead to a theology of "deep incarnation." In view of evolutionary biology, geology, astrophysics, and cosmology, God's incarnate presence in the man Jesus extends all the way down to the most elemental levels of physical reality and all the way back in time to the earliest chapters of cosmic becoming.

And third, an evolutionary sense of life combined with our new cosmological awareness of the enormity of space and time allows Christians to hope that in some mysterious way, all of creation is invited by God's Spirit to participate with Jesus in "deep resurrection."

Especially during a time of ecological crisis, Christians need to "ask the beasts." During the Easter vigil the church sings: "Exult, all creation, around God's throne; rejoice, O earth, in shining splendor, radiant in the brightness of your King!" Johnson comments: "At the most magnificent liturgy of the year, the church is singing to the Earth! It, too, needs to hear the good news, because the risen Christ embodies the ultimate hope of all creation."

The biologist George Williams spoke for many scientists and philosophers when he called nature a "wicked old witch" for letting life come about in the ragged, impersonal way that evolutionary biology has brought to our attention. Johnson has heard this complaint, and she is fully aware that the mystery of life's suffering and dying still remains. In response, though, her lovely and inspired book offers a theology of deep redemption. Far from editing out the rough passages in the story of life, and equally far from casting doubt on the creed, Johnson's theology invites us to be bold in considering the scope of healing that an infinite love can extend to a universe still coming into being.

After reading and meditating on this marvelous book you may never recite the Nicene Creed the same way again.