

***Ask the Beasts: Darwin and the God of Love* by Elizabeth Johnson, CSJ**

Elizabeth Johnson, the author of *Ask the Beasts*, has an orderly systematic mind. She sets out her theme at the beginning of chapters and summarizes at the ends. Sometimes her opening paragraph in a new chapter summarizes all the points she just made in the previous one. Use the beginnings and endings of chapters to follow her thought. Also mark passages where you have insights and little lights go off about implications—things you'd like to bring into conversation in class.

The questions below aim to help readers identify concepts and insights important to the chapters. Some questions ask for personal responses to the chapters. Class presentation will follow the book and questions will feed into table conversations.

Preface

1. What is the purpose of *Ask the Beasts* and the author's method?
2. What is the author's wager in taking this approach?
3. What do you see as your entangled bank?

Chapter 1: Beasts and Entangled Bank

1. What is the work of theology?
2. What is evolution?
3. What difference does Johnson make between "the natural world" and "creation?"
4. When has your faith needed understanding? What helped?
5. What models of engagement does Ian Barbour identify? Which seems most fruitful for our needs today?
6. What promise do you see in *Origin* and the Creed as dialogue partners? 14-18

Chapter 2: The Beholder and the Book, "When We Look..."

1. What does Darwin see and prove about how species unfold?
2. What is natural selection? How do differing species evolve? Note page 27-28.
3. What common 19th century scientific views is Darwin arguing against?
4. How does the theory of natural selection challenge traditional Christian doctrine? (36)
5. Was Darwin a religious man? What is the story of Darwin's spiritual journey?
6. What is the difference between the seeing and the arrogant eye?
7. Why name the chapter for the first words of Darwin's book, "When we look...?"

Chapter 3: Endless Forms Most Beautiful

Professor Jill Welter from the St. Catherine University biology department will join us for this session and the next to help us with the science.

1. How does variation that Darwin observes in nature set him on a course toward his theory?
2. Why does Darwin characterize life as struggle for existence? What is Natural Selection? How do the principles of divergence and extinction work?
3. What does the Tree of Life diagram illustrate? Define genus and species as biological categories.
4. How does Natural Selection rather than special divine creation explain the perfection of the eye and the evolution of instincts for social behavior?
5. How does Charles Lyell's work in geology resonate with Darwin's work in biology?
6. How does the fossil record support and help explain Darwin's theory of natural selection/descent with modification?
7. How does natural selection make sense of present-day distribution of plants and animals across the globe?
8. What is your favorite insight or image from this chapter?

Chapter 4: pp. 100-111: Evolution of the Theory *Bring questions and insights about Chapter 3 into this session.*

1. What questions about Chapter 3 do you have to bring to this session?
2. What ethical principles do you find yourself forming in response to these first four chapters that focus *On the Origin of Species*?
3. What amazes you about the capacity of natural processes to produce novelty?
4. How have some perverted Darwin's theory of natural selection and survival of the fittest?
5. How have genetics and paleontology confirmed the natural processes Darwin identifies?
6. How in the past 150 years has science updated, nuanced, and affirmed Darwin's work?

Chapter 4: pp. 111-121; Chapter 5: pp. 122-128: A Cosmic Lens, an Ecological Lens, a Theological Lens

1. What is the effect of cosmic evolution framing the phenomenon of life on Earth?
2. How is evolution relational? What importance do you see in Darwin's Tree of Life being a kinship tree?
3. Why has traditional theology historically downplayed the activity of the Spirit?
4. Why hasn't theology taken the natural world seriously?
5. How has philosophical and theological dualism (matter and spirit; nature and grace) affected self-understanding, social structures, and spiritualities?

Chapter 5: pp. 128-153: The Dwelling Place of God

1. How does the Hebrew Testament describe the activity of the Spirit of God?
2. What does the greeting, “The grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, the love of God, and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with you all (2 Cor. 13.14),” tell us about early Christians’ experience of God?
3. Why is the Trinity important in Johnson’s theological vision?
4. What sense of the Spirit’s presence and engagement with the world does biblical imagery give you? *Ruach* (wind), Water; Fire, Bird, Wisdom
5. How is describing God as a verb rather than a noun more adequate to the mystery?
6. What changes if God’s To-Be is To-Be-in-Relationship, if the divine essence is not substance but communion?
7. What is participation? How do we participate in creation?

Chapter 6: How God Acts: Free, Empowered Creation

“Not the monarch but the lover becomes the paradigm.” P. 159

1. This is the overarching question of the chapter: If you explore, understand and accept Darwin’s (and others’) evolutionary view of the universe, how can you still explore, understand and accept the universe as God’s creation?
2. How is the reality of creaturely freedom in communion with the reality of radical dependence on God? Or are these two realities mutually exclusive?
3. How does the metaphor of Lover, as Elizabeth develops it, offer a helpful image of God/Holy Spirit in action within the process of evolution?
4. What functions do law and chance play in the process of evolution? Why is this important?
5. How/why does Elizabeth suggest we must revise traditional understandings of matter, body and body/spirit dualism?
6. When Elizabeth says that the history of evolution is an “unscripted adventure,” what does she mean? How would you describe this history of evolution?
7. What is your favorite (or most significant) insight from this 6th chapter?

Chapter 7: All Creation Groaning and an Infinitely Compassionate Presence

Chapter 8: Bearer of Great Promise: the Cruciform World Lives the Promise of Resurrection

Chapter 9: Enter the Humans: Creative Fidelity to Earth's Well-Being

1. What makes Homo sapiens a unique branch on the evolutionary tree of relationship? (p. 239)
2. Why does Johnson use Bill McKibben's spelling of Earth? What feelings and reactions to this arise in you? (p. 241-242)
3. How does Johnson define crisis? (P. 243-248) What has contributed to this and how can we help shift it?
4. We are in the midst of a massive extinction episode. Why is this a big deal? (p. 248 ff)
5. What does "conversion to the Earth" – metanoia mean and what does it look like? How is this a/the moral issue? (256 and 259)

Chapter 10: The Communion of Creation

"The Bible is a complex set of works, written over centuries in different genres with various intents. The crucial factor is hermeneutical, how it is interpreted" (261).

1. Discuss the interpretation of the Dominion Paradigm, the Stewardship Paradigm and the Community of Creation Paradigm.
2. How is the Community of Creation Paradigm different? Why is this interpretive lens essential at this time?
3. What is "the ecological vocation" and how do we live it out, individually and collectively? P. 281