

The Origins Question

Text: Gen. 1:1-5, 26-2:3

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Introduction

“Mom, Dad, where did I come from?” For some reason this never seems to be an easy question to answer.

A seven-year-old approached his mother one evening and asked her what sex was. He was rewarded with a nervous lecture on the birds, bees, cats, dogs, and other facts of life. The little boy shifted his weight from right foot to left and finally said, "Gee, mom, how am I going to put all this on the top line of that little card the teacher gave me?"

-As told by Ralph P. Karstedt

As we get older the question gets more sophisticated but many of us don't get any more comfortable with our answers. “Mom and Dad where did I come from? I heard at school the other day I evolved from other living creatures. The Bible says people were created by God. So what's up?” There's as much nervousness generated by the second question as by the first.

So what is our story? What best explains us? For some it is found in the Bible. It is a story of creation and fall, of God's intervening to call a people to live out his purpose for humanity, of the coming of the Christ in whom that purpose is to be fulfilled. (Newbigin)

For some it is the story of evolution. Natural processes, not God, give rise to human beings. We understand ourselves best through the analysis of science, not Christian faith. We can best direct our future by harnessing the power of science, not by relying on revelation, worship, and grace.

Told this way, these two stories don't go together. You must choose one or the other (or believe two things that contradict each other, something lots of us do all the time.)

So where did I come from? Are there only two options? Or might scripture, faith, and reason allow for other possibilities?

1. There's an old saying which says, "To a person who only has a hammer in their toolbox, everything begins to look like a nail." What happens if these are the only hammers available?

Many times the story of evolution is told as one of *scientific materialism*. That's a fancy way of saying that nothing outside of nature is allowed to interrupt the system. Natural processes create all that is. Life and people arise through a billions of years long process called natural selection, in which the fit survive and adapt; the less fit die. The process of evolution is guided by chance, where the winners with the "smarter" genes over time eventually make better choices. And the purpose of it all is to propagate the species, to stay alive.

This is Darwinism, but even more radical than even Darwin himself first proposed.

If this is the only hammer in your tool box certain things tend to happen:

- God becomes unnecessary, and for some a threat to science.
- The new is almost always superior to the old; we are evolving.
- The difference between human beings and other living things is greatly diminished. Who's to say that "human rights" are superior to "animal rights"?
- There is a temptation to use "evolution" as a way of explaining almost all human behavior – from religion, to sex, to politics.

You might have a different hammer. Some times the Christian story is told as one of "young earth creationism." God is constantly intervening in creation, nothing is random or accidental. People are a special creation of God. The age of the earth is short, six to ten thousand years. Species may change but they do not evolve in a significant way; there is no time. And the purpose of life is to "glorify God and enjoy him forever".

If you are already a Christian, you are bound to like some things about "young earth creationism". But if it's the only tool you've got some things tend to happen:

- Evolution is usually seen as inherently anti-God.
- The Bible is interpreted as much as a modern scientific document as a religious one.
- The considerable evidence which points to an old earth must be recast to point to a young one – were primitive people hunting dinosaurs?
- Science as it is commonly understood and practiced in our world will not take you seriously.

There you have it. Life is tale of two hammers; choose one to pound the evidence to fit the scheme. Take your pick. Or can something else be said?

2. I think our own Scriptures, particularly Genesis 1, suggest that there may be a more faithful way than what's been said.

It begins with a powerful affirmation: *In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth.* It doesn't try to prove it. It has no interest in "science" as we understand it. It simply claims get this wrong and you will be hard pressed to get anything else right. We must believe in order to understand.

And then in 7 great days of creation it shows us the Creator at work – he brings order to chaos. Notice that the "*days*" while orderly are not "logical". On the first day we have "light"; but it's not until the fourth day we have the planets that bring the light. Even the term "*day*" is ambiguous enough by itself to speak of a long period of time or a short period. Could it be that interpreting the text with "young earth" literalism may be forcing the text to say something it wasn't written to say?

Gen. 1 was not written to answer scientific questions. In fact Gen. 1 looks a lot like other creation stories from other peoples that lived near ancient Israel. But it is written to refute them; not agree with them.

- Those other stories frequently show God struggling to bring order to an unruly creation. But in Gen. 1 God has total mastery. He speaks and it is done. With a word nothing becomes something and chaos turns to order.
- In those other stories people are created to be the servants and playthings of the Gods – to bring the god food and run his errands. In Gen. 1 all of creation we see is set into place, step by step, in preparation for the creation of man and woman.
- And then we find our deepest nature in the revelation that we are created male and female in the *image* of God. That image consists not in what we are made of (the text says we are "dirt") but in what we are made for. We are God's representatives in all of creation, to help all that is become all that it is meant to be. We are here to do far more than simply expand the gene pool.

To say that Genesis 1 wasn't written to answer scientific questions doesn't mean it has no implications for science. Behind all that is there stands an active, engaged God. There is a Creator and there is a creature and wisdom is knowing which one we are. To claim to be able to understand the world or your life apart from God is to totally misunderstand.

We are human not because we are made of different stuff, but because we are capable of a different purpose. We are image bearers – capable of doing what God would have done, enjoying what brings delight and enjoyment to God, and worshipping the one who made us and all things. What explains us best is not an endless process of natural selection, but the ability to fulfill the purposes of God.

3. So are forced to own only one hammer? Is it Christ or Darwin? Or is it possible that there may be more than one tool for helping us know where we came from – and just as importantly why we are here?

Perhaps evolution does explain some things. When we come up against the evidence of an ancient world – fossils and the findings of carbon dating – must we in the name of God and a young earth declare all such findings to be wrong, or a plot of the devil?

Perhaps evolution can say a word about how some things came to be even if it can't say nearly as well why they came to be. Perhaps God uses evolution as part of his careful guidance of creation.

On the other hand when evolution is taught as scientific materialism – the reality of God is excluded from the start – we should not roll over to science which has become another religion.

And the truth is that there are many things evolution does not explain. John Polkinghorne, a British quantum physicist turned theologian, believes that the evolution can explain least what makes us most human.

We in our own imperfect way reach out toward the “true, the good, the beautiful”. Survival of the species might explain why human beings learned to count, but it doesn't explain why we get excited about proving Einstein's Theory of Relativity. Survival of the species might explain the moral discovery that if I don't try to kill you, perhaps you won't try to kill me. But it doesn't explain the deep moral conviction we have that laying your life down for another is the height of goodness. And it certainly doesn't explain beauty – why sunsets can fill us with wonder, or some men and women will spend a lifetime painting pictures, molding clay, or singing songs simply for the sheer pleasure of it.

What might explain it? *...in the image of God he created him; male and female he created them. (Gen. 1:27)*

4. Our story is finally not so much a story of what we are made of but what we are made for. And that's why our story is always incomplete until it leads us into the presence of Christ.

There was and is no more perfect image bearer than Jesus. Philippians 2:6 sings that he is *in very nature God*. Colossians 1:15 tells that "*he is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn over all creation. For by him all things were created...*and toward him all things will move until he is supreme over all.

But this Jesus understood that being in God's image called him into a particular role:

Who being in very nature God, did not consider equality with God something to be grasped, but made himself nothing taking the very nature of a servant, being made in human likeness. (Philippians 2:7)

He makes the way for us, through his servanthood on the cross; to reclaim the image of God that is in us all but is disfigured by sin. He repairs the broken mirror of our lives to reflect the glory of God. To be created in God's image is for us, like him, to serve God's purpose.

And if a theory of evolution explains something of *how* God creates, so be it. But if it is used to teach the myth that we are created to serve ourselves in a godless world, then that theory must be brought like all things into subjection to Christ.

Conclusion

Genesis 1 is not an invitation to know something. It is an invitation to believe something, and to worship the creator God; the only way will come to rightly know anything at all.

That's why we do not have science textbooks in the pew, but Bibles and hymnals. That's why we believe the truth is as likely to be found in a good story or a good poem as in a good experiment.

So the worshipping believer looks at men and women and sees in them what science unaided by faith will always miss. As Gerald Manly Hopkins wrote long ago:

...for Christ plays in ten thousand places, Lovely in limbs and lovely in eyes not his to the Father through the features of men's faces.