

**Understanding
the Biblical
Creation
Passages**

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Paul Marston



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Introduction

One problem in modern times is that many people think they know what the Bible teaches, but actually are following a popular culture which misreads it. For example, at Christmas we may send cards with “three kings” around the manger, and winged angels in the sky. In the Bible, however, angels never appear with wings, and the magi who came to see Jesus were an unknown number of wise people (not necessarily all men), not kings, who came to see Jesus after he had relocated to the house (Matthew 2:1) and as a young child (*paidos*) not a baby (*brefos*).

Likewise, we need to look at what the Bible actually says on creation ideas like “Adam and Eve and the garden of Eden”, and not rely on popular culture. This is true for various kinds of people who may be reading this.

You may be wondering whether or not the Christian faith is true and the Bible “makes sense”. If so, it is important to ensure that you assess what the Bible really says and what Jesus Christ really taught, and not some popular “Mickey Mouse” version of these. You may be a Christian, and have experienced the risen Christ and know in your heart that Christianity is true – but want to ensure that your beliefs are genuinely those doctrines taught by Jesus and his apostles. But whether either describes you, or whether your interest is from some other perspective, it is essential to see what the Bible actually says on the creation issues.

So is it all plain reading? Can't we just read an English version (say the NIV or the NKJV) and take this in its plain sense? Do we really need to “interpret”? Surely God means what he says? In their acclaimed book about interpreting scripture, Fee and Stewart word this obvious question like this:

The aim of good interpretation is simple: to get at the “plain meaning of the text.” ... But... then why interpret? Why not just read? Does not the plain meaning come simply from reading?¹

¹ The question as worded in Fee & Stuart (1993) p.14.

Well, it is notable that one of the very first things the risen Christ is portrayed as doing in the gospels is this:

Luke 24: ²⁵Then he said to them, "O foolish ones, and slow of heart to believe in all that the prophets have spoken! ²⁶Ought not the Christ to have suffered these things and to enter into His glory?" ²⁷And beginning at Moses and all the Prophets, he expounded to them in all the Scriptures the things concerning himself.

The word "expounded" is related to our word "hermeneutics" – the interpretation of the text. Jesus certainly believed that his Scriptures (the Old Testament) were divinely inspired – this is shown throughout his teaching.² But he did not believe that they were "plain speaking"; he knew that they needed to be *interpreted*. The real meanings of many passages were "things concerning himself". Perhaps one of these, indeed, as we shall see, was Genesis 3:15, which is not about snake biology but about "things concerning himself".

If we are serious about assessing the biblical accounts of creation, then this cannot be done "on the cheap". We cannot just give a quick flip through an English translation, take the surface meaning, and base our views on this; it needs some proper study. Of course there are *bad* interpretations of the Biblical text, and interpretations that force the meaning in ways it was obviously never meant to go. The Fee and Stewart book which raised the questions about "plain meaning" above, answers this:

The antidote to bad interpretation is not no interpretation, but good interpretation, based on common sense guidelines.(p.17).

The Fee and Stewart book forms a good basis for a whole course on biblical interpretation³, but there are some basic things we will explore here in relation to the Biblical creation accounts:

1. What are the Hebrew terms used in the accounts, and what do linguistic experts and other contexts indicate they mean?

² See also Wenham (1993)

³ Other useful books include Klein et al (1993) and Osborne (1997).

2. What does Jesus (and also Paul) show us about the right approach to its meaning?
3. What kind of literature is it?

Anyone (whatever his or her personal beliefs), who is serious in his or her wish to understand and assess the Biblical teachings on creation, will surely be patient at the need to do this carefully. It cannot be done by a quick flip through, it requires a proper in-depth study - "there is no gain without pain". Occasionally, moreover, reference may be made to someone whose views seem inconsistent with Scripture. No personal criticism is intended in this. Spiritual people can be genuinely mistaken, and we all need, if we are Christians, to keep checking that our theology and understandings are based on those of our Lord.

In this particular work the focus will be on the Biblical sources themselves. Other works (eg Marston (2000) and Marston & Forster (2000)) look in more detail at the historic Jewish and Christian understandings of the creation passages, and also at the connection between these and science.

Jesus and Language

So how did *Jesus* use language? This is the most fundamental question for Christians. Strikingly, his friends as well as his critics so often "took him literally" when he was speaking in symbol and metaphor. The things of which Jesus spoke were, of course *real*, but they were neither *literal* nor *physical*. Let us look at some of these instances:



The Temple

John 2: ¹⁸So the Jews answered and said to him, "What sign do you show to us, since you do these things?" ¹⁹Jesus answered and said to them, "Destroy this temple, and in three



days I will raise it up." ²⁰Then the Jews said, "It has taken forty-six years to build this temple, and will you raise it up in three days?" ²¹But he was speaking of the temple of His body.

The Jewish Temple, with its columns and glistening gold roof, was one of the wonders of the ancient world. No wonder Jesus' hearers were focusing on the purely physical – perhaps under the delusion that this was “more real”. Perhaps they thought that Jesus must have “meant what he said”. Imagine later a friend saying “Surely he must have been speaking metaphorically?” “No’, one of them might insist, “I was there, I definitely heard him say he would raise up this Temple. After all, one should surely take the plain meaning of his words?” This, however, would be mistaken for he *was* in fact speaking metaphorically. Moreover, the Temple of the body of Christ, as we Christians understand it, is actually more real than the Temple built by Herod – for unlike Herod's Temple it is indestructible.

Born Again and Understanding Spiritual Language

The next chapter of John contains another incident:

John 3: ¹There was a man of the Pharisees named Nicodemus, a ruler of the Jews. ²This man came to Jesus by night and said to him, "Rabbi, we know that you are a teacher come from God; for no one can do these signs that you do unless God is with him." ³Jesus answered and said to him, "Most assuredly, I say to you, unless one is born again, he cannot see the kingdom of God." ⁴Nicodemus said to him, "How can a man be born when he is old? Can he enter a second time into his mother's womb and be born?" ⁵Jesus answered, "Most assuredly, I say to you, unless one is born of water and the Spirit, he cannot enter the kingdom of God. ⁶That which is born of the flesh is flesh, and that which is born of the Spirit is spirit. ⁷Do not marvel that I said to you, 'You must be born again.' ⁸"The wind blows where it wishes, and you hear the sound of it, but cannot tell where it comes from and where it goes. So is everyone who is born of the Spirit." ⁹Nicodemus answered and said to him, "How can these things be?" ¹⁰Jesus answered and said to him, "Are you the teacher of Israel, and do not know these things? ¹¹Most assuredly, I say to you, we speak what we know and testify what we have seen, and you do not receive our witness. ¹²If I have told you earthly things

and you do not believe, how will you believe if I tell you heavenly things?

A central theme in John's gospel is about seeing the signs of the Kingdom of which Jesus is the King (John 2:11; 2:23; 4:48; 6:2; 6:26; 7:36; 9:16; 11:47; 12:37; 20:30). Many people saw the miracles, but did not see them as signs. Nicodemus, though, had spiritual perception – he did see the signs. Nicodemus then, was at the very least a believer in the God-sent work of Jesus. There were, after all, those in Israel who were righteous, devout, spirit led, and waiting for God to bring his Messiah (Luke 2:25). Jesus does not actually tell him to repent; maybe he had already repented and received the baptism of John. What Jesus does is to gently rib Nicodemus for his lack of understanding. The most basic principle of spiritual understanding for the believer is that external symbols and physical language are used to describe inner spiritual realities. Jesus adds another, almost self-evident, point. If a person does not understand that spiritual Christian experience is conveyed by the use of symbolic language, then they can never understand “heavenly things” (ie what is going on in the spiritual realm) at all – because such things can *only* be conveyed in symbolic language! Thus, for example, the New Testament book of Revelation, is full of symbolic pictures: the cities of Babylon and Jerusalem, the harlot and the bride, the beast and the lamb, bowls of woes, horsemen, a river of life, a tree of life, etc. The book is *apocalyptic*, that is, it (as it were) draws aside the veil to enable us to see the conflicts that are going on in the heavenly realms. The “beast” represents “might is right” whilst the lamb overcomes through self-sacrifice; the city of Babylon and the harlot manipulate by appealing to self indulgence; the city of Jerusalem and the bride represent the self-giving in love of the church to Christ. In a sense, as Christians understand it, these spiritual conflicts are “more real” than the physical world. But if a person does not understand the use of symbolical language to convey spiritual realities, then he or she will never understand what Revelation is getting at. He or she will think it is all about dragons, cities, rivers and trees. We will look further at this below.

Living Water

Another instance of Jesus using symbolic language is in John 4:

John 4: ⁷When a Samaritan woman came to draw water, Jesus said to her, "Will you give me a drink?" ⁸(His disciples had gone into the town to buy food.) ⁹The Samaritan woman said to him, "You are a Jew and I am a Samaritan woman. How can you ask me for a drink?" (For Jews do not associate with Samaritans.) ¹⁰Jesus answered her, "If you knew the gift of God and who it is that asks you for a drink, you would have asked him and he would have given you living water." ¹¹"Sir," the woman said, "you have nothing to draw with and the well is deep. Where can you get this living water? ¹²Are you greater than our father Jacob, who gave us the well and drank from it himself, as did also his sons and his flocks and herds?" ¹³Jesus answered, "Everyone who drinks this water will be thirsty again, ¹⁴but whoever drinks the water I give him will never thirst. Indeed, the water I give him will become in him a spring of water welling up to eternal life." ¹⁵The woman said to him, "Sir, give me this water so that I won't get thirsty and have to keep coming here to draw water."



She just didn't get it. One version renders it: "Where's yer bucket?" Was Jesus offering her "real water"? Well the living water was actually more real than the physical water, but it was not physical. It is a central mistake in our materialistic times to take the "most real" as the physical.

Life and Death

Obviously Jesus does speak about physical life and physical death. But we all know that he also spoke about eternal life, and this was not denying physical death. In fact he says to Martha:

John 11: ²⁵"I am the resurrection and the life. He who believes in me will live, even though he dies; ²⁶and whoever lives and believes in me will never die. Do you believe this?"

Plainly believers in Jesus *do* physically die. This illustrates the complexity of the language about life and death as used by Jesus. Only context tells us whether he is speaking of physical or spiritual death.

Food, Bread and Harvests

It has been suggested to me that only those who "suppress the truth" fail to understand Jesus. This could, of course, be applied to those who heard him speak about the Temple, to the Samaritan women at the well, and perhaps even to poor old Nicodemus who clearly perceived and accepted that Jesus had come from God. But what happens when Jesus' own disciples come back to him?

John 4: ³¹Meanwhile his disciples urged him, "Rabbi, eat something." ³²But he said to them, "I have food to eat that you know nothing about." ³³Then his disciples said to each other, "Could someone have brought him food?" ³⁴"My food," said Jesus, "is to do the will of him who sent me and to finish his work. ³⁵Do you not say, 'Four months more and then the harvest'? I tell you, open your eyes and look at the fields! They are ripe for harvest. ³⁶Even now the reaper draws his wages, even now he harvests the crop for eternal life, so that the sower and the reaper may be glad together. ³⁷Thus the saying 'One sows and another reaps' is true. ³⁸I sent you to reap what you have not worked for. Others have done the hard work, and you have reaped the benefits of their labour."

These are disciples who have left all to follow Jesus; far from suppressing the truth they are earnestly seeking it from his lips. Yet they just don't get the point. The food, the "harvest" are real, but they are not physical – Jesus is again using physical language symbolically. But if these, who were with the earthly Jesus daily, could make this mistake, should we be surprised if today some otherwise spiritual people simply don't understand when God speaks in symbolic language?

There are other instances of Jesus' use of symbolic language:

John 6: ⁴⁸I am the bread of life. ⁴⁹Your forefathers ate the manna in the desert, yet they died. ⁵⁰But here is the bread that comes down from heaven, which a man may eat and not die. ⁵¹I am the living bread that came down from heaven. If anyone eats of this bread, he will live forever. This bread is my flesh, which I will give for the life of the world." ⁵²Then the Jews began to argue sharply among themselves, "How can this man give us his flesh to eat?"



Matt 26: ²⁶While they were eating, Jesus took bread, gave thanks and broke it, and gave it to his disciples, saying, "Take and eat; this is my body." [also Mark 14:22; Luke 22:19]

We may have no wish to quarrel with any Catholics who have developed an elaborate philosophy to try to take Jesus' words in some sense "literally", but it does seem misguided. The unleavened bread at the last supper was no more "literally" the body of Christ than he "literally" came down from heaven as a piece of bread. And for those non-Catholics who claim to "take Scripture literally" there are some further thoughts. The word "body" is used 41 times in the gospels. In 38 of them it is clearly meant literally – but this does not imply that this is true for "Take, eat, this is my body". Language is just not like this. The whole force of a spiritual and symbolic meaning is that the word(s) used also have a literal meaning - the way to determine whether a literal or symbolic meaning is intended is to look at the context.

Slippery Slopes and Other Arguments

Some very odd arguments have been used to argue for literalism against the preferred approach of Jesus. One is the "slippery slope" argument. "Stop taking the Bible wholly literally" we are told, "And next minute you'll be denying the resurrection!" Well most of those who make this "slippery slope" argument take "this is my body" figuratively, yet the same word "body" is used thus:

Luke 24: ³And they entered in, and found not the body of the Lord Jesus... ²³And when they found not his body, they came, saying, that they had also seen a vision of angels, which said that he was alive.

The whole context shows that the word "body" here is meant literally. To recognize that in Luke 22:19 it is meant symbolically rather than literally does not mean that we will later conclude that it is not literal in 24:3 and 24:33 either. The early Fundamentalists, who insisted on the physical resurrection of Jesus, were not literalists. The "slippery slope" argument is unnecessarily paranoid, and this distorts sound interpretation.

A second point concerns the kind of argument: "Well God was there at creation, so we have to take him at his word." Matthew was (presumably⁴) there at the last supper, he heard Jesus say "Take, eat, this is my body." But it would be nonsense to say that because the words are accurately reported, therefore the words must have been meant literally. Of course evangelicals believe that the Genesis 1-3 accounts are divinely inspired, of course God "was there", but why should this imply that he is speaking literally when he tells us about it? If eg someone says "I was walking on air at my daughter's wedding" then presumably he was there and we weren't – but plainly he is not speaking literally.

Where, then, does all this leave us? Well, Jesus said "He that has seen me has seen the Father" (John 14:9). To Christians, Jesus shows us what God is like. If, then, Jesus continually used language symbolically to convey spiritual realities, should we not expect the Father to do the same? If, as Christians, we take a "Jesus centered" approach, rather than rely merely on popular culture, we will be on the lookout for this kind of use of language.

Jesus and Nature

To Jesus, God worked as much through the agencies of nature as in the miraculous alteration of nature. Jesus said:

Look at the birds of the air; they do not sow or reap or store away in barns, and yet your heavenly Father feeds them. (Matt 6:26)

Consider the ravens: They do not sow or reap, they have no storeroom or barn; yet God feeds them. (Luke 12:24)

⁴ Presuming the traditional ascription of the authority behind the first gospel to Matthew – but in any event all Christians accept the accuracy of the report of what Jesus said.

God feeds the birds, but presumably not by special creation. Jesus follows the thinking in Amos 4:13:

He who forms the mountains, **creates** (*bara'*) the wind, and reveals his thoughts to man, he who turns dawn to darkness, and treads the high places of the earth- the LORD God Almighty is his name.

The Hebrew word “creates” used here is *bara'*, which is the strongest Hebrew word for create; it is the word used when God created the heavens and the earth or created man in his own image. But here in Amos the sense is in the present tense, and God is “creating” winds through natural processes and not by any miraculous act of “special creation”.

To Jesus, as a Jew, any notion that something was *either* God acting *or* “natural” would be absurd. His “ravens” reference may refer back to Job. When Job was puzzled at the issue of apparently unwarranted suffering, part of God’s response was to ask:

"Can you hunt the prey for the lion, or satisfy the appetite of the young lions, When they crouch in their dens, Or lurk in their lairs to lie in wait? Who provides food for the raven, when its young ones cry to God, and wander about for lack of food? (Job 38:39-41)

The God of Jesus Christ feeds the lions (that hunt prey) and the ravens that consume carrion and will even prey upon sick and injured animals. There is a mystery in innocent suffering, and, indeed, the whole book of Job addresses but does not entirely answer this mystery. But if we look to follow Jesus then we must assert that it is *this* world that God created – and that this includes the predatory habits of some of the creatures he continues to feed, including the lions, the ravens and the fearsome armour plated “leviathan” in Job. There is no room for any notion of some original (pre-fall) world where there was no physical death amongst universally vegetarian animals. There is undeniably mystery in the existence of animal suffering, but we have to be true to Jesus insistence that this *is* God’s creation.⁵

⁵ Some argue on moral grounds that animal death and predation date only from man, but is it really “better” to suggest innocent animals suffered for human sin?

To Jews, people are also said to be “created” (*bara'*) by God when they are actually born through normal processes:

Ps 89:47 Oh remember how short my time is: for what vanity have you created (*bara'*) all the children of men!

Isa 54:16 "Behold, I have created (*bara'*) the blacksmith Who blows the coals in the fire...

So was the blacksmith made by some kind of “special creation”? Presumably he was not. The occupation and activity of the blacksmith developed through the natural evolution of human culture, and the individual blacksmith was born to normal parents through the usual natural processes of reproduction. To Jews, however, natural processes were a means God might use to create.

Having established the background of language and attitude to nature of Jesus as a Jew, we can now turn to a close look at the creation accounts themselves.

The Terms and the Passages

The Hebrew Terms Used

bara' The strong word for “create”, though it does not necessarily mean “out of nothing”

yôm The Hebrew word for “day”.

zākār* | *n^eqēbā In Hebrew there are distinct words for male (*zākār*) and female (*n^eqēbā*)

'iš* | *'iššā There are also two other distinct words for man=husband (*'iš*) and woman=wife (*'iššā*).

ādām The Hebrew word *ādām* (which we write as Adam) can mean “man”, “the man” (with the definite article), “mankind” or “humanity”, or can be a name. Only the context, and that not always with certainty, can tell us which meaning it is to take.

The word *ādām*, unlike *'iš*, cannot be given a feminine form by the addition of *ā*, because *ādāmā* means “ground” as in Genesis 2:7.

’*nôš* Another word for man **’*nôš*** comes from a root signifying frailty, though does not always carry that connotation forward. Maybe it does in Gen 2:6 as he does seem a bit of a wimp!

hawwâ The term given in our versions as “Eve”. This appears only in Gen 3:20 and 4:1, before this there is reference only to “the woman”. The Genesis writer gives the explanation of the new name as “because she was mother of all life” (***hay***). The Setuagint (LXX) Greek translation Paul would have known renders it in Gen 3:21 as ***zōē*** or “life”, perhaps assuming that it is an archaic form of ***hayyâ*** or “living thing” . It also bears similarity to the Aramaic for serpent ***hiwyâ’***, though this could just be a kind of word-play similarity Hebrews often liked.

The Passages

There are two distinct creation passages in Genesis: 1:1-2:3 and 2:4-3:24, which describe events thus:

<p>Genesis 1:1-2:3</p> <p>In the beginning God created the skies and the earth. The earth was without form, and void; and darkness was on the face of the deep. And the Spirit of God was hovering over the face of the waters.</p> <p><u>Day One:</u> God created Day and Night</p> <p><u>Day Two:</u> God made the Sky (firmament) between the waters</p> <p><u>Day Three:</u> God made Dry Land. God made Vegetation</p> <p><u>Day Four:</u> God made Sun and Moon as lamps in the sky +</p>	<p>Genesis 2:4-3:24</p> <p>In <u>the day</u> (<i>yôm</i>) that the Lord made the earth and the skies before any vegetation or rain</p> <p>God formed man (<i>ādām</i>) out of the dust of the earth (<i>ādāmâ</i>)</p> <p>God planted a garden eastward in Eden, and there He put the man whom He had formed.</p> <p>God made out of the ground every tree grow that is pleasant to the sight and good for food. The tree of life was also in the midst of the garden, and the tree of the knowledge of good and evil.</p> <p>God took the man and put him</p>
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<p>Stars</p> <p><u>Day Five:</u> God made Sea creatures and flying creatures</p> <p><u>Day Six:</u> God made Land animals. God made Mankind (<i>ādām</i>) Male & Female in God’s image</p> <p><u>Day Seven:</u> God rested from all his work</p>	<p>in the garden of Eden to tend and keep it.</p> <p>God commanded the man, saying, "Of every tree of the garden you may freely eat; but of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil you shall not eat, for in the day (<i>yôm</i>) that you eat of it dying you shall die</p> <p>God said, "It is not good that man should be alone; I will make him an ally comparable to him." Out of the ground the LORD God formed every beast of the field and every bird of the air, and brought them to the man to see what he would call them... So the man gave names to all cattle, to the birds of the air, and to every beast of the field. But for the man there was not found an ally comparable to him.</p> <p>God cause the man to sleep, and took his side to make a woman. The man called her “wo-man”.</p>
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We will give now a fairly full version of the creation passages relating to human creation, with indications of the original Hebrew words (using the consistent terms for simplicity). Straight English translations cannot fully convey the language, so this is essential:

1:²⁷God created man (*’ādām*) in his own image: in the image of God he created him; male (*zākār*) and female (*nēqēbā*) he created them. ²⁸Then God blessed them, and God said to them: “Be fruitful and multiply: fill the earth and subdue it: have dominion over the fish of the sea...etc

2: ⁷And the Lord God formed the man (*'ādām*) out of the dust of the ground (*ādāmā*) and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life; and the man (*'ādām*) became a living being. ⁸The LORD God planted a garden eastward in Eden, and there He put the man whom He had formed. ⁹And out of the ground ground (*ādāmā*) the LORD God made every tree grow that is pleasant to the sight and good for food. The tree of life was also in the midst of the garden, and the tree of the knowledge of good and evil...

2: ¹⁸And the LORD God said, "It is not good that the man (*ādām*) should be alone; I will make him an ally comparable to him." ¹⁹Out of the ground the LORD God formed every beast of the field and every bird of the air, and brought them to the man (*ādām*) to see what he would call them. And whatever the man (*ādām*) called each living creature, that was its name. ²⁰So the man (*ādām*) gave names to all cattle, to the birds of the air, and to every beast of the field. But for the man (*ādām*) there was not found an ally comparable to him. ²¹And the LORD God caused a deep sleep to fall on the man (*ādām*), and he slept; and He took one of his ribs/sides, and closed up the flesh in its place. ²²Then the rib/side (*ṣēlā'*) which the Lord God had taken from the man (*'ādām*) he made into a woman (*'iššā*), and brought her to the man (*'ādām*). ²³And the man (*'ādām*) said: "This time! This is bone of my bones, and flesh of my flesh; she shall be called a woman (*'iššā*), for from a man (*'iš*) was she taken this one!" ²⁴Therefore shall a man (*'iš*) leave his father and mother and shall cleave to his woman/wife (*'iššā*), and they shall become one flesh. ²⁵And they were both naked, the man and his wife, and were not ashamed.

3: ¹Now the serpent was more cunning than any beast of the field which the LORD God had made. And he said to the woman (*'iššā*), "Has God indeed said, 'You shall not eat of every tree of the garden?'" ²And the woman (*'iššā*) said to the serpent, "We may eat the fruit of the trees of the garden; ³but of the fruit of the tree which is in the midst of the garden, God has said, 'You shall not eat it, nor shall you touch it, lest you die.'" ⁴Then the serpent said to the woman (*'iššā*), "You will

not surely die. ⁵For God knows that in the day (*yôm*) you eat of it your eyes will be opened, and you will be like God, knowing good and evil." ⁶So when the woman (*'iššā*) saw that the tree was good for food, that it was pleasant to the eyes, and a tree desirable to make one wise, she took of its fruit and ate. She also gave to her man (*'nôš*) with her, and he ate. ⁷Then the eyes of both of them were opened, and they knew that they were naked; and they sewed fig leaves together and made themselves coverings. ⁸And they heard the sound of the LORD God walking in the garden in the cool of the day, and the man (*'ādām*) and his woman (*'iššā*) hid themselves from the presence of the LORD God among the trees of the garden.

⁹Then the LORD God called to the man (*'ādām*) and said to him, "Where are you?" ¹⁰So he said, "I heard your voice in the garden, and I was afraid because I was naked; and I hid myself." ¹¹And He said, "Who told you that you were naked? Have you eaten from the tree of which I commanded you that you should not eat?" ¹²Then the man (*'ādām*) said, "The woman (*'iššā*) whom You gave to be with me, she gave me of the tree, and I ate." ¹³And the LORD God said to the woman (*'iššā*), "What is this you have done?" The woman (*'iššā*) said, "The serpent deceived me, and I ate." ¹⁴So the LORD God said to the serpent:

"Because you have done this, you are cursed more than all cattle, and more than every beast of the field; on your belly you shall go, and you shall eat dust all the days of your life. ¹⁵ And I will put enmity between you and the woman (*'iššā*), and between your seed and her Seed. He shall bruise your head, and you shall bruise His heel."

¹⁶ To the woman (*'iššā*) He said:

"I will greatly multiply your sorrow and your conception; in pain you shall bring forth children; your desire shall be for your man (*'iš*), and he shall rule over you."

¹⁷ Then to the man (*'ādām*) He said,

"Because you have heeded the voice of your woman (*'iššā*), and have eaten from the tree of which I commanded you, saying, 'You shall not eat of it': "Cursed is the ground for your sake; in toil you shall eat of it all the days of your life. ¹⁸ Both thorns and thistles it shall bring forth for you, and you shall eat the herb of the field. ¹⁹ In the sweat of your face you shall eat bread till you return to the ground, For out of it you were taken; for dust you are, and to dust you shall return."

²⁰And the man (*'ādām*) called his woman's (*'iššā*) name "Life" (*hawwā*) because she was the mother of all living. ²¹Also for the man (*'ādām*) and his woman (*'iššā*) the LORD God made tunics of skin, and clothed them.

²²Then the LORD God said, "Behold, the man (*'ādām*) has become like one of us, to know good and evil. And now, lest he put out his hand and take also of the tree of life, and eat, and live forever"-- ²³therefore the LORD God sent him out of the garden of Eden to till the ground from which he was taken. ²⁴So He drove out the man (*'ādām*); and He placed cherubim at the east of the garden of Eden, and a flaming sword which turned every way, to guard the way to the tree of life.

4: ¹Now the man (*'ādām*) was intimate with (*yādā*=to know) his woman (*'iššā*) LIFE (*hawwā*) and she conceived...

Gen 4: ²⁵Adam was intimate with his woman again, and she gave birth to a son and named him Seth, saying, "God has granted me another child in place of Abel, since Cain killed him." ²⁶Seth also had a son, and he named him Enosh. At that time men began to call on the name of the LORD.

5: ¹This is the written account of Adam's line. When God created Adam he made him in the likeness of God. ²He created them male and female and blessed them. And he called their name "Adam" in the day when they were created. ³When Adam had lived 130 years, he had a son in his own likeness, in his own image; and he named him Seth.

[NB the term *ādām* is used in 4:25 without any definite article, so is here rendered Adam.]

The Literality Issue

Let us make sure that one point is clear. Absolutely *no one* takes the *whole* of Genesis 1-3 literally. For example, in the first "day" God is said to have spoken, but the atmosphere was made only on the second day. Did God speak using literal sound waves? Most people take it that since there was no atmosphere for sound to travel in God did not literally "speak". Many Christians today say "God spoke to me" – but they usually do not imply any physical sound waves. Right from the start, then, the creation account signals to us that symbolic language is going to be used. Moreover, any sensible understanding of the creation passages, however much someone wants to be "literal", involves many further instances.

To illustrate this further we can look at the work of Henry Morris. It was Morris whose joint book *The Genesis Flood* in 1961, first helped spread to the general evangelical public the supposed "literalism" or "plain reading" of young-earth creationism ie the view that the earth was just a few thousand years old and made in 144 literal hours. Great scientists who were Christians throughout history had taken the view encapsulated by Francis Bacon (1561-1626) that God wrote two books: the "book of nature" and the "book of the Bible" and that science is the interpretation of nature and theology the interpretation of the Bible. Since God is the author both of nature and the Bible these two cannot contradict. But science and theology are both human activities, and both are fallible, so sometimes can appear to contradict – in which case we need simply to continue to reexamine and see if the apparent conflict resolves itself. Henry Morris, however, a sincere Christian but a hydraulics engineer with little understanding of hermeneutics, flatly rejected this long-held view, claiming:

the Scriptures, in fact, do not need to be "interpreted" at all, for God is well able to say exactly what he means.⁶

This presumably implies that Jesus was mistaken in imagining that

⁶ Morris (1984b) p. 47.

he had to “interpret” the Scriptures to the two on the Emmaus road, or to explain to his disciples what the parable of the sower meant. But with this idea, Morris then argued that high level scientific ideas could be deduced from this plain meaning. What is interesting, however, is that having proclaimed that he will take it all at its “plain meaning”, Morris then gets to the actual exegesis of Genesis 1-3 in his book *The Genesis Record*. Here we find that he *is* in fact “interpreting” it for us, and that actually he believes that ten important points in the creation accounts are not literal or the “plain meaning” but figurative. These are:

(a) Waters above the skies

Morris takes as a water vapour canopy which is steam not water.

(b) Dominion

These are, Morris says, “*military terms - first conquer, and then rule. In context, however, there is no actual conflict suggested.*”⁷

(c) The Rib

Morris emphasises that the ‘rib’ is really a ‘side’,⁸ but emphasises its immediate and ultimate spiritual interpretations rather than suppose Adam thereafter lopsided.

(d) “In the day you eat... dying you shall die” (2:17)

Morris has insisted, of course, that the word “day” is 24 hours throughout the passage. He also takes the prophesied “death” as physical. Logically, then, Adam should have physically died within 24 hours of his sin. Morris does not believe this, saying Adam: “*died both spiritually and (in principle) physically the very day he ...disobeyed.*”⁹ To say “in principle” is not a literal or plain understanding – the text says nothing about “in principle”.

(e) The Snake

The curse of the snake Morris takes as “*more than a reference to*

⁷ Morris (1976) p. 76.

⁸ Morris (1976) p. 100.

⁹ Morris (1976) p. 94.

the physical enmity between men and snakes’.¹⁰ Why does he do this when nothing more is specifically mentioned?

(f) Dust

On the snake’s gastronomic preferences Morris remarks: “*It would not “eat dust” in a literal sense, of course ... the expression is mainly a graphic figure of speech.*”¹¹

(g) Seed

In reference to the seed of the serpent’ and ‘seed of the woman’ Morris says: “*The term “seed” of course has a biological connotation, but this is not strictly possible here. Neither Satan, who is a spirit, nor the woman would be able to produce actual seed.*”¹² Why not? Snakes have biological offspring and so do women. Morris says the serpent’s seed is those who ‘*knowingly and willingly set themselves at enmity*’ with the people of God. This is a right interpretation but is not “plain” or literal at all.

(h) The Blood

Morris appears not to interpret literally Gen 4.10: ‘the voice of his brother’s blood cries unto me from the ground.’¹³ Elsewhere he adds: ‘*The blood of animals could only figuratively cover sins, of course.*’¹⁴

(i) Places

Morris does not take the plain sense of the biblical use of the place names before the flood, but thinks them ‘*carried over*’ and reapplied to entirely different post flood locations.¹⁵

(j) The ‘Days’

Morris allows the word ‘day’ in Gen 2:4 to mean ‘*the whole*

¹⁰ Morris (1977b) p. 76.

¹¹ Morris (1976) p. 119.

¹² Morris (1976) p. 121.

¹³ Morris (1976) p. 139.

¹⁴ Morris (1976) p. 119.

¹⁵ Morris (1976) p. 90; (1977b) p. 38.

period of creation’ i.e. six days,¹⁶ even though elsewhere he says that the word ‘never’ means a ‘*definite period of time with a specific beginning and ending*’.¹⁷

Now Henry Morris, as noted, was the most important young-earth creationist in history, the effective founder and most revered figure of the modern movement within the general evangelical church. But he simply could not maintain the nonsensical claim that “Scripture does not need interpreting” (his work is full of interpretation), nor the suggestion that it should all be taken in its “plain” or literal sense (these ten points are not literal). The Bible in general, and the creation accounts in particular, are simply not the same kind of literature as a hydraulics engineering textbook in which everything is presumably complex but literal.

Equally unsatisfactory is the approach implied in debate by prominent young-earth creationist John Mackay. Where at all possible, he suggested, we should take it literally, and only when absolutely forced to should we take it as symbolic. But in John 4:33 this would surely mean that the disciples were just applying the Mackay principle and rightly taking Jesus literally – whereas in fact we surely believe that they were showing a lack of spiritual understanding and of the way that Jesus and his Father use language? Mackay also argued that because a word has first to have a literal meaning before someone can adapt it to use metaphorically, so the first use of the word “day” in Genesis must be literal. Well of course a literal meaning does have to be there before a word is used metaphorically, but *not in any particular book*. Presumably people had a word for literal “day” from the beginnings of language, and the Hebrew word *yôm* had long been in common use when the human author of Genesis 1 compiled the creation account. Thus when Genesis first used figuratively words like “said” (1:3) and “day” (1:5), the literal meanings were already well established.

The core question, then, is not “is it all literal?” but “which parts

¹⁶ Morris (1976) p. 84; (1984b) p. 127.

¹⁷ Morris (1977b) p. 24; (1977) p. 60; (1984b) p. 127.

were meant to be literal and which symbolic?” This being so, how can anyone decide which are which? We need, of course, spiritual discernment, but we can also look at the context, the overall sense, and the approach taken in the New Testament on some of the issues. This last should be our starting point as Christians.

The Two Accounts and the Days

Day or days?

We are not going to be concerned here with whether or how far these two accounts (Gen 1 and Gen 2-3) had diverse sources. Few if any scholars today seriously believe that Moses sat down one day and wrote it all from scratch, but we may be happy to believe (as Jesus evidently did in Mathew 19) that both accounts were inspired by the same God. Even for those who do believe that the two were from different sources, plainly whoever put them in their present form did not see any contradiction between them.

But questions arise both about the time period and the order of events. To begin with, in Genesis 1 it is six days, in Genesis 2:4 it is “*the day*” in which God created. So was it one day or six days and were they literal? Henry Morris himself, supreme “literalist”, concedes:

The Hebrew word *yôm* can, if the context justifies, be translated ‘time’ in the general sense., and that the context of 2:4 ‘perhaps does justify such a meaning.’¹⁸

It is, then, pointless looking at the many uses of the word “day” throughout the Old Testament, which include both literal and metaphorical uses. It is the context that tells us whether a word is meant literally or not. Nor is there any point in inventing some arbitrary rule like “when followed by a number it is literal”, or “when it mentions evening and morning it is literal”. This would be like the Samaritan woman making up a rule such as “when someone says you won’t be thirsty again after talking about water then it must be literal”. The evening and morning are part of the imagery, if the day was meant figuratively then so are the evening

¹⁸ Morris (1976) p. 84.

and morning. Jesus told the story of the Good Samaritan and added in some unnecessary details like the donkey and the amount of money paid the innkeeper – but it was still a parable and its force does not depend on whether or not there was actually some literal event to which Jesus alludes.

What did Jesus say about the days?

So what did Jesus think about the “days”? Well, challenged one day concerning the Sabbath we find the following:

John 5: ¹⁶So, because Jesus was doing these things on the Sabbath, the Jews persecuted him. ¹⁷Jesus said to them, "My Father is always at his work to this very day, and I, too, am working."

This is interesting because it makes sense only if Jesus regards God as still in his “Sabbath”. The logic is that just as God is working in his divine Sabbath so Jesus is also working in the human Sabbath. But this means that the Sabbath of God was not 24 hours so that one could then ask “what did God do on the eighth day?” And if God’s seventh day was not a literal day, then why should the others be?

The Order of Events

The two accounts differ in the number of days, but also in the order. So does one account give the literal order whilst the other does not? The NIV (although notably not the NKJV, NASV, NRSV or any other version) tries to get around the question by translating Gen 2:19 as:

Now the LORD God *had formed* out of the ground all the beasts of the field and all the birds of the air.

Hebrew does not have a distinct pluperfect “tense”, and the verb here is no different from that when it said earlier:

And the LORD God *formed* the man from the dust of the ground.

The NIV rendering of 2:19 is *grammatically* possible, but would be a very unnatural way to take the sense in the whole sequence:

- There were no shrubs or plants yet (2:5) but a mist
- God formed man from the dust of the ground (2:7)

- God planted a garden and put the man into it and made trees grow (2:8)
- God said it was not good for man to be alone: “I will make an ally comparable to him” (2:18)
- God formed the animals and brought them to the man (2:19) who named them but “no suitable ally was found”
- God made woman (2:21)

Suppose, however, that Genesis 1 really did give the true chronological order, and Genesis 2 was intended to reflect this same order of events. Could the two be harmonized?

The first problem is that the Genesis 2 account begins (2:5) by saying explicitly that there was no vegetation yet. To harmonise the order with chapter 1 we would need to believe that between this and forming man in 2:7, God actually made the vegetation, the sun moon and stars, the sea creatures flying creatures and land animals. Only then did he make man etc. All of this would have to be “read in” from the information given in chapter 1. But would this make sense? If all this were the case then why on earth (as it were) start 2:5 with the deliberate statement that there was no vegetation yet? Why not get straight into the man bit?

The second problem is that God says “*I will make an ally...*” The obvious sense is that the proposed ally will come from some future creation – not from one made earlier. Yet the impression given is that the animals were being made and brought not only to be named but to see if any were suitable.

So unless we are willing to take an extraordinarily forced and unnatural reading of Genesis 2, the order differs radically from that in Genesis 1. Ironically, the only New Testament reference to chronology (1 Tim 2:13) apparently endorses the Genesis 2 chronology – yet modern supposed “literalists” usually take Genesis 1 to be the true chronology.

Most scholars, however, seem to conclude that it is just not that kind of literature. Genesis 1 tells us that things like “the deep” and the Sun moon and stars – which other societies took as gods – are just artifacts in the unfolding plan of God. The sun and moon are

“lamps”. This is, of course, observer language. Strictly speaking the sun is a lamp and the moon is a mirror. But the account is just not intended to carry that kind of information. In Genesis 1, the whole scene is set before humanity is made as the first organism to reflect directly the nature of God. As such, they are to have dominion or responsibility of stewardship.

Genesis 2 intends to make an entirely different point. Here the writer portrays the man (and in a sense *‘ādām* = humanity) as primary in the mind of God. This is why 2:5 says that not even the vegetation has been made yet. So humanity is formed – and the creation of vegetation in the garden is for him to dwell in. Land and air organisms are made as potential allies for humanity, the naming indicating understanding and stewardship. But between human and animal, affectionate though such a relationship can be, there is no relationship of an “ally comparable to him”. Animals, even other primates, do not have the kind of language and self-image humans do, which enables a relationship at the deepest level. So “finally” God forms that special form of human relationship, the relationship of relational “knowing” epitomized in the intimacy intended in marital sex. This relationship, God is saying, is something uniquely human. Moreover, taking the “side” re-emphasizes an ally-companion-equal, and that marriage is restoration of the complete human unit.

All these points are beautifully and powerfully made, in language that it has been possible for people in all ages to understand. The account identifies what is uniquely human:

- (i) Cognitive language (naming the animals, naming wo-man in a concept-carrying way)
- (ii) Moral responsibility (only *‘ādām* was given a moral command)
- (iii) Human relationship based on knowledge of each other possible only with human language – epitomized in the “knowing” or “intimacy” of marital sex.
- (iv) Cognitive recognition of the equality of the sexes as comparable “allies” in marriage

Trying to read the account as though it were a modern scientific text replaces eg the grandeur of a statement about the nature of human language, with a picture of God flying in all the millions of land and air species from all over the globe so that the man could name them all on the afternoon of the sixth day before woman was created. All this would be for a uniquely modern obsession with “literality” that cannot even be consistently maintained.

Traditional Theology and the Days

In popular culture it is generally imagined that until recently most Christians “took Genesis literally” and that only post-Darwin have some more “liberal” theologians sought to “compromise” by trying to symbolize it all away. But this is demonstrably false. Actually, the supposed “literalism” regarding the “days” and time order is largely a phenomenon new to the last half of the twentieth century as we shall see. In contrast, the overwhelmingly predominant view of the “days” amongst both Jewish and Christian commentators in the millennium or so after Christ was that they were neither literal 24 hour periods nor gave us the “scientific” time order of events.

Amongst Jews, for example, there are the renowned philosopher-theologian Philo (c15BC-50AD) who was a contemporary of Jesus and Paul. Philo emphatically assumes that Genesis was inspired and written by Moses, but writes:

He says that in six days the world was created, not that its Maker required a length of time for His work, for we must think of God as doing all things simultaneously, remembering that “all” includes with the commands which He issues the thought behind them. Six days are mentioned because for the things coming into existence there was a need of order... For it was requisite that the world, being most perfect of all things that have come into existence, should be constituted in accordance with a perfect number, namely six.¹⁹

The rabbi sages who wrote the Midrash also held a non-literal view. Leading authority Samuelson declares:

¹⁹ *On the Creation* Philo 13-14.

... the sages agree that the creation of this earth and sky was a single divine event and not a series of distinct occurrences spread out over six or seven days.²⁰

Rashi (1040-1105) remains the most important commentator for orthodox Jews even today.²¹ He says:

The text does not intend to point the order of the [acts] of creation... the text does not by any means teach which things were created first and which later [it only] wants to teach us what was the condition of things at the time when heaven and earth were created, namely, that the earth was without form and a confused mass.²²

Rashi actually argues from the Hebrew syntax itself that “The text does not intend to point out the order of the acts of Creation.”

The third most renowned Jewish commentator was philosopher-exegete Maimonides (1135-1204) Maimonides believes that everything was created at once but was afterwards separated into its different forms.²³

Finally, a renowned Jewish scholar critical of Maimonides but also influential even until the nineteenth century was Gersonides (1288-1344). For Gersonides too, the order in the Genesis account indicates the priority not the order of created things.²⁴

Turning to leading early Christian Bible teachers, the position is very similar. Justin Martyr (c109-165) refers to a contemporary view that each day was 1000 years to explain how Adam died “in the day” he ate the fruit²⁵; Clement of Alexandria (c155-220) has a complex symbolic view²⁶; Origen (c185-254) says that “no man

²⁰ *Judaism and the Doctrine of Creation* N M Samuelson (1994) p. 115.

²¹ On a visit to an orthodox synagogue in 2006 Rashi figured highly in the marginal commentary on the book of biblical extracts they used, and the visitors were told that Rashi remained the most important single commentator today..

²² *Commentary on Genesis* Rashi 1(1)

²³ Maimonides *The Guide to the Perplexed On Genesis 1-4*

²⁴ Gersonides *The Wars of the Lord* 70.

²⁵ Justin *Dialogue* 82 (*Ant Nic Fath* 1 p. 240). This is also in the Talmud *Genesis Rabbah* 19:8.

²⁶ Clement *Miscellanies* vi.16 (*Ant Nic Fath* 2.514).

of intelligence” takes it that literally “the first and the second and the third day, in which there are said to be both morning and evening, existed without sun and moon and stars, while the first day was even without a heaven”²⁷; whilst Augustine of Hippo (c354-430) in a book called “Genesis in the Literal Sense” has a highly symbolic understanding of the “day” and thinks that actually creation was instantaneous.²⁸ This symbolic view of Augustine predominated amongst the seventh century Celtic church, and the mediaeval scholastic biblical scholars.²⁹ *In other words, a symbolic understanding of the days in Genesis 1 predominated amongst both Jewish and Christian teachers for at least the first thirteen centuries after Christ.* Various types of non-literal view of the “days” predominated even into the founders of Christian “Fundamentalism” in the early twentieth century. An insistent biblical “literalism” on issues like the “days” is a recent invention in these days of modern materialism and physicalism.

This present little book focuses on the indications from Scripture itself, but this brief excursus has shown how clearly both early Jewish teachers who were fluent in the Hebrew thought forms and language of Genesis, and the earliest Christian teaching understood that though it was historical the language of the Genesis accounts eg on the days was not intended literally.

Days and the Sabbath Day

Those claiming to be “literalists” often state that Exodus 20, where the Sabbath is referred back to Genesis, indicates literal 24 hour periods, and imagine that the Sabbath started from creation. If this were true it would be very odd to find the consensus noted amongst generations of both Christian and Jewish scholars. It would also raise problems concerning Jesus’ words, considered above, which imply that the seventh day is not a literal 24 hour period. However, even if we consider the Old Testament Scripture

²⁷ Origen *First Principles* Bk 4 ch 3.

²⁸ J H Taylor (1982) p. 9.

²⁹ See also Marston and Forster (1999) and Marston and Forster (2000)

alone, we may also look at a quite similar Exodus passage that adds a further explanation:

Ex 31: ¹⁶ Therefore the children of Israel shall keep the Sabbath, to observe the Sabbath throughout their generations as a perpetual covenant. ¹⁷ It is a sign between me and the children of Israel forever; for in six days the LORD made the heavens and the earth, and on the seventh day He rested and was refreshed.' "

The Sabbath is clearly given here as a specifically Jewish thing, a sign between God and the children of Israel. Other nations are often berated for sins, but never for being uncircumcised or not keeping the Sabbath or eating pork; although other nations did have moral laws (like the Hammurabi code) none included a Sabbath. This, of course, is why these three things (the “works of the Law”) were the mark of being a Jew. This Jewish connection is reiterated in another part of the same Jewish Torah:

Deut 5: ¹²“Observe the Sabbath day by keeping it holy, as the LORD your God has commanded you. ¹³Six days you shall labour and do all your work, ¹⁴but the seventh day is a Sabbath to the LORD your God. On it you shall not do any work, neither you, nor your son or daughter, nor your manservant or maidservant, nor your ox, your donkey or any of your animals, nor the alien within your gates, so that your manservant and maidservant may rest, as you do. ¹⁵Remember that you were slaves in Egypt and that the LORD your God brought you out of there with a mighty hand and an outstretched arm. Therefore the LORD your God has commanded you to observe the Sabbath day.

The Sabbath, Jesus told us, was made for man, not man for the Sabbath (Mark 2:27). He was saying that it was not really that man had to fit in with a prior good experience of God (presumably God’s seventh day was only man’s second if it was literal?). Rather, the Sabbath ensured that servants, slaves, and the underprivileged all had this rest day – and in keeping it the powerful amongst the Israelites were to remember when their own ancestors were slaves and presumably lacked such a day in Egypt. The Sabbath was made for man.

It would, of course, be a nonsense to suppose that Almighty God, who faints not neither is weary, actually needed a rest. And what

did he do on the eighth day? Or the fourteenth day? Surely Jesus’ words need to be taken in their most profound sense? In his graciousness to his people Israel, God not only linked their Sabbath with their experiences of a lack of rest in slavery, but also pictured his own creative activity to them in symbolic terms that reinforced the principle.

The apostle Paul also makes it clear that the Sabbath was not a creation ordinance universal to mankind. He writes:

Rom 14: ⁵One man considers one day more sacred than another; another man considers every day alike. Each one should be fully convinced in his own mind.

Had the human Sabbath been in action from creation itself³⁰ this would surely have been a very odd thing to write? Of course there is a good principle that some time should be set aside for rest and worship, and early Christian leaders so dedicated Sunday. But there is nothing in the New Testament to instruct anyone to see Saturday or Sunday in this way and attempts to read it into oblique verses are forced. Paradoxically the would-be literalist McIntosh argues that the seven day cycle started at creation but that we can decide which day of the week it should be. This makes even less sense than the Seventh Day Adventists who began the modern supposed literalistic movement, who at least argued that the seven days had gone unbroken from creation (even though God’s seventh was man’s second which is confusing). However, Paul does not say “another man picks another day for his Sabbath” but quite explicitly “another man *considers all days alike.*” It is, he insists, a matter of individual choice and conscience whether there is a one-in-seven Sabbath or not. It is sad that enthusiasm for literalism (and a parallel enthusiasm for legalism) can lead well-meaning Christians to go against these plain words of the apostle. A Sabbath as such is no more imperative for Gentile believers than circumcision. No one can deny, of course, that in the dreadful days of wickedness and unchristian laws in nineteenth century Britain and America, when in one country young children were

³⁰ McIntosh (1997, 2001) eg clearly claims this, and totally ignores both Exodus 35 and Romans 14!

forced to work in factories until maimed and in the other slaves were treated worse than cattle, the preservation of Sunday as a day of rest was a small light in a very dark place. But in more humane times and places, where slaves and wage-slaves are emancipated, there may be other ways to ensure that a rest-principle is provided for the underprivileged.

Far, then, from being an argument for the literality of the 24 hour days, the Sabbath issues actually pose real difficulties for such literalism. Literalism would demean our God who needs no rest, cause confusion over the seventh vs second day, contradict Jesus' dictum that the Sabbath was made for man rather than man forced to commemorate a Sabbath reflecting a literal experience of God, and it could lead to a rejection of Paul's teaching on the non-universality of the Sabbath.

Of Snakes and Trees

The Serpent

The creation account of Genesis 2-3 has as a central character the serpent, so we need to identify who or what the serpent is. Taken on its crassly "literal" meaning, the account implies that:

- (i) This physical snake had a level of intelligence otherwise unique to humans
- (ii) This physical snake used language in the kind of cognitive and relational way that is otherwise unique to humans
- (iii) This physical snake was held morally responsible and was considered morally culpable by God for his actions



- (iv) As a result of God's judgment this snake could no longer walk upright, and would eat dust (though presumably retained the powers of speech as this is not mentioned).
- (v) Human descendants would henceforth hate snakes, and the snakes feel "enmity" towards humans.
- (vi) This particular snake would have his head crushed by one of the woman's descendants.

Some may claim that this is scientifically absurd because

- (a) Snakes are generally considered a bit less intelligent than mice and (outside of the *Hitchhikers Guide to the Galaxy*) neither have brains big enough to do all these things.
- (b) Snakes don't eat dust.
- (c) Snakes don't have the present mental capacity to feel "hatred" or "enmity", etc, these are functions of higher animals if not exclusively human.

Could it be that serpents *used to be* really clever, but lost it at the fall? The account says nothing of this, of course, and it is interesting that Jesus tells his followers as they go on mission: "Therefore be wise as serpents and harmless as doves." (Matt 10:16). This is in the present sense but surely Jesus is just adapting a common saying - it would be ludicrous to imagine this is a statement about biology. None of us would actually value missionaries with the intelligence of reptiles. This kind of literalism just isn't how language is used by Jesus.

When we look closely at the Genesis account there would also be huge theological objections to any idea that it is about a biological snake, say *sepentes callidus* or "smart-snake".

First, the whole drama of Gen 1:26-27 is that humanity is the *first* physical organism made in the image of God. God says: "Let us make mankind in our own image..." Throughout history, Bible teachers have understood this to mean (i) intelligence (ii) relational language (iii) moral responsibility and answerability. If

the serpent had all these, then this whole theology collapses, and God should have said “Let us make snakes in our own image...”

Secondly, Jesus himself gave some clear teaching on this passage. To his human opponents he says:

Matt 12: ³⁴You brood of vipers, how can you who are evil say anything good?

Matt 23: ³³"You snakes! You brood of vipers! How will you escape being condemned to hell?"

The “seed” (or descendant” – and the word can be singular or plural) of the woman was Jesus himself. In fact, Jesus was (as Christians believe) the only one in history who was actually the seed of a woman but not of a man! The “brood of vipers” was not physical snakes, but human opponents, and the descent was not physical. Genesis 3:15 is about “things concerning Himself” – not about snake biology.

Who then *was* the original “serpent”? Well Jesus also says:

John 8: ⁴³Why do you not understand my speech? Because you are not able to listen to my word. ⁴⁴You are of your father the devil, and the desires of your father you want to do. He was a murderer from the beginning, and does not stand in the truth, because there is no truth in him. When he speaks a lie, he speaks from his own resources, for he is a liar and the father of it.

The “father” of the “brood of vipers” was the devil (*diabolos*), the spiritual being who had tempted Jesus in the wilderness. This is actually a direct reference to the Genesis 2 passage. The very first lie was in Genesis 3:4: “You will not surely die” – and by it the “serpent” indirectly became the first murderer as well as the “father of lies”.

Genesis 2-3 is not about biology, nor about physical snakes. It is a symbolic representation of the first temptation of humankind by a spiritual *diabolos* or *Satan* portrayed as a serpent. Many today, of course, may doubt the existence of a spiritual realm at all, but it seems fairly central to the beliefs of those who follow Jesus and his apostles, and there is nothing inherently illogical about it.

But could there be *both* a physical snake *and* a *diabolos/Satan* behind it? There are several biblical reasons why not. First, it

unnecessarily complicates the text – and the usual motivation of those who suggest two of everything is the idea of “taking the text in its plain sense”. The “plain sense” would mean just a physical snake – with all the problems we have seen. Secondly, it leaves difficulties of whether the physical snake was intelligent, lingual, and morally culpable. If so, then snakes and not humans were the first physical creatures made in God’s image. But if the snake was none of these things, and *Satan* was simply using the snake, then the snake was a victim so why did God punish it?

Thirdly, the Bible itself tells us who the serpent was:

Rev 12:⁹The great dragon was hurled down—that ancient serpent called the devil, or Satan, who leads the whole world astray. He was hurled to the earth, and his angels with him.

Rev 20:²He seized the dragon, that ancient serpent, who is the devil, or Satan, and bound him for a thousand years.

The *devil* or *Satan* is here “the ancient serpent” – a clear reference to Genesis 3. Yet he is also a “dragon”. The whole point is that this is not *literal*. Revelation, as already noted, is a whole book of vivid symbolic imagery, it is about what is ultimately real but it isn’t meant literally. It says the *devil/Satan* is the ancient serpent, not that *Satan* used the ancient serpent. The whole idea of two serpents a physical snake and the spiritual *devil/Satan* desperately forces the biblical language. Moreover, to try to put two serpents into Genesis 3 – a physical one and a spiritual *Satan* - would be as absurd as to say that Jesus gave the woman at the well *both* spiritual living water *and* literal physical water. It misses the point of symbolic language.

The Tree of Life

The book of Revelation may also help us in regard to understanding the “tree of life”. God planted a garden in Eden, where the trees included the ‘tree of life’ (2:9) as well as the “tree of the knowledge of good and evil”. Are these literal trees? The other four Old Testament occurrences of this phrase ‘tree of life’ are all figurative (Prov 3:18, 11:30, 13:12, 15:4) – as are apocryphal references in 1 Enoch 24:4, 2 Enoch 8:3-9 and 2 Esdras 8:52. It is also mentioned in Revelation 2:7 as being

(present tense) ‘in the paradise of God’. The word ‘paradise’ (from the Persian for ‘park’ or ‘garden’³¹) is exactly the same word as used in the LXX³² of Gen 2:8 for ‘garden’ of Eden. Is it literal? The whole of Revelation is full of picture imagery, and to ‘take it literally’ would seem to be absurd. Revelation 21 describes how John saw “the great city, the holy Jerusalem, descending out of heaven from God”. This city has foundation parts named for the twelve (Jewish) tribes and twelve (Jewish) apostles, and is taken by most commentators to represent the people of God through whom the nations are blessed. John adds “But I saw no temple in it, for the Lord God Almighty and the Lamb are its temple.” The lamb is its illumination *and* Temple, but the “Lamb” is Christ not a literal illuminated lamb-shaped building. Then, in Revelation 22, we find:



Rev 22: ¹And he showed me a pure river of water of life, clear as crystal, proceeding from the throne of God and of the Lamb. ²In the middle of its street, and on either side of the river, was the tree of life, which bore twelve fruits, each tree yielding its fruit every month. The leaves of the tree were for the healing of the nations.

Is this a literal river of water of life? Surely no more so than the stream of living water Jesus offered the Samaritan woman at the well? So is the river *metaphorical* but the tree of life *literal*? Surely to try to make it so would be absurd. Only in our modern materialistic age, with its focus on the physical at the expense of the spiritual, could people imagine that in any such desperate struggle to introduce “literalism” they were honouring God. The “lamb” is not a mammal (a juvenile *ovis aries* with 54 chromosomes) but Jesus Christ. The river of life and tree of life are also pictures of the life in him, not H₂O and a piece of green

³¹ Morris (1987) p. 62.

³² The “Apocrypha” are books written between the Old and New Testaments. The LXX or Septuagint is a 2-3rd century BC Greek translation of the Old Testament current in Jesus and Paul’s day and sometimes used by Paul.

vegetation called *brachychiton vitalis*. Thus when the tasting of the ‘tree of life’ is linked with blessings for ‘washing one’s robes’ (22:14) it is not really about laundering - and the exclusion of ‘dogs’ (22:15) from the city need not concern literalist members of the canine defence league. Revelation is just not that kind of a book.

It is actually worth looking in detail at the deliberate parallels between the ‘first things’ in Genesis 2-3 and the ‘last things’ in the book of Revelation:

1. The heavens and earth were completed (Gen 2.1).
I saw a new heaven and a new earth (Revn 21.1).
2. The Lord God brought the woman to the man (Gen 2:22).
The bride/wife (which is the city) comes down from God for her husband who is the second Man (Revn 19:7, 21:2 & 10).
3. The gold is good and the bdellium and onyx stone (Gen 2.12).
The city is gold, jasper and precious stones (Revn 21:18-19).
4. There is a river flowing which divides into four rivers (Gen 2:10).
There is a river of the water of life (Revn 22:1).
5. There is a tree of life in the midst of the ‘garden of Eden’ (Gen 2:9; 3:22).
There is a tree of life in the ‘garden (paradise) of God’(Revn 2:7) on both sides of the river (?) with twelve fruits, and leaves for the healing of the nations (Revn 22:2).
6. Cursed are you more than all cattle - cursed is the ground (Gen 2:14; 2:17).
Every curse will be no longer (Revn 22:3).
7. The serpent (Gen 3, cf 2 Cor 11:3).
The serpent is Satan (Revn 12:9), is bound (20:2), and thrown into the lake of fire (20:10).
8. The serpent said ‘You shall not surely die’ (Gen 3:4 cf Jn 8:44).
Nothing unclean shall enter it, or one practising abomination or a lie. (Revn 21:27).

Note again that it makes no sense to say that there are two of everything: a literal and symbolic form. Jesus did not offer the Samaritan woman spiritual water of life *and* literal H₂O from a bucket. Jesus is not figuratively a Lamb *and* literally a juvenile specimen of *ovis aries*. So logically why should we expect there to be both a spiritual “tree of life” *and* a literal *brachychiton vitalis*?

So what about the tree of the “knowing good and evil”? If it was just a literal tree (perhaps *brachychiton conscio*) then why did God not just put it outside the garden (or put an electric fence around it) to save all that trouble later? But if it actually symbolically represents the possibility of the experiential knowledge of good and evil, then it represents a moral sense and the freedom to choose to experience evil. And if, indeed, it is symbolic of this divine gift to humanity of moral responsibility and choice, then it represents a central part of what constitutes being “made in the image of God”. The “tree” symbolised something in the human make-up, and for God to “omit it” would have meant to make a different kind of being entirely. Had he done so, humanity would have been automata and not in the image of God.

The serpent lied because humanity was *already* in the image of God because they had moral sense and choice. The *experiential* knowledge of evil, in a sense, made them “wise”, but did not make them like God as the serpent said, because God has no experiential knowledge of evil. The whole picture is certainly not a myth nor a fairy story, but neither is it about a couple of biological trees. It is a powerful symbolic portrayal of human choice between the experiential knowledge of evil and the tree of life which is Christ.

We should note that none of this is anything to do with “science”. It comes simply from trying to follow the Jesus who showed the two believers on the Emmaus road how the Old Testament should be interpreted as saying “things concerning himself”. The tree of life is not about biology, it is a “thing concerning himself”. The snake is not about biology it is about Satan, and its future conflict with the “seed of the woman” is a “thing concerning himself”. To interpret the creation passages in this kind of a way is simply to be a follower of Jesus Christ and to recognise his pre-eminence.

The Creation of Humanity

The language used about human creation in these early chapters of Genesis is highly complex. The “*ādām*” as first introduced is humanity, male and female, and is formed from ordinary chemical elements found in the ground (the word for “ground” being *ādāmā*). Some of the more literalistic elements of rabbinic thought even presumed that the original *ādām* was hermaphrodite!

The account in chapter 2 then pictures God as making a series of animals and birds, each as a potential mate for the *ādām*. As already noted, we need not imagine a literal hermaphrodite *ādām* sitting sipping his cocoa on the veranda on the first Friday afternoon, and weighing up whether each one of perhaps 800,000 specially flown in kind of creatures from the aardvark to the zebra via the kangaroo (including eg 417 genera of snakes) would make a suitable mate. God did not really need to make innumerable bungled stabs at making a suitable mate before hitting on the right idea – and it would be demeaning to insist on this kind of crude literalism in a passage which is making a profound point about humankind’s unique use of language and the uniqueness of human relationship.

So, from the *ādām*, Genesis says that God took the *ṣēlā* ‘ = rib/side to make the *’iššā* (woman), leaving the *’iš* (man). Though some commentators retain “rib”,³³ in most of the other 40 Old Testament uses it means “side”, and the LXX Greek version translated it *pleura* which also elsewhere (eg Num 33:55, 2 Kings 2:2) means “side”. Thus the first century Jewish commentator Philo (who had an absolute belief in the divine authority of the passage) denied that the account contained “mythical fictions”, but concluded that since men are not now lopsided the account was meant symbolically not literally.³⁴ The “golden throated” great

³³ Hamilton (1990) p.178 argues for “side”.

³⁴ Philo *The Second Book of the Treatise on The Allegories of the Sacred Laws* vii.20; *On the Creation* 13-14. See also Marston (2000b) for a more general Jewish treatment.

Christian orator and preacher John Chrysostom (c334-407) likewise wrote:

Don't take the words in human fashion; rather, interpret the concreteness of the expressions from the viewpoint of human limitations. You see, if he had not used these words, how would we have been able to gain knowledge of these mysteries, which defy description?³⁵

Commentators have long recognized the symbolism of the “side”, as an ally-equal comparable to him. But the account is theological/symbolical, it is not about biology. Philo could see this in the first century, Chrysostom in the fourth, and so most Christian leaders have seen it until these present days of materialistic literalism.³⁶

The reuniting of the *'iššâ* (woman) and *'iš* (man) occurs in marriage to make a cleaving “item” of a single humanity-flesh. Jesus, in Matthew 19, insists that the purpose of this divinely inspired passage is to teach God's intentions that marriage should be heterosexual (from 1:27) and involve a permanent “cleaving” or one man and one woman to make the married unit.

Notably it is the *'ādām* (the humanity) that is pictured as the one recognizing (using language which categorises and does not just describe) the nature of *'iššâ* (woman) as taken out of the *'ādām* (humanity) to leave the *'iš* (man). The recognition of the special nature of humanity is a function of humanity itself, it is not particularly a male thing, so perhaps for this reason it is the *'ādām* and not the *'iš* that is pictured as making this recognition.

Coming back to the text, it is *after* they took the forbidden fruit that in Genesis 3:21 the man first called the woman “Eve”, and the Genesis writer adds “because she was the mother of all living.” But is “Eve” a name? Interestingly, the LXX or Septuagint, the 2-3rd century BC Greek translation of the Old Testament that was

³⁵ *Homily 15*. See also Marston and Forster (1999) ch.7.

³⁶ Luther, in his commentary, was a rare exception – admitting that it sounded like a fairy story but saying we had to believe it anyway. In this unusual literalism he consciously departed from his usual (and wiser!) earlier mentors Augustine and Hilary.

used by New Testament writers, does not transliterate the letters here as though it were a name, but simply renders it as Ζωη, ie ‘Zoe’ which just means “LIFE”. Some other Jewish figures likewise doubted it was a name here. In Gen 4:1, however, the LXX transliterates the Hebrew as Εὐαν or (*Evan*) perhaps now regarding this as a name. Obviously in making a general point Paul (2 Cor 11:3; 1 Tim 2:13) can refer to “Eve” being formed and then tempted, but in strict terms in the Genesis passage itself:

- (i) Even in Gen 4:1 the word “Adam” is not used as a proper name until at the earliest in Genesis 4, the term just means “the man”.
- (ii) “Eve” is not used at all until after the temptation and fall
- (iii) “Eve” may well not be thought of as a name but rather as a symbolic title until 4:1 when *ādām* is used with the definite article – the NAS and NASU correctly render it “the man”, in the context of sex with “the woman” now called “Eve”.

The very first use of the term *ādām* without the definite article (or an associated preposition) is in Genesis 4:25: “And *ādām* knew his woman again, and she bore a son named Seth.” Then Genesis 5 turns specifically to the genealogies, going back to Seth and the Adam. The reference is back to Genesis 1:26-27. Yet, even then, the use of the term *ādām* – now in 5:1-3 *without* any definite article – is enigmatic. Is “Adam” without the definite article, then, a name? Well ironically 5:2 says that God called *their* name Adam – ie the male and female *collectively* were called “Adam”. Let us reiterate, in the only place in the creation accounts where it specifically says that “Adam” is a name, the name refers to both male and female. Their third son, Seth, is born when the man is 130 years old, and Cain has already had a family and built a city.

Genesis chapter 4 contains the account of Cain and Abel. Let us first consider the deeper meaning. To many, it may seem a mystery why Cain, a vegetable farmer and possibly even a vegetarian, should have had his gift rejected, whilst Abel, the herder of flocks, did not. But anthropologists generally recognise that the nomadic, hunting, flock herding peoples tend to have a

different social structure from those who inhabit settlements with agriculture. With agriculture comes the value of land, and with this ownership, and with this a social structure much more with rich and poor. It also leads to more conflict because settlements tend to enlarge, form alliances, and compete. Ironically, then, settlement and agriculture may lead to more human violence. At one level, then, this speaks of the violence introduced into human culture by settlement. But are Cain and Abel also individuals?

Gen 4: ³And in the process of time it came to pass that Cain brought an offering of the fruit of the ground (*ādāmā*) to the LORD... ⁹Then the LORD said to Cain, "Where is Abel your brother?" He said, "I do not know. Am I my brother's keeper?" ¹⁰And He said, "What have you done? The voice of your brother's blood cries out to me from the ground (*ādāmā*). ¹¹So now you are cursed from the ground (*ādāmā*), which has opened its mouth to receive your brother's blood from your hand. ¹²When you till the ground (*ādāmā*), it shall no longer yield its strength to you. A fugitive and a vagabond you shall be on the earth." ¹³And Cain said to the LORD, "My punishment is greater than I can bear! ¹⁴Surely you have driven me out this day from the face of the ground (*ādāmā*); I shall be hidden from Your face; I shall be a fugitive and a vagabond on the earth, and it will happen that anyone who finds me will kill me." ¹⁵And the LORD said to him, "Therefore, whoever kills Cain, vengeance shall be taken on him sevenfold." And the LORD set a mark on Cain, lest anyone finding him should kill him.

Plainly some elements of the account are meant to be symbolic: the ground does not literally have a mouth and does not cry out anything (any more than snakes talk). Another mysterious element of the account, if the individuals are meant literally, is in Cain's response. The usual response to the old chestnut question: "Where did Cain get his wife from?" is easily answered as a sister, born to Adam and Eve, but not named because only the males are mentioned. But even allowing for a couple of sisters at this time, if we take the account at its literal face value Cain apparently had no brothers (only Abel whom he had just killed). So to say: "...it will happen that anyone who finds we will kill me" seems to indicate an exceptionally nervous disposition bordering on paranoia and

looking into some distant future. Moreover, the account goes on to say:

Gen 4: ¹⁶Then Cain went out from the presence of the LORD and dwelt in the land of Nod on the east of Eden. ¹⁷And Cain was intimate with his woman, and she conceived and bore Enoch. And he built a city, and called the name of the city after the name of his son Enoch.

This is, as far as the account indicates, before even Adam has had another son Seth: Cain built a named "city". This word is used over a thousand times in the Old Testament. It usually refers to a walled substantial structure, sometimes with dependent villages or towns, and at the very least refers to some kind of fortified village. Having been frightened of being a "fugitive and vagabond", Cain now builds a city. This clearly does not sound like the language of a man for whom the only other male dwellers on earth at the time are literally his dad Adam and his own baby son Enoch. A city is, however, the next step on from a settlement.

We cannot be dogmatic about this, but there surely must be some doubt as to how far the Genesis writer intended us to take it as a straight literal account of a dad and two brothers who were the only three men around.

Adam and Eve and the New Testament

Introduction

It is beyond doubt that if we look to Jesus and the New Testament to guide us, then much of Genesis 2-3 has to be understood as being couched in highly symbolic language. But what about the man *ādām* and the woman *'iššā*?

Before we look at the texts, we need to note one important thing about the use of language. On January 27th 2007 in the British Parliament, David Taylor MP made the following reference to the head of the airline Ryanair who had just made some controversial statements:

He appears to wish to present himself as the Robin Hood of the modern world in maintaining access for poorer people to cheaper holidays. However, in reality, is he not the Al Capone of the

aviation industry, defending the indefensible, trying to create a taxation-free zone, with an arrogance and breathless contempt for politicians which he revealed in his comments; (Reported in *Hansard*)

So we can ask “Does David Taylor believe that both Robin Hood and Al Capone were historical figures?” We all, of course, know the stories of Robin Hood, Maid Marion, Friar Tuck, Little John and the dastardly sheriff and king John (1199-1216). But historians know of no reference before 1377, and Maid Marion and Friar Tuck are certainly later additions. Maybe there really was a real Robin Hood, maybe not, but the line from David Taylor does not tell us whether or not he believes in the Robin of legend, believes in *any* kind of Robin Hood at all, or whether he thinks the boss of Ryanair believes in a historical Robin Hood either. It is just not his point. “Robin Hood” is a part of our collective culture, we all instantly know what David Taylor means – and his meaning depends neither on whether he believes there was a real Robin Hood nor whether there actually was.

On the 23rd March 2005 Baroness Noakes in the British House of Lords made the reference to an earlier Hardman lecture of Lord Howe:

He started his speech with the arresting thought that if taxes had existed in the Garden of Eden, the serpent would not have needed an apple; the prize of a simpler tax system alone would have seduced Eve. (*Lords Hansard*)

Did Lord Howe believe in a literal Eve and serpent, or that the fruit was really an “apple”? Again this text gives us no way of knowing this. It is simply not the point. The serpent and Eve are a part of our collective culture, and we all know what the Baroness and Lord Howe mean. Their meaning is not dependent either on whether they believe there really was an Eve, or on whether there in fact was.

Now of course “Adam” and “Robin Hood” are dissimilar for Christians, because “*ādām*” is not a figure built up in legend but a term in the divinely inspired account of creation. Of course we also know that Jesus and the New Testament writers all totally accepted that the Genesis accounts were divinely inspired,

whereas Baroness Noakes and Lord Howe may or may not do so. But the key point here is that we need to be very careful in concluding that, because someone makes a reference to a famous figure in their cultural history, they believe that figure is literally as the accounts hold. It is quite possible to draw some lesson for a contemporary situation with such a reference, without meaning to imply anything about the literality of the figure cited.

The Gospels

Jesus himself, as noted, believed (as do his evangelical followers today) that the creation accounts were inspired by God. He presumably saw no contradiction between the account in Genesis 1 and that in Genesis 2-3 because, as a Jew, he was disinterested in chronology or time order. A Jewish figure like Jesus would not be at all concerned, for example, that Matthew 4 and Luke 4 give a different order for his temptations in the wilderness. It wasn't the point, any more than Genesis 2-3 was meant to teach the order of events – or for that matter cosmology and biology. In Matthew 19 Jesus refers to Genesis 1:26-27 for the male-female element in marriage, and Genesis 2:24 to show that the leaving of parents and cleaving together to become a permanent “item” are central to God's intentions. Had the accounts simply been literal history (and in contradiction over the order of events) they would have said nothing about God's intentions. To Jesus, however, the whole point of the two accounts is that they are to teach us different things about God's intentions. They tell us that God intended sex to be the experience of intimacy and deep knowing within permanent, monogamous, heterosexual marriage. Jesus links the two accounts together because *they both teach God's intentions*, not time order, cosmology and biology. To try to make them to be about cosmology and biology does not support but rather undermines this understanding of why they are there.³⁷

³⁷ The present writer has also written books which rely heavily on this meaning of the creation accounts as seen by Jesus, including *The Biblical Family* (1980), *God and the Family* (1984), *Gay-Partnerships and the Jesus-Centred Church* (2006) and *Christians, Divorce and Remarriage* (2006).

The only direct reference in the gospels to “Adam” (as the Hebrew word is transliterated in the Greek of the New Testament) is in Luke 3:38 where Luke enigmatically gives Jesus’ genealogy back to “of Enos of Seth of Adam of God”. This (as Jude 14) relates directly to Genesis 5 as we have seen. But we need to take great care with Hebrew genealogies. Matthew 1:1, for example, says:

The book of the genealogy of Jesus Christ the son of David the son of Abraham.

This is pretty specific – the “son of” is even more specific than just “of”. The plain meaning would be that Abraham was literally Jesus’ grandad, though obviously the writer knew that this was not the case. But then he goes on to say there were fourteen generations between Abraham and David, another fourteen to the Babylonian captivity, then fourteen to Jesus. So is *this* literal and plain? Well, a scholarly commentary notes:

Matthew or his source has deliberately arranged the fourteens by not inconsiderable omissions.[Hagner (1993) p.6]

Why did Matthew do this? We cannot be sure. Some suggest that it was because Hebrew letters have numerical values, and “David” has the value 14. Others, that this means that the post-Christ age is entering the seventh seven, the period of perfection and fulfilment. Whatever was in his mind, the writer evidently regarded the symbolic number issues as more important than a strict literality in his genealogy. This is reminiscent of how the first century Jew Philo explained the seven days of creation. But it shows that Hebrew genealogies were produced with other agenda than strict literality. How odd, then, that dear old Archbishop Ussher in the 1600s thought he could just add up the literal ages and calculate the date of Adam as around 4004BC. Certainly “the father of”, “the son of” and “begat” or “fathered” were all used loosely by Hebrew writers like Matthew. Luke’s enigmatic “Enos of Seth of Adam of God” cannot be taken as though an entry in a modern registry of births and deaths.

Paul

The only apostle who refers back to Adam is Paul. So does he give a clear indication as to whether “Adam” is a named individual?

Here are the passages, trying to show translations which most directly reflect the original Greek text:

Rom 5 ¹²Therefore, as through one man sin entered into the world, and death through sin; and so death passed unto all men, for that all sinned:-- ¹³for until the law sin was in the world; but sin is not imputed when there is no law. ¹⁴Nevertheless death reigned from Adam until Moses, even over them that had not sinned after the likeness of Adam's transgression, who is a figure of him that was to come.

¹⁵ But not as the trespass, so also (is) the free gift. For if by the trespass of the one the many died, much more did the grace of God, and the gift by the grace of the one man, Jesus Christ, abound unto the many. ¹⁶And not as through one that sinned, (so) is the gift: for the judgment (came) of one unto condemnation, but the free gift (came) of many trespasses unto justification. ¹⁷For if, by the trespass of the one, death reigned through the one; much more shall they that receive the abundance of grace and of the gift of righteousness reign in life through the one, (even) Jesus Christ. ¹⁸So then as through one trespass (the judgment came) unto all men to condemnation; even so through one act of righteousness (the free gift came) unto all men to justification of life. ¹⁹For as through the one man's disobedience the many were made sinners, even so through the obedience of the one shall the many be made righteous.

²⁰And the law came in besides, that the trespass might abound; but where sin abounded, grace did abound more exceedingly: ²¹that, as sin reigned in death, even so might grace reign through righteousness unto eternal life through Jesus Christ our Lord. (ASV)

1 Cor 15: ²¹For since by man came death, by Man also came the resurrection of the dead. ²²For as in Adam all die, even so in Christ all shall be made alive. (NKJV)

[note: NASU has “a man” which is also possible]

1 Cor 15: ⁴⁵So also it is written, "The first man, Adam, became a living soul." The last Adam became a life-giving

spirit. ⁴⁶However, the spiritual is not first, but the natural; then the spiritual. ⁴⁷The first man is from the earth, earthy; the second man is from heaven. ⁴⁸As is the earthy, so also are those who are earthy; and as is the heavenly, so also are those who are heavenly. ⁴⁹Just as we have borne the image of the earthy, we will also bear the image of the heavenly. (NASU)

2 Cor 11: ²For I am jealous for you with a godly jealousy; for I betrothed you to one husband, so that to Christ I might present you as a pure virgin. ³But I am afraid that, as the serpent deceived Eve by his craftiness, your minds will be led astray from the simplicity and purity of devotion to Christ. (NASU)

1 Tim 2: ¹¹Woman should learn in quietness and lawful-submission. ¹²I do not permit a woman to teach or to usurp authority over a man, but to be in quietness. ¹³For Adam was formed first, then Eve. ¹⁴And Adam was not deceived, but the woman being deceived, fell into transgression. ¹⁵Nevertheless she³⁸ will be saved in the childbearing if they continue in faith, love, and holiness, with self-control. (mostly NKJV!)

In the Romans passage Paul begins by noting that where there is no moral awareness (ie a consciousness of a moral law), then there is no sin (5:13). We may eg speak of a “bad dog”, but we mean simply that its behaviour is not what we want – only humans have an awareness of morality and so commit “sin”. We should not be misled on this either by childhood stories of Peter Rabbit or by nature films that sometimes ascribe human emotions and thinking processes to animals. Paul’s immediate point is that the Jewish Law, like the command given to Adam who was a “type” or allegory of the coming one, contained *specific* commandments. Yet, plainly, between Adam and Moses sin and death *did* reign, so people *did* have a moral sense whether or not it was associated with a specific commandment. The specific Jewish Law brought by Moses simply increased that awareness of morality and sin.

³⁸ The NIV “women will be saved through childbearing” is inaccurate. The NKJV is surely correct in referring it back to “the woman” and the thought it not well expressed by “women”.

Romans 5 compares the human act which first released a sin-principle into the world, with the act of Jesus which brought reconciliation. We may note firstly that there is no concept here (nor anywhere else in the Bible) of some kind of guilt inherited from Adam. The idea of inherited guilt was invented by Augustine in the 5th century, based centrally on a misunderstanding of the Greek *eph ho* (in that = because) in Romans 5:12. The doctrine is flatly contradicted by the basic teaching in Deut 24:16:

Fathers shall not be put to death for their children, nor children put to death for their fathers; each is to die for his own sin.

A family background can have a bad effect on up to three or four generations (Exodus 20:5), and David (in the extremity of his grief at his realization of sin) could poetically speak of a sin-saturated origin (Psalm 51:5³⁹), but there is never any concept of genetically inherited guilt. Whatever our view of “Adam”, the idea of genetically inherited guilt is theologically wrong and unacceptable. ⁴⁰Spiritual death spread to all humans *because* they all have sinned.

This can be reinforced in two ways. Firstly, Paul’s basic approach to “last things” and the spiritual realm was Pharisaic (see Acts 23:6), though it was totally transformed by the centrality of the work of Jesus the Messiah and the clarity of vision that faith was (and always had been) the *central* feature of a holy life in right-relationship with God. Now the book of 2 Baruch, which dates from around AD 100, was probably translated (into Syriac) from Hebrew. It contains the following interesting passage:

For although Adam sinned first and has brought death upon all who were not in his own time, yet each of them who has been born from him has prepared for himself the coming torment. And further, each of them has chosen for himself the coming glory. For truly the one who believes will receive reward. But now, turn yourselves to destruction, you unrighteous ones who are living

³⁹ To take, as does Augustine, this cry of anguish as sober theology would be as foolish as to take Psalm 51:4 (Against you and you only have I sinned) as a basis for a theology that we can only sin against God. In any case, even if taken literally verse 5 does not mention inherited guilt.

⁴⁰ See also Marston & Forster (1999) in the Appendix.

now, for you will be visited suddenly, since you have rejected the understanding of the Most High. For his works have not taught you, nor has the artful work of his creation which has always existed persuaded you. Adam is, therefore, not the cause, except only for himself, but each of us has become his own Adam.⁴¹

The Adam-sin thing was in Jewish thought at the time of Paul, but the concept is of every member of humanity “becoming his own Adam” – all have sinned! Is this Paul’s concept?

Paul’s own language indicates that this is indeed most likely to be his meaning. The “because all men sinned” is a similar idea to each of us becoming his own Adam, so sin and death spread. Most commentators accept that Romans 5-6 gives the objective truths largely repeated subjectively in Romans 7-8. Paul’s word in Romans 5: “death spread to all men, because all sinned.” could be taken in conjunction with later words in Romans 7:9: “I was alive once without the law, but when the commandment came, sin revived and I died.” Paul speaks, of course, of spiritual death, and this came to him, he says, at the point where he first realized the moral compulsion of a law of God, and then broke it. He is recording, in his own life, the principle “death spread to all men because all men sinned.” This also refers back to Romans 3:21: “all have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God”.

Paul’s language, rendered by the ASV in a fairly direct way, is convoluted and complex. He makes one central point of comparison. Through the first act of human sin a sin-principle (“Sin”) was let loose in the world which revives (cf 7:9) in each one of us when we first feel the authority of a moral law and chose to break it, leading to our spiritual death. Likewise, through the act of obedience of Jesus the Messiah a grace of God was released, which more than restores those who choose to accept God’s free offer of forgiveness and transformation. Obviously the comparison of “one man’s act” is strong here, but what does it tell us about the literality of the Eden story? Well Paul’s theme is the centrality and cosmic significance of the work of Jesus the Messiah, not the

⁴¹ 2 Baruch 54:15-19 tr A Kiljn in *The Old Testament Pseudepigrapha*, Vol 1 (1983).

nature of the Genesis account. Thus, for example, Paul says that sin entered the world through the act of one *man*. If the Genesis account is literal, then what about the woman? Who sinned first, the man or the woman (or indeed the serpent who was in the world when he told a lie and was later punished for it)? In 1 Tim 2:14 Paul says: “Adam was first formed, then Eve. And Adam was not deceived but the woman being deceived fell into transgression”. This reflects her claim in Genesis that “the serpent deceived me and I ate”, but the word “transgression” is the same as that used for Adam’s “transgression” in Rom 5:14. Paul uses “transgression” and “sin” virtually interchangeably in Romans 5. There is no indication here, or in the judgement of God in Genesis 3, that her being “deceived” meant she had not sinned. So if Paul was meaning in Romans 5 to imply that he took Genesis 2 as a literal account then why not say: “As through one *woman* sin first entered the world, and death through sin...”? or even more strictly “As through one serpent sin first entered the world...”? To say “As by one man sin entered the world...” is simply not true if the account in Genesis 2-3 is literal or plain.

It is so odd that some people have casually assumed that Paul’s language here reinforces a literal understanding of Genesis 2-3 when in fact it does no such thing. Either Paul had not read the account properly (a view that no evangelical could accept and which seems even more absurd in the light of 1 Tim 2:14), or he was really not intending to make a man called “Adam” the first sinner. Perhaps in Romans 5 he is thinking of “Adam” the name as given to *male and female* in Genesis 5:2.

He created them male and female, and blessed them and called them Mankind (‘*ādām*) in the day they were created. (NKJV).

This would differ from 1 Tim 2 where “Adam” is the man, but then this ambiguity exists in the original Genesis passages, and a quite different point in being made. Paul’s language, moreover, is quite loose, and we do not take “all men” to exclude women.

Paul’s second passage, in 1 Corinthians, is even more clearly using the term “Adam” in the sense of “old humanity”, and “Christ” as the one of whom the church is said to be the body (1 Cor 12:27). The “‘*ādām*” as formed from dust was humanity,

before the separation into man and woman. To be “in Adam” is to dwell in the old humanity, to be “in Christ” is to be a part of the one New Man (Eph 2:15) which is Christ. So here Paul is using “Adam” and “Christ” as collective entities. Christ is also the “heavenly man” – the man entirely directed by the Spirit as Christians believe they too one day will be in a “spiritual body”. Some other early Jewish sources also play with the idea of a second or heavenly Adam. Paul adapts it and transforms it – but it would be impossible to try to make all his references here to “Adam” mean a named individual male in a literal garden.

The 2 Corinthians 11:2-3 reference shows just how fluidly Paul used symbolic language. The church is pictured as a chaste bride of Christ – a symbolism repeated in Revelation 18; 23; 19:7; 21:2; 21:8; 22:17. No one, of course, takes it that the church will one day become a literal woman. What a striking contrast here between the church-bride faithful and chaste, and EVE who was deceived. Does this mean that the story of Eve and the serpent has to be literal? Well Paul says “I espoused you a chaste virgin (bride)” – he doesn’t say “*like* a chaste virgin”. He does not, moreover, *tell* them he is going to use symbolic language, he just expects them (and us) to discern it. He is writing to the same church to whom he earlier compared “Adam” (the old humanity) and “Christ” (the New Man). Eve, then, is the old humanity in its feminine form, whilst the church the new humanity also shown as a feminine form. Eve was weak and deceived, the church (he hopes!) strong and faithful and chaste. There is much more here than simply picking out some individual whose name was Eve who got tempted by a snake. The same serpent who deceived the old humanity also wants to deceive the New Man, the church, the bride of Christ. We see how the symbolism is fluid – as indeed it is in Revelation where the church can be both a city and a bride. We just have to get used to this kind of symbolic language – remembering that Jesus said if we fail to understand symbolic language when it is used of basic earthly spiritual experiences (like being born again), how ever are



we going to understand heavenly things that can be expressed only in such language?

In 2 Tim 2:13 the Adam and Eve account is used in a parallel but slightly different way, again to make a point about the church of that time. The issue for Paul is not whether the Genesis account was literal, but that God intends the account to teach us something about his intentions for the church age. In the church age, the Christian gospel was *first* committed to male Jews. Paul’s point (if we look in the wider context⁴²) is that this gospel has to be accepted in tranquility by those who got it from the chosen apostles. The word “silence” or “quietness” means this, it is not a word meaning “not speaking”.⁴³ The comparison is with Genesis 2, which pictures the moral precept being given to the man and hence to the woman, who should have accepted it in tranquility rather than questioning and altering it. The man (Gen 2:17) unlike the woman (Gen 3:1) *knew* what God really had said – just as the male apostles of Christ knew what *he* really had said and brought that message to the church. In the context, there were those who were usurping the apostolic authority to bring a new and different “gospel”, echoing the words in Genesis 3: “Has God said?....” As before Paul hopes that the church (the new bride) will be stronger than Eve in accepting the word as given. Here, however, there is a further thought. Note how Paul says “*she* will be saved through the childbearing if *they* continue...”. It is nonsensical to suggest (as some have) either that he means women generally are saved by becoming mothers or that godly women never die in childbirth. It is most natural to take it to continue the reference to Genesis 3 – this time to the prophecy that the seed of the woman would crush the head of Satan. Thus “the childbearing” refers to the birth of the

⁴² See also Marston (2007). The assumption being made here is that 2 Tim was written under Paul’s authority, whether or not Paul literally dictated it.

⁴³ It is not relevant to our present theme, but a careful exegesis of this passage no more implies that church leadership is restricted for all time to men, than that it is restricted to Jews. Some of the other ideas read into it, such as that women are more easily deceived, fit neither the text nor the practice of the apostle Paul who encouraged women extensively in ministry. This is dealt with in depth in Marston (2007).

messiah, the seed of the woman through whom salvation came, and *uniquely* the work of a woman because no man was involved. Paul's easy change from singular "she" to plural "they" (though this is disguised by the NIV's rephrasing) bears out his highly symbolic intention here. The same Eve-Mary parallel comes even more explicitly in words of the great second century theologian and champion of orthodoxy, Bishop Irenaeus:

Mary, having a man betrothed, and being nevertheless a virgin, by yielding obedience, became the cause of salvation, both to herself and the whole human race...For what the virgin Eve had bound fast through unbelief, this did the virgin Mary set free through faith. [*Against Heresies* xxii.4]

Paul is happy to parallel the virgin-betrothed-Eve either to the virgin-bride-church or to the virgin-Mary or to both. In both cases the point is that Eve abandoned the truth as she had received it.

Did Paul think that Eve was a literal person? It is not all that easy to tell, because obviously Mary was a literal person but the church is not a literal bride. He speaks of the "one man" Adam, but also says: "as in Adam we all die..." Looking at contemporaries, in particular Philo, who used some similar symbolic language, our best guess may be that Paul probably thought Eve was an individual but was unlikely to have taken the snake, the side etc literally. Whether he actually thought it was a man or a woman through whom sin first entered humanity, or whether he even thought the Genesis account was meant to give that kind of information, we can never know. What we do need to note is the falsity of a breezy assumption that because Paul (as he plainly did) took the Genesis account as inspired and intended to teach us important lessons, he thought it was all meant to be literal. His use of the Genesis passages indicates nothing of the kind.

What's It All About?

The Choice

In approaching the creation accounts in Genesis 1-3 Christians have two basic choices.

On the one hand we can desperately try to make this to be about chronology and biology, fighting against the sense of the text, the use made of it in the New Testament by Jesus and Paul, and the approach taken in the millennium or so after Christ by both Christians and Jewish commentators. We can have a snake made in God's moral, intelligent and relational image, an account confused about when shrubs and animals were first made, and physical trees which miraculously become symbolic in Revelation. We can struggle with the issue of whether a man named "Adam" or a woman named "Eve" first introduced sin into the world, and wonder what God did on the eighth day other than walk noisily about in the garden in the evening.

On the other hand we can try to read it for what it is – a powerfully pictorial and divinely inspired account that tells us who we are, what God intended for us to be, and how we stand in relation to God, his created world, and other people.

Adam and Eve?

So where does that leave us with "Adam" and "Eve"? Is it a clear teaching of the Bible that they were actual individuals? Let us first recap the main meaning of Genesis 2-3:

- (i) The woman is intended as an ally of the man, an equal "taken from his side" (this equality would have been against the general culture of the time).
- (ii) Humanity is uniquely in God's image in having a language which conveys meaning and relationship (symbolized in the naming of the animals)
- (iii) Humanity is uniquely in God's image in having moral responsibility (symbolized in the forbidden tree)
- (iv) God's intention was for humanity to have permanent one-man one-woman marriage, with the total identification as "an item", and with sex as the deepest form of relational knowing of each other.
- (v) An outside evil influence (which Jesus identified as Satan) tempted humanity, and they first knew sin experientially.

(vi) God is pictured symbolically as a landowner, strolling in his estate in the evening cool – calling his tenants to account.

(vii) Following their sin, God predicts that one day a descendant of the woman (Jesus) will be opposed by a “brood of vipers” (his human opponents) but will crush the head of the serpent (Satan)

The New Testament use of “Adam”, particularly by Paul, is ambiguous and complex. Yet, logically, if there was a time (as we all agree) when there was *no* sin in the world, there must have been a point at which some individual *first* recognized a moral imperative and then broke that precept. There must, logically, have been a *first sin*. Was it by a man or a woman? The fact that Paul in one place says it was through “Adam” that sin first came, and in another that “Eve” first transgressed, should make us rather wary of being dogmatic. In Romans 5 he obviously uses the words “sin” and “transgression” virtually interchangeably. Had he been a literalist in the modern mode then, assuming Paul is the authority behind both Romans and 1 Timothy, this would have been a simple self-contradiction.

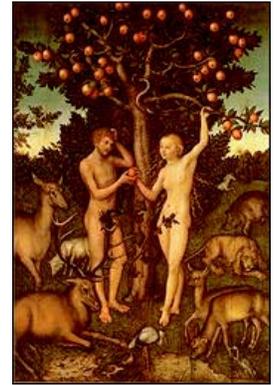
As Christians we have to accept that we don't always know the answers. At what precise point, for example, in the life of the infant Paul, brought up in a Pharisee family (Acts 23:6), could the breaking of a recognised divinely-sanctioned moral imperative have led to that event where Sin revived and he died (Rom 7:9)? Who can say? At what precise point in human beginnings did some individual of humanity (*ādām* – male or female) first feel the compulsion of divinely sanctioned a moral law and in breaking it “die”? Who can say? All we know is that both occurred.

When the first sin was committed, were “Adam” and “Eve” the only humans alive? Again this is hard to say. “Eve” is poetically called “the mother of all living”, and yet the words of Cain give a strong indication that he had reason to fear others on the earth. If there were, then sin spread to all men (and presumably women—though the text literally says “all men”) because all sinned. Once the knowledge of good and evil together with the sin principle (or “Sin”) were released in the human world, the spread of sin and death becomes all but inevitable.

Popularity, Truth and Science

Popular Culture

“Adam and Eve” have become as key an element in our popular culture as Robin Hood. Christians feel as familiar with the literal serpent and Eve (usually with discreetly arranged hair in more modern pictures), as with the three kings around the manger with an ox and ass and a few shepherds in the background and some winged angels singing overhead. That much of this picture is not supported by close study of the Bible can come as a shock, and be naturally resisted – the more so because the New Testament points to a much more symbolic use of language in the creation accounts than in the nativity. But this study does not seek easy popularity but truth. The truth is that the meaning and language of the creation accounts, in themselves or viewed through the New Testament, is not well conveyed by the popular culture versions of Adam and Eve. Irrespective of any input from science, much of the accounts need to be taken as symbolic not literal. Only when this proper “hermeneutical” task has been done should we even begin to look at any current scientific views of natural and human origins.



Origins of Biblical “Literalism”

Popular culture can hardly be expected to rightly understand Scripture. But how are we to explain the obsession with physical literalism that has infected a large sector of the church in modern times? The actual origins of this literalistic or young-earth creationist movement are well documented.⁴⁴ In the last quarter of the nineteenth century, and the early years of Fundamentalism in the twentieth, it was virtually impossible to find any scientist or Bible teacher who thought the world was a few thousand years old

⁴⁴ See eg Marston and Forster (2000) and Numbers (1993)

and was made in seven literal days. The idea arose in the early twentieth century through the work of the Seventh Day Adventist George McCready Price. Price was inspired (as he says) by the words of the Adventist prophetess Ellen White, he insisted that the seven day cycle went back to creation and he formulated an elaborate alternative geology (although he had no scientific training) suggesting that all the strata were laid down in one flood. Ellen White, of course, had strongly attacked the early Fundamentalists for not keeping the Sabbath on Saturday, and none of the early Fundamentalists adopted Price's system. Generally the Adventists received little support other than from Lutherans. It came into the mainstream largely through the book by Baptist engineer Henry Morris and Lutheran pastor J C Whitcomb *The Genesis Flood* (1961), a book that credits Price and is little other than a rehash and copy of Price's work. Since then various young-earth creationist movements have grown in various countries, and attracted those in diverse denominations.

But why? The early Fundamentalists in the period 1912-1925 had already reasserted the essentials of the Christian gospel without falling into literalism – none of the writers in *The Fundamentals* (from which the movement got its name) disbelieved in an ancient earth, and their leading theologians tended to accept evolution. It is understandable that a movement that tends to be both legalistic and literalistic like the Adventists should give birth to an obsession with literalism, but why should this spread to so many otherwise sound evangelicals? How, in view of Jesus' use of language, do we see well-meaning evangelicals adopting principles like “we take the biblical language literally unless absolutely forced not to”? This is really a socio-psychological question, and needs more work to be done on it. One factor may be a modern misconception that the truly real is the physical, and the dominance of technology, engineering, and reductionism, in which often there is no meaning beyond the physical.

The Science Bit

The real concern of this article is about right discernment of Scripture. Obviously, however, if Scripture is inspired, then any correct interpretation of it has to be consistent with any true

interpretation of nature taken in science. Here are just a few observations, given in merest outline, though much more exploration could be made:

1. As already noted, the word create (=bara') is used for God's present creation of winds – presumably through natural processes. Scripture therefore gives no indication of details of universe creation. Most theologians have taken the universe to be created “out of nothing”, and current ideas of a big bag arising in quantum space are as near to creation from nothing as makes no odds so maybe they got it right.
2. The “days” do not indicate order, so there is no reason to imagine that the sun and moon were made after vegetation. Moreover, though Scripture says both are “lamps” it is observer language, it does not deny that the moon shines by reflected light and is a mirror not a lamp. It is about theology (they are not gods) not physics.
3. Scripture gives us no idea of timescales of creation, it would be equally compatible with a long period or a short period of creation or an instantaneous creation (as many early Jewish and Christian teachers thought). There is today overwhelming evidence from astrophysics, geology, and paleontology that the earth is very old, much of this science having been developed initially by devout Christians, so on this basis we can take it to have been a long period.
4. Again, as far as the language of Scripture is concerned, the “creation” of animals could have been through natural processes or by some immediate direct contrary-to nature act. The text itself says: “let the earth bring forth living creatures..” If this were meant literally it sounds like spontaneous generation, certainly it sounds fairly naturalistic. But probably it was not meant to convey that kind of information. God made the creatures in “kinds”, but again this is intended as observer language not scientific precision. Manifestly the diversity of animals does exist, and when Darwin wrote *The Origin of Species* he did not intend to deny that there were diverse and genetically distinct kinds of creature. There is no inherent contradiction between the

Genesis accounts and an idea that God used natural processes to create the diversity of distinct kinds of animal, just as he continues to use natural processes to create the winds. It is an empirical question to decide whether macro-evolution did in fact occur, and whether (as Intelligent Design advocates claim) there are gaps in the process which can be filled only by assuming a contrary-to-nature divine direct act (or “fiat”). God is as much in the natural feeding of the ravens as in the miracle of Jesus walking on the water. That one is a “natural” process and the other miraculous is determined only by a science which establishes that one is a part of regular cause-effect whilst the other cannot be so explained. The theological issue is simply that God is behind both.

5. In the late 1980’s studies on human mitochondria led to a surprising conclusion:

The transformation of archaic to anatomically modern forms of *Homo Sapiens* occurred first in Africa, about 100,000 to 140,000 years ago, and that all present-day humans are descendants of that African population.⁴⁵

By the early 1990s Leakey could write:

The mitochondrial DNA in each human being can be traced back to a single female who lived in Africa over 100,000 years ago.⁴⁶

The male descent can be found using analysis of Y-chromosomes, and this leads to a similar timescale. Modern humans (*homo sapiens sapiens*) are believed to have developed in a small breeding population between 100,000-150,000 years ago – which is very recent in geological terms. There is no genetic connection between them and eg Neanderthal man, and their precise ancestry is disputed. There is a “mitochondrial Eve” and “chromosomal Adam” from whom all present humans descend – though this descent is neither exclusive nor is it assumed that these two were

⁴⁵ Wilson *Science* (1987) vol 237 (2nd October) p.1292 and Wilson et al (1987).

⁴⁶ Leakey (1992) p. 220.

married together and living in a garden. The biblical account of the temptation with the fruit is a symbolic picture of the first time a human (male or female?) felt the moral compulsion of a divine “law”, broke it, and (in that day!) “died”. Where exactly it happened in this story, and how it spread from the first one to the others in the community, we cannot really now well imagine. All that we know is that if “sin” is a present reality rather than an illusion, then there must have been a first sin, and it must have spread to others.

6. It is generally believed that settlement began in the in the Natufan culture in the Mediterranean region of the Levant (the Middle East) in the twelfth century BC. It was here than both settlement and agriculture seem to have begun. It may be that this process, with its consequential increase in human warfare and killing, is reflected in the account of Cain and Abel.

Conclusions

Surely both to Christians and to those seeking to assess the rationality of the Christian doctrine of creation, the key issue is how Jesus, Paul, and those with their Jewish background understood the Genesis accounts of creation. Modern “literalists” generally simply do not consider this much, rather they usually try to force the Biblical text into saying things that the New Testament indicates it was never intended to say. Such literalism is, as has been indicated, largely a later 20th century phenomena, in an age where physicalism has sold to many the notion that the physical is “more real” than the spiritual realities of which Jesus spoke using symbolic language. There are, of course, issues about how much of Genesis 1-3 is “intended literally” and what exactly the symbolic language means. There are also issues of how far God worked through natural processes and how far through acts which operated in ways out of his usual natural cause-effect sequences. There are issues of how far we can reconcile any given ideas of science with ideas in theological hermeneutics of the creation accounts. But in all this we need to cling to the indications given to us by Jesus and Paul for our theology and linguistic basis, and not be “wise in our own understandings”.

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