

## **Science & Faith at the Crossroads of Creation: The Sixth Day, Genesis 1: 24-31** **By Ken Wilson ©2006 October 8, 2006**

REVIEW: We've cleared out a lot of culture war debris in order to consider the issue of how to understand the creation texts of the Bible in the light of mainstream science. We've reviewed the four major views Christians take toward the creation texts of Genesis (Young Earth, Old Earth, Intelligent Design, Theistic Evolution); and we've wrestled with the underlying assumptions of each of these views, reminding ourselves the most important truths of Genesis transcend the more narrow questions of how it all fits with modern science.

My underlying assumptions, which I unpacked in previous sermons, are these: first, the creation texts of Genesis are not intended to be read as science, having been written before the advent of the scientific method and science not being the only or best way of telling all the truth God wants to tell; second, the lens of science, in my humble opinion, is not able to detect God's action in the world because God is too intimately involved and too infinitely beyond the natural order to be pinned down by the scientific method. At most science can say, "the God thesis can neither be ruled in nor ruled out." In fact, Darwin's theory emerged in an era when it was widely assumed that science could detect God's action in the world, but this assumption doesn't stand up under examination. It grants science powers it simply does not have. How could any merely human construct, such as science, ever definitively detect a presence as subtle, as personal, as powerful, as imminent and transcendent as God? God is much more than a factor in the universe. God is the "ground of being" for the universe's existence. These assumptions make it difficult for me to adopt either the Young Earth, Old Earth, or even the attractive Intelligent Design view (the latter being based on the singular assumption that science itself can detect intelligent design.) For this reason, I prefer the "theistic evolution" approach to understanding how science and faith come together at the crossroads of creation, a view which sees no inherent conflict between the biblical accounts of creation and the mainstream scientific view.

REASSURANCE: (for those saying, "I used to like Ken!"): I am not saying Genesis is less true than science. Genesis tells us what we most need to know of our origins. I'm simply saying that the inspired text is not intended (by the ultimate author, God) as a scientific telling of origins, though there is much common ground between the scientific and biblical accounts. The Genesis creation accounts, in my view, are conveyed through the God-chosen means of story or poetic narrative. By "story" I don't mean a fib, fiction, or something that "ain't so Sam." I don't mean "something widely believed that is contrary to reality." I mean a way to tell the truth "through a compelling and convincing metaphor of some subtlety on a subject too difficult to describe in any other way." For the latter language I am indebted to Carl Sagan (not a believer) but this language (and this understanding of the Genesis text) is completely consistent with the view of C.S. Lewis, the great Christian apologist.

My colleague Bob Royce, a pastoral intern here at the Ann Arbor Vineyard gave me this great word picture. Picture it this way: God is telling Moses (traditionally, the author of

Genesis, though the text itself doesn't make this claim) the details of creation in scientific language, scribbling out the equations on a black board up on Mount Sinai. He's working through  $E = MC^2$ , how the various physical constants of the universe are fine tuned for life; he's cracking open the DNA code for Moses, and the incredible intricacies of the cell, and through it all, God is commenting on how the divine fire runs through all these equations. God steals a glance at Moses, whose eyes are glazing over. Moses, it turns out, has forgotten the elementary geometry he learned from his Egyptian tutors. Moses says, "Lord, this won't make any sense to them--even I can't understand it." God asks, "Was Aaron any better in math?" Moses replies, "Not that good!" At which point God makes a decision: "Time to go to Plan B then. Let's tell them a story that conveys the truth they need to know in a form that makes sense to them. We can't wait for them to invent the language of science because my people need to know where they come from! So here's how we'll begin, 'In the beginning, God...'"

I hope I don't need to say that there are truths that God tells in the Bible through means other than story or poetic narrative. Certainly the gospels and the New Testament letters are a different kind of writing than Genesis 1. (If the resurrection of Jesus isn't a literal and physical, albeit mysterious, phenomenon, it is certainly an absurdity, and provides no hope that didn't already exist. It's not a metaphor, but an event in history, and a sign of coming attractions.) The gospels and letters contain eyewitness testimony (as do many other books of the Bible), whereas there were no human eyewitnesses for the events of Genesis 1. God doesn't need metaphor, story, or poetry to tell us, "Thou shalt not commit murder, or adultery or thievery." (Though of course he reinforces these truths with story and poetry.)

Finally, I take this approach to the creation texts of Genesis, not because it's the best way to make room for science, though I think this is a wonderful side benefit of the approach. But fundamentally, I take this approach because I sincerely believe it's the best way to honor the text and the God who inspired it. (At the same time, I acknowledge that others take a different for the very same reason; we are after all, dealing with one of those "debatable issues.")

Henceforth I will proceed in this series with the understanding that the creation texts of Genesis are inspired, true, authoritative and that a faithful reading does not require us to dispute the findings of evolutionary science. As a pastor, I'm not asking anyone to accept evolutionary science, per se. One is either convinced by the science or not and this is certainly not a "faithfulness to God" issue either way.

REMINDER: My motive in taking the time to work through these issues is to make the gospel accessible to those for whom it has not been accessible enough. The evangelical church in America has been effective primarily in the "bible belt," and not nearly as effective in the "biology belt." We live in the latter, not the former. Because I believe the gospel is powerful, I assume that when it is being proclaimed but not effectively anywhere, it's more likely an indication that there is some faulty telling going on, rather than a faulty gospel. Jesus himself said, "When I am lifted up, I will draw all people to myself." So this series is an attempt to redress what I think amounts to a faulty telling of the gospel in the "biology belt." Even if you don't share my assumptions about how

science and faith fit together, I'd encourage you, for the sake of the gospel, to stick with me as we tackle this question.

I've said it before, but it bears repeating: **I hope when we're finished, you won't feel the slightest obligation to agree with my particular leanings on how science & faith intersect. I do hope you'll love Jesus more, have a deeper appreciation for his book, and a wider love for world he loves. So that together, we'll be more useful to Jesus in his passionate pursuit of the world his father made and holds in being still.**

So much for review, reassurance and reminder. Now let's focus on the most important part of creation (from our perspective): the creation of humans on "the sixth day." Today, we'll consider Genesis 1: 24-31; next week, we look at Genesis 2, another view of "the sixth day"; then we close the series (I think! I hope!) with Genesis 3, the great exile from the Garden (which seems also to have happened on "the sixth day.")

We'll begin with the account in Eugene Peterson's translation, *The Message*. (After this, we'll switch back to the New International Version, a more literal translation than Peterson's.)

**God spoke: "Earth, generate life! Every sort and kind: cattle and reptiles and wild animals—all kinds." And there it was: wild animals of every kind, cattle of all kinds, every sort of reptile and bug. God saw that it was good. God spoke: "Let us make human beings in our image, make them reflecting our nature so they can be responsible for the fish in the sea, the birds in the air, the cattle, and, yes, Earth itself, and every animal that moves on the face of Earth." God created human beings; he created them godlike, Reflecting God's nature. He created them male and female. God blessed them: "Prosper! Reproduce! Fill Earth! Take charge! Be responsible for fish in the sea and birds in the air, for every living thing that moves on the face of Earth." Then God said, "I've given you every sort of seed-bearing plant on Earth And every kind of fruit-bearing tree, given them to you for food. To all animals and all birds, everything that moves and breathes, I give whatever grows out of the ground for food." And there it was. God looked over everything he had made; it was so good, so very good! It was evening, it was morning—Day Six." (Gen. 1: 24-31)**

There are so many images for God's creative work in the early chapters of Genesis. God creates by speaking a word: creation through universe-rocking information. In Genesis 2, God is depicted as a father, not a puppet maker, shaping life as a master craftsman would. Here in today's text, we have this more emergent image: "let the land produce...wild animals" How are we to picture such a thing literally? This is language that is designed to be understood more broadly than simply literally. God is intimately involved in the creative process but there's also an indirect quality to "let the land produce...." The text itself, in my humble opinion, is saying the "how" of creation is subtle, mysterious, a dynamic process. It's not to be imagined as magic. There's no wand waving, followed by a "poof!" As Jonathan Edwards, the leader of the evangelical Great Awakening, said, "God is a God of means." God loves to work "through means." What those "means" are is not

important here in our text. It's not important to detail how it is that "the land produces" life. What is important is to realize that God is intimately involved.

What of this phrase "according to their kinds"? An entire cottage industry of biblical interpretation has insisted that this means each species, having been created, is now "fixed" forever. For the life of me, I can't understand how the text demands this.

Mainstream science affirms that species produce "according to kind"; parents produce offspring in their own likeness with only slight variations from generation to generation. A population of given species becomes separated geographically; two separate populations of the same species continue to reproduce "according to kind"; but the intervening mountain range or ocean keeps them from mixing their DNA, so each now separate population of the same species makes very slight changes separately; because there is no longer any mixing of the now separated gene pools, little by little the separated gene pools become so different that if the barrier were somehow removed, members of each population could no longer cross breed if they wanted to. They've become two distinct species at that point, distinct branches on the tree of life. And it's all happened by everyone reproducing, "according to kind."

I've often heard it said, "I can't believe we're descended from monkeys" as if one chimp years ago gave birth to a bouncing baby human boy. This is not what evolutionary science says. It says we share a common biological ancestor with other primates; humans are one branch of the branching off process described above. The other primates are relatively close to us on the tree of life. But this process has occurred through reproducing "according to kind." For the life of me (and I've tried hard) I can't see how science and Genesis conflict at this point.

I can understand that the process of "descent" is difficult to imagine, especially if the mechanism of evolution has not been clearly explained; even then, it requires such long time frames that it's hard to picture. The iconic image of a line of primates gradually becoming upright, doesn't do justice to the sheer length and subtlety of the process. It gives the impression that a Neanderthal gave birth to a Homosapien. Instead, science says simply that Neanderthals and Homosapiens shared a common ancestor. That evolution is not easy to imagine shouldn't surprise us. Try bending your brain around the demonstrated reality that time slows down the faster objects travel. It's hardly intuitive. But having said that, it's not at all difficult to imagine that we are more closely related biologically to primates than we are, say, to fish. Anyone looking at a chimpanzee can't help but think how similar they look to us.

My Bible tells me God was intimately involved in whatever process there was. Therefore I believe in God the Father Almighty, maker of heaven and earth and all things visible and invisible! I believe God was and is intimately involved in bringing me and mine into existence!

This issue has been muddied by the fact that some (thankfully not all!) evolutionary biologists, Richard Dawkins among them, often wander into religious speculation and say, "Any idiot knows nature can't be designed because it's not perfect! Why would God design a non-functioning appendix?"

I would say, "With respect, you're confused about the biblical God. Stick to biology, which you are very good at. But your theology is suspect. God is not an engineer striving for some blueprint perfection. He did not say, 'Perfect! Keep it as is forever!'" (In fact so far as I know hell is the only place where things are frozen, static, locked in. Life is always in development, in progress--it's the very nature of life in fact; even the divine life is love, relationship in progress, and not some static reality. Of course, I'm wandering here into some deep waters.)

In fact, God said, "It's good!" I think the "amplified version" might be: "It's beautiful, it works, and it's all related, it fits together!" Even before the human rebellion surfaced, God is portrayed more as an artist striving for beauty than, say, a Greek Philosopher trying to attain some abstract ideal of perfection that never changes. Creation isn't that: it is as art is, an emergent process, an exploration of the possibilities.

That's consistent with the image of God stepping back as an artist would and almost with a sense of discovery, saying: "It's good." By the sixth day he's already working with pre-existing medium, like a craftsman: energy and matter already exist, and out of them the artistic exploration of God continues.

"Then God said," [NASB] The "then" is important in the biblical text, just as it is in the scientific rendering. First information (God said), then energy (let there be light)...then matter: the elements--helium, nitrogen, carbon, molybdenum, the stuff of earth; then simpler life forms, vegetation, waters teeming with life, then earth brings forth mammals, then the pinnacle (not yet exceeded): humanity! What voice are we hearing? The voice of Biology or the Bible? It's hard to tell the difference!

And isn't it marvelous! Isn't it wonderful! And isn't it quite reasonably the work of someone's hands! Working through means that have been detailed by science--sure, why not? "God is a God of means!"--but in and through the means, GOD, GOD, GOD intimately involved.

It's enough to make you feel good about information, and good about energy and matter and good about the earth and sky and this swarming, undulating, throbbing network: profligate, excessive, extravagant, beautiful life! It's enough to make you say, "You know what's winking at us through all this glorious, fearsome, staggering display? It's God! I wanna know him! Get right with him! Partner with him!"

**"Then God said, "Let us make man in our image, in our likeness, and let them rule over the fish of the sea and the birds of the air, over the livestock, over all the earth, and over all the creatures that move along the ground." So God created man in his own image, in the image of God he created him; male and female he created them." (Genesis 1:26-27)**

Even better! We humans are special. We are connected with all the other work of his hands--science powerfully affirms it as well--but we're special, which is a value judgment beyond the competence of science to make. Genesis affirms it though and with emphasis! We're special, not just in our own eyes, but in the eyes of God!

And now a word about translations: in Hebrew, the word translated "man" here, 'adam,

just means "the human" (as in The Message translation.) 'Adam can also refer to humanity; in fact the context suggests that meaning of 'adam, because 'adam is created male and female. The first appearance of the human in Genesis is as humanity, male and female (as the other species are introduced in their group rather than individual form.)

Here's another point of some contention: "let them rule" and even the stronger, "subdue" that appears in Genesis 1: 28. These are stronger words in the Hebrew than Peterson's translation would suggest ("be responsible" and "take charge" or "hold sway.")

Some environmentalists have said, "We humans started to really abuse the environment during the Industrial Revolution which began in England, a Christian nation. The Christian Bible says, 'rule the earth' so that's the problem--the Bible itself supports a harsh dominance over creation."

The Industrial Revolution did begin in a Christian nation, but abuse of the environment was not fueled by devotion to Christ, or any reasonable reading of the Bible. Many Christians raised a prophetic voice against the abuse during the Industrial Revolution, when it really got started. For example, my favorite poet, Gerard Manley Hopkins, a Jesuit priest wrote this poem, titled "The Grandeur of God."

The world is charged with the grandeur of God.  
It will flame out, like shining from shook foil;  
It gathers to a greatness, like the ooze of oil  
Crushed. Why do men then now not reck his rod?  
Generations have trod, have trod, have trod;  
And all is seared with trade; Bleared, smeared with toil;  
And wears man's smudge and shares man's smell: the soil  
Is bare now, nor can foot feel, being shod.  
And for all this, nature is never spent;  
There lives the dearest freshness deep down things;  
And though the last lights off the black West went  
Oh, morning, at the brown brink eastward, springs--  
Because the Holy Ghost over the bent  
World broods with warm breast and with ah! bright wings.

The "rule" of humans is an aspect of our being in the image of God and God is not a polluter! He models the opposite in the Bible--we're to "tend the garden" with and for him. There's a long tradition of concern for animals in Torah (the Laws of Moses.) In fact the treatment of animals better under Moses is at least as good as that advocated by PETA. Plus which, we have Jesus defining true "human-in-the-image-of-God rule": **"You know that those who are regarded as rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them, and their high officials exercise authority over them. Not so with you. Instead, whoever wants to become great among you must be your servant, and whoever wants to be first must be slave of all."** (Mk. 10: 41-44)

There's every biblical incentive, in other words, for Christians to be leaders in the matter of caring for the environment. (I was pleased to learn that Bert Waggoner, the National Director of Vineyard in the United States signed a recent call for evangelicals to take global

warming seriously.)

**God blessed them and said to them, "Be fruitful and increase in number; fill the earth and subdue it. Rule over the fish of the sea and the birds of the air and over every living creature that moves on the ground." Then God said, "I give you every seed-bearing plant on the face of the whole earth and every tree that has fruit with seed in it. They will be yours for food. And to all the beasts of the earth and all the birds of the air and all the creatures that move on the ground—everything that has the breath of life in it—I give every green plant for food." And it was so. God saw all that he had made, and it was very good. And there was evening, and there was morning—the sixth day. (Genesis 1: 28-31)**

So much is packed into this text! "Be fruitful & multiply" anticipates, and I believe sanctifies, complexity, culture, and technology. There could be no global expansion of humanity without these developments. While culture and technology can be abused, they are not inherently evil. We weren't meant to remain a little kinship group in a garden. The Bible ends not with a garden but a City! Complexity, technology, culture--it's all part of the "very good." (And it's why we shouldn't abandon our cities or the complexities of culture, but seed them with God's loving influence whenever and however we can.)

This "very good" is the highlight of the sixth day; in fact it's the climax of the entire hymn of creation that Genesis 1 is. It's all the more arresting since the previous five days of creation have warranted a "good" whereas the sixth day receives a "Very Good!"

To what and to whom does this "very good" apply? Yes, it is a response to humanity but not to the humans alone; not humans exalted so the rest of creation recedes as secondary. Not "man the measure of all things," the mantra of a humanism minus the divine context. But humans placed within creation alongside and among the other creatures (we share the same birthday and the same diet with the other sixth day animals--and notice they too have the "breath of life," a very noble thing.)

This is another sweet spot between the biblical and scientific understandings. Science powerfully affirms the interconnectedness of all things in the universe. In fact, the more developed science becomes, the more we appreciate the interconnectedness of the natural realm. Science tells us the enormous time scale of the universe and its corresponding vast expanse are absolutely necessary for human life. The rate of expansion unveiled when the universe exploded into being is a crucial number, one of the most important "constants" of the physical universe, still in force today. If the rate of expansion had been too high (the explosive force too powerful), gravity, which holds things together rather than exploding them apart, would be overwhelmed; no stars or planets could form, meaning no chance for life. Too weak an explosion, though (too low a rate of expansion) and gravity would dominate; the universe would collapse back upon itself, and there would be again, no chance for life. This rate of expansion, it turns out, had to be fine tuned to an incredible degree. If it were even one part in  $10^{59}$  higher or lower, it wouldn't work for life. That's in inconceivably small fraction! Human life absolutely depends on that highly tuned number, which is responsible for the age and the size of the universe. We're interconnected to an incredible degree with the duration and size of the universe itself. (By the way, you

physicists will have to forgive me if I've gotten any details wrong in this rendering. But I'll bet you two bits to a rotten orange that any errors in my rendering don't take anything away from the wonder of what I'm trying to convey.)

Science tells us the calcium in teeth is literally stardust: from super-nova explosions billions of years ago. We are connected to the stars through our teeth! That sense of connection we feel with a dog, or a child looking at a bug thinking, "it's got legs like I do!": all that truth is also the truth of Genesis, just in a different form. Only Genesis goes on to say what science cannot: It's good, it's very good, and it's good because it's "of God."

And now we're done with the science and faith part and we're left with the God and us part. Whatever your view of how science and faith intersect, we can all agree that Genesis is for us. This ancient text, assembled by an ancient people at least 2600 years ago, a people bullied by every empire in the neighborhood, trampled underfoot, dispersed, modern attempts made at extermination, has made it safely into our hands. These people somehow preserved their book for us. And through Jesus of Nazareth it's become our book too. It was preserved for us by the One who knew their God as Abba, Father. Now this story, which was his story, is now our story.

It's our story given to us after the rebellion (the consciously chosen alienation from God) had begun, after the process of moral and spiritual ruin was well underway. This is good news for bad times!

And we have bad times. We have bad hair days and flat out bad days. We feel bad about ourselves and others; some of us, often. Life takes a bad turn and we may think, "Maybe the whole shooting match got off to a bad start and is headed for a bad fall, and the only real news is bad news, and good is just a temporary thing, or maybe just wishful thinking."

Even when things are going well, we are haunted by the fear that things essentially, fundamentally, eventually, originally, are bad, not good. That's what's going on when we have that little fear in good times that bad times must be on the way, that "the other shoe is about to drop."

Hey, I'm a pastor. I'm pretty well convinced on the doctrine of human depravity, with or without seminary. I've got my own as evidence. And I've heard a fair sampling of yours. NPR's "This American Life" did a show about an anonymous "confess your sins hotline." They played excerpt from the tape recorded messages, people telling their darkest secrets. Listening for just a minute, a profound sadness settled over me.

What if we each of us listed the worst dark deed done to us and the worst we've ever done--just one of each, and scrolled 'em down the screen where we project the lyrics to our songs? We couldn't bear to watch! Such a weight would settle over us.

When we're frustrated by way the war in Iraq is going or the latest scandal out of Washington, the frustration is more personal than just our response to those things. It's anchored in a lifetime of frustration with the human condition, including our own and our little worlds of family and work.

We don't need a prophet thundering how bad it all is! With half a brain, we know how bad it is! We need, if anything, a prophet thundering: "In the beginning, God. In beginning, good." All this good beneath the smudge and smell. And the stock from which we spring--energy, matter, earth--and the heart from whom we spring, good God!

If good is not an illusion but the harder, more substantial form of reality than evil is, we've got us a real hope! And man, do we need hope in our times.

Don't you see? God is staking out his claim on the earth! Good God! Good earth! Not empty space, devoid of purpose, meaning, value. Sacred Space! Sacred Place! Good, good, very good!

Oh how we need to hear this! The space God is staking out for you is a good space! The world, the realm, the place for you from God is a good place, where his "very good!" resounds.

Yes, ruin has been running riot for ages! We feel bad for a reason! But the season of bad must give way to the season of good, the long winter must give way to a coming Spring!

The God of glory Thunders! His voice is over the waters still! Good! Good! Good! Good! Good! Very Good! And an Exceeding Good yet to come, heading our way!

"All shall be well, and all shall be well, and all manner of things, shall be well!"

When Jesus says, "When you pray, go into your inner room and close the door and your father who sees in secret will reward you" he is saying...

"You don't need to be afraid to go into Sacred Space, because it's a place where God's 'very good' resounds and surrounds even you, and it's a place where even God's coming Exceeding Good can be heard and felt and known...."