

Science and Faith at the Crossroads of Creation: In the Garden

By Ken Wilson, October 15, 2006©

My task today is to teach this text of human origins (Genesis 2: 4-17) in a way that doesn't require the listener to choose between the revelation of Scripture and the findings of mainstream science, evolutionary science in particular. I'm approaching the text with the following assumptions. First, the creation texts of Genesis are inspired, authoritative, sacred Scripture written in the form of poetic narrative and thus were not meant by the original authors, or ultimate author, God, to be read literally or as scientific narrative. Second, the God of the Bible is too intimately involved and infinitely beyond the realm of nature to be detected definitively through the scientific method. (While the creation does speak of God's glory, the scientific method is not, in my view, able to detect God's voice or prove that it is him speaking through creation.) These assumptions rule out the Young Earth, Old Earth, and Intelligent Design Theory views that are so popular with my fellow Evangelicals, but they are consistent with the view called "theistic evolution."

Naturally, I think these assumptions are correct and consistent with a faithful reading of the biblical text. Plenty of even conservative evangelical scholars say Genesis 1-3 should not be read literally because it is something like poetic narrative. A footnote from Genesis: A Commentary by Bruce Waltke, professor emeritus Regent College states: "If the creation account is not meant as science, then it should not be pitted against scientific theories. Rather, scientific theories should be critiqued by scientific method. This is not the Bible's concern." But this light of biblical interpretation is often kept under a bushel for fear of upsetting the apple cart within the American evangelical community. That's no longer useful, if we want to reach people on the outside of faith looking in.

There are people who need Christ, even love him from afar, who are torn up inside over the issue of science and faith. They may feel Christianity is not a path they can pursue with integrity as it would require them to deny what they understand to be true scientifically.

The Ann Arbor News recently printed a piece I wrote for the opinion page titled, "Evangelicals Must Evolve: Quashing Science Does Not Advance the Cause of Christ." A woman left me a voicemail in response that went something like this: "I tried to email you about that article in the paper, Mr. Wilson, but it bounced back, so let me read it to you. 'When I saw that the author of the article was an evangelical, I couldn't believe my eyes. I cut it out of the paper and showed it to all my friends. It was so well written [editorial comment: would I be sharing this anecdote with you if she thought it was poorly written?] and I can't thank you enough for writing it.' [At this point, the woman's voice broke and she started to cry.] She continued, "I'm sorry, I guess this has really affected me. I'm a disaffected Christian and this just meant the world to me." These are the people who don't attend evangelical churches (or often any church) so their voice is rarely heard by evangelical pastors. What's worse, we pastors, fearing controversy, haven't been doing our job wrestling with these issues for people like this woman, helping them to see that the choice between mainstream science and faith may be a false choice. Meanwhile we

willingly engage in our own "in house" controversies which have no impact on people like the woman who left me that voicemail. We've got to do better than that.

Of course, I realize this is part of the theological territory labeled "debatable issues." People I love and respect approach the creation texts of Genesis with different assumptions. How grateful I am for the generous spirit this series has been met with from those in this congregation who approach the text with different assumptions. The evangelical landscape in the United States has been dominated by a different view than I am presenting in this series. For many, this is the first time a different view has even been on the radar screen. But love covers a multitude of assumptions! I've felt your love! I've especially been blessed by your acceptance of and shared conviction concerning my motive for pressing this out: to make the gospel accessible to those who have no quarrel with mainstream science. (If I'm wrong, at least I'm wrong for the right reason!) Though you may have a different take on the text as it relates to science, you keep showing up for this series, chewing the meat and spitting out the bones. I wouldn't have it any other way. And I so much appreciate your partnership in the common cause of the gospel.

On then, to the text itself: "This is the account of the heavens and the earth when they were created. When the LORD God made the earth and the heavens- and no shrub of the field had yet appeared on the earth and no plant of the field had yet sprung up, for the LORD God had not sent rain on the earth and there was no man to work the ground, but streams came up from the earth and watered the whole surface of the ground- the LORD God formed the man from the dust of the ground and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life, and the man became a living being. Now the LORD God had planted a garden in the east, in Eden; and there he put the man he had formed. And the LORD God made all kinds of trees grow out of the ground—trees that were pleasing to the eye and good for food. In the middle of the garden were the tree of life and the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. A river watering the garden flowed from Eden; from there it was separated into four headwaters. The name of the first is the Pishon; it winds through the entire land of Havilah, where there is gold. (The gold of that land is good; aromatic resin and onyx are also there.) The name of the second river is the Gihon; it winds through the entire land of Cush. The name of the third river is the Tigris; it runs along the east side of Asshur. And the fourth river is the Euphrates. The LORD God took the man and put him in the Garden of Eden to work it and take care of it. And the LORD God commanded the man, "You are free to eat from any tree in the garden; but you must not eat from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, for when you eat of it you will surely die."
(Genesis 2: 4-17)

Fifty years ago the dominant stream of biblical scholarship approached this text and many like it as a collection of fragments from different perspectives with barely a center to hold it together. What was lost or ignored in this approach was how well the text holds together as a narrative! Especially when joined to the remainder of the chapter (the creation of Eve) this is a moving, stirring, beautiful, coherent, compelling narrative!

Now clearly this is a slightly different take on creation than Genesis 1. The sequence of

creation is different for example. In Genesis 1, plants are created before people. In Genesis 2, Adam is created before vegetation. Both can't be taken literally, without performing some interpretive gymnastics! This is an indication in the text itself that it's not meant to be read literally. The literal sequence of events is not the concern of the author and it's likely not the concern of the original hearers. (In fact the ancients could not have even conceived of anything like a scientific telling of the creation; they knew the question of origins was in the distant past and there was simply no way to access the past except by means of revelation through story. It's hard, of course, for us to appreciate how inaccessible--absurd even--anything like a literal accounting of events would seem to them. Our attempt to view it that way is, in fact, an attempt to impose our modern perspective on them as if it is inherently superior. Tsk, tsk.)

Genesis 2 is making a different point. Genesis 2 is focused on humanity, so the human comes first as a focusing device. This is not unlike a filmmaker who puts the focus on a human face and the background scene gets blurry. He's saying, "Focus on the face!" This text invites us to do likewise.

From God's perspective the earth is not just the earth: it's home for humanity (which is a reason for taking good care of it.) Home is what the garden is all about. The word means a "walled enclosure"; like the song in West Side Story, "there's a place for us, somewhere" (Science would say "this is our ecological niche.")

Home is what the Bible is concerned with from first to last. It's concerned with the most incredible journey: making our way home. Jesus' greatest parable, "The Return of the Prodigal Son," is a homecoming story; everyone in that story--younger brother, older brother, father --is looking to get their home back. (It's also an example of a truth that's best told through the means of a story.)

"There's a place for us, somewhere!" Genesis is saying, "somewhere is here!" The earth itself is the temple! (And one day it will be plain to all, when "the glory of the Lord covers the earth as the water covers the sea.") The garden functions as the holy of holies and the humans are the priests tending the temple.

What makes the earth home? It was given to us. We didn't buy it. (Our first home is always given to us.) And it's where we first met father. *"The Lord God formed the man from the dust of the ground [this is a word play in Hebrew; the man = adam; the dust of the ground = adamah; an English equivalent would be "human from the humus"] and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life, and the man became a living being"* (Genesis 2: 7)

Our uniqueness is emphasized: we share "the breath of life" with other species, but we have a special capacity for intimacy with God because we are "in his image," his breath enters us and we are soul uniquely fit for relationship with him. Earth-bound, heaven-kissed, that's us!

Here's a Scientific Language Translation: this is when humanity gained the capacity of self awareness, our uniquely human consciousness. Before this, we were not "homo-sapiens," which means, "man, the wise." We were emerging, still in formation (under the potters hands in biblical language.) As we became fully ourselves, with this human consciousness (conceived of as a constellation of traits, including the power of abstract language, vivid self awareness, conferring a capacity to connect at depth with others) it's as if a light turns on in Motel 6; someone is home for God to come home to, who shares his image, his "self-in-relation-to-others awareness"; there's now someone on earth for God to connect with, work with, partner with, share his life with at a much deeper level. Genesis 2 depicts first, the joining of God with humanity, and then the before the joining of man and woman.

Just to be clear: I'm saying a faithful reading of Genesis would allow (not require, allow) for the science that says homo-sapiens are closely related genetically and by shared ancestry with other species that are not quite homo-sapiens, but share many of our traits. Genesis is shining its light on God's otherwise invisible hand in and through this. The scientific details are in the background, or better, not even on radar screen of the text, written as it was 2600 years ago; the lens of Genesis is focused on God. God is what we're looking for and God is what we find in Genesis!

If you don't accept the perspective of mainstream science that's fine, but if you do, as I do, this is how the two languages might be understood to dance together, or compliment each other. Regardless of your view of the science, however, the truths of Genesis are the same, an important "common ground" that we can all stand on: We share the breath of life with other species, but we're uniquely "in his image,"; we're meant for a deeper intimacy, sharing of life, partnership with God. God's hand (in, with, through, under, on and beyond the process) is upon us.

"Now the LORD God had planted a garden in the east, in Eden; and there he put the man he had formed. And the LORD God made all kinds of trees grow out of the ground—trees that were pleasing to the eye and good for food. In the middle of the garden were the tree of life and the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. A river watering the garden flowed from Eden; from there it was separated into four headwaters. The name of the first is the Pishon; it winds through the entire land of Havilah, where there is gold. (The gold of that land is good; aromatic resin and onyx are also there.) The name of the second river is the Gihon; it winds through the entire land of Cush. The name of the third river is the Tigris; it runs along the east side of Asshur. And the fourth river is the Euphrates. The LORD God took the man and put him in the Garden of Eden to work it and take care of it." (Genesis 2: 8-15)

This is "all things bright & beautiful," expanding on the sixth day, "Very Good!" The word "paradise" isn't used here, (a word of Persian origin meaning "garden of earthly delights") but that's the picture. The earth is a paradise!

"All kinds of trees [not just a few] that were pleasing to the eye and good for food." (2:9)

Pleasing to senses is the order of the day. Sensual. As delightful as Christmas morning. (Even the primordial trees in the center, later a crime scene, are good.) And the *river* that "*waters the garden.*" Everything is so delightful!

[Side note: two of the rivers mentioned--the Euphrates and the Tigris--are known to us; the other two, are not known and we don't know if the original hearers would have known them either. Good stories--and this one is God-breathed--do that sort of thing.]

The point of all this is the pleasing nature of it all: the gold of the land "is good" (as if we needing reminding about the goodness of gold, but that's the whole point here) the resin is "aromatic"--all forms of the beautiful, the delightful, the useful, the valuable, the good.

Including work! Work is good too. Something useful to do. I have a friend, Rick, who told me recently, "That popular conception of heaven as nothing but ongoing conscious worship, singing and harp playing doesn't move me; I need something to do!" Rick is an engineer. He loves to do things. He buys a fresh load of topsoil every year, just to move it around. He kills portions of his lawn in order to bring them back to life. The man needs something to do!

The picture of life with God in Genesis is not a bleak denial of matter, of nature, or this world of interest and challenge, delight and pleasure.

We operate under the influence of two distorted perspectives. Either we embrace life, instead of God. Or we embrace God, instead of life. Genesis denies both distortions.

The picture of the "religious life" (if that's what you want to call it) is not to ignore the earth to focus on "God alone." As if life is about wearing the same khaki pants every day, not enjoying, engaging, embracing anything around you so you can focus on God alone.

The Genesis vision is to enjoy, endure, embrace, engage, but most of all, encounter life on earth with God. That's the way we're meant to have God.

And the LORD God commanded the man, "You are free to eat from any tree in the garden; but you must not eat from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, for when you eat of it you will surely die." (Gen. 2: 16-17)

Good stories are filled with dramatic tension. One of the ways you add dramatic tension to a story is to slip in a hint of tragedy when things are going great. In the movie, Titanic, it's those revelers enjoying an evening on the deck, noting with interest the little chunks of ice floating by. To the characters in the movie "Titanic" means "unsinkable." But we moviegoers know better. To us "Titanic" means "unsinkable ship that sunk." We're like that hearing Genesis. We want to jump out of our skin saying to those who are in the story itself, "Pay attention to that ice! Heed the warning!" because we've already run into the iceberg. (This is the genius of the story teller to draw our attention to the warning.)

This first message spoken to Adam is a command. We hear "command" and think "drill sergeant." We think "boss getting us to do the dirty work he's too high on the food chain to have to do himself."

But that's the wrong emotional context when we're talking about God. The emotional context is the party in the garden of earthly delights. It's our first contact with God: our awakening to our homo-sapien, man-the-wise status with that first kiss from the Most High. Everything we see delights us, all of it for us, from him. And he speaks the command to keep the party going!

What are the first three words of the first command? YOU ARE FREE....! This might be the best kept Bible secret of all time!

Think of it! You are free! Eat whatever you want, the choice is yours! There's no force feeding, no parental hovering, no smothering authority figure ordering from the menu for us! We are given an incredible freedom by God on planet earth. The realm of freedom is wide, vast, expansive; the realm of restraint so very narrow, limited, localized: "just stay away from this one thing that's mine and not yours."

What does the "knowledge of Good & Evil" refer to? No one can say with certainty. Isn't that odd? You'd think the Bible would spend much attention on explaining what this is all about. Instead, the Bible is very reserved about explaining it, as though it's more important to respect the mystery of it. Perhaps, and this is simply conjecture, we could think of it like this: Only God has the scope, perspective, and experience to know the true nature of good and evil. Good and evil are not merely human inventions or constructs. They are deep spiritual mysteries that are not meant to be known autonomously, apart from God.

When we say, "I'll decide what's good for me, thank you!" it's important we understand: we're making that judgment with limited data. Perhaps part of our being truly wise is understanding our limitation, and trusting a Higher Power to help us make those judgments.

"Why do we need a command from God if, in the universe, we are the ones with the most developed brains?" God is smart. He goes right to the nub from the get go. These new-under-the-sun creatures of his have been so well equipped, they have so much under the hood, so to speak, that they, among all creatures, will be most tempted to overreach, to forget who they are. That's always been the core issue with us: whether we have the wisdom to say to God, "You are God, and I am not." Confusion here is confusion everywhere.

Which brings us back to freedom. What is freedom? Can there be true freedom if we're free of, independent of God? Or is that the first and primary bondage?

"You are free...." In context, is *"you are free to eat from any of the trees in the garden."* But I think it's not too much of a stretch, given the epic nature of this text, to say *"free to*

eat' isn't limited to issues of diet. Something more ultimate seems to be at stake here than the menu for humanity. It's not just free to eat, it's free to be in this world...I think.

Ultimately, freedom is a gift. Long before it's a right, it's a gift.

Freedom begins with a proclamation from God, "You are free" linked to his command. It depends on our accepting ourselves as "not God" and the test case for that is: will we obey a command? Freedom and obedience, in other words, are inextricably linked in Genesis. We can't have one without the other. There's no true freedom without obedience and no true obedience without freedom.

The issue of freedom was a contested issue for the ancients. Much of ancient religion was not rooted in freedom. It revolved around the gods controlling us; it had to do with the stars and the planets ruling our fortunes.

Don Bromley spoke of Genesis 1 as a prophetic challenge to the existing creation stories of Egypt and Babylon. Genesis 2 is a prophetic challenge to every story humans tell about their place in the world.

Which brings us back to science. The story of science has given us wonderful freedoms (from disease, from ignorance, etc) and yet science has also made us wonder if we're truly free. "We're not all that free" we might be tempted to think, if the data of science is our only data. We're driven by our genes, our environment, our social structures. The debate in science isn't "Are we free or not?" The debate is over which factors (genetics, nurture, social structures) in what proportions, control us. (Thankfully, Quantum Physics is lately riding to the rescue for the cause of freedom by telling us at the quantum level we can't predict what happens next. Physical matter seems to have an inherent freedom.)

So what it is? Are we free or are we not? Are we just the product of our DNA, our environment, our social structures?

Genesis 2 is a story of naked humanity in more ways than one, humanity stripped to the bare essentials, the bare necessities. When you strip away all the accumulation of culture, history, all the generational layers, what's underneath?

Is it, as it feels sometimes, that we're just a talking, thinking, feeling, leaf floating down the river, making jokes, philosophizing, fussing, but at the end of the day, just carried by the current?

We're tempted to passively acquiesce: "Oh well! What the....!" as if that's the truth about us. We're not really free....we're just acting out some script we didn't choose, stuck in a bad movie, lip synching our lines.

Whatever story you think you're living under right now, there is this other story, "*In the beginning God....*" A love story. God waiting a long time for us. Kneeling in the dirt to

form us, and when we blinked at him and he saw that look in our eyes--of recognition--he rejoiced to see our day, the sixth day.

And God said, "It's all yours, and you're free to embrace it all and enjoy it all, and work it and care for it all, with me. This is your freedom...the only condition? That we respect each other: I respect you with the gift of freedom, which fits who you are; you respect me by knowing that I am God and you are not. It's a risk we each need to take, but without risk, there can be no trust and without trust there can be no love between beings who are free."

He stands before us still to see what we will do.

Choose this day, then, not just whom you will serve: yourself or God or something or someone else. But choose the story within which you will do your choosing.

Stories are more than entertainment. The ancients understood this better than we. Stories are the way we express our being in the image of God. Without meaning, we don't do so well. Stories are the way we express meaning. Our Bible tells us so. Our Bible is not just a collection of facts. Our Bible is the story of God in search of us! Life has a plot, a purpose, an arc of meaning. We know it in our bones. Even when our philosophy says otherwise, we can't shake it. When pressed, we make meaning of our meaninglessness. We tell that as our story and find ourselves a noble role to play within it. We're hooked on meaning like we're hooked on oxygen.

Having to choose between the story of science and the story of God in search of humanity is, I think, a false choice. In my humble opinion, we've wasted far too much energy imposing that false choice on our culture.

Having to choose between the story of autonomous 'adam (human independent of God) and surrendered 'adam (human respecting God as God respects the human), that's the true choice!

What's our way back into this story of God and humanity walking together? Without even reading ahead, you probably already know that we've blown it on that score. We can never go back, but how do we go forward? The way forward is through the new 'adam, the new surrendered human, Jesus of Nazareth.

Let me suggest that we pray together this simple, "Act of Surrender":

"Jesus of Nazareth, I acknowledge before you my thirst for what you have to give. I surrender myself--whole and entire, what was, and is, and is to come--to you. Plunge the wrongs I have done and the wrongs done to me into your fathomless mercy. Receive me as I am today, and make of me what I am meant to be, and let me walk in the path of your new creation."