

Science & Faith at the Crossroads of Creation: In the Garden, Not Alone by Ken Wilson ©2006

We are working the Biblical creation texts from a "friendly toward mainstream science" perspective based on two assumptions. First, the creation texts are meant to be read as epic-poetic narrative, not as science. Second, the scientific method is not suited to detect or reveal the biblical God who is too intimately involved and too infinitely beyond the natural realm for that.

These are reasonable enough assumptions and reasonable people may well approach the text from different assumptions. One would think there would be plenty of grace to differ on issues like this within the Christian community. Yet we've been plagued by entirely too much dogmatism on this debatable issue! There is a tendency for the advocates of differing positions to claim that theirs is the only way to be faithful. We'd do well to heed the counsel of St. Augustine, the African bishop of old, speaking on the debatable issue of angels (do angels have bodies? can angels get "into" a person or do they speak from without? etc.) "To ask such questions as these and to guess at the answers as one can, is not a useless exercise in speculation, so long as the discussion is moderate and one avoids the mistake of those who think they know what they do not know." (Handbook on Faith, Hope, and Love) The issue of science and faith at the crossroads of creation is not "a useless exercise in speculation"; in fact, confusion on this question can be a major stumbling block in accepting biblical truth, so we have a responsibility to do some thoughtful speculation. But it's an issue we can all approach with "moderation" knowing that we don't know all there is to be known on the question. Or as John Wimber used to say, "Play nice!"

Today, we continue our look at the question of human origins. **I hope when we're finished, you won't feel the slightest obligation to agree with my particular leanings on how science and 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.** This is not about "being right" in the abstract so much as being effective in bringing the transforming presence of Jesus into the heart of Ann Arbor and surrounding communities.

The LORD God said, "It is not good for the man to be alone. I will make a helper suitable for him." Now the LORD God had formed out of the ground all the wild animals and all the birds in the sky. He brought them to the man to see what he would name them; and whatever the man called each living creature, that was its name. So the man gave names to all the livestock, the birds in the sky and all the wild animals. But for Adam no suitable helper was found. So the LORD God caused the man to fall into a deep sleep; and while he was sleeping, he took one of the man's ribs and then closed up the place with flesh. Then the LORD God

made a woman from the rib he had taken out of the man, and he brought her to the man. The man said, "This is now bone of my bones and flesh of my flesh; she shall be called 'woman,' for she was taken out of man." For this reason a man will leave his father and mother and be united to his wife, and they will become one flesh. The man and his wife were both naked, and they felt no shame. (Gen. 2: 18-25)

First, let's clear the landscape for a "friendly to science" perspective. If we read this literally or as something intended to convey truth in a scientific sense, the text becomes the basis for an "alternate science" critique of mainstream science; we must choose between mainstream science and our literal reading. The evidence of science suggests humans are derived from something more complex than literal dirt and that we arrived as a population (or as an emerging gene pool), not a single pair.

Insisting on a literal reading requires us, in other words, to choose between the understanding of mainstream science and the understanding of Scripture. Furthermore a literal reading robs us of the convergence between science and Scripture. Genesis 1, for example, introduces humanity as a male and female population. In fact, all the various forms of life in Genesis 1 are introduced as populations: "Let the waters teem with fish..." etc.

A literal reading also presents us with very significant interpretive dilemmas. How do we reconcile the different sequence of creation in Genesis 1 and 2? How do we reconcile the universal law against incest in light of the fact that by a literal reading, the children of Adam and Eve have only themselves to mate with? (To mention just two difficulties.) It's not as though the literal reading provides us with the "plain and simple" truth. The literal reading leads us into a morass of complexity, in fact.

Conflict with science evaporates and nothing is lost in the biblical truth department if we understand Adam and Eve as a figurative, not literal pair. There are, of course, many literal-historical people in the Bible: kings, priests, prophets, Mary, Jesus, Paul, Priscilla, to name a few. There also seem to be figures whose identity is ambiguous. They may be literal-historical people or they may be literary characters, representing groups of people. Job for example, may be a literary character who represents sufferers for whom the conventional wisdom about suffering doesn't apply. Jonah may represent God's messengers who bristle at the message and either refuse to deliver it or do so "under protest." There are biblical figures like "the Bride of Christ" who are clearly "corporate individuals." The "anti-Christ" may be one of these as well, as St. John refers to "many anti-Christ." The "servant" of Isaiah's writings, seems to be a messianic individual at times, and a corporate individual at others (representing Israel); sometimes the servant is both. In other words, we're not on shaky ground to say Adam and Eve could be a representative pair, not a literal-historical pair.

What's really at stake here? Does it matter if Adam and Eve are literal or

figurative? I don't think so. What concerns us and the text are issues like these: our condition in relation to God, His creation, and each other. From a merely strategic perspective, why spend our time and equity contesting the truths of mainstream science, when we've got these more important truths to proclaim?

The truth of our text (and there is no argument from science on this) is that we become ourselves only in relation to others. Relationship is what, or rather who, the Trinitarian God is at irreducible core; us too, in his image.

"I think, therefore I am" (Renee Descartes) is only partly true. "I am because you are!" (Archbishop Desmond Tutu) captures the biblical truth better.

"The LORD God said, "It is not good for the man to be alone." (Gen. 2:18) What a shocker in the middle of this text! The pattern of Genesis 1 is, Good, Good, Good, Good, Good, then VERY GOOD! Genesis 2 is VERY GOOD at the detail level: good God, good start, good gold, good trees, and then, out of the blue, before sin is even on the event horizon, and before the serpent is mentioned, we have this, NOT GOOD!

If we think Genesis brand creation is instantaneous and static perfection, we're not reading our Bibles carefully. God is portrayed as an artist, not a perfectionist. In the Hebrew understanding perfection means something like whole, complete, holding together, not "attaining an ideal." Our desire for the perfect-ideal life, or the perfect-ideal mate is a fools errand, and may even be a form of idolatry: a seeking after that which is not.

What's the first "not good" about 'adam, and every child of 'adam, which means every one of us? Not good looking? Not good enough? NO! What God saw in 'adam he sees in all of us: "it's not good for the 'adam to be alone" This is a core human issue! It's an issue all human beings, including scientists, grapple with: are we alone or not?

Peter Atkins, the chemist and colleague of Richard Dawkins at Oxford, and one of an elite group of popular science writers buys the false choice Richard Dawkins (and ironically, many Christians) presents: we must either choose a literal reading of Genesis or science. Dawkins and Atkins both choose science. Which leaves Atkins saying this: "Gone is purpose, gone is the afterlife, gone is the soul, gone is protection through prayer, gone is false comfort. All that is left is exhilarating loneliness and the recognition that through science we can come to an understanding of ourselves and this glorious cosmos."

Hold the phone! How does science verify or disprove afterlife? Soul? Purpose? If we insist on a literal reading, we push human beings who are scientists into that corner--God or science, your choice! They choose science! It's what they know! Science stands mute on the truths of Genesis, leaving them to grasp for straws like this: "all that is left is exhilarating loneliness." I don't know anyone who finds loneliness exhilarating! I've never found it exhilarating. Oh, there may be a strange comfort in loneliness from time to time, but exhilarating?

It's important for us to remember something Jesus stressed: there's no virtue in making it hard for people to believe, or laying burdens on them we won't help them to lift. Jesus has a different heart: "I have sheep who are not of this fold and I must lead these too!" Can't we find a way to help them? Can't we do our homework?

The LORD God said, "It is not good for the man to be alone. I will make a helper suitable for him." (Gen. 2: 18) OK, we've arrived at the "shibboleth." (Remember when the tribe of Ephraim wanted to identify the Gileadites who were sneaking into their territory? They made them pronounce a word, shibboleth, that they couldn't pronounce correctly. That's what we have in this text: a shibboleth, "what you say right now and how you say it makes you friend or foe.")

In male dominated cultures, where men are viewed as superior to women, this text is used to support that view. Is that what the text itself is laying down?

Not to beat a dead horse (er, metaphor) but hold the phone! Genesis 1 introduces humanity as "male and female" saying, "let them rule." That's a first hint. A second is like unto it. We hear "helper" as "lower level assistant" but Hebrew is not English. Robert Alter, a Hebrew scholar who doesn't have dog in this fight said this: "The Hebrew 'ezer kenegdo (King James Version, "help meet") is notoriously difficult to translate. The second term means alongside him, opposite him, a counterpart to him. "Help" is too weak because it suggests a merely auxiliary function, whereas 'ezer elsewhere connotes active intervention on behalf of someone, especially in military contexts, as often in the Psalms." Alter translates 'ezer kenegdo, "sustainer beside him." The same Hebrew word applies to God as our helper. Inferior, subordinate God? I don't think so. "Sustainer beside him" has a different connotation, than "helpmeet" doesn't it?

This brings me to an important question raised in our Introducing Jesus Brand Spirituality class, which functions as a new members class: "Why did God rely on story so much instead of putting it straight more like an instructional manual?" An excellent question!

God is personal and speaks to persons and story fits complex, multi-faceted persons better than an instructional manual. Stories are better at being cross-cultural too. The first computer viruses were designed to go out and wiggle their way into existing software to repair it. The Gospel is like that. (Thanks, oddly enough, to Richard Dawkins, the anti-religious evolutionary biologist who compares religion to a computer virus--the analogy, properly understood, which is not the way Dawkins intended it, works great for the gospel!) The gospel works its way into every story in order to transform it from within. Story is like that. In a patriarchal culture, the text slips in without overturning the patriarch, but it leans the culture toward equality. If evolution exists, then it was God's idea. Which means God appreciates the evolutionary process. Cultures can change dramatically over short periods of time, but usually that only happens through violent means. Instead God introduces a story which begins an evolutionary

process within human society to bring about human equality. In an egalitarian culture, it slips in too, without undermining equality and it helps us realize there's unity in diversity, not just in uniformity. Stories last, and stories have transformative power, in other words. Instruction manuals are outdated as soon as they are written. (Which is not to say stories don't also convey straightforward instruction, but we're moving far afield.)

The LORD said, "It is not good for the man to be alone. I will make a helper suitable for him." Now the LORD God had formed out of the ground all the wild animals and all the birds in the sky. He brought them to the man to see what he would name them; whatever the man called each living creature, that was its name. So the man gave names to all the livestock, the birds in the sky and all wild animals. But for Adam no suitable helper was found. (Gen. 2: 18-20)

God creates as an artist, exploring possibilities, not as an engineer with a blueprint bringing things up to a pre-existing code. Presumably, God knows a black-capped chickadee is not a suitable sustainer beside him---YET, and this is huge, he goes through the process! As Jonathan Edwards said, "God is a God of means!" Evolution is a process. From the human, late arrival point of view, evolution is life exploring it's way toward us. All the ancestral species are good, but they are also, "not yet."

Plus which, this is darned entertaining because, we on other side, know what a sustainer looks like. So we're saying, "No! Not yet!" right along with Adam and God. That's the story grabbing us like stories do and straight instructional manuals don't.

But for Adam no suitable helper was found. So the LORD God caused the man to fall into a deep sleep; and while he was sleeping, he took one of the man's ribs and then closed up the place with flesh. Then the LORD God made a woman from the rib he had taken out of the man, and he brought her to the man. (Gen. 2:20-22)

This is written millennia before anesthesia and yet here is God pictured as an anesthesiologist and surgeon, not to mention cloning scientist! There are many reasons to love the Bible, but this is surely one of them.

"The Lord caused the man to fall into a deep sleep" is key! The original hearers were children of Abraham. And it was well known by them that Abraham also "fell into a deep sleep." And his falling into a deep sleep signaled the beginning of a seminal visionary experience recorded in Genesis 15.

"Fell into deep sleep" in Genesis 2 is code for the mode of visionary experience. THIS IS VISIONARY EXPERIENCE! Visionary experience means, not literal "out here" events, but literal "in here" visionary events.

Is this the text itself telling us how it wants to be read? Not science, not instructional biology manual, but visionary experience for the human to understand the other human because who the other is sheds light on who I am.

"I am because you are."

But wait, there's more! (Sounds like the Home Shopping Network, no?) We're not on our own to know our own. There's no true understanding of the other except as one presented to us by a third party, YHWH. All relationship is, in a sense, Trinitarian--not just you and me but you and me and YHWH makes three! Relationship in two dimensions always falls flat! If it's just me and the clerk across the counter, just me and my boss, well, then right there, we've stepped out of divine love. All relationship is Trinitarian: every relationship is presented by, involves, touches a third party. Everybody is God's somebody!

A friend of mine tells a great story on himself. He was in a lousy mood one day and bought gas at the local Meijer's station. The pump farthest from the store, wouldn't you know it, was the one that made you go into the store to pay. And my friend was in a hurry that day. And in that bad mood, he stormed into the store to give the store clerk a piece of his mind--how ridiculous it was that he couldn't pay at the pump, etc. He drove away, and the thought popped into his mind, and it wasn't in the sound of his own voice: "Where are you going?" Instantly, he knew that he'd been tasked by God to turn around, go back to the gas station, purchase a flower for the clerk, and present it to her with an apology for the boorish way he behaved. It ain't just you and me. It's you and me and YHWH makes three. Everybody is God's somebody.

We're not on our own to know our own! God would be the love between each one of us. And if we could see that we'd be better for each other.

Do you mind if I get a little personal? I fell into an understanding of the visionary nature of this text when happened to me. I was on a five day silent retreat, the first I'd ever taken. Not to worry, it wasn't my idea. I had to do it for a class I was taking in spiritual direction. I never would have tried such a thing on my own. But I'm telling you, five days of complete silence does something to a person. In fact if the FDA understood what silence does to a person, they'd treat it as a controlled substance. Well, on my five day silent retreat I was alone in a little prayer room and this text from Genesis floated through my brain. Only it didn't stop there. It pulled me into itself. That is to say, I had something like a visionary experience. I was in the garden and Lord YHWH was there, though not visibly so. Also there, before me, was my wife. And we were being presented to each other in all our vulnerability. We just looked at each other. After 35 years of marriage it was like meeting her for the first time.

When it was over, it felt as though I'd been healed of something: embarrassment. You see, I'm the high school senior who got his girlfriend pregnant. It was my task to go to my girlfriend's father, Stan, and tell him, "Mr. Rozell, Nancy and I are getting married. Nancy is pregnant and I'm the father." He went stunned, then he said, "You fiddle farted around, didn't you!?" It sounds humorous at the distance of 37 years, I know. But at the time, neither of us was laughing. I wasn't just feeling bad for the selfish act of making love with someone

before either of us were ready to receive the intended or unintended consequences. He didn't lecture me on the moral failing. That would have been tolerable. Stan was just saying, "How stupid!" I was, needless to say, but it is the point, embarrassed. And I think my visionary experience on that retreat was God's kind way of removing any shred of embarrassment from my most sacred union with my wife of thirty-five years. Isn't God kind? And isn't his Word living?

The man said, "This is now bone of my bones and flesh of my flesh; she shall be called 'woman,' for she was taken out of man." (Gen. 2: 23) Much is made of this as Adam's power trip. But this is also the first time 'adam refers to himself. This is the first time 'adam calls himself a man. I don't think 'adam knew who he was until he met another of his kind, in visionary experience, mediated by Lord YHWH, and he came out of that sleep a different 'adam, no longer alone.

For this reason a man will leave his father and mother and be united to his wife, and they will become one flesh. (Gen. 2: 24)

We don't often notice it, but the need to leave is part of the good created order. I lucked out in the son and daughter in law department. The last time one of my kids got married I inherited Ben. Good choice! Happy for Ben, happy for Amy; Amy good for Ben, Ben good for Amy; wouldn't trade married Amy for single living at home Amy, everything good, good, good, good, good, VERY GOOD, but I was sad at the leaving!

This helps me understand that sadness... The fall didn't make me sad! Sin didn't make me sad! The devil didn't make me sad! Leavings, including good ones, make us sad. Sad can get out of hand, but sad ain't always bad.

The biblical story of life before "the fall" is much more textured than we think. It has room for the "not good" and for leaving.

The man and his wife were both naked, and they felt no shame. (Gen. 2: 25)

Completely vulnerable were they, no covering, no hiding, and they felt no shame. No shame, none, nada, zero set! Right down to holy of holies territory within them: their sexuality, no shame.

How much sadness this evokes in us when we hear it! How this reminds us that shame is imbedded in so much human experience now. Those who ought to feel shame--the sociopaths of this world, don't or can't. What a shame! Others are plagued by it without doing anything to deserve it. What a shame! Most of us just muddle in the middle of the shame Bell Curve. What a shame!

Imagine your inner world without any worry. Now imagine your inner world without any shame! Hurts to think about it, we need it so bad!

Genesis is wading into tender territory: HUMAN SHAME. Where is all that shame coming from? Can we ever be free?

This is the dramatic set up for Genesis 3. "Now the serpent was more crafty..." (Gen. 3:1) The story that we call, "the fall" and we're not talking about the

season after summer.

Why would God even bring it up--these naked humans and they felt no shame-- unless there was a way out of our shame? Unless this is what God, the creative genius and soon to become the redemptive genius, is working toward. This is a word of hope for us. We've got a long way to go, but God is going to get us there. We're not the only ones who are bothered by our shame. It bothers God too. And we're not the only ones trying to get rid of our shame. God has it on his to-do list as well. And the rest of the Bible is about his getting that job done for us.