

Science & Faith at the Crossroads of Creation: Genesis 3, The Exile Begins by Ken Wilson, ©2006

How would you describe what religion is about to a group of secular minded New Yorkers? Phyllis Tickle was the first religion editor for Publishers Weekly, the trade journal for the publishing industry. Phyllis was hired to help Publishers Weekly make sense of the enormous boom in religious publishing that took them all by surprise in the 1990's. Her first task was to educate those unfamiliar with religion about the world of faith in general. Mrs. Tickle came up with this analogy. Religion is what tethers our tenuous lives in this world to something more secure. It's like a massive rope that connects a ship to its dock. The rope has three cables or cords (spirituality, morality, physical aspects) covered with a water-proof casing, which is the story (for Christians, the biblical account of God in search of humanity.) Between the waterproof casing and the three cables is a mesh fabric, that allows some play between the two. Think of that mesh fabric as the "common imagination." What does that mean? It means we have bare facts, but we interpret the facts through lens of our common imagination.

It's a bare fact: the sun moves across the sky in an arch, sunup to sundown. In Bible times, the common imagination pictured the sun literally revolving around the earth. This picturing of the sun is reflected in the Bible (see Psalm 19.) Which makes sense, because the Bible is God's word in the language and thought forms of humans. If God didn't to speak to us like this, we couldn't understand him. Science of course has a lot to do with the "common imagination."

Five hundred years ago, Copernicus and Galileo made a startling discovery (about a hundred years apart.) The sun doesn't literally revolve around the earth; the earth rotates on its axis and revolves around sun. This tore a hole in the common imagination. Some continued to believe the earth was the center, others accepted the new picture. For a long time, there wasn't a common imagination.

From our perch in the twenty first century, this seems like much ado about nothing. But at the time big issues were at stake: If the earth is not the center, does that mean we humans are a side show? Is the Bible unreliable because it speaks as though the sun revolves around the earth? Where is heaven located? In the common imagination, the highest heaven was literally just beyond the star studded dome of the sky. The Bible speaks in this language as well. Where is it now? Was the Bible wrong to refer to heaven as a place up there? If they imagined it to be literally up there, did that mean the Bible itself is mistaken? If they intended it literally, can we receive it figuratively and still be faithful to Scripture?

We resolved these issues by deciding it's just fine not to read the Bible as an astronomy text. Today we can understand heaven's location as a transcendent-parallel dimension, which fits our emerging common imagination and the biblical text quite nicely. But at the time it was huge. Take for example this excerpt from a letter to Galileo from a Cardinal of the Catholic Church: "To affirm that the earth revolves very swiftly around the sun is a dangerous thing, not only irritating the theologians and philosophers, but

injuring our holy faith and making the sacred scripture false" (Cardinal Bellarmine.) The Protestant reformers of the time had similar concerns about Galileo's findings. The whole church was upset.

Now the issue is origins and the diversity of life. Evolutionary science is disrupting the previous common imagination, just as the calculations of Copernicus did about the earth in relation to the sun.

We live in confusing times, because we lack a common imagination on the question of origins. Some accept the picture of a 13.5 billion year old evolving universe. Others don't. Joan Roughgarden, an evolutionary biologist, reports that that 35% of Protestant physicians don't accept evolutionary science. The polling data show that about half of Americans have difficulty imagining the evolutionary narrative. Where does that leave American Christians? Divided over the issue. Some say, "I believe in God the Creator, working through evolutionary process." Others say, "I believe in God the creator and evolution is bunk." There is every conceivable position staked out between these two within the Christian community today. Since the rise of science five hundred years ago, we've had these discussions. We usually work it out.

How do we read Genesis 3 if our imagination has been shaped by the story of mainstream science? That's today's task, and I don't just mean a 24 hour calendar day either.

A "Not Friendly to Mainstream Science View" would understand Adam and Eve as a literal-historical pair. (This is true in both the "Young Earth" and "Old Earth" views, if I understand them correctly. "Intelligent Design" is a view that claims no commitment to any sacred text, so the identity of Adam and Eve is a moot point for those who hold this view.)

In this view, until Adam and Eve sinned no physical death took place (at least no physical death of "the higher animals," though lower life forms did die according to some.) A major proponent of the Young Earth view says the 2nd Law of Thermodynamics (entropy, things tend to move from an ordered to a disordered state) didn't exist or apply until Genesis 3. You can see that for someone whose imagination was formed by mainstream science, this is as close to impossible to imagine as anything could be. It's very challenging to ask someone to believe something they can't even imagine. Faith does not take place in a vacuum.

A "Friendly to Mainstream Science View" would understand Adam and Eve not to be a literal-historical pair. Instead they are viewed as figurative, representing the first population of homo-sapiens.

In this view, God breathed on a population of hominids who became fully human (whether in a moment or over a span of years is not important in this understanding.) They received the image of God, conceived of as including traits like the moral sense (concern for right and wrong, the ability to make free moral choices); the image of God might be understood to also include our fully human consciousness, making us capable

of spiritual intimacy; the image of God might also include our capacity to conceive of and long for eternity as no other species can. Genesis 2 is the inspired truth of that coming of age in story form. Genesis 3 is the inspired truth of the bad choices our ancestors made in story form.

I've encountered two significant objections to this "friendly to mainstream science" reading. The first is expressed with a comment something like this: "What does this say about life before the fall? I always imagined it as pain free, idyllic, heaven on earth, paradise." That's a reasonable objection and it calls for a response.

The Biblical descriptions of life before "the fall" are brief, poetic, and not written in "science-speak." If you asked serious Bible readers what life was like before Genesis 3, you would get a wide ranging set of answers, which would be mutually incompatible and mostly based on conjecture. This is not an issue the Bible is concerned about except to affirm the truths highlighted in Genesis such as the goodness of the earth and God's involvement in creating it, the original goodness of humanity and God's involvement in bringing us into existence and our being the subjects of God's love and concern, including being accountable to him for our actions.

Why couldn't we get a consistent response from serious readers of the Bible to this question? Because there are many non-biblical works of imagination that shape our "common imagination" and we tend to read the bible informed by our common imagination. The common imagination includes such things as religious art, poetry, and songs. John Milton's Paradise Lost is a poetic drama with lengthy descriptions of life leading up to "the fall": Satan in the heavenly courts scheming our demise, "Our two first Parents, yet the onely two Of mankind, in the happie Garden plac't, Reaping immortal fruits of joy and love, Uninterrupted joy, unrivaled love In blissful solitude." Milton has had a profound influence on the Christian imagination, whether or not we've read any Milton.

All this and more shapes our common imagination. Why do so many people picture the forbidden fruit as an apple? That's not in the Bible. We assume (correctly I think) that the serpent of Genesis 3 represents a supernatural being. This is not stated in the text. In fact, the text describes the serpent as an animal, and at a level of detail reserved only for humans. The only thing about the serpent which is not "animal like" is his communication skills. There's a difference between the biblical text, in other words, and the "common imagination."

So we need to acknowledge that God hasn't actually revealed much about this question of life before the fall. We imagine plenty, but we know little. For example...

Genesis 2-3 occurs on a single day. Taken literally, human life before the fall lasted a few hours; the fall is virtually simultaneous with our arrival.

When we read, "The day you eat of it, you will die" (Gen. 2: 17), we assume God is referring to spiritual death. But that's an inference based on the fact that Adam and

Eve don't physically die after sinning. One could also assume that God changed his mind or decided not to impose the penalty of same day death. In Genesis 2, before the fall, the mystery of evil is a local presence on earth. Literally, of course, it's a crafty, talking serpent, and we don't know from the text itself that the serpent represents Satan. In Genesis 2, before the fall, not everything is good: "It's not good for the man to be alone." (Gen. 2: 18) "Paradise" is a word not found in the text itself and may not have been exactly as we might imagine it: a crystal vase shattered by the fall.

What's shifting here is not the truth of the Bible. What's shifting is our common imagination: how we picture or imagine the truth of the Bible playing itself out.

It's a big shift, as big a shift as Galileo's science rap laid on us 500 years ago. It's like being fitted with new lenses; at first, it's dizzying. Who asked for these new lenses, anyway? But it's a shift the Bible can survive and the gospel can survive and we can survive. We'll be all right!

The second substantive objection to the "Friendly to Mainstream Science" reading of Genesis 3, is Romans 5: 12-20 (see especially vs. 12 and 15.) In this text Paul compares Adam to Jesus who is a literal, historical person, like Abraham Lincoln. So what does it mean if we understand Adam as a representative figure?

In my book, Jesus is the center of everything: a literal, historical person. If he's not literally risen, our hope is in vain. So this is an important issue we're facing.

If the text were saying, "We know Jesus of Nazareth is a literal historical person because Adam was a literal historical person and if Adam wasn't, Jesus is not" then Houston, we have a problem. But the text is not arguing this.

Jesus being a literal-historical person like you or me or Abe Lincoln, doesn't depend on Adam being one. This is well established by history itself. Paul certainly didn't doubt it and didn't need to prove it. He was alive at the time when Jesus was a public figure in Israel, and had personal access to plenty of eyewitnesses.

Paul's argument here is something else. The text is part of a major New Testament theme: Jesus is Lord of a New Creation. Jesus is a New Adam, a new start for a new humanity, getting ready in advance for a new creation.

And the new creation will be better than the old creation was bad!

The operative phrase in Romans 5 is "how much more." If old Adam messed things up, how much more will the new Adam restore them. Original sin happened when Adam's slate was clear--shame on our weak ancestors; but the second Adam is greater because he cancels the trespasses which have gone before, then launches a new creation. The power of the creator and redeemer is working in him! Yes, we've got a dysfunctional family history, but we're getting a fresh start and though the past is against us, the future is for us!

Paul no doubt pictured Adam as a literal-historical figure. Does this mean he perjured

himself? I don't think so. It means he spoke in the language of the common imagination of his time, allowing him to make sense. It's reasonable to assume that Paul pictured the sun revolving around the earth. Let's take it a step further. Jesus said, "the lamp of the body is the eye" which makes no literal sense to our common imagination because the eye is a lens not a lamp. But in the ancient world they had a different common imagination. It was understood that the eye conveyed a source of illumination from within to the surrounding exterior, like a lamp does. As a fully human, human being who, according to Phillipians 2 emptied himself of divine prerogative (such that he didn't know the time of his own return) it is reasonable to assume that Jesus may well have shared in the common imagination of his time concerning the human eye, even though he was obviously Lord of the human eye, having healed quite a few. The truth telling of Jesus and Paul is in the language of the time.

On balance, I think one can be a faithful Christian faithfully reading Holy Scripture in a way that is friendly to mainstream science; that is, viewing Adam and Eve as figurative, representative humans, not literal historical ones.

Now that we've cleared the science and faith landscape, on to the treasure hidden the field: the text itself! *The man and his wife were both naked and they felt no shame. Now the serpent was more crafty than any of the wild animals the LORD God had made. He said to the woman, "Did God really say, 'You must not eat from any tree in the garden?'"* (2:25-3:1)

Pun alert! The Hebrew for naked (sounds like "arom") sounds almost exactly like the Hebrew for crafty (sounds like "arum.") The only difference in the Hebrew is the placement of a jot (of "jot and tittle" fame.) The closest English equivalent might be: "the humans were nude...the serpent was shrewd."

The author is saying, take notice! Humans were vulnerable, innocent, naïve, defenseless. We are newcomers to the moral realm and the realm of concern for eternity. All that stands between nude humans and the shrewd serpent, representing pre-existent evil, is an intimate trust in God. Strip away our flimsy defenses, and THAT'S ALL WE EVER HAVE! As long as they trusted and obeyed his word of freedom and warning--"You are free to eat from every tree, just don't eat from the one tree that's mine and you're not ready for"--they were fine. But oh how vulnerable we are, by nature, apart from trust in God!

Anyone who thinks this is a primitive, childish piece of writing doesn't know their Dante from their Dan Brown. This is the most ingenious, powerful, true to the human experience piece of writing you'll ever run into. This is what happens when we converse with evil. This is the mystery of temptation.

Evil's first face is not a monster face, but a friendly one.

He said to the woman, "Did God really say, 'You must not eat from any tree in the garden?'" The woman said to the serpent, "We may eat fruit from the trees in the

garden, but God did say, You must not eat fruit from the tree that is in the middle of the garden, and you must not touch it, or you will die." "You will not certainly die," the serpent said to the woman. "For God knows that when you eat of it your eyes will be opened, and you will be like God, knowing good and evil." (Gen. 3: 1-5)

Distortion always begins with our image of God. God says, "You are free to eat from any tree, just please stay away from this one" is twisted into "Don't you dare touch anything!" Our image of God is being distorted: he's an ogre, hard, demanding, arbitrary, maybe even self-serving. This is the accuser at work, as he's at work when we twist each other's words for hidden purposes.

The mystery of evil presents itself falsely as a soothing comfort: "You won't die, everything will be fine...God just doesn't want you being as knowledgeable as he is. Knowledge is power! He's protecting his monopoly!" The serpent is our agent, looking out for our interests, right?! (Just don't look for any help from him when we fall into the mess he'd have us make of our lives.)

This is a classic principle of spiritual discernment: when you're moving closer to God, the evil spirit will disrupt and disturb you; when you're moving toward, attending to evil, evil will comfort and console you.

When the woman saw the fruit of the tree was good for food and pleasing to the eye, and also desirable for gaining wisdom, she took some and ate it. She also gave some to her husband, who was with her, and he ate it. (Gen. 3:6)

Underneath all the smooth talk, it's really a power grab; they saw that fruit as a path to power apart from God, making them on a par with God.

Then the eyes of both of them were opened, and they realized they were naked; so they sewed fig leaves together and made coverings for themselves. Then the man and his wife heard the sound of the LORD God as he was walking in the garden in the cool of the day ["cool of the day" = wind in Hebrew; they heard him in the wind?] and they hid from the LORD God among the trees of the garden. But the LORD God called to the man, "Where are you?" He answered, "I heard you in the garden, and I was afraid because I was naked; so I hid." And he said, "Who told you that you were naked? Have you eaten from the tree that I commanded you not to eat from?" The man said, "The woman you put here with me—she gave me some fruit from the tree, and I ate it." Then the LORD God said to the woman, "What is this you have done?" The woman said, "The serpent deceived me, and I ate." (2: 7-13)

These are the first signs of spiritual ruin. It's framed as a spiritual awakening (their eyes were opened!) in reverse: to evil, not God. They feel shame at their nakedness and hide themselves from each other. Then they hide themselves from God. (Our exile begins when we hide ourselves.)

The first words from God sound almost forlorn, "Where are you?" For the first time God has to look for us because we're hiding. How do you think he feels about that? Imagine how a parent feels losing track of his or her child, and you get the gist.

Shame, hiding, fear, blame shifting, it all goes back to the beginning. The man blames the woman and the woman blames the serpent. But the Lord calls them all to account. Let's consider this for a moment. The Lord calls them to account.

The Lord might have simply left them to their own devices in the garden. But he doesn't. He approaches them and engages them. God calling us to account is part of his commitment to relate to us as persons of dignity and worth. He's not one to leave at the first sign of trouble.

So the LORD God said to the serpent, "Because you have done this, "Cursed are you above all livestock and all wild animals! You will crawl on your belly and you will eat dust all the days of your life. And I will put enmity between you and the woman, and between your offspring and hers; he will crush your head, and you will strike his heel."

This is the first messianic reference in the Bible: the woman will bear an offspring who will deliver a death blow to evil, after evil has felled him. Christians believe this was fulfilled when the demonic horde flashed their fangs at the crucifixion like a vampire delights in the feed, but that death rent the heavens, tore the fabric of space-time and the new creation began to flow from the future into the present.

By the way, all Christians acknowledge the head crushing and heel striking is figurative not literal. There's no such thing as a completely literal reading of this by anybody...

To the woman he said, "I will make your pains in childbearing very severe; with pain you will give birth to children. Your desire will be for your husband, and he will rule over you." (Gen. 3: 16)

First, here's an interesting intersection between science and faith. Evolutionary biologists think that part of our becoming homo-sapien involved a rapid (in evolutionary time frames) expansion of our brain capacity, primarily in the frontal lobe (site of our reasoning powers and our capacity to plan for the future). This expansion happened more rapidly than the female pelvis could adapt by getting larger to easily accommodate the birth of babies with larger craniums. This is one reason the labor of human females is generally more painful than many species. As we became homo-sapien, our pain in childbirth increased. [see [The Dragons of Eden](#), by Carl Sagan]

Second, here's something to keep in mind about "and he will rule over you." The rule of men over women is linked to the curse not to the blessing of creation (or redemption.) As followers of the One who cancels the curse we're not called to enforce it! That should go without saying.

To Adam he said, "Because you listened to your wife and ate from the tree about which I commanded you, 'You must not eat of it,' "Cursed is the ground because of you; through painful toil you will eat of it all the days of your life. It will produce thorns and thistles for you, and you will eat the plants of the field. By the sweat of your brow you will eat your food until you return to the ground, since from it you were taken; for dust you are and to dust you will return." (Gen. 3: 17-19)

The human experience is riddled with so much futility! Murphy's Law is a universal one. Assembly is always more complicated than the instructions on the box imply. This was true in the agrarian age of the Bible. It was true in the industrial age of our grandparents. And it is true in the information today. Remember this next time you're cussing at your computer. You're not just railing at technology. You're reacting to the human condition.

Adam named his wife Eve, because she would become the mother of all the living. The LORD God made garments of skin for Adam and his wife and clothed them. And the LORD God said, "The man has now become like one of us, knowing good and evil. He must not be allowed to reach out his hand and take also from the tree of life and eat, and live forever." So the LORD God banished him from the Garden of Eden to work the ground from which he had been taken. After he drove them out, he placed on the east side of the Garden of Eden cherubim and a flaming sword flashing back and forth to guard the way to the tree of life. (2: 20-24)

Here's another indication we're not to take this story literally. There is no indication in the text that the Garden vanished. In fact, eternal angels were stationed there to protect it from pillaging. If this is meant to be read literally, the garden and those cherubim should be visible on google earth. Of course, it's not. Because this is not about that. This is a God-breathed story about the human condition.

Our story (and it is our story) ends with exile setting up the rest of the Bible. We're cast away, our Fed Ex packages undeliverable. Exile is where we are spiritually, relationally, socially, internationally...this is the state we're in when the gospel comes to us, saying...

"A man had two sons [Jacob & Esau, perhaps?], and the family got all messed up, and everyone felt alienated from everyone else. And it broke father's heart, and he's doing everything in his power to make it a home again, throwing a banquet feast and inviting us to the table. Will we come in from our exile? All who are on the outside looking in, all on the inside looking out, down and outers, up and outers, hurry up and come home. God misses you even more than you miss him....the kingdom is near, which means our long exile is over, if we just embrace it."