

6 September 2015

Science or Meaning? Genesis 2:18-25

One of the biggest problems that modern people have with the Bible is the way it seems to contradict the findings of modern science, and the primary battlefield for this struggle for the past 150 years or so has concerned their different accounts of the origin of the universe and of humanity in particular. The Bible, in Genesis 1, describes all that exists being created by God by decree – God speaks, and they are – over the course of six days. Moving ahead in Genesis slightly and adding together the years of all the genealogies there, you can determine that this week of creation would have taken place just over 6,000 years ago. As for humanity, Genesis 2 describes God shaping a man out of clay and then, to provide him with a partner, building a woman out of one of the man's ribs. By contrast, scientific analysis of fossils indicate that life on earth is hundreds of millions of years old. The prevailing theory of the origin of the universe is that it began with a "Big Bang" about fourteen billion years ago, from which event the universe is still expanding. As for humanity, biologists describe human origins in terms of evolution – saying that life on earth is in constant change as it adapts to new environments, so all creatures, including us, have evolved from earlier, simpler creatures.

As you can see, there are some points of difference between these two accounts. These differences have seemed to many to be irreconcilable, with the result that many scientists have rejected Christianity as a whole as an ignorant superstition and many Christians have rejected science as a whole as a sort of subversive atheism. Schools are caught in the middle. School boards packed with Christians demand that science teachers "balance" their teachings on evolution with teachings from the Bible. Biology textbooks dance around the issue, not wanting to offend school districts in Texas, and science teachers never know when they'll be challenged by students, parents, or administrators for doing their jobs. Increasingly, young adults just roll their eyes at the whole business. It is a frequent reason given for their leaving church.

Interestingly enough, this is not the first time science and religion have banged heads. In the 15th century, Nicholas Copernicus published a book arguing that the earth revolved in a year-long orbit around the sun and rotated each day on its axis. That rotation, he said, is what makes it look as if the sun is moving, but in fact the sun is still and the earth is moving. This was a problem. Not only did the prevailing science say that the sun revolved around the earth, but the Bible supported that theory. Psalm 19, for instance, which we just read, describes the sun rising at the end of the heavens and continuing its circuit over the earth to the other side. There is even a place in Joshua 10 that describes God stopping the sun in its movement for a while, so as to give the Israelites a longer day in which to kill their enemies. So, when Copernicus's theory was published, there was an immediate outcry from religious leaders. Martin Luther – remember him? – wrote, "People gave ear to an upstart astrologer who strove to show that the earth revolves, not the heavens or the firmament, the sun and the moon. This fool...wishes to reverse the entire science of astronomy; but sacred Scripture tells us that Joshua commanded the sun to stand still, and not the earth." John Calvin just said that anyone who believed Copernicus instead of the Bible was possessed by a devil.

This is an instructive example, because the church's 16th century conflict with Copernican science exactly parallels today's conflict with evolutionary science. But today, the Copernican thing is a complete non-issue. Except for a few cranks, no one doubts that the earth revolves around the sun. So how do Bible-believing Christians justify that? Basically, by saying that the Bible preserves the worldview held by its human writers, as you would expect, and that trusting the Bible as an inspired source for knowledge about God does not mean we have to adopt its human writers' pre-scientific worldview.

Should I say that again? *Trusting the Bible as an inspired source for knowledge about God does not mean we have to adopt its human writers' pre-scientific worldview.* That means we should not assume that the Bible is scientifically accurate – in fact, given how far science has progressed since the Bible was written, we should probably assume that when the Bible speaks on scientific matters we should be skeptical. So, does that mean that the Bible is just outdated? I don't think so. Let me illustrate from this passage in Genesis 2, verses 18-25:

Then the Lord God said, 'It is not good that the man should be alone; I will make him a helper as his partner.' So out of the ground the Lord God formed every animal of the field and every bird of the air, and brought them to the man to see what he would call them; and whatever the man called each living creature, that was its name. The man gave names to all cattle, and to the birds of the air, and to every animal of the field; but for the man there was not found a helper as his partner. So the Lord God caused a deep sleep to fall upon the man, and he slept; then he took one of his ribs and closed up its place with flesh. And the rib that the Lord God had taken from the man he made into a woman and brought her to the man. Then the man said,

*'This at last is bone of my bones
and flesh of my flesh;
this one shall be called Woman,
for out of Man this one was taken.'*

Therefore a man leaves his father and his mother and clings to his wife, and they become one flesh. And the man and his wife were both naked, and were not ashamed.

Let me tell you about this passage's scientific evidence. I remember being so excited as a child when I learned from a fellow missionary kid that men actually have one fewer ribs than women do. See? Proof that this biblical story is historically and scientifically accurate. There's only one small problem. It's not true: we have the same number of ribs.

So where did that story come from? I know know. All I can say is that someone felt that the most important thing about Genesis 2 is that it be shown to be scientifically accurate, so he made up the rib story. You'd think that such a silly lie would disappear, since it can be easily disproved by, you know, counting, but the story went viral. I heard it in Singapore. My wife Rebecca heard it as a child in Wyoming. Many of you have told me you heard it, too. Children are still being taught this ridiculous falsehood. Why? Because evidently a *lot* of people think that scientific accuracy is what really matters here. But it's not. Here's what matters in that story: God created humanity – by whatever means – but and created us in need of love and community. No other creature was sufficient, because the community that people need is one of equal partnership. That's why God created both man *and* woman, different in many ways but equal.

That equality is represented in the narrative by the fact that the woman comes from the man's side – not his foot or head. And in a perfect world – that is, a world without human sin – man and woman would live together in peace and love, equals, hiding nothing, ashamed of nothing.

That, I believe, is what this passage means. And notice that that meaning has absolutely nothing to do with whether humans were formed in a moment from mud and bone or shaped over millions of years. It has nothing to do with whether the story can be empirically proven and everything to do with deep insight into the heart of God and God's loving wish for us to live as equals in community and mutual love. But as long as we're fighting over the details of *how*, we miss all that meaning. And for my part, I'd rather have the meaning than the science. Fifty years from now, science will have changed. Science does that. But the heart of God does not, and that's what we'll find in this passage if we'll just stop defending it long enough to listen.

So, let me recap. Neither our faith nor the Bible are opposed to science. This week, as it happened, I was reading in Leviticus and came to the long chapter 13 on leprosy. Reading that, I realized that this chapter was science. It describes symptoms, based on observation, and provides clues for the priests – who were the physicians of Israel – to know when a skin disease is contagious and when it's healing. It suggests a treatment plan involving quarantine and periodic follow-up checks. It's science. Probably the best science available in the 5th century before Christ. But science knows more now. If you break out in a suspicious rash, don't go to Leviticus 13; go to a doctor. It's great the the Bible uses the best science at its disposal – so should we – but that's not what the Bible's really about. We do not turn to this 2000 year old book for science, but for meaning. When we read Genesis 1, for instance, we should not be straining our minds to find some way to make the fossil record fit scripture. It doesn't. Instead, we should be looking behind the details to what it tells us about God: that God creates voluntarily, joyfully, seeking love and relationship, and that creation is good. Nothing exists that God did not create, and so all our praise and thanks and worship should be given to God and God alone.

That's what it means. That's what it will mean as long as the world exists. Science will change. Theories will come and go, but in every way that matters the Word of God is forever.