

Finding humans origins from biblical theology #4

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This is by way of being an appendix to the main conclusions I've drawn in previous posts about the possible implications for human origins of seeing Adam, in the context of Genesis, as proto-Israel, yet also as a real and historical (not fictional) archetype. I've suggested that we should distinguish the whole race of mankind, created in Genesis 1, from Adam as one member of that race, chosen to become the forerunner of a new kind of relationship with God as Yahweh, analogous to the calling from the generality of humanity of Abraham, or of Israel the nation, or of those born again into Christ. But someone may ask if this does this not imply two separate creation acts for man – the first in Genesis 1, and the second that of Adam “*from the dust of the ground*” in ch.2.

Let's explore the word “create” a little. On the one hand, as the Hebrew word *bara* it's only ever used with God as subject. On the other, it's not the *only* word used of God's creation, even in Genesis. The word “make” (the generic artisan word *asah*) is a virtual synonym in Genesis 1, but we shouldn't forget his acts also include “separating”, commands for the earth to “bring forth” and for the water to “teem”. Adam in ch.2 is “formed” (*yatsar*), a word also mostly used of God in Scripture, but also of people making images, for example.

Although “create” may be a useful technical term in theology, for example in describing what God does *ex nihilo*, in Hebrew Scripture it seems simply to be used, with several other verbs, in a non-technical way for anything new that God brings about. Its use in Genesis is not so much about saying that certain parts of the work required *bara* and others not, but about the attribution of divine will and causality to the whole account – the word *bara*, like certain other key words, is mentioned seven times from 1:1 to the linking verse 2:4. The Genesis account is constructed almost as carefully as creation itself.

John Walton may well be right in suggesting that the particular nuance of *bara* is about functional organisation, but it is certainly not necessarily about “*pffing*” something from nothing in an instant. Ps. 51:20 asks God to create a clean heart in him – meaning the transformation of the old one, and morally rather than physically at that. In Ps. 54:16 God says he creates the smith, which is as much as to say the skills, training and vocation for a trade come to actual existing men ultimately from God. Israel is described as being “created” (from a rabble in Egypt) in Isa. 43:1, and so too, prophetically, the new nation of the Church (from sinners like us) in Ps. 102:18. God creates evil in Isa 43:7, meaning “disaster”, not “sin”, and the context is the destruction of empires by war and similar quite normal events. He even creates darkness (the mere *absence* of light) in that same verse.

In all these the common theme is not “causing to exist *ex nihilo*“, but “design” – God's specific intentions come to be, whether that be from nothing, or from something already existing; and the result may be a situation as much as something material. Perhaps the word's most telling use, in considering what “Adam as Israel” says about the creation of mankind, is that great creation text, Ps. 104, in which God's control of the usual cycle of death and birth in nature is described in v.30 as “creation”.

So *bara* is a general, not a technical, word – but nevertheless we should not understand it as meaning “natural causes”. The whole point of all its uses, and its synonyms and analogues, is to point to God’s bringing about of what would otherwise not happen. I’ll come back to that, after we look at the matter of God’s apparent use of existing materials.

In Gen. 2:7 God forms Adam from dust (*adamah*), and breathes his breath or spirit into his nostrils. In vv.21-22 Eve is made from Adam’s rib, or side. Now, from the point of view of divine power, this was clearly unnecessary: God could easily create both Adam and Eve *ex nihilo*, as to all immediate appearances 1:27 describes the creation of mankind.

Conversely, from the “scientific” point of view, God was not manufacturing products from raw materials at all in these texts. Dust is not only organisationally, but chemically, dissimilar to human flesh. And mass was apparently not conserved, nor the genetic structure retained, in the creation of Eve. So why do it that way?

Jesus’s miracles may be instructive, not by being miracles, but by being instructive. When Jesus turned water into wine, he flouted all we understand about nature. Wine is not chemically derived from water, and there is no potential power in water to become wine (only the power in grapes, yeast and so on to incorporate water into a far more complex product). Likewise, two dead fish have no inherent potential go forth and multiply in any circumstances, and still less five loaves, yet the Lord chose to feed 5,000 that way rather than by turning stones into bread (as Satan had once reminded him he could).

The reason is clearly the theological symbolism taught by these things. The wine at Cana represents the new wine of the gospel replacing the old water of the ritual law. The bread and fish taught the disciples that their apparently meagre resources were, in Christ’s power, sufficient to feed the whole Kingdom of God.

And so the dust of Adam’s origin is, throughout Scripture, used as a metaphor for man’s humble earthly origin and, indeed, his commonality with the animals over which he has been given rule (Eccles. 3:19-21). As I pointed out in a previous post, this is made the point of contrast between the old “natural” creation in Adam, and the new spiritual creation in Christ (1 Cor. 15:42-50). I would suggest that it is this origin from the earth that Genesis is concerned to teach, and not the precise mode of events.

Granted, the life-giving breath of God breathed into Adam may be taken as our spiritual constituent – and this may indeed be significant that there is something of heaven in man’s nature, too. Only it cannot be pressed too far because in Gen. 7:15, *all* animals are said to have the breath of life, and hence arises the doubt in Eccles. 3 about whether man’s spirit has any different destiny after death from that of the animals’. Similarly Eve’s origin from Adam is also used throughout Scripture to show the complementarity of the sexes to form humanity only jointly and, sometimes though not at all fashionably, woman’s derivation from the male (1 Cor. 11:7-8, 1 Tim 2:11-14).

Drawing a few threads together, then, the function of the mode of Adam’s origin in Genesis is primarily symbolic of his earthiness. Moreover, as mentioned in a previous post, it is a

description also used in Babylonian myth about human origins, probably for much the same symbolic reasons. In *Enuma elish* man is made of clay (from earth) and divine blood (a hint of spiritual human exceptionalism).

The more significant thing in Genesis, perhaps, is that Adam is not mentioned as having parents, and that is unusual for major biblical figures. And I have been making the case that he was a member of an extensive human race which, I have argued, was already in being from Gen. 1. Yet this too, as I have shown from the Mesopotamian Adapa myth, is not unprecedented – Adapa was a leader *amongst* other men, yet was described as created by the god Ea.

In that case I suppose the reason for that description is to indicate Adapa's "chosenness" – the very thing I have marked out as significant about Adam. The role of an archetype is "mythical", in the good sense that Postell comprehends when he speaks of Adam being used in Genesis as a figure of Israel's own failure. I would argue that using creation language about him, rather than his genealogy, mirrors the creation of Israel as a nation, far more significant than their ancestry.

So, to return to Adam as an actual human being, was there anything exceptional about him before his admission to the garden? It's of course not impossible that the language of creation in 2:7 indicates some new spiritual capacity for relationship with God, but that isn't clear from the text. Israel, after all, was an extraordinary nation but comprised ordinary folks.

There is certainly no suggestion that Adam has been endowed with "an eternal soul" – eternal life is to be found only in the garden. Rather, it is his solidarity with the human race that seems to be stressed afterwards – he took the image of God *into* the garden with him, and the image departed from God's presence when he was exiled. It seems to me, then, that Adam becomes "first father" of the human race seen in its spiritual dimension by dint of his covenant relationship, not of his creation.

Turning now to the creation of mankind as a whole, what I have said about the flexibility of the word *bara* (and all words about God as Creator) means that many options remain open that are true to the text. The form of Genesis 1 as a "temple inauguration" text means that treating it as a series of *ex nihilo* instantaneous acts is unnecessary, and not even likely to be intended by the author. The use of the vocabulary of creation throughout Scripture in any case shows that it may be applied to the transformation of things into quite different things (animals by normal generation from ancestors in Ps. 104 being literal, even if Adam from dust may be metaphorical).

That makes evolutionary interpretations, on the face of it, perfectly compatible with the "compositional strategy" of the text (note I am not suggesting that the author had any conception of evolution whatever – merely that what he *did* conceive does not contradict it). But there are some important caveats to that.

The first is that *bara* in nearly all cases bears the sense of "divine innovation". God has a purpose or design, and the world is a different place because of its instantiation. That puts great constraints on the kind of evolution with which it would be compatible, and, to be blunt, cuts across some of the commonest conceptions of theistic evolution that are current, though

not against earlier (and now scarcely mentioned) concepts like those of B B Warfield, Charles Kingsley, Alfred Russel Wallace and a few modern writers. Evolution, to be compatible with Gen 1:26ff, needs to be of the kind of specificity that creates a King Cyrus to judge the nations, rather than one in which men discover government and warfare. It is as teleological as the creation of a chosen nation of Israel, rather than God's looking out for someone to invent monotheism. That kind of evolution comes pretty close to progressive creation.

Secondly, although it's easy for Evolutionary Creationists to invoke "natural evolutionary processes" to account for man as well as all other life, pointing to all those genetic markers of common descent, it's still by no means clear to philosophers that many of the specific features of humanity are, *even in principle*, capable of evolving biologically.

Traditional Catholics, following Thomas who in turn followed early Christian thinkers as well as Aristotle, reason that the "intellectual soul" of man must be created, not generated naturally. And that is because reason is an immaterial thing, which therefore *cannot* arise from inert matter, but only directly from another intellect – specifically that of God. For this reason, Catholic orthodoxy holds that each and every human soul is a new creation, though this immaterial form is united to a material body which may well be the result of natural generation, and even evolution of a certain type.

The only way one can conceive of such an immaterial thing as the rational soul arising *de novo* in the world is by an act of special creation, at the minimum transforming a natural essence inherited by common descent, but (since their doctrine also insists that the intellectual soul requires an *appropriate* physical form, and even *produces* it) probably requiring biological transformation as well by the same creative act.

Thomism may be unfashionable nowadays, but evolutionary theory has been singularly unsuccessful in providing a persuasive explanation for human consciousness, will, reason and spirituality. The reason is not simply the stupidity of evolutionary Just-So stories, but the mind-body problem that is still one of the major difficulties of philosophy – one reason why Thomistic ideas have had something of a resurgence, even amongst atheists like Thomas Nagel. Consciousness – indeed all subjectivity – is simply not something that follows from materialism, or arises from matter. It is not an illusion, but the central truth of human experience. And if it is not intelligible in evolutionary terms, then it requires special creation.

It seems to follow, therefore, that whilst there might be no reason to make the origin of Adam in particular an act of special creation, the origin of mankind in Genesis 1 (in the form I have sought to demonstrate in the previous posts), seems to require it from the nature of man himself – which is the image of Christ by creation, just as he himself is the exact image of God by begetting. In other words, as I said in the last post, creating a self-portrait is not the same as selecting an *objet trouvé*.

Now that kind of special creation might be compatible with common descent. If dust can become Adam, and human flesh can become the divine Christ, I suppose a hominin could become a man in the image of God in quite a satisfactory way, and might even leave some genetic markers. But a biological explanation cannot be regarded as theologically complete, or even necessarily a good explanation for understanding the uniqueness of man as intended from the start, in God's plan, for eternal fellowship with himself.

So I'd suggest that it's absolutely legitimate to be questioning the standard biological story, at least as far as its completeness goes. It's legitimate, for example, that Ann Gauger has been in examining the possibility that mankind arose from a single couple in deep time. I don't personally see why that is necessary – it is Adam and Eve who, arising in my “Adam as Israel” scenario much later, need to be a single couple. But be that as it may, Genesis *demand*s a profound discontinuity between the beasts and mankind, which any kind of Darwinian gradualism, or any other naturalistic mechanism, must fail to bridge in principle.

Therefore, Christians in biology ought to be looking for the discontinuity, not the continuum. That's where they'll find the “literal meaning” of Gen 1:26-28.

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