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# The Book of Beginnings – Studies in Genesis

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LESSON III : INTRODUCTION – POLEMIC NATURE OF GENESIS / HISTORICITY OF ADAM

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**THE POLEMIC NATURE OF THE BOOK OF GENESIS** — *‘Polemic’ is defined as ‘an attack or refutation of the opinions or principles of another,’ meaning that when Moses wrote, he wrote with the cognizance of various pagan myths and deliberately wrote to correct the errors taught within those myths.* We will just touch on this here but many evidences of such writing will be found as we go through the creation story. *“Though Genesis shares many of the theological presuppositions of the ancient world, most of the stories found in these chapters are best read as presenting an alternative world-view to those generally accepted in the ancient Near East. Gen 1-11 is a tract for the times, challenging ancient assumptions about the nature of God, the world, and mankind.”* [Wenham, 1:intro xlv] *“Instead of a borrowing or a historicizing of ancient myth, it is fairer to say that Genesis comes closer to a repudiation of pagan ideas about origins, mankind, civilization, and the flood.”* [Mathews, 1:89]

For example, many see parallels with Gen 1-9 with the *Atrahasis*, the Babylonian myth of origins, the Sumerian flood story, and even the stories of the flood in the Gilgamesh epic or Egyptian texts. *Moses was educated in the best schools of Egypt; without question these creation stories (what we would call myths) were part of his education. “This is not to say that the writer of Genesis had ever heard or read the Gilgamesh epic; these traditions were part of the intellectual furniture of that time in the Near East, just as most people today have some idea of Darwin’s ‘Origin of Species’ though they have never read it.”* [Wenham, 1:intro xlvi]

**WHY THE SIMILARITIES BETWEEN THE ANCIENT MYTHS AND GENESIS?** — *Because of some similarities, the liberals are quick to accuse Moses of copying from these various myths. But a better explanation appears to be that Moses wrote to correct the errors of popular abounding theories of his day.* A very plausible scenario is that at one time the entire ancient world knew the truth of creation; after all, at its earliest stages all civilization came from Adam (and passed along through Noah; it is quite reasonable Adam was aware of the creation story). But as fallen man scattered through the world, paganism and error crept into the original story. As time progressed fallen man perverted the original story with the addition of its own gods and monsters. *“And some things that should not have been forgotten were lost. History became legend. Legend became myth. And for two and a half thousand years, the [creation story] passed out of all knowledge.”* (with apologies to J. R. R. Tolkien but I have always wanted to say that!) *So as the Lord’s Spirit guided Moses, thousands of years of error was corrected with an inspired and infallible record of creation.*

**THE GOD OF SCRIPTURE VS. PAGAN DEITIES** — *“The ancient oriental background to Gen 1-11 shows it to be concerned with rather different issues from those that tend to preoccupy modern readers. It is affirming the unity of God in the face of polytheism, his justice rather than his caprice, his power as opposed to his impotence, his concern for mankind rather than his exploitation. And whereas Mesopotamia clung to the wisdom of primeval man, Genesis records his sinful disobedience. Because as Christians we tend to assume these points in our theology, we often fail to recognize the striking originality of the message of Gen 1-11 and concentrate on subsidiary points that may well be of less moment. But an examination of the wider context of Gen 1-11 within the book itself, and the structure of these chapters, does, I believe, emphasize the centrality of these themes in the opening chapters....* If it is correct to view Gen 1-11 as an

inspired retelling of ancient oriental traditions about the origins of the world with a view to presenting the nature of the true God as one, omnipotent, omniscient, and good, as opposed to the fallible, capricious, weak deities who populated the rest of the ancient world; if further it is concerned to show that humanity is central in the divine plan, not an afterthought; if finally it wants to show that man's plight is the product of his own disobedience and indeed is bound to worsen without divine intervention, Gen 1-11 is setting out a picture of the world that is at odds both with the polytheistic optimism of ancient Mesopotamia and the humanistic secularism of the modern world. *Genesis is thus a fundamental challenge to the ideologies of civilized men and women, past and present, who like to suppose their own efforts will ultimately suffice to save them. Gen 1-11 declares that mankind is without hope if individuals are without God. Human society will disintegrate where divine law is not respected and divine mercy is not implored. Yet Genesis, so pessimistic about mankind without God, is fundamentally optimistic, precisely because God created men and women in his own image and disclosed his ideal for humanity at the beginning of time.*" [Wenham, 1:intro 1; intro liii]

## THE HISTORICITY OF ADAM

The following is heavily borrowed from an essay by Richard P. Belcher, Jr., professor of OT at Reformed Theological Seminary, Charlotte & Academic Dean at both RTS Atlanta and RTS New York City; quoted in Douglas F. Kelly's book, *'Creation and Change'*, chapter 14, pp. 311-328. Bro. Belcher's thesis addresses the growing denial of the historicity of Adam in the interest of accommodating evolutionary theory.

***'The Devil's in the Details' ... LITERALLY!!*** — Anyone who has dealt with Mormons understands one of Satan's tricks is to change the meaning of words, so that after asking the 'essential' questions about being a Christian, one can walk away from a Mormon believing that person was saved. The problem is that while both people are saying the same words, what those words mean to the believer means something entirely different to the Mormon. In like manner, over the last forty years a similar thing has happened in some circles when it comes to the creation of Adam.

**NOT JUST THE LIBERALS** — Unfortunately this is not just happening amongst liberals; e.g.,

- **Bruce Waltke**, former professor of OT at Dallas Theological Seminary, Reformed Theological Seminary and is presently at Knox Theological Seminary, suggests the data in favor of evolution is so overwhelming that the church is in danger of becoming a cult if she continues to reject it.
- **Tremper Longman**, former professor of OT at Westminster Theological Seminary, Fuller Theological Seminary, and now teaching at Westmont College, has co-authored a book *'Science, Creation, and the Bible'* where he argues evolution threatens Christian doctrine and the gospel can be advanced to our educated friends if we accept evolution.
- **Peter Enns**, former professor of OT at Westminster Theological Seminary has written that Christians must reinterpret Scripture in the light of evolution. His book *'Inspiration and Incarnation'* led to institutional strife and the eventual loss of his position. He is currently professor of Biblical Studies at Eastern University, St. Davids, PA.
- **C. John Collins**, professor of OT at Covenant Theological Seminary, has written books where he compromises the traditional view of Adam in light of evolution. His book *'Did*

*Adam and Eve Really Exist? Who They Were and Why You Should Care* (2011) explores whether the fall of man can be compatible with a Darwinian view of human origins. While he is not as committed to evolution as other scholars, his hermeneutical approach is similar to their approach.

***Each of these scholars have taught at Reformed seminaries and their writings are well-known and even trusted in Reformed circles.***

**EVOLUTIONARY CONCEPTS OF ADAM AND EVE** — Gen 2:7 states, *‘then the Lord God formed the man of dust from the ground and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life, and the man became a living creature.’* (ESV) Eve is then created from Adam, after Adam did not find a helper suitable from amongst the animals (Gen 2:18-23). ***The woman who is thus formed is distinguished from the animals, ruling out the existence of any type of living creature, whether animal or human-like, who could have been a match for Adam.***

But evolution presents a gradual change of organisms which leads to the development of higher forms of life. The highest of these life forms are called **hominids** which includes human beings and creatures from which they developed. Some argue that a founding group of hominids emerged in Africa about 200,000 years ago which then migrated to other parts of the world. ***In this view Adam and Eve represent a population rather than a single couple.*** Denis Alexander, biologist and an Emeritus Director of the Faraday Institute for Science and Religion, Cambridge, writes in his book *‘Creation or Evolution’* that *‘science and religion can be successfully pursued together’* and states Adam and Eve were Neolithic farmers who God called to Himself about 6,000-8,000 years ago. They were part of a larger hominid group yet not spiritually alive. God’s revelation to Adam set him apart so that for the first time humans understood what it meant to be made in the image of God. Thus Adam became the *‘federal head’* of the human race but is not the *‘biological source’* for all mankind. Others that accept this line of reasoning believe Adam and Eve were not even individuals but represent groups of hominids.

**EVOLUTION AND THE INTERPRETATION OF GENESIS 2** — The defenders of evolution make three *hermeneutical* (the interpretation of Scripture) moves to make Genesis 2 compatible with evolution:

- the first move is to identify Gen 1-11 in such a way that it is interpreted as **symbolic with the purpose of teaching theology but not historical truth**. Besides, they say, *‘the early chapters of Genesis describe events which no one could have witnessed and thus they cannot be historical.’* Thus, *‘the names Adam and Eve are symbolic’*, *‘the snake is just a familiar figure from popular folklore’*, *‘there are more people in Gen 4 than just Adam and his family’*, etc. In later lessons we will look at the evidence and importance of the early chapters of Genesis being prose and narratives, not poetic and symbolic.
- the second is to **read Genesis in the light of other ancient literature**, such as the *Enuma Elish* (Babylon creation myth), the *Atrahasis Epic* (Sumerian, written in ancient Akkadian cuneiform script and found at various Mesopotamian sites), and the *Egyptian Creation Myth from Heliopolis*. Instead of reading these myths as compared with Genesis, Genesis is ‘assumed’ to have borrowed from these various myths. Thus, *‘Since there are similarities between them, Genesis must be understood as a myth as well’*. This too underscores the importance of understanding Moses as writing to correct the errors of common creation stories at his time, as mentioned previously in this lesson.

- the third move is to see **Genesis 1 and 2 as contradictory** rather than Genesis 2 retelling certain aspects of creation in more specific detail. *‘Since the creation stories in Genesis 1 and 2 contradicts each other, they must be symbolic rather than literal’*. But Gen 2:5,6 does not describe the entire creation week but only day 6 when God created man. Genesis 2 is therefore not looking back to Genesis 1 but forward to what will take place in the Garden of Eden. Note Gen 2:4 starts a toledot (see earlier lessons) so the story moves from a broader perspective to a narrower perspective. This also means the plants in Gen 2 are cultivated plants that will grow in the garden and are therefore different from the uncultivated plants mentioned in Gen 1 (this distinction is based on the qualifying phrase *‘plants of the field’* which does not occur in Gen 1). The focus on the garden also explains the need for human beings to take care of the plants.

**C. J. COLLINS’ MOVE FROM THE TRADITIONAL VIEW** — To his credit, C. John Collins in his book *‘Did Adam and Eve Really Exist?’* tries to keep the historicity of Adam within certain boundaries, e.g., *‘there was a historical fall that included disobeying God’*. But then he writes, *‘the origin of the human race goes beyond merely natural processes’*, and *‘Adam and Eve stand at the headwaters of the human race’*. To Collins, Gen 2:7 is not part of what he calls the ‘traditional’ view; i.e., God did not take loose soil to create the first man. Concerning the early chapters of Genesis as a whole, Genesis 1-11 has a ‘historical core’ which teaches truths in a figurative and symbolic manner but cannot be taken too literally. ***So while he attempts to maintain historical teaching, his approach to Genesis 1-11 and specifically Gen 2:7 is no different than a thorough-going evolutionist.***

**‘FULL CIRCLE’ – A WORD OF CAUTION** — This brings us full-circle to where we began: ***Satan is a master deceiver.*** If one accepts the teachings as represented above, any believer (even a Pastor or a professor) could truthfully state they believe in a historical Adam and still accept evolution. Therefore upon a profession of belief in Adam, follow-up questions concerning Gen 2:7 and how Adam was formed are necessary. ***Was Adam a literal person created from the dust of the ground with Eve taken from his side or are they merely figures representing groups or theological points? Was Adam the first human being or was he just one of many hominids that God happened to choose to establish as a beginning?*** These questions must not remain unanswered if one is looking for a test of orthodoxy.

**CREATION, EVOLUTION AND THE REST OF SCRIPTURE** — Any acceptance of evolution effects more than Genesis; it has implications for the rest of Scripture and especially the Gospel. For example:

Luke 3:38 traces Jesus’ genealogy back to the first man Adam; was this a single individual or a group of people?

Acts 17:26 speaks of the human race being *‘of one blood, from one man’* and from a single source; did the human race originate with Adam and Eve or from a variety of hominids?

1 Tim 2:13 confirms the order of creation from Gen 2 (*‘Adam was first formed, then Eve’*); is this true or false? Was Paul confused?

1 Cor 11:12 also confirms the order of creation (*‘woman was made from man’*); is this true or false? Again, was Paul mistaken?

1 Cor 15:45 speaks of *'the first man Adam'*; this rules out any scenario where God sets apart a first couple from a group of humans to be the headwater of the human race.

Rom 5:12 says sin and death came into the world through one man, Adam, and that one man (whom Paul calls *'the first Adam'* in 1 Cor 15:45) is then contrasted with our Lord Jesus Christ (the *'last Adam'*, 1 Cor 15:45).

***Evolution questions not just creation but the entire integrity of the Scriptures. Throughout the Word of God is the teaching of an original world without sickness, natural disasters, even death itself but all of that is a part of our existence due to the sin of mankind (in Adam, Rom 5:12-21). But evolution is constructed upon the foundation of hundreds of thousands (or millions) of years of death, decay, mutations and the like. So was death always a part of the natural order of things or is it the judgment of God because of sin? It must be one or the other; we cannot have it both ways. Is evolution true or are the Scriptures true? According to the Word of God:***

**MANKIND WAS CREATED IN A PERFECT ENVIRONMENT** — *'And God saw everything that he had made, and behold, it was very good. And there was evening and there was morning, the sixth day.'* (Gen 1:31)

**DEATH CAME AS JUDGEMENT UPON THE SIN OF ADAM** — *'The Lord God took the man and put him in the garden of Eden to work it and keep it. And the Lord God commanded the man, saying, "You may surely eat of every tree of the garden, but of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil you shall not eat, for in the day that you eat of it you shall surely die."'* (Gen 2:15-17)

*'Therefore, just as sin came into the world through one man, and death through sin, and so death spread to all men because all sinned... For if many died through one man's trespass... And the free gift is not like the result of that one man's sin. For the judgment following one trespass brought condemnation... For if, because of one man's trespass, death reigned through that one man... Therefore, as one trespass led to condemnation for all men... For as by the one man's disobedience the many were made sinners.'* (Rom 5:12, 15-19)

*'For the wages of sin is death, but the free gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord.'* (Rom 6:23)

*'For as by a man came death, by a man has come also the resurrection of the dead. For as in Adam all die, so also in Christ shall all be made alive.'* (1 Cor 15:21, 22)

*'Thus it is written, "The first man Adam became a living being"; the last Adam became a life-giving spirit. But it is not the spiritual that is first but the natural, and then the spiritual. The first man was from the earth, a man of dust; the second man is from heaven. As was the man of dust, so also are those who are of the dust, and as is the man of heaven, so also are those who are of heaven. Just as we have borne the image of the man of dust, we shall also bear the image of the man of heaven.'* (1 Cor 15:45-49) ***Was Adam a created being from the dust of the earth or was he one of many hominids? If the creation of Adam as told in Genesis 1 & 2 is a fairy story, what are we to make of the gospel?***

**THE LORD WILL ONE DAY DESTROY DEATH** — *'Then Death and Hades were thrown into the lake of fire. This is the second death, the lake of fire.'* (Rev 20:14)

*'Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth, for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away, and the sea was no more... He will wipe away every tear from their eyes, and*

*death shall be no more, neither shall there be mourning, nor crying, nor pain anymore, for the former things have passed away.’ (Rev 21:1, 4)*

**CONCLUDING REMARKS** — Richard Belcher’s concluding remarks to his thesis is a fitting conclusion to our discussion as well.

*“We live in a day and age where what the church believes is the minority position on most of the ethical questions of the day. Plus, much of what we believe is abhorrent to mainstream culture. What we believe about the uniqueness of Christ is seen as intolerant by most people. What we believe concerning the appropriateness of the sexual relationship only within marriage is seen as prudish and impossible. What we believe Scripture clearly teaches about homosexuality is seen by our current culture as non-loving and even hateful. We believe these things because we believe Scripture clearly teaches them. But if the views that we hold on these important issues are viewed by our culture as uneducated, narrow, intolerant, and hateful, why should we be surprised when our view of the historicity of Adam is also seen as uneducated and out-of-touch with mainstream culture? The real question is whether we are willing to endure the shame that comes when we stand for the truth of God’s word.” [Richard P. Belcher, Jr., quoted in Kelly, *Creation and Change*, 328]*