

Human Evolution and Divine Agency

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Modern Christians often find themselves at a crossroads when confronted with the two predominant understandings of human and universal origins. Plain sense readings of Genesis lead many to believe in a historical six-day creation that occurred in the past ten thousand years while proponents on the other side of the spectrum use current scientific understanding to support a creation that occurs through evolutionary means. How one views human origins has a profound impact on one's concept of how God works in the cosmos. In this paper, I will lay out a background to better understand the characters of Adam and Eve within the context and purpose of Genesis as well as the Pauline letters. Then, I will show how a shift in one's understanding of Adam and Eve may necessitate a change in one's view of God's action by outlining the major models of Divine agency. Finally, I will explore a model of Divine agency proposed by Thomas Oord and the implications it has on our relationship with the Divine.

In the ongoing tensions that occur between religious and scientific communities, few are as controversial as human origins. While this tension is not inherently necessary, the positions taken lead to unproductive debate and little resolution. Coupled with this tension are perspectives on the role that God plays in the cosmos (Divine Agency). In the mind of some, if God is not miraculously intervening and the direct explanation for the origin of humans as a perfect pair in a paradise then his entire role as sovereign Creator controlling the cosmos, history, and even our daily lives is undermined and threatened.

The concern begins with the very character of humanity as represented by Adam in the second Genesis story (chapters 2 and 3). Some Christian groups' plain sense¹ understandings of Genesis typically lead them to view Adam and Eve as actual and real, if not historically verifiable,

figures. However, the compelling evidence for evolutionary processes raises several questions about the credibility of this supposed first human pair. Many, what are sometimes referred to as liberal or modern, Christians now find themselves at a crossroads of attempting to stay faithful to their church traditions while being unable to reject the mounting scientific evidence of human origins.

These options may seem mutually exclusive, but I will propose that Adam and Eve can be viewed in new ways in an attempt to simultaneously be true to the message of the biblical text and uphold scientific discovery. As we reshape our view of Genesis and Adam, our perceptions of how God works in the cosmos will likely need to change as well. Here, I will present the problems that plain sense readings produce, then discuss some of the ways that God's providence can be viewed. Finally, in an effort to fill the void and offer resolution,

¹ I will use 'plain sense' rather than 'literal' as it is popularly used today. Literal in Augustine's language, for example, meant true or actual meaning;

it did not refer to the plain sense, superficial, common, or vulgar reading done by the masses with no theological training.

I will submit a model of divine agency that has recently been offered by Thomas Oord.²

Exegeting Genesis

A plain sense understanding of Genesis has undoubtedly been the common person's mainstay for centuries, including Saint Paul.³ While other interpretations of the text have certainly existed, many Christians still choose to believe in a six-day creation that occurred between six to ten thousand years ago. However, in the recent past the evidence for evolution has continued to exponentially mount. Darwin's observations and publications in the 19th Century in addition to the fossil record have cast significant doubt on such literal interpretations of Genesis. The completion of the Human Genome Project in 2003 dealt another heavy blow to this method of interpretation by showing humanity's close relation to modern primates.⁴ When faced with this evidence, it seems that there are three options of how to move forward. First, one could believe the scientific evidence, accept evolution, and reject Christianity. This option operates from the viewpoint that the Bible, especially Genesis, is attempting to make scientifically and historically accurate claims, but they do not hold up under scrutiny. The second option is to cling to the past interpretations of Genesis and Paul's letters and reject evolution. Again, the underlying assumption that Genesis is making scientific and historical claims is present, yet these individuals believe them at face value and reject contrary scientific evidence. The third option is to try to meld the other views together by proposing that evolution is valid, but that Adam and Eve were some sort of elevated pair of hominids within that process. Various explanations

exist for this idea, but again, it seems lacking. In an attempt to 'protect' Genesis and its validity, this option provides an explanation that the text does not validate.⁵ In agreement with Peter Enns, I submit that a fourth option should be explored. By understanding the proper context of Genesis, our *expectations* of the text change, leading to the origins conflict's becoming entirely unneeded.

First, we must explore what has led to this need to change our views. A combination of factors that mostly emerged in the 19th Century united to create this sweeping reform of thought about how the relationship between science and faith should look. The predominant components that effected this change were scientific discovery, Biblical criticism, and archaeology that led to the discovery of additional ancient texts. The work of Charles Darwin along with the discoveries of other scientists such as Charles Lyell clearly made many people rethink their prior interpretations of Genesis.⁶ Biblical criticism "refers to the academic study of the Bible that is marked mainly by a historical investigation into the date and authorship of biblical books."⁷ This gave scholars the means of examining the text from the inside out, yielding information that helped determine why this literature was written in the first place. Finally, archaeology spanning from the 19th Century to present day has shed ample light on the environment in which Genesis was written. It also illuminates Israel's connection to the pagan world and why they felt a need to be a separate people.⁸ Biblical criticism and archaeology are both helpful in reevaluating our expectations of the text. In no way does this undermine the value or importance of

² Oord, 2015

³ For a description resolving this issue see Brannan, 2011.

⁴ Walton, 2015, pg. 12

⁵ Enns, 2012, introduction

⁶ Walton, 2015, pg. 2

⁷ Enns, 2012, pg. 4

⁸ Enns, 2012, pg. 5

Scripture, but rather it helps us reorient ourselves with the text and its message.

Ancient Understanding of the Cosmos

Having an accurate context for reading Scripture is needed for us to explore the background information that should be considered when understanding the literal (e.g. true) meaning of Genesis. First, even the pagan peoples living during the time periods when Genesis was written had a different understanding of the world than we do currently. They explained most phenomena, including natural laws, with divine causes. They thought of the universe with ideas that were familiar to them such as kingdoms, unlike the material, mechanistic understanding that we typically employ today.⁹ Additionally, they largely believed that divine action of the past also intersected with everyday occurrences.¹⁰ Using this information, it makes sense that Israel would follow suit, in line with the polytheists of the dominant culture, by asserting that their God, the one true God, of the past was still active in their nation's development. One can see this use of past/present intersection in the story of Adam and Eve. Peter Enns states that Adam can be viewed as a precursor of Israel—"Israel's drama...placed into primordial time."¹¹ It can then be understood why Paul makes strong allusions to Jesus being a second Adam in I Corinthians 15. In the New Testament, Jesus represents this intersection by being the culmination of Israel's ancient message. From this vantage point, it seems unfair and unhelpful to expect Genesis to make completely accurate scientific and historical claims. The message of this text seems to be concerned with showing God's action within the distinct people group of

Israel, not about scientifically explaining universal and human origins.¹²

What about Paul and Adam?

Even if we can accept this understanding and not place undue pressures on Genesis, there are still issues that the topic of Adam raises. One might not hold to a literal interpretation of Adam, but it certainly appears that Paul views Adam and Eve in this manner. Throughout Paul's letters, he seems to posit Adam and Eve as the first humans whose original sin is the cause for universal sin and death.¹³ In fact, much theology within many Christian churches seems to be contingent on the validity of these statements. But just as we did with Genesis, we need to evaluate Paul's interpretation of Adam in light of Paul's ancient surroundings and his personal experiences. First, his spiritual encounters led him to view everything through the lens of his transformation through Christ.¹⁴ Because of this, Paul may use Adam in a unique way to show how Jesus' death and resurrection put Gentiles and Jews on the same footing. Paul begins with Christ and then uses Adam as supporting material to demonstrate that all humans face the problems of sin and death. Additionally, it is imperative that one keep in mind that Paul is a product of his culture. Although his experiences led him to teach some radical ideas, he was just as steeped in his culture as we are in ours. A clear example of this is the three-tiered cosmology that Paul references in his writings. In the ancient world, there was a belief that the universe existed in three layers—the earth, the heavens, and the underworld. In II Corinthians 12, Paul mentions a man being swept into the third heaven, a reference that many scholars believe to reflect his adherence to the

⁹ Walton, 2015, pg. 18

¹⁰ Enns, 2012, pg. 61

¹¹ Enns, 2012, pg. 66

¹² Walton, 2015, pg. 170

¹³ Enns, 2012, pg. 79

¹⁴ Enns, 2012, pg. 81

common cosmology of his day.¹⁵ Yet, few if any Christians seem bothered by this flawed part of Paul’s understanding of the cosmos.

Therefore, it seems odd that so many Christians are exceedingly unsettled that Paul’s view of Genesis and origins may not align with the scientific and historical facts of origins uncovered by science today. If the truth and message of the Gospel is contingent on the scientific accuracy of ancient thought, Paul’s view of origins is not the only issue with which we should be concerned. Paul uses Adam to make more general claims about the Gospel and the kingdom of God, rather than delivering a science lesson.¹⁶ Paul’s Adam serves the purpose of showing that Jews and Gentiles are bound together in a universal humanity marked by sin and death. Through his experiences, Paul has the realization that the plight of Israel is a worldwide issue. Paul saw God’s solution as being the death and resurrection of Jesus, so he made the conclusion that the problem must be death. “Paul [then] began a process of re-understanding Israel’s national story in light of this unexpected universal ending, which accounts for much of how Paul interpreted the Old Testament.”¹⁷ Part of this re-understanding was Paul’s positing Adam as the source of the sin and death that plague humanity.

In concluding this section, we see, that the Bible, including Genesis, is an ancient text written in a specific ancient setting; consequently, it is imperative that it be read in that manner. This fact, combined with scientific discovery, leads to the conclusion that a plain sense reading of Genesis with our modern worldview is not an option.¹⁸ In order to grasp the true literal meaning, we have to see it in light of the

ancient world and find the spiritual message that remains true regardless of culture or modernity or whatever science may uncover.

Faith and science can be compatible. Evolutionary models, in contrast with plain sense (e.g. young earth or creation science) creationist models of origins, are not. That being said, the issue at stake for Christians in this situation is not a scientific one.¹⁹ A fear exists concerning what one might lose if they let go of the treasured plain sense reading of Scripture. Straying away from traditional plain sense meanings of Scripture can feel like one has strayed away from the faith entirely. Yet, we must keep in mind that traditions and theology from our religious past were informed by scientific understanding of that ancient time period. This is not to say that everything from the past is now obsolete, only that it is reasonable for portions of our faith and theology to shift as we gain deeper scientific understandings of the universe.²⁰

Discussion and careful alteration of one’s view can and should be a valued part of everyone’s faith journey. Finally, merging faith and science “requires a synthesis, not simply adding evolution to existing theological formulations.”²¹ Though it is not easy to depart from some of our past traditions, we must consider the need to foster a sustainable faith that future generations can bear.²²

What about Divine Agency?

Once our views of Adam and Genesis have shifted, our views of God’s providence tend to follow suit, but what does that look like? In his book, *The Uncontrolling Love of God*, theologian and philosopher Thomas J. Oord succinctly covers seven of the most common models of

¹⁵ Enns, 2012, pg. 93

¹⁶ Walton, 2015, pg. 170

¹⁷ Enns, 2012, pg. 131

¹⁸ Enns, 2012, pg. 137

¹⁹ Enns, 2012, pg. 145

²⁰ Polkinghorne, 2000, pg. 184

²¹ Enns, 2012, pg. 146

²² Enns, 2012, pg. 148

divine agency that Christians commonly believe. One of these seven models is Oord's own theory of providence, which he claims avoids the inconsistency and theodicy issues that nag at the other models.²³ I will present Oord's view alongside the others in order to continue fostering helpful conversation about divine agency and to provide an alternative for those who may feel unsatisfied with other models.

The first common model of providence claims that God is causing and controlling of all things. Therefore nothing is random, but rather, it is all part of the plan and working of God.²⁴ Many who align with this view reference John Calvin in their arguments, claiming that God's omnipotence puts him in this position of complete control and causation. These assertions directly pit this model against the theodicy issue, since it would appear illogical for an all-loving God to be the direct cause of the evil that we see and experience. The second model states that God shows love to his creation by giving them mostly free will, but at times, he overrides free will or natural laws in order to accomplish part of his will.²⁵ While this may explain why there is evil in the world, it seems to place the blame for that evil on God since he has the ability to prevent suffering but allows it to happen. The third model asserts that God is all-powerful, yet he *chooses* to limit himself out of love for his creation. John Polkinghorne is a good example of someone from this camp, stating that when God does act, he does so within the natural laws which are established so as not to impose on his creation.²⁶ This model appeals to some who believe that it is truly remarkable and significant that, among other

choices, God chooses love over control. However, critics of this model claim that since God *could* intervene to prevent suffering and evil, he is still culpable.²⁷ The fourth model asserts that God is not really a being, but is a sustaining, static force. This God is unable to or uninterested in engaging in relationships, and does not intervene in creation.²⁸ This model is often criticized because it seems to disregard the abundant Scriptures that reference a personal, relational God. However, the model is consistent in its explanation and eludes the theodicy issue. The fifth model closely aligns with deism, stating that God took part in an initial creation event, but is now completely withdrawn. This impersonal God never exerts any influence over creation and is not involved in personal relationships with it. Like the previous model, it is consistent, yet many people take issue with the idea that an omnipotent God could create a world that would bring forth so much suffering. This explanation also bothers those who feel that God acts in daily life and gives personal revelation.²⁹ The final model does not give any concrete answers, but posits that God is not a being like we are beings, so we are unable to comprehend his agency. This model appeals to mystery and transcendence, claiming that God is different from creation in nearly all respects.³⁰ The downside of this explanation is that it gives few true answers about divine providence, and might even lead into some 'God of the gaps' style arguments, which are inherently dangerous.

In an attempt to synthesize an alternate model that sidesteps some of the critiques mentioned above, Oord presents a novel model in his most recent publication. His model is most similar to the one that

²³ Oord, 2015, pg. 94

²⁴ Oord, 2015, pg. 83

²⁵ Oord, 2015, pg. 86

²⁶ Silva, 2012, pg. 20

²⁷ Oord, 2015, pg. 92

²⁸ Oord, 2015, pg. 95

²⁹ Oord, 2015, pg. 100

³⁰ Oord, 2015, pg. 102

states that God chooses not to impose, but Oord asserts that God *cannot* control his creation because he is fundamentally kenotic.³¹ That is, God's nature is so intensely love, that this quality supersedes all other qualities, including his power and sovereignty. God's very character compels him to practice a love that is self-sacrificial, thereby empowering his creation to have complete free will.³² The best example of this sacrificial love is evident in the incarnation and death of Jesus.³³ The issue at stake here is not whether or not God chooses to exert his control, but rather that exerting control would be God denying his own nature—an impossibility. Oord's explanation also allows for randomness and evil while still affirming the loving nature of God.

If we assume for a moment that Oord's model is true, what does that say about God and our relationship to him? Some may worry that a God who has partial control will have no real relationship with mankind. However, the absence of intervening control does not inherently diminish the relational qualities of God. On the contrary, he desires for his creation to know and reciprocally love him as well as others. He relates with his creation by luring all things into his will where they can live out this love in relationship to him and others.³⁴ Some process theologians might even say that these experiences with God and creation are what constitute our existence and personhood.³⁵ In this model, another insight that we gain is that this magnitude of love that God embodies is risky and requires vulnerability on his part. In his involuntary relinquishing of control, he is submitted to the openness that a

relationship requires as well as the failure that some relationships may entail. But Oord reminds us that this kind of patient risk-taking is what stems from such an uninterrupted love.³⁶ In the same vein, this overarching love also places certain limits on the omniscience of God. If God knows that something will transpire ahead of time, then it *has* to happen that way, and free will is muddled. In this way, God has limitations of his power and foresight, making him unsure of what decisions and paths his creation will take. As a result, God is fully relational, never manipulative or controlling, and experiencing events with his creation in complete compassion and in real time.³⁷

Again, if one assumes that the above premises are correct, implications can also be drawn about what an appropriate human response to this kind of God would be. If the nature of God is foremost love, and we seek to emulate God, it is clear that we should strive to emulate this love. In a world full of watered-down, warped, and feigned displays of 'love,' practicing this self-denying, empowering love provides such a stark contrast to the counterfeit; it pulls us deeper into the will and character of God. Next, in a world with abundant suffering and evil, the furthering of this love demands action on our part. As Kathryn Tanner so beautifully states, "Irrespective of the likely success of one's action to better the world, one is obligated to act simply because this is the only way of living that makes sense in light of the fact of one's life in God."³⁸ In trying to ascertain exactly what this kind of action looks like, we find the clearest example in the life of Jesus.³⁹ In living out the message that Christ embodied, I believe that we will find ourselves in the heartbreak and filth of

³¹ Oord, 2015, pg. 157

³² Oord, 2015, pg. 160

³³ Oord, 2015, pg. 110

³⁴ Oord, 2015, pg. 115

³⁵ Polkinghorne, 2000, pg. 245

³⁶ Oord, 2015, pg. 134

³⁷ Oord, 2015, pg. 136

³⁸ Polkinghorne, 2000, pg. 234

³⁹ Oord, 2015, pg. 137

the world of evil, spreading the only hope that can penetrate such sorrows—ceaseless, divine love.

Conclusion

It is my hope that this synthesis is helpful in reevaluating aspects of our faith that we may have left unexplored. While Adam and evolution might only seem to oppose each other, a particular perspective of these two can actually meld together to

tell the same story. Once we rethink our expectations of Adam, our views of divine agency may evolve as well, leading to a re-synthesis of our faith, a re-ligating or tying together of disparate pieces of information—the true function of religion. In allowing ourselves the openness to do so, I believe that we will find ourselves fully enveloped in the relational nature that God intends for us.

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