



Genesis on the Origin of the Human Race

ROY A. CLOUSER

Department of Philosophy and Religion
Trenton State College
Trenton, NJ 08650

From: *Perspectives on Science and Christian Faith* **43** (March 1991): 2-13. **Responses:**
[Siemens](#), [Nelson](#)

It has long been suggested that Genesis and the sciences look at human origins from differing, but compatible, points of view. Nevertheless, it has generally been left disconcertingly vague as to just how the viewpoint of Genesis differs from that of the sciences. This article maintains that the key to clarifying the biblical view of human origins lies in the definition of "human" that is both taught and presupposed in Scripture. Since the Scriptural definition is that a human is essentially a religious being, the Genesis account is taken to refer primarily to the appearance of religious consciousness in beings who thereby become fully human. Seen in this way, the Genesis account is not only compatible with the idea of a biological evolution, but that idea turns out to be the best explanation of at least one part of the Genesis text.

As every schoolboy knows, one of the great obstacles to taking the Bible seriously is that it is supposed to conflict with modern science. The conflict, of course, mainly centers on the account of the origin of humans given in Genesis versus the account given by modern evolutionary theories. Boiled down to its essence, the heart of the alleged incompatibility between these accounts seems to center on two points: 1. evolutionary theory sees humans as the products of a long continuous process of biological development whereas Genesis sees a sudden appearance of humans as the immediate result of an act of God; 2. evolutionary theory sees both men and women as emerging from the same biological process whereas Genesis sees the existence of the first woman as derived from that of the first man.

In the century and a half that has passed since *The Origin of Species*, there have been three sorts of attempts by Jewish and Christian thinkers to resolve these apparent conflicts. One has been to interpret the Genesis text so as not to take seriously any of it that appears incompatible with whatever scientific theories are currently prevalent. Attempts of this sort have often produced highly allegorized readings of the text, proclaimed it to be myth, or tried to regard it as poetry. A second sort has been those which are largely associated today with Fundamentalists. These attempts regard the text as stating scientific truths of various kinds which are infallible because revealed by God. They then try to resolve the resulting conflicts by simply rejecting any findings of biology, geology, paleontology, genetics, etc., which do not appear compatible with the text

construed as natural history. Ever since the Scopes trial, this sort of attempt has been popularly described as taking a "literal" interpretation of Genesis. The third sort of attempts at resolving the apparent conflicts are those which try to show that they are only apparent; that the text and the sciences are looking at the origins of humans from different-but mutually compatible-points of view.

In what follows I will offer an attempt of the third sort. I believe the text offers an account of human origins which is not the same as, but is compatible with, a variety of possible scientific accounts including that of a biological evolution. My attempt will center on ascertaining the viewpoint and intent of the text itself, and will in that sense be primarily concerned with the literal meaning of the text. Pursuing this approach, I find that the Fundamentalist view is not that of the literal meaning of the text at all, so that the mistake of such views as "scientific creationism" is not that they take the text too literally but (partly) that they don't take it literally enough.

In order to set my interpretation of the text in its proper setting and spell out its assumptions, it is necessary that I first give a quick sketch of two background issues. The first is the essential nature of religious belief, the second is the central theme and overall structure of the Bible. In both cases my treatment of these issues is greatly abbreviated here for lack of space, so that most of the arguments which can be given for my conclusions must be omitted. At the very least, however, the statement and application of these conclusions will demonstrate that what one assumes about these issues regulates how Genesis is interpreted.¹

What Is Religious Belief?

In my work on comparative religion, I have found that while religions differ widely on what they regard as divine, they nevertheless agree on what it means to be divine. The difference between these two is the same as the difference between an office and an office holder. A description of the office of President of the United States differs from a description of the President himself. Following this analogy, I have found that the various religions of the world disagree about who or what holds the office or status of divinity but agree on the description of the status itself. For no matter how widely they differ over the description of what is divine, they all agree that the divine is whatever does not depend for its existence on anything else, while all else depends on the divine for its existence. In short, the divine is whatever is "just there"; it is that which is utterly self-existent or nondependent. This is the only thing I find common to all religions.

For example, it is not only the case that Jews, Christians, and Muslims believe God alone to have this status, but Taoists attribute it to the Tao, Hindus affirm it of Brahman-Atman, and Buddhists ascribe it to the Dharmakaya or Void. In fact, I have not been able to find any exception to the recognition of self-existence as essential to divinity. So while religions differ radically over how many divinities there are, whether the divine is personal, and how people come to stand in proper relation to the divine, etc., none doubts that the divine is whatever it is everything else depends on.

Moreover, Scripture confirms that it is indeed this status which is essential to God's divinity. For Scripture begins with the teaching that God depends on nothing while he has created and sustains everything other than himself. This is assumed in all else that it teaches; it is always the Creator of "all things" who speaks in Scripture and is spoken about. In fact, the name "Yahweh", the proper name of God revealed to Moses and considered by Jews too sacred to pronounce, means "the one who causes to be."² And when St. Paul describes the nature of false religious beliefs, he says that

they are those by which people have perverted the true idea of the Creator and instead mistakenly identified some part of creation as divine (Rom. 1:25). It is in this sense that Bible writers regard all people as having some religious belief; all people regard either God or some God-surrogate as the divinity on which all else depends.

In what follows, I will therefore presuppose that any belief in something as self-existent is a religious belief. This will be so even if the divine is thought to be impersonal, even if the belief issues in no worship, and even if it includes no ethical code. In short, a religious belief is one which accords divine status to something no matter how the something is conceived. This means, for example, that a materialist who regards matter energy as "just there" has a religious belief every bit as much as a Jew or Christian. The materialist simply believes in a different divinity rather than having no religious belief at all.³ According to the materialist religion, the divine is impersonal, worship is not appropriate, and human destiny ends with death.⁴

What is the Central Character of Scripture?

If you were asked to write a book report on the Bible which had to start with a short sentence stating the main theme of the whole book, what would you write? How one answers this question makes an enormous difference to the interpretation of Scripture. It is our assumption as to the nature of the whole Bible, which determines how we are inclined to interpret its parts. Of course, one can only garner an idea of the whole from reading all the parts, so these two mutually influence one another. But there are numerous indications within Scripture itself and within the whole Judeo-Christian tradition which I believe make the nature of the whole clear: the central theme of the entire canon is that of *covenant*. It is that, after all, which is the proper title of the book; "Testament" is our translation of the Hebrew and Greek words for "covenant" (*diakhkh*). What we have in Scripture is the record of the main editions of the covenant God made with mankind: the editions with Adam, with Noah, with Abraham, with Moses, with David, and finally, with Christ. In each new edition there are additions and changes from the earlier editions, but these serve to develop the central covenantal themes which remain constant throughout.⁵

If you were asked to write a book report on the Bible which had to start with a short sentence stating the main theme of the whole book, what would you write?

Seen in this way, Scripture must be understood as having an essentially *religious* character. It is the inspired record of the covenant offered to mankind by the real Creator. It teaches truth about the covenant maker, God, and the covenant receiver, humans, and is centrally concerned with how the covenant receivers are to stand in proper relation to the covenant maker. Everything it teaches is governed by this purpose. So whether it records parts of history, or includes poetry, states genealogies, or speaks of the end of the world, its governing purpose remains that of teaching us how to stand in proper relation to the only true divinity, Yahweh.

The "encyclopedic assumption" ignores the Bible's own central theme and purpose, and tries to force the text to yield truths about matters which never crossed the minds of its authors.

In the previous paragraph, I briefly alluded to Scripture as the inspired word of God. This is of crucial importance to every Christian since it is by having an inspired record of the covenant that it is transmitted to mankind. Scripture is and always will be the primary source of the content of our Faith, and it is its message that is experienced by every believer as the truth from God about God. As Calvin once put it:

As to the question "how shall we be persuaded that [Scripture] came from God...?" it is the same as if we were asked, "how shall we learn to distinguish light from darkness, white from black, sweet from bitter?" Scripture bears upon the face of it as clear evidence of its truth as white and black do of their color, sweet and bitter of their taste. (*Institutes* I, 7, 2.)

But having such an inspired record also carries with it a great temptation. The temptation goes like this: since God's covenant is inspired and preserved by Him, why not use it as a short cut way of finding out other things we want to know? We have questions about prehistory, biology, geology, astronomy, economics, etc. And these questions are ones there is no way-or no easy way-for us to answer. But suppose there are statements or hints about these matters in Scripture. Wouldn't these also have to be infallibly true? In fact, even if there are ways for us to investigate questions on nonreligious matters, shouldn't a believer at least start by canvassing Scripture to see what it says on any given topic?

I call succumbing to this temptation the "encyclopedic assumption." It results from regarding the Bible as an encyclopedia in which we may look for an answer to any sort of question we may have. The encyclopedic assumption may not go so far as to think that the answer to *every* question is in Scripture, but it does suppose Scripture to contain answers to all sorts of nonreligious questions. It ignores the Bible's own central theme and purpose, and instead of trying to ascertain the literal meaning of the text (where "literal" means the intent of the author), it tries to force the text to yield truths about matters which never crossed the minds of its author(s). This temptation has not been resisted successfully in the whole history of biblical interpretation. The Jewish Cabala, and the Talmudic attempts to extend general ethical principles into a vast set of rules for every conceivable circumstance, are examples of this assumption at work. So is the Canon Law of the Church developed throughout the middle ages, and so are the more recent attempts to obtain scientific truth from Scripture.

At this point I want to emphasize that my objection to the encyclopedic assumption is not an exceptional hermeneutical point made especially for Scripture. Rather, it is a general point that applies to every text whatever. To interpret a text properly, we must understand as much as possible not only about its language, cultural setting, historical circumstances, and literary form, but also about the questions and concerns its author is addressing. It is the author's intents and concerns that must guide how we interpret any text, whether it be a novel, poetry, a textbook, a training manual, or sacred Scripture.⁶ Thus it is *never* proper for us to assume that because we have a burning question or problem, that an author of Scripture (or any other book) must also have had it. Still less is it proper for us to assume that if we have a burning question God *must* have revealed an answer to it. The inspiration and preservation of Scripture are in order to vouchsafe to us the covenant of God, not to save us the time and effort of investigating the creation to find the answers to our questions. Scripture is not a shortcut on scientific work.

The Genesis Account

Following what has been said above, I contend that the creation account of Genesis should be understood-along with everything else in Scripture-as focally concerned with religion; that is, with the covenant by which we stand in proper relation to the only genuine divinity: God. Genesis' creation account cannot be correctly understood apart from its role as background to the editions of God's covenants with Adam, Noah, and Abraham which follow it. And these covenants themselves must be seen, in turn, as supplying background to the covenant with Moses.

Viewed as prologue to the covenant(s), the main purpose of the first part of the creation account is plainly to identify the covenant-maker. It distinguishes the God of Israel from the gods of Paganism by proclaiming Him to be the creator of everything other than Himself. It does not intend to tell us what we would have seen could we have been there to observe the universe in its early stages. This is evident from the way the text itself places its emphasis. In every case, it stresses God's total control, repeating again and again that everything comes about by His command. Before each creative episode we find, "And God said, `Let there be" At the same time the text shows little or no concern with the processes that were set in motion, or with how long they took. All the text says about what an observer would have seen is the repeated expression, "And it was so."

**It is improper to raise such questions as
whether the creative days are literal 24-hour periods
or geological eras. They represent episodes of divine creativity
which are stated in a literary framework. . .**

If we press our examination of Genesis' account to include its literary structure, then the text looks even less like an encyclopedia, even less like an attempt to provide scientific information. For example, it speaks of "days" of creation as follows: Day 1: God separates light from darkness; Day 2: God separates sea from atmosphere; Day 3: God separates land from sea and creates plant life; Day 4: God creates sun, moon, and stars; Day 5: God creates sea life and birds; Day 6: God creates animals and humans. There is an obvious correspondence here between days 1, 2, and 3, with days 4, 5, and 6. Day 1 speaks of the difference between light and darkness as the plan which forms the precondition for the appearance of the sun, moon and stars on day 4. Day 2 offers the separation of atmosphere from sea as the precondition for the purpose of the creation of sea life and birds on day 5. And the formation of dry land and plants on day 3, is the precondition for the creation of animals and humans formed on day 6. This match-up of the first three days with the last three days seems to be too prominent a feature of the account to have been accidental. But if it was not accidental, then it shows something very important. It shows that the intention of the text was to reveal a *teleological* order to the process of creation, which is not at all the same as either a scientific explanation or a description of what an observer would have seen.⁷

**The intention of the text was to reveal
a teleological order to the process of creation,
which is not at all the same as either a scientific explanation
or a description of what an observer would have seen.**

which provides an account of the teleological order involved rather than the chronological or causal orders involved. By centering its attention on God's purposes, it is clear that the intent of the text is to teach truths about God rather than to answer questions about the early stages of the universe or the earth. Its main burden is to convey that there is no blind chance or fate involved in the origin of the universe, and to deny that God was limited by any other force or by the material he had to work with. The purposes are God's, as was the accomplishment of those purposes. But the text shows not the slightest hint of any concern with the processes by which God accomplished His purposes, or with how long the accomplishing took.

This stress on everything being subjected to God's control and purpose becomes more detailed as the account goes on. We are told that God's purpose for creating the universe was to create humans, and His purpose for creating humans was to enter into a covenant of love and fellowship with them. The main features of the prehistoric covenants with Adam and Noah are sketched so as to show how they led to the covenant with Abraham. And the main features of the covenant with Abraham are filled in so as to show that the Sinaitic covenant with Moses is a continuation of the covenant with Abraham. Viewed from the standpoint of its own internal organization and themes, therefore, there is simply no excuse for reading Genesis' creation account in isolation from what follows it. Nor is there any excuse for missing its teleological rather than chronological organization, or for overlooking its religious character as preamble to the history of the covenants. It is simply religious through and through, and attempting to read it so as to satisfy scientific curiosity is a blatant distortion which obscures its religious significance.

In sum, an examination of the biblical text shows that the Fundamentalist approach is one which attempts to force the text to address the questions and concerns of fundamentalists, rather than one which allows the text to tell us what *its* concerns and questions are. The concerns of the text are, generally stated, these: Which is the true God? How, in general, does the universe relate to Him? How, more specifically, do humans come to stand in right relation to Him? The text is not at all concerned with such questions as: By what processes was the earth formed? How long did that formation take? How old is the human race? By what natural processes did humans first appear on earth? The upshot, then, is that what Genesis offers is a birth announcement of the universe, especially of mankind. Moreover, it is a birth announcement which contains revelation of its Father's redemptive purposes.

**The upshot, then, is that what Genesis offers
is a birth announcement of the universe, especially of mankind.**

But if the central theme of the first part of the account is to identify the covenant-maker, the central theme of the story of human creation is to identify the covenant-receiver. That is, first we are told about the self-existent status and the nature of God, then we are told about the dependent status and the nature of humans. But if this is really the case-if the theme here is the *nature* of humans-then the interpretive rule to be followed would be to read the accounts of the making of Adam and Eve as partly figurative. The element to be recognized as figurative would be the acts of "making," while the real import of the theme is to convey truth about human nature. Thus the interpretation of the biblical remark that God created Adam "from the dust of the ground" would not be that it is intended as a description of God's act, but as a comment on Adam's nature. To be sure, it is by God's creative activity that humans come into being. But on this interpretation the

expression "from the dust of the ground" should not be understood as a description of one causal deed in space and time by which a biologically human being came into existence, but as conveying the fact that part of human nature is that humans are made of the same stuff that the rest of the world is made of. Thus, humans never are, and never can be, more than creatures of God. They are not little bits of divinity stuffed into earthly bodies which are degraded as "the prison house of the soul." Nor can they have any existence but what is given them by God.

**God says that he made humans of the stuff
He called into being and from which He made everything else,
and He can dissolve them into that stuff again.**

This interpretation is supported by the way Genesis and other of the Scriptures (e.g., Psalms 22:15 & 29, 30: 9, 44:25, 103:14, 104:29; Ecclesiastes 3:20, 12:7; Isaiah 26:19; and Daniel 12:2) make use of the expression "the dust of the ground." The expression recurs in connection with the sentence of death being passed upon mankind for disobeying God: "From dust you came and to dust you shall return." Here it is clearly the dependent, mortal nature of humans which is the point. Their relation to God is not merely an extra added to their lives, but is what their lives ultimately depend upon. God says that he made humans of the stuff He called into being and from which He made everything else, and He can dissolve them into that stuff again.

It seems, therefore, that there is good textual reason to suppose that the remarks about God forming Adam from the dust of the ground are not intended to provide a description of a single event which *by itself* accounts for the coming-into-being of the first homo sapiens. That is, it is not to be understood as teaching that God made a mud model of a life form with no biological predecessors and blew on it with the result that it came alive, hopped up, and walked around. Yet it is something almost this crude that many fundamentalists seem to envision.

The same principle of interpreting formation language as conveying the nature of what is created rather than the process by which it appeared, can now also be applied to the understanding of the story of the formation of Eve from a rib of Adam. Once again, it should not be taken as a literal description of the single act by which the first woman appeared in the world, but is intended to teach that the woman shared the same human nature with the man. That this is the main point is clear from the words attributed to Adam in response to being given Eve: "she is bone of my bone and flesh of my flesh." That is, she is the same kind of creature as he is. The application of this interpretation to the story about Eve is also supported by the surrounding context. In the story, Adam's remark quoted above is preceded by the text's comment that although Adam named all the animals none of them were proper mates for him, and it is immediately followed by the assertion that it is because Eve was formed from Adam's rib that men and women are proper mates for one another: "For this reason a man leaves his father and mother and unites with his wife...." Thus the context shows that the rib represents the sharing of one common human nature.

The fundamental point of the story of Eve's origin, therefore, is that although it was only Adam who was earlier said to be formed of the created elements of which the rest of the world is formed (the "dust of the ground"), and to have been formed for the purpose of entering into a covenant relationship with God, what was formerly said only of Adam now applies equally to Eve. Women are said to have the same human nature as men, so that each has only the other as a proper mate

among all living creatures ("her desire shall be toward her husband"). But above all, their common nature means that both are dependent upon God and have been created for covenant fellowship with God. This is clearly shown by the fact that Eve, too, is later held covenantally responsible for her disobedience despite the fact that God's command was originally directed to Adam.

**The biblical account of the origin of humans
does not focus upon the sorts of questions that a scientist would pose.**

I conclude, therefore, that the biblical account of the origin of humans does not focus upon the sorts of questions that a scientist would pose. It is not concerned with the geological conditions, the biological processes, or the time they took, to play their role in bringing the race into existence. Thus there should be no reason for us to feel nonplussed by the discovery of these conditions, processes, and the great time span over which they operated. To feel let down by the biblical account's omission of them, betrays the influence of the encyclopedic assumption. It shows we expected a *scientific* account from the text. Otherwise why should we feel let down that there is no hint of the vast time span involved, but not let down that there is no hint in the text of other equally startling discoveries? For example, we do not feel let down that Scripture gave us no indication of the vast space-span of the heavens, nor disappointed that there isn't the slightest warning that we are surrounded by trillions of invisible animals that every day attempt to invade our bodies and eat us.

**Why should we feel let down that
there is no hint in the text of the vast time span involved,
but not let down that there is no hint of other
equally startling discoveries?**

Although I find the view of Genesis sketched above convincing in its general outline, it has so far been chiefly negative. I have tried to warn against the encyclopedic assumption and show what the text does not focus on. Furthermore, nothing said so far helps to resolve the two main parts of the traditional conflict with biological evolution mentioned at the outset: first, the text gives the strong impression that humans appeared suddenly; second, the text teaches that the human nature of the woman was somehow derived from that of the man. But using what has been outlined so far will now allow the construction of a more positive interpretation which can address both these points.

The Biblical View of Human Nature

In any discussion of the first appearance of humans, some definition of human nature must be assumed, since it is simply impossible to deal with the origin of humans without some idea of what counts as a human. This is especially true for the interpreting of specific data bearing on any hypotheses about human origins. If we are trying, for example, to interpret skeletal or artifact remains, our judgment as to whether they are human remains can't help but be controlled by our idea of what a human *is*.

Now I do not mean to suggest that anthro-pologists, biologists, and others who work with theories of human origins have never raised this issue. The question of how to define what counts as human

is, indeed, one of the questions which has been raised often-and given various answers-in the history of such theories. But it is generally raised as merely one more interesting issue alongside many others. Its treatment in many scientific works on human evolution has been pretty ho-hum. It's often no more than: "Oh, yes-there's another question we can raise, and here are a few of the answers that have been proposed." But I contend that the acceptance of a definition of "human" *governs* any theory or interpretation of data bearing on human origins. As I see it, the true importance of this regulatory role of the definition of "human" for the question of human origins has yet to be fully appreciated.⁸

As a prime example of the pervasive control exercised by any such definition, consider the influence of the definition which has had the widest acceptance. This most influential of all definitions of "human" is the one proposed by the ancient Greeks, namely, that man is a "rational animal." According to this definition, humans are to be distinguished from other life forms by being animals, and they are to be distinguished from other animals by being rational. To apply this in a scientific way, however, one is forced to say exactly what "rational" means. And there have been quite a number of interpretations proposed.

**It is simply impossible to deal with the origin of humans
without some idea of what counts as a human.**

One proposal was the view that human rationality appears with the use of tools. However, this view has become ever harder to maintain in the face of the evidence that many animals use tools in clever ways. In fact, it is not only the higher primates (such as chimpanzees) which do this, but such critters as ants, otters, and birds.⁹ The allied proposal that man is the *tool-making* animal is almost equally as imprecise. To be sure, making tools is a higher accomplishment than simply using them. But there is simple tool making at least among chimps, and the selection of any one particular level of tool making as defining humans is going to be pretty arbitrary.

Another proposal was that the hallmark of human rationality consists in the ability to use language. This seemed to be a pretty safe definition for a long time (it was held by the great rationalist philosophers of the 17th and 18th centuries), but a few years ago it became known that gorillas and chimpanzees were capable of being taught significant amounts of the deaf sign language. There is now a convincing body of evidence that these animals have been able to carry on elementary conversations with their human teachers, and even with one another!¹⁰

**From a biblical point of view, it is not necessary
to sift through and wonder about all the different definitions
of human nature. This is because a definition of what
counts as a human is part of the biblical revelation.**

Some rationalists appealed to the ability to do mathematics, rather than having a language, as the distinguishing characteristic of human rationality. And, to be sure, no animals have yet exhibited any ability to do math. There are, however, people who can't do math either.¹¹ Thus a hard-line rationalist would have to say that such persons are not really human. But other than a prejudice in

favor of mathematical ability, there is no good reason to say that a young child or retarded person is not really human.

Besides these ideas of human nature which concentrate on the "rational" part of the traditional definition, there are others which are biological and concentrate on the "animal" side. For example, there is the definition that a human is any being who is bi-pedal, walks upright, and has a certain brain size in comparison to body size. Then again, there is the proposal that these biological characteristics in conjunction with certain cultural indications-such as tool making-are sufficient to define a human. But significant as such indicators may be for the work of the anthropologist, they are a long way from comprising an adequate *definition* of a human. Even the combination of skeletal similarities, similarities in brain size, and the presence of artifacts will not tell us conclusively what we really want to know when we investigate primitive remains: were the creatures who had these bodies and left these artifacts the same *kind* of creatures as ourselves? Were they human in essentially the same sense that we are?

From a biblical point of view, however, it is not necessary to sift through and wonder about all the different definitions of human nature. This is because a definition of what counts as a human is part of the biblical revelation. Indeed, it is part of the Genesis story! For it is clear in that account that what defines a human is being in the image of God, and that an essential part of that image is the capacity for fellowship with God. In short, humans are essentially religious beings. They are beings created for the very purpose of entering into covenant fellowship with their Divine Creator. Here we can refer back to our earlier definition of religious belief, and the clarity it lent to the fact that Bible writers never try to prove the existence of God but everywhere presuppose that all people have some religious belief or other. Our definition makes sense of this position by showing that it means all people are religious because even if they do not believe in the true God, they cannot help but have some substitute divinity. It is on that ground Bible writers admonish their readers to turn their faith from false gods to the one, true God.

**It is clear in the Genesis account that
what defines a human is being in the image of God,
and that an essential part of that image is the capacity for fellowship with God.**

*From the biblical point of view, then, the origin of the human race on earth is identical with the origin of what I shall call religious consciousness in living creatures. By "religious consciousness" I mean that core-constituent of the image of God which consists in the innate disposition to regard something as divine, and to model an understanding of human nature on whatever idea of divinity is accepted. Thus a being is not a human because it walks upright, forms concepts, makes tools, or has a language (though these-and other-abilities appear to be preconditions for the manifest exercise of religious consciousness).¹² Rather, a being is human only if it has an innate religious disposition to believe in something as divine, the normal manifestation of which is some actual religious belief. Seen from this angle, the biblical text deals with human nature in a manner consistent with its overall *religious* focus and perspective.¹³ It is an account of human origins which acknowledges human nature as creaturely ("out of the dust of the ground"), but focusses on its inbuilt relation to its real or pretended divine Creator ("in the image of God").*

**Thus it was precisely by responding to God's revelation
that the possessor of that religious capacity became
completely human, and was therefore the first human.**

One result of this definition is that the designation "homo sapiens" is not fully synonymous with the term "human," even if the two expressions are extensionally isomorphic. This is because no biological or biological-cultural classification can capture what is truly essential and unique about human nature: the capacity for the consciousness of standing in relation to the divine Origin of all created reality. In fact, accustomed as we are to a particular biological form and cultural achievements as typical of humans, there is no reason to suppose either of these are inevitable. From a biblical point of view, we must say that the bodily shape and cultural accouterments of beings might be strangely different from what we have come to expect, while the beings possessing them be nevertheless human, provided they are *religious* beings.

Because of the essentially religious focus of the text, and the essentially religious nature of humans, I find the biblical account to be giving us an account of the origin of the human race in the sense of telling us about the initial appearance of religious consciousness in creatures. It is not interested in the time span or biological causes which preceded the capacity for religious belief, but only in the last step of the processes which produced humans. That last step was the one that actualized the religious capacity of the first being in which such capacity appeared, and Scripture indicates that this last step was *God's speaking to Adam and establishing His covenant with him*. Whatever physical and biological pre-conditions may have led to the development of the capacity for religious consciousness, it was the revelation of God which was the last condition needed to activate and actualize that capacity. *Thus it was precisely by responding to God's revelation that the possessor of that religious capacity became completely human, and was therefore the first human*. For this reason when the text says that God breathed into Adam the breath of life, it should not be understood to refer only to "breath" in the ordinary sense. The word for "breath" is the same as the word for "spirit" in Hebrew, so that there is a pun here in which both senses of the word are intended. It is by God's will that the man exists and breathes (is biologically alive), but it is also because of God's Spirit that man stands in proper covenantal relation to God (is alive in the full religious sense). All through Scripture, humans are said to stand in proper relation to God by receiving his Spirit, and thus to have received the gift of life.¹⁴ For example, Jesus said that he came that we might receive life "more abundantly," that is, the fullness of human life, which is life everlasting in fellowship with God.

**While there was not a single act which produced
the biological species homo sapiens, there was a single act which produced
the first truly human being by making him God's covenant-partner.**

In this sense, there was indeed a single act in space and time which caused there to be human at one moment when there had been none the moment before. But that act was not God seeing to it that Adam was formed from the dust of the ground; it was God's revealing himself to Adam and putting him in covenant relation to himself so as to make him a fully human (religious) being. Thus while there was not a single act which produced the biological species homo sapiens, there was a single act which produced the first truly human being by making him God's covenant-

partner. Notice that in the briefer synopsis of the origin of humans given in chapter 1, their creation is immediately followed by the statement that God blessed them and gave them responsibilities. These are both covenant relations. And in the more detailed exposition of chapter 2, the imparting to Adam of the "breath of life" is followed by information I take to be a commentary on the rest of what that means: God's binding upon Adam covenant obligations to Himself and to the specially protected environment in which Adam was placed. In other words, the essential part of making Adam a human included putting him in a special setting for his covenantal probation, which probation included both what he must do ("cultivate the garden and take care of it") and what he must not do ("you must not eat of the fruit of that tree") in order to stand in proper relation to God. All this covenant information is, I contend, literally the last step in the origination of humans.

**Genuinely human life necessarily includes
an actualized capacity for religious belief, and full human life
includes the covenant relation to the true, rather than a pretended, Creator.**

It is thus a central teaching of the text that it is not the case that humans came into existence at one time and at a later time had the covenant added to their lives. Genuinely human life necessarily includes an actualized capacity for religious belief, and full human life includes the covenant relation to the true, rather than a pretended, Creator. We hear this point echoed again and again in Scripture. It appears in Jesus' remark in Matthew 4:4 (which he took from Deuteronomy 8:3) that human life does not consist of only biological sustenance (bread), but also in religious relation to God (God's word). Moreover, it cannot fail to be significant that Jesus makes this comment in the midst of his temptation by Satan. His remark comes at the point of a new start for the human race which (religiously) begins over again with his defeat of Satan by complete covenant obedience.

If this interpretation is correct so far, it resolves the first part of the supposed conflict of Genesis with biological evolution, for it shows how the possibility of a long evolutionary process for humans is compatible with their also appearing suddenly. But more than that, I believe it also provides the basis for showing how the second difficulty-about the humanity of the woman being derived from the man-is to be resolved.

For if the final step in becoming human is to have an activated religious consciousness, and that step is accomplished by entering a covenant relation with God, then the woman's humanity was derived from the man's in the sense that she did not receive the covenant directly from God but from her husband. Thus the story of the rib transplant is figurative in the same way as is the story of forming Adam of the dust of the ground. Each account expresses truth about human nature in terms of a body-formation story. In each, it is the covenant relation to God by which religious consciousness is initiated and a truly *human* being is created. But whereas Adam received the covenant directly from God, Eve received it from Adam. In that way her becoming fully human was dependent on his already being human.

Replies To Objections

Now it might be objected that if some version of biological evolution is a correct account of the biological processes and preconditions for the rise of beings with a capacity for religion, then we would not expect that capacity to appear only in a solitary individual. Instead we would expect it to have appeared in many individuals at very nearly the same time.

The religious capacity could very well have appeared in many people at about the same time, and there yet be a particular individual who was the first in which it appeared and was actualized.

In reply to this criticism, I have two arguments. The first is that my interpretation of the biblical account and what we're told by evolutionary theory compliment one another. The religious capacity could very well have appeared in many people at *about* the same time, and there yet be a particular individual who was the first in which it appeared and was actualized. There is no incompatibility here. The second argument is that my interpretation does more than show there is no necessary incompatibility, but also provides a way to explain the puzzling remark in the text that the children of Adam and Eve went to other locations and married from among the people there. This is such a jarring and unexpected thing to be told, that virtually every child who hears it for the first time asks: "If Adam and Eve were the first people, where did those other people come from?" But if the view I'm suggesting were correct, this is just what we would expect; we would expect that there would be others in whom the religious capacity would have arisen at nearly the same time (but just after) that of Adam and Eve, and been actualized by coming in contact with God's covenant. This would not in the least count against what Scripture teaches about Adam. It would still be true that Adam was the *religious* head of the human race in virtue of his being the first human, in virtue of his having been the first to be put on probation with respect to obeying the covenant, and in virtue of his being the universal instantiation of us all in failing that probation.

The view I'm proposing would, however, contravene an old tradition in theology which regards Adam as the biological progenitor of all humans as well as the religious head of the race. My replies to this objection are, first, that despite the long standing theological tradition to the contrary, there is no explicit biblical assertion that all humans descended from Adam. His being the first religious head of humanity (receiver of the covenant) is never equated with, or made to depend upon, his being the biological progenitor of all people. Nor is there any reason why Adam's special office respecting the covenant in relation to the rest of the human race couldn't be the same as that which was proposed for his relation to Eve's humanity. That is, the covenant which actualized the humanity of all people spread from him and Eve to the others. In that sense they are the parents of the common religious root of the human race.¹⁵

Adam's being the first religious head of humanity (receiver of the covenant) is never equated with his being the biological progenitor of all people.

Finally, the New Testament says there is a direct parallel between Adam's being the first religious head of the race, who failed to keep the covenant, and Jesus' being the new head of the race who perfectly kept the covenant on behalf of the rest of fallen humanity (e.g., Romans 5:12-21, I Corinthians 15:22). But this parallel supports my point rather than creates difficulties for it. For if Adam's failed headship of the race is the same as the headship at which Jesus succeeded, then surely neither man's covenant leadership depended upon his being the biological ancestor of

anyone.

Summary

Humans undeniably have a biological aspect, and the idea of a long, continuous evolution of life forms is, I think, a convincing hypothesis about that aspect of humans. It is a theory whose explanatory power and supporting evidence have not only grown significantly, but it is a theory against which no one has been able to propose any plausible alternative for almost two centuries. But even if any of our present versions of it are in fact correct, evolutionary theory itself still could not tell us what a human essentially is. That is a belief which any thinker *brings to* the enterprise of theorizing, and which is a reflection of his or her own religious belief. For the Jew or Christian, this can be nothing other than the essentially religious character of human nature, reflecting faith in the personal Creator. It is this faith which both requires and provides a distinctive interpretation of the role of evolution in human origins.

**In the matter of the origin of the human race,
then, it appears that the theory that life forms
gradually evolved does not need to be rejected from a biblical point of view.**

I find, then, that many traditional understandings of the supposed conflict between Genesis and evolutionary theory have been seriously askew. They have approached the text with the encyclopedic assumption, and thus found a conflict of their own making. Even the interpretations which regard Genesis as myth, or poetry, or which allegorize it, are ones which started by assuming that its literal meaning does conflict with science. It is that assumption which prompted those interpretations, and they were designed precisely to avoid such conflict. They have thus failed to appreciate the specifically *religious* character of the text, and thus missed the rich store of information it gives us about the origin of humans as religious beings. If, on the other hand, the encyclopedic assumption is given up, we find the literal meaning of Genesis (the intent of its author) is able to give us reliable truth about the nature of both the covenant-maker and the covenant-receivers. This truth is essential not only to the correct interpretation of human nature, but is such that it must guide any theory we accept about human origins including the specific interpretation we should take of the evolutionary processes involved in those origins.

In the matter of the origin of the human race, then, it appears that the theory that life forms gradually evolved does not need to be rejected from a biblical point of view. This is not to make a final judgment about the merits of the theory relative to its physical, paleontological, biological, or other scientific evidence. But it is to say that so far as the biblical account goes, no Jew or Christian need reject it on *religious* grounds. By the same token, however, it means that no one who rejects biblical religion is entitled to do so for the reason that its account of human origins conflicts with that highly confirmed theory.

[A Response](#)

©

NOTES

¹My conclusions on these issues have been argued more extensively in chapters 2 & 4 of my book, *The Myth of Religious Neutrality* to be published in the fall of 1991 by Notre Dame University Press.

²See *From the Stone Age to Christianity.*, W.F. Albright. Doubleday Co., Garden City, 1957, pp. 15 -16.

³In order to have no religious belief at all, one would have to claim to believe there is nothing that is self-existent or "just there." But that is a claim with no coherent interpretation. For even if each and every thing were believed to depend on something else, the entire array of all things-whether finite or infinite-would still be something that does not depend on anything. This is because, ex hypothesi, there would be nothing else for it to depend on.

⁴It is thus not necessary for someone to believe in a god in order to have a religious belief. Since a god is thought to be a personal being, many people are literally atheists (don't believe in any god) but still have a religion because they still regard *something* as divine. In fact, there are forms of Hinduism and Buddhism which do not believe there are any gods. And in many forms of paganism, no god is thought to be divine as I have defined that term. Instead, the gods are thought of as beings who depend on whatever is divine, but who are more like the divine than humans are.

⁵This approach to the interpretation of Scripture was developed by Prof. Geerhardus Vos of Princeton, in his classic work *Biblical Theology* (Eerdmans Pub. Co., Grand Rapids, 1948).

⁶It should be noticed that as I have defined "literal," it is not in opposition to "figurative" and should not be confused with "literalistic." The literal meaning, as I have defined it, is the intent of the author as opposed to allegorizing extentions of the text's meaning in order to meet an externally imposed program or concern.

⁷See, e.g., N. H. Ridderbos in *Is There a Conflict Between Genesis I and Natural Science?*, (Eerdmans Pub. Co., Grand Rapids, 1957); also C. Vanderwaal in *Search the Scriptures*, vol. 1. (Paideia Press, St. Catharines, Canada, 1978. pp. 53 ff).

⁸There are indications that this is changing. For some of the more widespread definitions of "human" and their influence on the interpretation of evolutionary theory, see Roger Lewin's *Human Evolution*, W.H. Freeman Co., NY, 1984, pp. 24-28, 98 ff. Lewin reports that currently the most popular idea of human nature is that it is essentially *ethical*. From a biblical point of view this is headed in the right direction, but does not go far enough. Interestingly, he cites the ability to ask the question "Why are we here?" as a prime example of "ethical" consciousness (pp. 24 & 99). But clearly such a question goes beyond matters of good and evil to truly religious issues of origin and purpose.

⁹Besides the well known case of the Darwin finches on the Galapagos islands, there are other tool using birds. See "Tool Using Bird: The Egyptian Vulture," *National Geographic*, May, 1968.

¹⁰"Conversations with a Gorilla," Francine Patterson. *National Geographic*, Oct., 1978.

¹¹Here too, the issue is how much mathematical ability should count as defining human rationality. All normal humans have a number sense and can count. But some animals also exhibit a limited number sense. See T. Dantzig, *Number the Language of Science*. Doubleday & Co., Garden City, 1954, p. 1-6.

¹²Human logical, social, linguistic, and other functions are here called preconditions for the *exercise* of religious consciousness so as not to give the impression that religious consciousness originates or emerges from them. The biblical teaching about the human heart or soul makes clear

that the heart is not only something more than all the ways humans function and can exist apart from them after the death of the body, but is actually that which controls their manifest exercise in bodily life. Thus the image of God-the very center of human self-identity which is the root of the innate religious disposition-cannot itself be accounted for evolutionarily or by any other scientific theory. In this connection, there are two excellent recent studies which are helpful: John Cooper's *Body, Soul, & Life Everlasting* (Eerdmans Pub. Co., Grand Rapids, 1989) and Richard Swinburne's *The Evolution of the Soul* (Clarendon Press, Oxford, 1986). Of course, the classic work on the biblical doctrine of the heart is still H. Dooyeweerd's *A New Critique of Theoretical Thought* (Presbyterian & Reformed Pub. Co., Phila., 1955).

¹³The way the Bible downplays the biological aspect of human origin in favor of its religious side has a parallel with the way Scripture deals with history. In recording historical events, Bible writers take the same specifically *religious* perspective that they do when dealing with human origins. For this reason they often downplay or omit economic, political, and other components of the events they record in order to emphasize their religious side. From the view of a modern historian, this is sloppy historiography. But they do this because they see the religious element as the most important of all. So while they do not think there are two histories-one religious and one secular-they do see the religious issue in history as the key to understanding *all* history. Kingdoms and civilizations may rise and fall, but the central issue is always whether people are covenant keepers or covenant breakers.

¹⁴For example: Genesis 41:38; Judges 6:34, 14:6; I Samuel 10:10; Job 27:3; Acts 2:17; Romans 8:9-11, 15, 23; I Corinthians 15: 45; Galatians 6:8; Revelations 11:11.

¹⁵descended from Adam, is Adam's own remark (Genesis 3:20) referring to Eve as "the mother of all living." It is far from clear that this lone remark settles the doctrine of universal Adamic (or Eveian) descent, however. It seems much more likely that it is to be taken as a comment on God's immediately preceding prediction that a descendent of Eve's will defeat the devil (represented by the snake) and overcome the curse of death thus restoring the lost promise of life to the human race.
