

Comments on Original Sin

Recently, the pastor of our church presented a sermon based on the third chapter of the Old Testament book of Genesis. In this chapter, titled in some bibles as “the Fall,” Adam and Eve—created originally without sin and in a state of grace—disobey their creator and are invested with a sinful nature that would be passed down to their descendants through the rest of time. Nowhere in the sermon did the pastor suggest that the text on which he was preaching was anything but an accurate account of what had happened on that fateful day. On the way home from church, I commented to my wife that this was an excellent sermon. To some, this may seem a most surprising comment, given that I do not believe that the events recorded in the pastor’s biblical text actually happened. It may appear even more surprising when I confess that I firmly believe The Bible to be the inspired and infallible Word of God. I expect that these apparent incongruities require a bit of explanation.

I should start by stating that I do not believe that my faith in the truth of biblical revelation requires me to accept the proposition that all biblical texts must be taken literally. Clearly, some of the revelations in the creation account are not factual. Rather, they are stories conceived to make particular points that The Creator intended us to take away from our reading. In fact, the best evidence from studies into the history of mankind make it clear that, at the time in that history when Adam and Eve were proposed to have lived, modern humans (in the image of God??) had already been populating the earth for some fifty thousand years. So we need to look at what it is that the biblical story of “The Fall” is intended to tell us and what we can do to integrate that intention with what we now know about our beginnings as a human race.

First lets take a look at the intention behind the story of Adam and Eve. Its purpose was to inform us about “original sin”—the tendency in all humans to corrupt the good order that is required for us to live in peace and harmony with one another. The biblical story tells us that this tendency did not exist in the first humans, but was imposed on them by The Creator who had created them in a state of grace but withdrew that grace because of their disobedience. Most importantly, that tendency was imposed on their descendants...forever, condemning us to lives in which we are destined to contend against an inborn character we acquired because of someone else’s disobedience and which we are powerless to change. That’s what the story tells us. Now, let’s see what we can learn from what we are told by the evidence from scientific inquiry.

You don’t need to be a scientist to conclude that original sin as I defined it above exists as an indisputable reality. The history of mankind is abundant with evidence of that reality—right up to the present. So, the question is not whether it exists, but where it came from. If the Genesis account of The Fall is only a story, then where do we go to find the actual cause for original sin? Can the science that makes a parable of the story of Adam and Eve be employed to provide a credible alternative explanation for the origin of original sin? Yes, it can.

If Adam and Eve were simply symbolic characters, then where do we look elsewhere to find the actual origins of the human race? The best scientific evidence suggests that the first humans in God’s image appeared some fifty thousand years ago, at the time of what paleoanthropologists call “the cognitive explosion” (see <http://www.ocomm.net/adam>). At that time, over a very short period, evidence appeared showing a remarkable increase in the capacity of *homo sapiens* for cognitive thinking. Could this be the time in history when the first human(s) became the Image of God? Why not? The biblical record makes it clear that modern humans are a species set apart from the rest of creation. What makes more sense than the association of the Image of God and the unique capacity of humanity for rational thought.

There is no scientific explanation for the cognitive explosion. It just happened—like the “Big Bang” just happened. In a geological instant—and possibly in an actual instant—developing humanity transitioned from stone-age creatures into rationally thinking modern humans with the ability to plan for their futures, to perceive the existence of a higher power and to record their lives in detailed paintings on the walls of their living quarters. In that instant, we were changed forever—but, not in every way. Our brains may have changed, but we have retained as a species all of the animal nature we possessed before our first parents were touched by The Creator and invested with His image. And that animal nature—particularly the drives for self-preservation and procreation (described in Scripture as “the flesh” or “our sinful nature”)—is what defines what we now know as “original sin.”

Hopefully it is clear that this alternative explanation has not altered in any way the doctrine of sin as we understand it from a literal reading of the story of “The Fall” in the book of Genesis. It simply makes the idea of original sin a lot more understandable and gives us a more realistic look at what we are struggling with when we face temptations of “the flesh.” However, in offering this alternative, I do not want to suggest that the story of Adam and Eve should be abandoned in biblical teaching simply because the principals were not real people in real time. Like the principals in other treasured parables in Scripture (e.g., the Good Samaritan or the Prodigal Son), these illustrations continue to provide us a time-honored view of our own nature and the nature of the God who created and sustains us.

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