

“Genesis and Evolution”

Some years ago, my younger brother and I made a trip to western Kentucky to trace our family roots. One of our goals was to find the grave of our great grandfather in the city cemetery at Paducah. We searched all over that cemetery. Then we found it! To our great surprise, our great-grandfather was buried just a stone’s throw away from the grave of John Scopes who died in 1970.

Does the name John Scopes sound familiar to you? Think of the play and the movie, “Inherit the Wind.” Think of the defense attorney, Clarence Darrow. And, think of the so-called “Scopes Monkey Trial.” As you may recall: John Scopes was the high school teacher who was tried in a Dayton, Tennessee court in 1925 because he was teaching the scientific Theory of Evolution in his classroom.

The headstone on Scopes’ grave is relatively simple. It bears these words, “A Man of Courage.” I, for one, think that inscription is well-deserved. I paused for several moments before Scopes’ grave. Reflecting on his life I thought about how long ago that famous trial was. I also thought about how now, 3/4 of a century later, Fundamentalist Protestants and others continue to fight against the Theory of Evolution and against it being taught in our nation’s public schools.

Instead of the Theory of Evolution, opponents champion the teaching, of a Bible-based theory, called Creationism [or Intelligent Design]. In fact, I and many other modern Christians--both mainline Protestants and Roman Catholics--consider Creationism to be both unscientific, and essentially an incorrect view of how our world began.

Some people say that our Holy Bible is a book of scientific truths. The fact is that I cannot accept that idea as an article of my own personal faith. I certainly look to the Bible for religious truths--namely, truths about God, and truths about us humans in our relationship with God. In fact, over my thirty-one years as an ordained Christian minister I’ve spent a great deal of time seeking to discern such religious truths and convey them to others.

But, I do not expect our Holy Bible--parts of which were written nearly 3,000 years ago--to be a source book for modern scientific truths. In fact, our Bible was compiled in an early period of human history which has sometimes been referred to, as “pre-scientific.” Our Bible was written long before the emergence of modern science and its scientific method, which focuses on: the careful observation of empirical phenomena, the formulation of hypotheses to explain and predict those phenomena, and the systematic testing of those hypotheses to determine their accuracy.

In our modern day, the scientific field of biology is almost exploding with new knowledge. Today we often hear about such things as genes, chromosomes, and DNA. In fact, the double-helix structure of the DNA molecule wasn’t discovered, until as recently as 1953--by

Watson and Crick at the University of Cambridge in England. I was about 5 years old at that time. And now, as we know from the media, DNA research is being used to improve our health and to help determine the guilt or innocence of people in some crime situations.

That's our modern day. In contrast, let's consider a pre-scientific, biblical understanding of genetics. Our first scripture reading this morning, which begins at Genesis 30:37, tells the story.

The biblical patriarch Jacob wanted to breed sheep and goats which were striped, speckled, or spotted. Apparently, those variations in color were considered unusual for those animals at that time. So, how did Jacob do it? As the Bible says: Jacob took freshly-cut sticks from three different kinds of trees. He peeled some bark off those sticks, so parts of the white pulp underneath would show through. Jacob did this, presumably so those sticks would appear striped, speckled, or spotted. Then Jacob placed those sticks in the animals' watering troughs.

As the Bible indicates: Animals came drank at those troughs, then bred in front of them. As the animals looked at those peeled sticks in the processing of breeding, they produced offspring which were striped, speckled, or spotted. According to the story, Jacob used those sticks many times in that way until he became a wealthy man with large flocks.

As you may recall, a Moravian Christian monk by the name of Gregor Mendel is said to be the "Father of Genetics." He laid the foundation for that science in the 1860's with his experiments on peas in his monastery's garden. In contrast, the biblical account of Jacob could well date back to about 1800 B.C.—almost four millennia ago.

Even in that early period, the ancient Hebrews knew a surprising amount about the human spirit, about God, and about religious faith. That's part of what makes our Holy Bible so valuable to us today. But, we should not assume that those early Hebrews were also automatic authorities, on empirical matters which are open to scientific inquiry today.

People who interpret the Bible in a very literal way--as though it is totally infallible--will sometimes argue, that the biblical account of our world's creation is completely accurate as written. However, there is an inherent problem with that assertion which one doesn't often read about in the media today. And that problem is this: According to many modern biblical scholars there are two stories of creation in the Bible not one. And those two stories are different enough from each other that they both can't be literally true accounts of how our world and we humans were created.

How could there be two stories of creation in our Bible? According to scholars, those two stories come to us from two different traditions of early Hebrew faith--traditions which were combined, when the book of Genesis was compiled. At the beginning of our Bible, those two different traditions are simply placed side by side as two different accounts of the Creation. In contrast, those two traditions are closely woven together in the Genesis account of Noah and the

flood.

To give you an example: Genesis 6:19 has God's command that Noah is to bring "two of all living creatures, male and female" into the ark. However, a few verses later, Noah is given a different command. There God tells Noah to load the ark with seven pairs of every clean animal, two pairs of every unclean animal, and seven pairs of every kind of bird. Does such a difference in the details of the Noah story matter greatly? Probably not, unless one is trying to view that story completely literally as an infallible historical account.

Now let's turn to the two creation stories themselves. The first creation story runs from the very beginning of Genesis to chapter 2:3. Scholars say that this story likely comes from the 5th or 6th century B.C. -- sometime after the Hebrew people were conquered by Babylonia, and exiled in Babylon.

This first creation story comes from the early Hebrew tradition, which scholars call the "Priestly" source. It's called that because this tradition tends to deal with issues which were of concern to Jewish priests and the rituals at the Jerusalem Temple. The Priestly story of creation is quite distinctive. I'm sure you know it fairly well. That story explains the creation of the Jewish Sabbath by indicating that God created our world in 6 days then on the 7th day rested. In fact, this story probably has a lot to do with why we moderns have seven day weeks--instead of weeks based on some other number of days.

This first creation story begins with water--the dark and frightful waters of chaos. Creation takes place as God dramatically separates those waters and powerfully holds them apart, so dry land can appear. As you think of this story, think of God separating the waters of the Red or Reed sea, so Moses and the Hebrew people could cross over it on dry land. Think also of God parting the Jordan River, so Joshua and the Hebrew people could easily cross over it, into the Promised Land--without getting wet. [Joshua 3:17]

This idea of God miraculously parting waters and holding them apart to create dry land, was a significant motif in early Hebrew thinking. In a sense, it portrayed God as the source of order, overcoming chaos.

As you will recall: This first creation story gives a day-by-day account of God's many creations. For example: On the first day, God calls light into being. On the third day, God calls the earth to bring forth vegetation. On the sixth day, God calls human beings into existence, in God's image. In this account: God creates human beings last. Humans seem to be at the pinnacle, of all God's creative efforts. Also, in this creative act, God calls men and women into being, at the same time. That's the first creation story, the Priestly account from the 5th or 6th century B.C.

Now let's take a look at the second creation story, which begins at Genesis 2:4b. You heard sections of that second story this morning in our second scripture reading. This second story is said to be even older than the first. It likely dates back to the 9th or 10th century B.C.

This story is said to have come from the “Yahweh” source. It is called that because that tradition commonly refers to God as “Yahweh Elohim,” which is translated, “LORD God.” As you may know, some early Hebrews thought of “Yahweh” as God’s personal name.

It’s interesting to note that this second creation story does not begin with the waters of chaos, which need to be held at bay. Rather, this story begins with the dry earth which needs to be watered before creation can begin. In this second story, water is a positive symbol identified with fertility. Also, this story does not divide the creation up into separate days.

In this second creation story, the first thing God creates is a human male figure. In this story—unlike the first story--men and women are not created together. In the first story, God calls human beings into existence. However, in this second story God essentially bends down, molds a male figure out of clay, then breathes God’s own breath into that figure. Thus, as the Bible says, “man became a living being.” According to this second creation story, the very last thing God creates, is a woman so the man will have “a helper as his partner” and not “be alone.” In this second story, the woman is derived from the man. She is created from the man’s own rib.

As I think you can see, these two stories of the creation have some significant differences. Given those differences, both of these stories cannot be literally true accounts of how our world and us humans, were created.

But then, that brings me to my point. I don’t believe that either of these stories should be viewed as scientific accounts of creation. Also, I don’t believe that these stories should be placed in competition with the scientific Theory of Evolution. These creation stories--from thousands of years ago--are essentially documents of faith. Science can help us understand HOW our world was created. In contrast, these creation stories contain special spiritual insights which can help us better understand, WHY [and by WHOM] our world was created.

It seems that science is good at answering many of the HOW questions in our lives. For example: science can tell us how it is possible for us humans to be alive. It can tell us how our hearts work and how our stomachs turn food into the nourishment our bodies need. But, it is to religion and faith we must turn to discover why and for what special purposes each one of us has come to be alive.

Science deals best with questions of HOW. Religion deals best with questions of WHY. Science and religion each have their own special kind of truth, and their own proper domain. Of course, the problem comes, when people try to cross those boundaries and turn religion into science and science into religion.

On one hand, I think religion should respect the best efforts of science to explain the mechanisms by which our world came into being. On the other hand, I think science should respect the best efforts of religion to understand the spiritual dimensions of our world which are beyond the ability of science to test empirically.

One of my favorite quotes, comes from Ralph Washington Sockman, the famous New York preacher of the mid-20th century. As Sockman once observed:

*“The larger the island of knowledge, the longer the shoreline of wonder.”*¹

And so it often seems to be. Science has made amazing strides in formulating the Big Bang Theory to explain the mechanisms by which our universe was created. However, religion can go where science cannot. For religion can perceive our wondrous God who truly was “in the beginning” even before there was a Big Bang which created both time and space.

We’ve looked briefly at the two creation stories in Genesis. Now I’ll list some of the precious religious truths which may be found in those stories. For example, those stories teach us these things:

- God is the sole creator of our world. There are no other gods.
- God created our world, but God is not identical with it. In fact, there is a difference between the Creator and the creation.
- The world which God created is essentially “good.” In and of itself, the physical world, matter, human bodies, and sex are not evil, and are not to be despised.
- In creating us humans, God made us in God’s own image. As portrayed in one of the stories, God even breathed God’s own breathe into us humans. In principle, our connection with God is that close and that intimate.
- In creating us humans, God gave our lives both purpose and ultimate meaning.

All of these are important religious truths which can be discerned from these two ancient creation stories. And, it is religious truths such as these which make a great difference to our lives today.

In conclusion: let science be science, and religion be religion. For as people of faith who live in the 21st century, we very much need the special truths which both of these ways of knowing can provide us. I thank you, John Scopes.

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Endnote

1. Ralph Washington Sockman, *Now to Live!* Abingdon-Cokesbury Press, 1946.