

What Genesis doesn't say: Rethinking the creation story

by [Conor Cunningham](#) in the [November 16, 2010](#) issue



Many people believe that according to the Bible, there has been a cosmic Fall as a result of the sin of the first humans, and death was a consequence of this supposed Fall. Many such approaches to scripture are lamentably lacking in theological

sophistication. In certain respects, some of the approaches recommended by no doubt sincere religious believers are more consonant with atheism than with the orthodox Christian tradition of scriptural interpretation.

In light of the understanding of scripture offered in the first five centuries by the saints and fathers of the church—not to mention later figures such as the Victorines and St. Thomas Aquinas—Christians were never medieval in their approach to scripture. If anything, it is our common contemporary approach to scripture that is medieval, in the pejorative sense of the term. For example, despite the very best of intentions, the advent and rise of creationism and its understanding of the Bible represent a lapse into intellectual barbarism, a complete abandonment of the Christian tradition.

The approach to scripture and to theology offered by modern ultra-Darwinists demonstrates the real dark ages. In a recent television documentary, the atheist writer Richard Dawkins rightly lambasted all forms of New Age nonsense, but he seemed to overlook a surprising ally: "At the very moment when the Magi, guided by a star, adored Christ the new king, astrology came to an end, because the stars were now moving in the orbit determined by Christ. This science, in fact, overturns the worldview of that time, which in a different way has become fashionable once again today." So says Pope Benedict XVI.

If such contemporary approaches are misguided, how ought we to interpret the book of Genesis? Let us take as one example the existence of Adam. St. Paul interprets this figure to be a type of the one to come (Rom. 5:14). We must avoid a temptation here: despite our predilection for thinking of time in strictly linear terms, we should think of the type as having reality only in that of which it is a type. We understand Adam only in virtue of the one true Adam, or, to put it more strongly, the only Adam. Thus all talk of whether Adam was historically real (which atheists such as Dawkins deny and creationists affirm) rests on atheistic presumptions. As it happens, these presuppositions are also profoundly fundamentalist (an antidote to this might be to require both ultra-Darwinists and creationists to read the Song of Songs literally).

Adam, the idea of a Fall and so on can be revealed only in Christ if we are to remain faithful to the church fathers. It is folly to interpret the Fall or the existence of Adam in either positivistic or strictly historical terms, since there is no Fall before Christ. That is to say, there was but a glimmer of its occurrence, and this glimmer was only about Christ and not about some historical event of the same genus as the Battle of

Trafalgar. Moreover, before Christ there was neither death nor life nor even sin. For all such concepts find their truth only in the passion of the Christ, and for one very simple reason: creation is about Christ and nothing else. Jesus, as the Word of God, is the metaphysical or ontological beginning and end (*telos*) of all that exists. This is not some wishy-washy religious nonsense but is, on the contrary, perfectly logical.

We should therefore bear in mind that, for theology, protology leads to eschatology. So, for example, according to the church fathers, Adam was Christ and Eve was Mary, while paradise is the church, and the Fall signals humankind's redemption in Christ. Indeed, without Christ there would be no need of redemption—so the Fall would not make any sense. Thus the Fall is never a stand-alone item and makes no sense on its own. As Jaroslav Pelikan points out, in the second century it was the Gnostics and not the Christian fathers who posited a doctrine of original sin.

So it is misleading to speak of a doctrine of original sin as espoused by church fathers such as Irenaeus. By the third century original sin was not part of Christian faith except in a very vague, qualified manner. Irenaeus did not think what we term the Fall to have been cosmic in nature. For him Adam's fall was a matter of transgression or disobedience that arose out of his childish, immature nature. "But the man was a little one, and his discretion still undeveloped, wherefore also he was easily misled by the deceiver."

Moreover, for Irenaeus, paradise was not to be placed in the past as something we humans had lost, but rather in the future—that is, paradise is eschatological, as it suggests life in its fullness, a fullness that comes only through union in Christ. For Irenaeus, Adam's transgression did not cause him to forfeit his *imago Dei*—i.e., his rational powers and, much more important, his body. But Adam did lose his likeness (*similitudo*) with God, a similitude that signaled a spiritual similarity with God. This likeness could be regained through what can only be termed a religious conversion. For Irenaeus, human history did not involve some sort of vertical fall from which humankind was ever at pains to lift itself. Rather history denotes a providential progress toward a future that is full of promise. According to Christianity, creation is not finished but ever *in statu viae*—on the way. Creation is thus a matter of *akolouthia*, a gradual unfolding of God's purpose. This recalls Irenaeus's famous doctrine of recapitulation, according to which Christ consummates the entire history of the human race in himself.

If the first two chapters of Genesis are about the very creation of existence and all that partakes of it, about how everything that is relates to its Creator, then a literal approach would do the scriptural account a great disservice. The literal would kill and not reveal, destroy and not disclose. The early Christian fathers were not alone in thinking this; Jewish thinkers of the same period, such as the philosopher Philo, were very much in agreement. It is true that Philo took the six days of creation as literal, but he did not think of them as temporal periods, for that would have been ridiculous. Moreover, if we were to adopt a crude form of literalism, manifold other absurdities would arise. As Philo says, "Far be it from man's reasoning to be victim of so great an impiety as to suppose God tills the soil and plants pleasantries." Likewise, according to Philo, it is foolish to think of paradise as a place; it is rather to be understood as a symbol for wisdom.

Similarly, Origen (185-254) says the Genesis account of creation "enshrines certain deeper truths than the mere historical narrative . . . and contains a spiritual meaning almost throughout, using the letter as a kind of veil to hide profound and mystical doctrines." Elsewhere Origen says, "For just as there [in the Law and the Prophets] it [the Word of God] was covered by the veil of flesh, so here with the veil of the letter, so that indeed the letter is seen as flesh, but the spiritual sense hiding within is perceived as divinity."

The point is that today we at times fail to understand what theology is, and thus what the church fathers took their task to be. We read Genesis as a discrete piece of history and then later read the Gospels as further examples of such history. But this is wrongheaded at best and atheistic at worst. For if we read the texts in this way, we end up generating problems that did not exist for the fathers: falsely identifying what we take to be separate events, such as creation, Fall and redemption.

We appear to labor under the illusion that if the clock stopped, as it were, between any of these three discrete events, they would make sense on their own. We wrongly assume they have an intelligibility that stands alone, on its own terms. But nothing could be more misleading and therefore more damaging.

Take the seemingly commonplace understanding of original sin: original sin does not exist, at least when taken on its own. So we should not be surprised (although unfortunately we probably are) to read that "the traditional doctrine of original sin is not to be found in Genesis" (Bruce Vawter, *On Genesis: A New Reading*). Or again, "Neither in Paul nor in the rest of the Bible is there a doctrine of original guilt,

wherein all are proleptically guilty in Adam" (Peter C. Bouteneff, *Beginnings: Ancient Christian Readings of the Biblical Creation Narratives*). No doubt certain biblical translations have encouraged this view of sin, but according to the Greek, the text of St. Paul's epistle to the Romans actually states: "Death came to all insofar as all sinned" (Rom. 5:12). After all, only one man did not sin, and he rose from the dead.

We frequently miss the fact that Genesis has nothing to say about the origin of evil. As Walter Brueggemann argues in his commentary on Genesis, "Frequently, this text is treated as though it were an explanation of how evil came into the world. But the Old Testament is never interested in such an abstract issue. In fact, the narrative gives no explanation for evil." There are good reasons for this, not least of which is that for the church fathers (especially in the East) there is no disjunction between creation and redemption.

Analogously, any schism between nature and grace is the destruction of grace rather than its preservation, for it spiritualizes grace, making it religious and thus inherently atheistic. As Alexander Schmemmann says,

According to its conception, it [the world] is all sacred, not profane, for its essence lies in the divine very good of Genesis. The sin of man consists in the fact that he darkened the very good in his very being and as such has torn the world away from God, made it an end in itself, and therefore a fall and a death. But God has saved the world. He saved it in that he again revealed its goal: the kingdom of God.

Think of it this way: we do not consider baptism in isolation from communion, nor from any of the other sacraments, for to do so would render them unintelligible. Similarly, we should not isolate creation from incarnation, for if it is true to say (as do both Gregory of Nyssa and Maximus the Confessor) that incarnation and redemption are no less part of God's purpose than creation, then the created order has an eschatological dimension from the very beginning. Therefore, the incarnation is not the consequence of or a reaction to the Fall, but was always God's intention.

The first few verses of Genesis are characterized by the refrain "And God said," which we can take to signal the freedom involved in creation, for no intermediary mechanism is posited: "God says," and that is sufficient. But God does not, it seems, hold God's power jealously, like an occasionalist deity might. In verse 12 God delegates what has been his defining activity up to this point: the earth brought

forth vegetation (1:12). Here, for the first time, God hands over (*tradit*) his creative power, encouraging the land to produce on its own. As Bonhoeffer says, "God gives to God's work that which makes God Lord, namely the ability to create."

This ability is accentuated by the command in verse 22 to be fruitful and multiply, for humankind was now to bring forth life. A striking change of language occurs at verse 26. Until that point the phrase "Let there be" is repeated, but at verse 26 it is personalized: "Let us make mankind in our image, according to our likeness." The divine fiat becomes a divine *faciamus*.

Moreover, at each stage of creation God declares it to be good, but with the advent of humankind, creation is seen to be *very* good. When God says, "Let us make," the plural pronoun suggests that God deliberates, thus implying a more precise and intentional approach—to the extent that the creative word is not simply the issuance of a divine decree, but the result of a more deliberate involvement. As Origen writes, "Only these creatures [man and woman], to the exclusion of all the others, are designated as the personal work of God."

Coupled with the language of "In the beginning," humankind's creation is an undeniably radical innovation in what we might term the genre of creation myths. As Bill Arnold points out in his commentary on Genesis, "Ancient religion was polytheistic, mythological, and anthropomorphic, describing the gods in human forms and functions, while Genesis 1 is monotheistic, scornful of mythology, and engages in anthropomorphism only as figures of speech."

Following the six days of creation comes a day of rest, the Sabbath, but this is not meant to signal that God is tired. It indicates that creation is a personal, deliberate act, more a work of art than a forced production or emanation from some impersonal power. The Sabbath therefore, constitutes the meaning of creation, for creation is meant to have rest; it is to repose within divine purpose, a purpose that is free of necessity and is instead a matter of utter generosity.

The subsequent keeping of the Sabbath meant that humankind was freed from the whims of superstition and from the agon of the vicious cycles of both seasons and times (usually expressed in terms of deities); all such seasons were subjugated, for no matter what time of year, whether winter or summer, the Sabbath ruled the week, subordinating all, including the powers of the world and every utilitarian logic, to an order akin to the sheer play of a child.

As Arnold points out:

The seven-day structure together with the creation of a sourceless light in Genesis 1.3 has lifted Israel's sights above the ancient religions and their infatuation with the natural rhythms of time itself. The deities so frequently worshipped in antiquity responsible for the seasons of nature—sun, moon, and stars—have been transformed into mere lamps illuminating the creation at the command of the one and sovereign Creator. Like the first word uttered in the creation process, "Let there be light," this last word—a blessing of the Sabbath—pertains to time itself, and therefore speaks to the role of the Sabbath for the entire cosmos and not just for Israel.

This account is more than astonishing. Here creation occurs in a twofold sense. On one hand there is the advent of a physical world, but on the other, this world is one of freedom. Existence is meaningful—it is, in a word, a gift. And it is the only true gift, inasmuch as it constitutes the very possibility of every subsequent gift.

If we are to acknowledge creation—to think of this universe, and humankind along with it, as actually existing—the only way to do this is as Genesis does. For all other understandings of creation would render existence a mere shadow. If the deity were anything other than personal, creation would be but a suburb of that deity's own nature. In short, creation would not be real; but more than that, the deity would not really be God. And if existence is not the fruit of divine generosity, then we would be forced to conclude that we do not exist at all, that there is no such thing as existence.

There is no way around this: either a personal God or the abyss of nihilism. We are therefore a people, a species, of the Sabbath, because whether we believe in God or not, we manifestly refuse nihilism in our daily lives (even if we fashionably espouse it). Thus we can understand that the very edge of existence begins, ends and permeates every week; in so doing life takes on ultimate meaning. It is from here that we speak of sin, crime and atrocity; likewise, of joy, truth, beauty and hope. Without the Sabbath, without the personal deity revealed in Genesis two and a half millennia ago, all such notions are but vibrations on the cold immovable stone of utter silence—one so great and all-encompassing that it straddles what we parochially call sound and its absence: nothing is said, nothing happens, not even its absence.

This article is adapted from Conor Cunningham's book Darwin's Pious Idea, just published by Eerdmans.