



Arie Leegwater

# A Hard Lesson: Interpretation, Genomic Data, and the Scriptures

On a late April 2010 visit to the Smithsonian National Museum of Natural History in Washington, DC, I viewed a diversity of exhibits, particularly those in the David H. Koch Hall of Human Origins. To move from panel to panel describing and detailing the evolution of humans from primate forebears to modern humans, one is taken on a journey of over seven million years. This mind-boggling experience, coupled with a recent *Science* issue (328 [7 May 2010]: 710–22) detailing the mapping of the Neanderthal genome and its genomic heritage in modern humans, and reading this issue of *PSCF*, devoted to the historicity of Adam and Eve, genomics, and evolutionary science, challenged some of my long-cherished positions. Such encounters call for a serious examination and reconsideration of certain crucial matters.

Speaking personally, it was a hard lesson to digest, as I suspect it may be for many readers of *PSCF*. What should we make of all the diverse anthropological evidence collected from several continents as well as the recently acquired detailed genomic data? Should we sweep it under the rug, considering it to be the result of a shameful misguided investigation, since it assumes a view that calls into question the “plain straightforward reading of Scripture”? Or should we dispute the science and suggest the data is open to multiple concordist interpretations? Neither of these positions would be fair to the nature of scientific practice. “Science in God’s world has its own proper task of giving joy, its own peculiar ministry of healing, its own God-given gift of serving up nuanced insight for one’s neighbor” (Calvin Seerveld). Nor would either position honor the role of hermeneutics in interpreting biblical literature.

Parenthetically, as an editor, I have often hoped that I could keep these matters at a studied distance, because, in my opinion, there are many other

pressing and important issues which the Christian community needs to address and which, due to the ferocity of the debates, frequently become emasculated. And secondly, and for perhaps far too long, a discussion of origins has functioned (for many) as the self-identity or touchstone of our affiliation.

But, back to the matter at hand. If we accept the long-drawn-out saga of the evolution of living forms in creation, how must we then understand ourselves? Where and how do we humans “fit” in this development? That question is often the dominant theme in our discussions. As someone has perceptively remarked, “It is not the ‘fourth day,’ but rather the ‘sixth day’ that is in question.” To hold that the center and meaning of our life lies outside ourselves may be a posture that many persons and different religions share. But to honor this position as a Christian confession takes one on an eccentric and peculiar journey. In his *Institutes*, Calvin raised the classic question of human self-understanding, the question of how humans can know themselves. The answer that Calvin gives points us away from our desire to first examine ourselves: “Again it is certain that man never achieves a clear knowledge of himself unless he has first looked upon God’s face, and then descends from contemplating him to scrutinize himself” (I.i.12). We, as humans, are essentially God-related creatures (*Homo religionis*).

While recognizing our human condition, we also need to tread carefully. The intense debates often assume the stage is set by posing “hard scientific data” to be in tension with our (systematic) theologies. In simple terms, the scene is portrayed as a battle between believing science and believing Scripture. Should science be interpreted by Scripture or Scripture by science? We desire simple satisfying answers. To a large extent, however, we have simplified the issues. Putting the matter in

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this way, I think, will cause us to lose sight of the integrity of both the Bible and of science. If the reliability of the Bible as the Word of God is wedded to its scientific reliability, the “scientific” battles for an infallible Word of God have been lost from the start. We have then placed both on the same (scientific) level, and in the process, we will lose the reliability of the Scriptures. The Scriptures are not written as a historical research report, nor do they give a scientific account. Rather, they are a testimony of faith, albeit in the form of God-inspired literature. The Bible is part of creation which bears witness to the Word of God who was present at Creation. The Bible points us to Christ. The Bible is not divine. The Holy Scripture in its entirety is revelation, but it is not the whole of revelation. Reducing the Word of God to the Scriptures can be a form of bibliolatry. The revelatory Word of God for creation speaks to its reliability and trustworthiness.

Stating it differently, the Bible speaks in pre-scientific language and pictures. It employs the language of the day, reflecting the world-picture of the original audience. The language of the Bible is accommodated to the cosmological and historical awareness of the day. In our eyes, these cosmological world-pictures may seem hopelessly scientifically naive, but the Word and Spirit are able—the church confesses—to penetrate our hearts, regardless of our local customs and situations, or of the world-pictures we hold.

In addition, we often discount the philosophical and historical contexts that undergird many of our procedures of interpretation. We live in a westernized rationalist culture which probably reached its zenith in the Enlightenment, but is still clearly regnant in the practice of the natural sciences and the theological sciences. This historical context has shaped our view of the Bible and its interpretation: we like (or deem it necessary) to compare the scientific propositions of science with the propositional revelation (teachings) of Scripture. In an effort to counteract the rational infallibility of scientific propositions, Christians respond with the rational infallibility of revealed propositions. Consequently, employing the term “inerrancy” to describe the character of the Scriptures seems inherently tied to a rationalistic and positivistic position and plays into the hands of higher criticism. Our intellectual instincts tend to treat faith as basically an intellectual matter. But faith is much richer in its purview.

“Faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen” (Heb. 11:1, RSV). Faith has to do with promises and expectations, with the certainty of our identity as God-related creatures.

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## In This Issue

As mentioned in the editorial, this special theme issue of *PSCF*, increased to eighty-eight pages, is devoted to a discussion of the historicity of Adam and Eve, genomics, and theological reflection in the light of evolutionary science. I owe a debt of gratitude to Walter Bradley (Baylor University) who organized a symposium on these topics at the 64<sup>th</sup> ASA Annual Meeting held at Baylor University in 2009. The authors of the four main articles have greatly refined their lectures since they were first delivered. I consider it important to publish this quartet in the same issue of *PSCF*. The articles are written by three theologians, C. John (Jack) Collins (Covenant Theological Seminar), Daniel Harlow (Calvin College), and John Schneider (Calvin College); and a geneticist, Dennis Venema (Trinity Western University). The issues discussed are of perennial interest to the evangelical community. The reader will encounter a number of diverging and challenging views. As is to be expected, this dialogue is conducted with Christian civility and sensitivity.

This issue concludes with an essay book review written by Michael Keas (College at Southwestern). It is a comparative evaluation of two recent books authored by Jack Collins and William Dembski; both were speakers at the ASA meeting at Baylor. Several book reviews and letters complete the issue.

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