Updating Human Origins

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In 2016 I proposed an “evolutionary” model of human creation and the Fall based on a divinely directed “explosive” growth of social cognition and “hypersocial” behavior in coastal South Africa. But science never stands still, and a variety of more recent studies raise questions for the model. This article reviews some of that new data, and evaluates their implications. These challenges include (1) increased evidence of multiple gene flows between archaic hominines and the Homo sapiens lineage; (2) skeletal evidence that cerebral modernization occurred over 400,000 years in Africa within species Homo sapiens; (3) paleoarcheological evidence of gradually increasing technical and social complexity over the same period; and (4) indications that those advances were dispersed and Pan African. In light of these evidences, is a localized transforming event still possible? I suggest here that it is.

A contrast is often drawn between the “timeless truths” of theology and the “changing theories” of science. In one sense, such a distinction may seem to have some justification. Biblical theology is intended to be founded on a stable, static database—the scriptures—whereas scientific theorizing seeks to explain a changing, ever-growing mass of physical data. But reality is more complex than that. Science does not invent data, it discovers them. And biblical theologies obviously can and do draw quite different doctrinal formulations from the same scriptural “data.” In the same way, scientific disciplines also frequently propose quite different theories to explain the same data. As humans, our world views, shaping principles, and paradigms necessarily enter in as we form models of reality (for even scientists and theologians are human).

As Christians, we frequently argue that we must allow our theological understandings to inform our scientific paradigms; this makes sense if God is the source of both the Word and the world. When theology and science are both forming explanatory models of some of the same things, such as the nature of humanity, integrating these quests may leave honest thinkers feeling as if they are wrestling with an angel. What makes it more difficult is that the collection of data by science never stops. And since all theories are human models of reality, when God’s reality clips you over the ear with new data, you have to rethink. That duty applies to both the scientist and the theologian.

Few areas of study are more fraught with important implications for both theology and science than human origins. A number of important research results have been published during the last two or three years bearing on that subject, potentially calling for alterations in integrative models. These data involve, Variously, multiple genetic studies, improved site dating, new skeletal and cultural finds, and new analyses of old data. Here I intend, first, to outline some of the new genetic data and tie it into a coherent pattern. Then I will examine how nongenetic data fit into that pattern. Finally, I will...
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