

Animadversions on “Human Evolution in Theological Context”

Jon Garvey

Use of Scripture

George Murphy’s scholarly essay, found on the Biologos website at http://biologos.org/uploads/projects/murphy_scholarly_essay.pdf, is actually quite hard to critique from Scripture, because of the selective use he makes of it. For example, he states that his theology of sin and the fall depend firmly on the theology of the cross. But it seems to this reader that he makes quite selective reference to this, basing his preferred “fiduciary influence” theory of atonement almost exclusively on the use of the concept of “reconciliation”, on the grounds that it is the most useful in this context. But he virtually passes over the other, often more common, New Testament descriptions of the work of the cross, such as ransom, propitiation, etc.

Indeed, in the essay he writes:

Atonement has been made—for the fundamental meaning of atonement is not ritual sacrifice, paying of a debt or serving a sentence but literally “at-one-ment,” reconciliation.

Despite his protestation that he is not dismissing other models of atonement, this would seem to state a direct preference for the reconciliation model. This in spite of the fact that, taking “atonement” strictly as opposed to its general use for “the work of the cross” its New Testament use, derived from the Hebrew “*kpr*” (“cover”) root, is “propitiation”, or perhaps “expiation” and not reconciliation at all. Expiation, of course, means “paying a penalty” and propitiation “averting the wrath of someone offended.” Both concepts, in the Old Testament and the New, are closely linked to the idea of ritual sacrifice. Both seem to sit very uneasily with the “evolutionary” view of sin’s origins that he takes.

Murphy states (in blog discussion) that his main passage for describing the origin of human sin is Romans 1, and yet he is not happy to endorse Romans’ later use of the direct comparison between a historical Adam’s one sin being the cause of the world’s sin and death opposed to Christ’s one act of obedience. Similarly, he is unwilling to accept a historical basis for a mythological Genesis 2-3, whilst drawing on the overall picture in Genesis 1-9 to affirm that sin gradually increased in the world. Yet the non-mythological theological statement in Ecclesiastes 7.29 that “God created man upright” is excluded in the same sentence as the views of non-Biblical theologians as untenable in the light of scientific knowledge (blog reply to me).

It is hard to see what criteria are being applied in the choice of what Scriptures are to be accepted. I’m sure it’s not simply that he accepts those passages that endorse his model. He does state:

I see the proper relation between science & theology - briefly - as follows: Theology may suggest promising scientific studies but science can be done without theological input. But for science to be theological [sic] useful it must be put in the context of revelation, & may then urge changes in theological formulations.

One can only assume that this principle is the one employed here, in which case the “changes in theological formulations” necessitated by science appear to include the

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simple rejection of parts of the sacred text, and not only the theology of Augustine or Calvin.

Murphy’s reasons for rejecting the classic view

In a blog reply, George Murphy states:

That approach keeps an historical Adam, descent from a single couple & a state of integrity with moral purity & freedom from disease & death (at least conditionally). That state couldn’t exist in the world as we know it to have been - a change in the laws of physics would have been required. But (usually implicitly & without reflection) part of the world - presumably Eden - was different & there such a state could exist until humans sinned. The 1st humans, though they evolved physically from earlier species, were transformed in body & mind to that state.

So for all intents & purposes “theological humans” _didn’t_ evolve &, moreover, the world in which they lived was not really our world. (It’s rather like the old idea that Gen.1 is about the creation of humans spiritually & Gen.2-3 about their “fall” into materiality.) Theology is walled off from evolution (& our scientific knowledge of the past generally) & Christians can continue as if they still lived in the 16th century.

Behind this idea that an historical Adam and Eve is incompatible with evolution is an extension, in Evangelical language, of the Enlightenment denial of miracles in a rational world:

In creation, where (to use an old image) God works with and through creatures as “instruments,” God limits that action and works within the capacities of creatures, in accord with what we call the laws of physics. God could display absolute power and “violate” those laws, but our experience shows us that if such events happen at all, they are extremely rare.

I should add that he makes an exception for the resurrection (and perhaps the miracles of Christ) on the grounds of his controlling idea in Christology – Christ as the New Creation. This, of course, is thoroughly orthodox, but his former statement, especially the ambiguous “if such events happen at all,” seem to cast doubt on all Old Testament miracles and, indeed, on all God’s direct actions prior to Christ.

What is novel in his approach is that he makes such “hiddenness” on God’s part essential to his character. “Truly, you are a God who hides himself (Isaiah 45.15)”. Whether this passage is justly used as a proof text beyond its context of God’s paradoxical raising up of pagan Cyrus to bless his own people Israel the reader must judge, but he goes further:

If the event of the cross is God’s self-revelation, we may expect it to be a clue to God’s general modus operandi in the world. The incarnation and passion of Christ are marked by the “emptying” (kenosis), or self-limitation, of Philippians 2:7.

I would dispute a couple of things here. Firstly, Philippians quite clearly contrasts the self-emptying of Christ in his incarnation with the glory he had from the beginning

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with the Father. It is an act of grace unique to the 2nd person of the Trinity, and to apply it generally to God’s action in the world has no valid warrant from the passage.

Secondly, if we are to take our model of God’s activity in the world from the incarnation, then we must also take account of the many outstanding miracles that the self-emptied Christ performed in the world. Logically, the Creator’s “kenosis” is no more or less compatible with such miraculous interventions than is that of Jesus.

Some Charismatics see miracles everywhere, and Young Earth Creationists are prone to introduce extra-Biblical miracles at any point where science contradicts their theology. But no orthodox theologian would deny that not only science, but everyday life, would be impossible were not God’s ordering of the Universe by natural law the norm.

Nevertheless, God’s irruption into such a Universe on occasions is the witness of the whole of Scripture. Indeed, it is its basis, because such events are closely united to the concept of Revelation.

Revelation and the Two-book Theory

Many formulations of the Two Book Theory of God bypass one of its important foundations.

In Christian theology, God is external to, and above, his Creation. He himself is not subject to the laws of physics, which is why unlike the Universe he is eternal, omniscient, omnipresent and so on. That is why he, and the whole spiritual realm, are not accessible to the tools of science. Any reliable information that we are to gain about God, therefore, must come from his own revelation of himself.

This is not so much a question of kenosis, but of the way things are – God can only be known by those in the natural world by supernatural self-disclosure. Revelation must, therefore, by definition, be supernatural. If God were to hide himself completely in his dealings with the world, then revelation is simply impossible. Or to put it the other way round, there cannot be such a thing as natural revelation. I will return to the question of such passages as Romans 1, or Psalm 19, which do not in fact deny this premise.

But first, I will look at the nature of revelation in Scripture, for though Murphy says very little about it in his essay:

...we need not feel required to determine whether God’s earliest revelation was to members of Homo sapiens or to those of one of our ancestral species...

his subsequent blogs seem to posit a rather vague revelation to early humans that their selfish acts, inherited via evolution, were in some way wrong, and even opposed to God, thus rendering them liable to disobedience and hence, to the first sin. Essential to this is that God could not have endowed them with original righteousness (contra Ecclesiastes 7, etc), and that his revelation was not strong enough to prevent sin being “inevitable” in the light of the strength of their inherited traits.

Remember, incidentally, that by what has been said above, even such a vague revelation must necessarily be “miraculous”, that is, divorced from natural law. Apart

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from man’s insight, there is no conscious knowledge of God in the world. Evolution proceeds on a-theistic principles (if we do not grant ID a valid place in science). It also proceeds entirely a-morally, which is key to Murphy’s case. The selfish acts produced by evolution are not “sin” for the flatworm or chimpanzee – they are merely genetically programmed behaviours. But they become sin in man because, firstly, he exercises some freedom of will and, secondly, because God in some way reveals them to be against his divine will. So to suggest that true knowledge of God, or of his moral requirements, could evolve through natural processes is incoherent. Supernatural revelation of some sort is a *sine qua non* for the origin of sin.

Survey of revelation in Scripture

Contrary to what one might think, revelation to individuals in Scripture is never vague, and is usually associated with profound changes in life and, frequently, with other supernatural endowments. I take the following examples at face value to show the Biblical theology of revelation, rather than to argue for the historical accuracy of the text.

Take the earliest non-Adamic man, Cain. Having murdered his brother, he had hidden the fact until God challenged him and exiled him to another land, consequently in the course of time to father a line of great technical innovators.

Enoch, by the faith engendered by his revelation walked with God and (as Hebrews reminds us) “did not experience death.”

Noah’s revelation had him foreseeing the Flood, building the ark, and surviving to repopulate the earth.

Abraham, whatever the nature of his call in Ur, was gifted with parenthood at an unnatural age, and was made wealthy and powerful even as a wanderer, as well as being privileged to participate in God’s judgement of the cities of the plain.

Jacob was changed through his experience of God from a delinquent to a Patriarch. He saw visions of heaven and, whatever it actually means, wrestled with God or his angel.

Joseph’s revelation saw him predicting the future, interpreting a king’s dreams and being given the ability and opportunity to run the land of Egypt (simultaneously preparing the ground for the reception of his family there).

Moses was given massive endowments – military and political leadership, oratory (despite his halting tongue), miraculous power over the pantheon of Egypt, miraculous power over nature and the ability to construct a law that is still followed today.

The Judges were given abilities to save the nation, superhuman strength, and so on.

David was granted, through his revelation, unparalleled military ability and his son, Solomon, unparalleled wisdom.

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The prophets were often called from birth to a life of faithful proclamation that sealed the fates of nations (as well as informing Christian theology today). Elijah, of course, is credited with a unique series of miracles, and like Enoch, to exemption from physical death.

One must also, of course, step outside the Bible to recall how the revelation of God to individuals like Augustine, Luther, Wesley, Wilberforce, Moody and millions of others – including all those of us who have found Christ – transformed not only their own lives but the lives of those around them.

As George Murphy rightly says, the paradigmatic revelation of God to us was in Christ. But because of the mystery of his dual nature, as well as bringing God’s character to us in Jesus, God also revealed himself *to* the man Jesus of Nazareth. Faith was as important to Jesus as it was to the other heroes of the Bible. But as I have said above, the revelation of God to Christ worked itself out in acts of power, wisdom, forgiveness and human love befitting the man on whom God bestowed the Spirit without measure. His calling led to the greatest miracle of all, the resurrection, from which all believers reap eternal benefit.

In conclusion, then, revelation in the Bible is never a vague, dark perception of God but a life-transforming event often accompanied by unusual endowments and events. This corresponds to revelation’s essential nature as a supernatural irruption of the uncreated God into the material world.

The revelation to the first humans

One reason for the greatness of the revelation of God to, and through, Christ is that, agreeably to Murphy’s emphasis, the Incarnation inaugurates an entire new creation. Through the resurrection Jesus introduces a new humanity whose eventual manifestation will, in turn, lead to a new heavens and a new earth.

This raises the question, however, of what we should expect of God’s *first* revelation of himself to mankind. Given what has been written above we cannot be theologically coherent if we see it as an emergent natural property of evolving hominids. Neither can we really envisage it as being any less in greatness than the examples from Scripture which, in crude terms, are associated with the mere maintenance of God’s creation in preparation for Christ.

If anything, we would expect it to match most closely, though in lesser glory, the revelation of the new creation in Christ. After all, what is being introduced is the transformation of the world from one that is purely natural and material to one where God is worshipped for who he is, and dwells in fellowship with rational creatures.

Taking John H Walton’s interpretation of Genesis 1 as a starting point, we could also see it as the process whereby God consecrates the whole world as the temple in which he dwells, with mankind formed in his image to subdue it to him and serve him. In Biblical, functional, terms then the first revelation of God to man is the last act of the first creation, designating the role of the pinnacle of his work and heralding the sabbath rest where God occupies, and reigns, within his temple.

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It is therefore necessary to examine what constituted this first revelation. Being a revelation, it is not susceptible to scientific examination, but only to revelation itself. However, one would not expect Scripture to be silent on such a key event in both human and divine history – and of course, it is not.

Although Genesis 1 and 2 are separate stories, in the context of the book they reflect the same events from different viewpoints. This unity is confirmed in the resumé in 5.1-2 and in the chapter 1 imagery of the birth of Seth in v3.

1. The first thing we read about man, after the implication of his basic animality from his creation on Day 6 in ch1, is that he (male and female) was created “in the image of God.” Though endless argument has occurred about what constitutes this image, it is clearly a unique and distinctly human attribute, rather than an emergent biological property. One cannot imagine that *H. sapiens* is “in the image of God”, a chimpanzee “not in the image of God” and *H. erectus* partly in the image of God.

In fact, recent work suggests that we should rather be looking at the term “image” in ANE terms, man being created not “in” but “as” the image of God. ANE gods were held to inhabit the authorised temple-image in the form of some kind of divine essence. Once consecrated by the correct rites, the image functioned as the god for the purposes of worship, prayer, sacrifice etc. Feeding the image was feeding the god.

If Genesis 1 is seen as a temple-consecration text, then unlike the surrounding deities, Yahweh had the whole cosmos as his temple, and instead of men being mere servants to keep the gods fed, man himself was the image through which the world would relate to him. This explains the reverence for human life seen in the story of Cain and Abel, and even more markedly in the accountability for human bloodshed, even for animals, in the Noahic covenant.

To make a valid correspondence to the ANE parallels, man as image did not have merely to resemble Yahweh in some way, such as reason, morality or spiritual sensibility, much less physical form. But he had, in some way, to be indwelt by God. This aspect seems to be echoed in chapter 2 by the fact that whilst Adam, like the animals, is created from dust, yet unlike them Yahweh breathes his breath into his nostrils. Again, this imagery precludes the idea that this “imageness” could be an emergent evolutionary attribute. One can be not indwelt, or indwelt – but there is no halfway stage of partly-indwelt.

What qualities such an indwelling would give (in the absence, at that point, of conscious sin) remain to be determined. Since the onset of sin we remain human, and are still “the image of God”, tarnished though that image is. The closest parallel, maybe, is the indwelling of Christians by the Holy Spirit which, whatever our theological tradition, we expect to be accompanied by profound effects on our relationship with God, our behaviour, and even our knowledge. We would expect that some such qualities would accompany the “breath of God.”

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2. The second thing of note in Genesis is the unique command to “Fill the earth and subdue it,” to “rule over the fish of the sea and the birds of the air and over every living creature that moves on the ground.” It is to be assumed that this rule is on God’s behalf, effectively as his priests: domination is not a result of sin, but of God’s revelation. This rule is reflected in ch2 by Adam’s naming of the animals which, of course, implies in Hebrew thought knowledge of, and authority over, them.

It should not need pointing out that, like God’s image, the concept of rule is entirely absent from the world of nature. Mere survival is the dictum. We may see a lion as a top-level predator, or even as king of the beasts, but no such concept occurs to the lion, or to his prey. Neither is rule inherent in mere rationality – certainly not the concept of ruling the world. The fact that man is both exploitative and conserving of the world now does not follow from evolution. It may indicate that man was providentially endowed with such unnatural ambitions, but only really makes sense as the remains of the original revelation, and vocation, God gave to our race.

So whatever communication we suppose man to have received about the immorality of inborn selfish behaviours, we can say that it was accompanied by an equal knowledge of God’s commission to rule the world on his behalf. This in itself would be a strong disincentive to giving way to temptation. When I was a physician, the responsibility of the role I held ensured that I avoided certain “unprofessional” behaviours over an entire career. Were God personally to make me ruler of the world that situation would be magnified.

3. Moving on to chapter 3, the specific provision of the garden within the land of Eden, as Adam’s dwelling place, speaks of another aspect of revelation. Criticising views of a literal Adam, George Murphy writes in a blog:

But (usually implicitly & without reflection) part of the world - presumably Eden - was different & there such a state could exist until humans sinned.

Nevertheless, a distinct garden separated from the world exists in the story, and we need to consider its significance. As has been pointed out frequently, Genesis 2 is another kind of temple inauguration text, only unlike ch1 it is painted on a restricted geographical canvas. The garden, in which God walks and talks with man, and in which man tends God’s plants, can only represent a temple precinct (the temple gardens of Old Mesopotamia being a close parallel). As such the garden represents worship, service and communion in the presence of God. The theological point is that the first man dwelt in close communion with Yahweh – that God had revealed himself in a very personal and powerful way.

Once more, such communion places the possibility of disobedience on a completely different footing from the picture of early men driven by instincts and vaguely aware of the existence of a God who might disapprove.

4. The presence of the tree of life in the garden, and the lack of any prohibition in its use, is striking. When, after the fall, mankind was excluded from the tree it

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was because in eating it they would “live for ever.” Since eternal life is the big promise of the Christian hope, such a provision to our ancestors cannot be glossed over.

In the context of George Murphy’s study, there is no point in arguing over whether such life was physical or spiritual, or whether it included freedom from disease. Sound theologians down the ages have felt free to suggest that Adam would have died physically even had he not sinned, but that he would in some way have lived on. But Murphy states simply that “freedom from death”, being incompatible with the universe’s natural laws, was impossible for early man. On the other hand Genesis, in whichever sense it is understood, replies that it was indeed part of God’s endowment. Bearing in mind that Christians are said to have eternal life now, and yet expect, barring the coming of Christ, to die physically, a flat denial of our ancestors’ freedom from death in some form seems overconfident.

One helpful idea is that the garden represents the presence of the God who preserves life (or in whose presence there can only be life), whereas the exclusion into the natural world of Eden and beyond in ch 3 represents alienation from that God and its inevitable consequence, death. However we see the relationship of this passage to physical and/or spiritual death, it is clear that the close relationship which our ancestors had with God was combined with knowledge of – and knowledge that they had access to – eternal life.

5. We come now to the prohibition God put on eating of “the tree of the knowledge of good and evil.” Taken as it stands, this suggests that, at first, man did not have any moral sense. This would accord well with a biological view of man as an advanced hominid. So Murphy’s idea that man was subject to the kinds of genetically-determined behaviours that we see in the great apes is quite plausible. What is by no means so clear, from the endowments of God’s revelation detailed above, is that such a privileged being had, in effect, little power to resist these behaviours. That is an assumption on purely biological principles applied to a situation which, as I have shown, was far from purely biological.

Be that as it may, at this point in Genesis 2, any such behaviour would not have had the character of sin, for moral awareness seems not to have been part of the revelation of God. As Paul helpfully points out in Romans 5, “sin is not imputed where there is no law.” Morally, they were innocent of any “animal” behaviours they might still have been exhibiting.

What *was* part of the revelation was a prohibition against one particular, apparently arbitrary act, with no obvious link to “inbuilt” selfish behaviours. Its only notable characteristic was being forbidden by the God with whom they had close communion and from whom they had received great privileges.

Built into this act of disobedience, as the very name of the tree showed and as experience proved, was knowledge of good and evil. Not only did they see they had offended God, but they saw they were naked. Ink has been spilt about the significance of this in a Hebrew society with a taboo on nakedness, but at

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the very least it is symbolic that they found in themselves, to their surprise, unexpected evil and were ashamed.

Maybe they just felt shame for their disobedience. Maybe they saw their previous “selfish” animal behaviours for the first time with God’s eyes. But it was not that genetic inheritance which was responsible for their disobedience to the single “law” given them, but the same spiritual pride which, we must assume, was responsible for the sin of fallen angels who have no evolutionary inheritance.

The result of this new knowledge was a mixture of curse and blessing. Apart from God’s judgement itself, the existence of conscience brought the sense of condemnation and shame that besets all men now and influences much of their behaviour, including finding means to quench its insistent message by adding evil to evil. Positively, conscience brings the shame that leads to repentance. It becomes the law to those who have not received God’s law, as Paul develops in Romans 2.

But despite its essential core of being God’s judgement for disobedience it is, like eternal life, part of God’s spiritual provision and not the result of evolution. Conscience is unknown in the animal world, just as morality is. But far from being a cause of sin (as in George Murphy’s model, where developing knowledge that existing behaviour has moral connotations gives way inevitably to conscious sin) moral conscience is the *result* of the first sin, which was pure disobedience to God.

None of this addresses the question of what would have happened had Adam not sinned. In Murphy’s thesis, had they not sinned then, persistent temptation would have worn them down in the end. Sin was inevitable, all being subordinated to the greater revelation to come in the cross. But though the Bible is silent on what God might have had in mind to transform Adam’s role from being a gardener in a temple enclosure to being God’s viceroy over the whole earth, the picture it presents is of a test, not an endless ordeal. In the terms of Genesis, had Adam and Eve retained the spiritual order by rejecting the serpent’s arguments and accepting God’s sovereignty, it is hard to believe that God would not have shown them a better way to know right from wrong and to subdue their genetic inheritance. It is hard to read from the story that God wanted to cosset them in the garden for ever, when he had created them to subdue the whole earth.

Scripture suggests that the cross was in God’s mind from the start, and of course any theology that includes God foreknowledge must accept that, in that sense, sin was inevitable and the cross a glorious revelation of God’s ability to turn evil to good. But that is different from the suggestion that man was set up to fail, that he was condemned for sins directly resulting from a biological bias that, if it was not the result of mere chance, was the result of God’s providence through chance.

To summarise what the Bible teaches of God’s first revelation to man, then, it included (1) Some form of divine indwelling (*imago dei*) (2) The commission

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to rule the world (3) Close fellowship with God (4) Knowledge of and access to eternal life (5) A single prohibition linked to a penalty. To which may one may add (6) legal innocence from the non-provision of a sense of conscience and possibly also a positive divine influence.

All this makes for a much more heinous account of the lapse into sin than seems allowed for by Murphy’s model, and yet it also gives a view of man’s original state that makes more sense of the “return to Eden” imagery of many parts of the Bible. Nobody would seriously want to return to a state where man balanced precariously on the precipice of giving way to his powerful, genetically mediated, passions.

A word on natural revelation

It may appear to some that passages like Psalm 19, in which the heavens declare the glory of God, or especially Romans 1.18ff, in which God’s wrath against men is because the plain testimony of nature has been ignored, are evidence for natural revelation. In other words, no such revelation from God as I have outlined would be necessary for evolving man to become accountable for his moral failings or godlessness. Instead, reason alone ought to have sufficed to regulate early man’s behaviour.

This understanding would appeal to those who seek to minimise, or exclude, the supernatural in their account of man’s spiritual anthropology. But it actually ignores the obvious context of both passages, which is man fallen from communion with God.

It is a plain fact that God is not obvious in what he has made to any creature in the world – other than man himself. Nobody rails at their dog for sniffing fox-droppings during a sublime sunset. Pigeons may use the stars to navigate, but few other animals bother to look at them, let alone reflect on their proclamation of God’s glory. So the association of God with his creation cannot be the mere product of evolution. As people like Alister McGrath point out, even human reason alone is likely to come to agnostic conclusions about the existence of God.

But if our ancestors received spiritual revelation from God that included the knowledge of his role as Creator, then refusal to acknowledge it is shown to be the result of sin, rather than ignorance or intellectual diversity.

And the Romans passage suggests this is true. In v 21, it says that “Although they knew God, they neither glorified him nor gave thanks to him...” It does not say that nature enabled them to deduce there was such a God. It does not say that most people are taught about God in Sunday School. It says that “they knew him”.

Now clearly it would be false to say that all men know God today in the same way. But Paul’s mind is on the phrase, “since the beginning of the world”, which in his thinking means the world of Genesis 1 and 2, where the first of mankind were in intimate relationship with God. Paul is seeing Paul as paradigmatic of (or in the light of Romans 5 as fully representative of) the whole human race. And so “natural revelation” in such passages is seen as the reflection of an ancient spiritual revelation, represented in the first chapters of Genesis.

[The Hump of the Camel](#)