

The Bible, Science and Human Origins – from Science and Christian Belief, October 2016

It is risky trying to compress a multi-author scientific paper into a few lines of summary. There is a special risk when the scientists are very careful to treat with respect their Bible literalist “opponents”, rather than adopt the easy simplistic approach which perhaps a majority of the population would support – namely that “in an argument between modern science and ancient fairy tale, science simply has to win”. These scientists are disposed to be modest in presenting what science does say and can say on human origins and on the specialness of humanity.

Some of us suspect that those who thought up the Genesis story of human origins, who told it, recorded it, and edited it, would be quite un-phased by what a good modern scientific text book says on human origins. That guess about what sensible “pre-scientific” folk would make of science is partly coloured by the reality that, centuries later, 19th Century Bible readers and 19th Century scientists were not all at each others’ throats over “Darwin”. Indeed they were often the same people.

That there has been and is a clash between “science” and “religion” on the issue of human origins depends, in its extreme form, on a series of assumptions which would be rejected by many people who love their Bibles and many people who love their science, as well as by the very many who love both. Such assumptions include: *The Bible narrative is Divine revelation not human seeking to understand. Most Bible stories are literally true, not just figuratively true. If any “knowledge” is not scientific knowledge, it is ignorance rather than knowledge. The “natural world” doesn’t require any explanation beyond what lies within the natural world. If there any external factor, it is now over 18 billion years distant, and of no great importance to Mr and Mrs Smith in 2017. If science rules, God doesn’t. The existence of a special relationship between God and human beings depends not just on God being unique, but on human beings being unique. God being Creator rules out things (and people) evolving to reach what they are now.*

There is sometimes a modern arrogance that all this is something new: that our religious predecessors just got on with believing everything that their Scriptures told them, untroubled by devil-inspired new (and therefore phoney) knowledge. So let’s just note that there were Jewish scholars at the time of Jesus who regarded the Genesis story as important theology, but not as historical fact. Read the article to explore further.