

Genesis 2:4-17

Man in the Garden

As the Creator surveyed His progress at the end of the sixth day of creation, “God saw all that He had made, and behold, it was very good” (v. 31). His glory, His design, His plan, His purposes were all manifest in the works of His hand. Creation was intended to bring glory to the Creator and manifest His being to all humankind, and as such it serves as the beginning of all general revelation, “for since the creation of the world His invisible attributes, His eternal power and divine nature, have been clearly seen, being understood through what has been made, so that they are without excuse” (Romans 1:20).

By way of review, let us again recount the creation of man. This was the climax of the creative week. This was why everything else had been created. God held counsel with Himself, in the perfection of the trinity, and resolved to “make man in Our image, according to Our likeness; and let them rule over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the sky and over the cattle and over all the earth, and over every creeping thing that creeps on the earth” (v. 26). Scripture declares that man, *ādām*, was created “male and female” (v. 27). These Hebrew words, *zākār* (male) and *neqēbā* (female) particularly express sexuality and sexual distinction. There simply is no biblical argument for a non-binary understanding of human sexuality as created by God. The appropriate use of sexuality is fundamental to God’s intention for humanity, as is seen in the blessing and command given to man at his creation.

Man was inaugurated by receiving both a blessing and a command at his creation. “God blessed them; and God said to them, “be fruitful and multiply, and fill the earth, and subdue it; and rule over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the sky and over every living thing that moves on the earth” (v. 28). Note that God spoke directly to His creation. This implies not only a superior position to the rest of creation, but is representative of what is meant by the “image of God” which we will discuss later. Man was to procreate and fill the earth which had been created for him. As he did so, man was to be the caretaker of that earth, and manage the estate to the satisfaction of his Creator.

Man was to be a caretaker of his Creator’s handiwork. *Kibbesh* means subdue, to conquer or subjugate, and *radah* means to rule, yet the context is that this was to be performed in the interests of the Creator, not for man’s own personal desires. That man could act as regent, and need not concern himself with his own agenda, was insured because God had provided all that he would need. God informed Adam that “²⁹I have given you every plant yielding seed that is on the surface of all the earth, and every tree which has fruit yielding seed; it shall be food for you; ³⁰and to every beast of the earth and to every bird of the sky and to everything that moves on the earth which has life, I have given every green plant for food”; and it was so” (v. 29-30). There was no competition for survival. Man had all he would ever need. He had only to concentrate on serving His Creator.

Imago Dei

One of the more beguiling phrases in the passage is the phrase “image of God.” These words have been disputed since the days of the early Church. Beginning with Irenaeus in the late second century, the meaning of ‘image’ and ‘likeness’ have involved discussions of the Trinity, sin, and humanity. The controversy continued throughout the Middle Ages and into the age of the Reformers. Even in the

twentieth century, theologians have continued to dispute the meaning of the terms and their implications for the relationship between God and man.

Without getting too far drawn into the debate, we can say that the words ‘image’ and ‘likeness’ are used interchangeably, both here and in Genesis 5:3. In each case, the terms denote physical representation, such as there might be between a carved image and the model used by the artist. This is not to suggest that Scripture teaches that God is human, or even that God has a physical form. As Ezekiel described his vision, “now above the expanse that was over their heads there was something resembling a throne, like lapis lazuli in appearance; and on that which resembled a throne, high up, was a figure with the appearance of a man” (Ezekiel 1:16). To appear as a man is simply the best way humans can describe God; there is no expectation that that is a literal description.

The image of God conveys many things, not least of which is that humankind were the climax of God's creation. However, the best case to be made for the implications of “image of God” have to do with the ideas of rulership and sonship. For rulership, the context of Genesis 1:26-28 describes the creation of humankind to serve as God's representatives on earth. Man was intended to be God's viceroy, an understanding very common in the ancient Near East where rulers required governors, satraps, and others to rule vast empires in their stead. This seems to be emphasized by the psalmist when he wrote,

³When I consider Your heavens, the work of Your fingers,
The moon and the stars, which You have ordained;
⁴What is man that You take thought of him,
And the son of man that You care for him?
⁵Yet You have made him a little lower than God,
And You crown him with glory and majesty!
⁶You make him to rule over the works of Your hands;
You have put all things under his feet,
⁷All sheep and oxen,
And also the beasts of the field,
⁸The birds of the heavens and the fish of the sea,
Whatever passes through the paths of the seas.” (Psalm 8:3-8).

Parallel with this concept of rulership, is the idea of sonship. The other passage where these words are used is in Genesis 5, which shows that this “image of God” was perpetuated by Adam's descendants,

¹This is the book of the generations of Adam. In the day when God created man, He made him in the likeness of God. ²He created them male and female, and He blessed them and named them Man in the day when they were created. ³When Adam had lived one hundred and thirty years, he became the father of a son in his own likeness, according to his image, and named him Seth” (Genesis 5:1-3).

The same argument can be inferred from the genealogy given by Luke where he traced Jesus' ancestry to “the son of Enosh, the son of Seth, the son of Adam, the son of God” (Luke 3:38). We are then created in the “image of God,” and this implies both that we are to be stewards of creation, and also to share in the

inheritance of the Creator. It is, then, the “image of God” that allows us to anticipate eternity with our Heavenly Father.

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In verse 4, the author uses for the first time the *tōlēdōt* formula, “this is the account of . . .” (v. 4). It will appear with regularity in the passage to come. For this particular section, however, the author’s point is to draw our attention to the account of man in the garden, specifically before sin entered the world. Man had been created to oversee the creation, specifically by tending the vegetation. Thus the author’s description that “no shrub of the field was yet in the earth, and no plant of the field had yet sprouted, for the Lord God had not sent rain upon the earth, and there was no man to cultivate the ground” (v. 5). That is not to say there were no plants, for they had already been created, and they were watered by “a mist [which] used to rise from the earth and water the whole surface of the ground” (v. 6). But the emphasis here is on man and agriculture, and so the plants referred to are those plants that man would farm. Since the climax of the entire passage will be the Fall and the resulting consequence of growing food only by work and difficulty, the vegetation referred to here is not that created on the third day.

The author is also more descriptive in accounting for the process by which Adam was created, writing that “the Lord God formed man of dust from the ground, and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life; and man became a living being” (v. 7). In Genesis 1:26, the word ‘made’ had been used. Here the author used ‘formed’ instead. The former has to do with assembling, the latter with perfecting. The ‘dust’ refers to the loose surface of the ground that dissolves in the rain or is blown away by the wind. Either description connoted the transience of existence of which Adam will be reminded after the Fall. The author also employs wordplay here, in that man, *ādām*, and ground, *ādāmah* are very similar. Finally, Adam (and the beasts) have the “breath of life” which distinguished them as living creatures. That is why eating plants was not considered bringing about death, as we might understand today from modern botany. This breathing into him involved the transmission of what is particular to God’s image and likeness.

Man must be given a place to live, so “the Lord God planted a garden toward the east, in Eden; and there He placed the man whom He had formed” (v. 8). That the garden was in Eden, suggests that Eden was known as a geographical place, of which the garden was only a part. Traditionally the garden was referred to as ‘paradise’ [*parādeiso* in the Greek] which is actually a word derived from the Persian that means park, or enclosed area. The Hebrew word, *ēden*, literally means “a place of abundant waters” as is indicated by the four rivers which flowed from it. That it was in the east is accounted for by the fact that at the time of the writing of Genesis, the Israelites were in Canaan and the Tigris and Euphrates rivers (the two rivers still identifiable after the flood) were to the east.

The rivers themselves are described in some detail.

“¹⁰Now a river flowed out of Eden to water the garden; and from there it divided and became four rivers. ¹¹The name of the first is Pishon; it flows around the whole land of Havilah, where there is gold. ¹²The gold of that land is good; the bdellium and the onyx stone are there. ¹³The name of the second river is Gihon; it flows around the whole land of Cush. ¹⁴The name of the third river is Tigris; it flows east of Assyria. And the fourth river is the Euphrates” (v. 10-14).

These rivers have no doubt, changed their course through the millennia. And we must not forget the geographical and environmental effects of the flood, so any desire to be the modern-day Indiana Jones to find the lost “Garden of Eden” is foolish. But clearly we can conclude that the garden was not only well watered and fertile, but also had rich mineral deposits for tools and other household items.

Within the garden, two trees are specifically mentioned. Not only did “the Lord God caused to grow every tree that is pleasing to the sight and good for food; [but also] the tree of life also in the midst of the garden, and the tree of the knowledge of good and evil” (v. 9). Both trees were in the center of the garden, perhaps they even stood together. That one was identified as the “tree of life” did not indicate that it produced life in and of itself, granting life is the prerogative of God alone, but may mean that the tree was the source of life in the garden. Looking at Genesis 3, the “tree of the knowledge of good and evil” seems to imply that the knowledge received was something beyond what man was intended to possess, some sort of divine wisdom, “then the Lord God said, ‘behold, the man has become like one of Us, knowing good and evil’” (Genesis 3:22).

With the garden ready, “the Lord God took the man and put him into the garden of Eden to cultivate it and keep it” (v. 15). Man was to work, he was not simply to lie about idle and enjoy the blessings of the garden without contributing to its upkeep. Thus we see that from the beginning, man was to have something to do; man was to manage the estate of his Lord. Man’s existence was to be purposeful. Labor itself is not the result of the Fall, as we will see the consequences of the Fall in this area was that work was to be unproductive and frustrating.

We know that the Bible teaches that God, our Creator, has every right of command. Thus it should come as no surprise that “¹⁶the Lord God commanded the man, saying, ‘from any tree of the garden you may eat freely; ¹⁷but from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil you shall not eat, for in the day that you eat from it you will surely die’” (v. 16-17). Note first, that God spoke directly to Adam; there was no room for miscommunication. Importantly, also, was that this demonstrated the communion possible between the creature and his Creator.

Second, we can observe that the command is not harsh, nor is it intended to be restrictive. Adam, and eventually Eve, could eat from “any tree of the garden.” Notice that, in their original state, they could have chosen to eat from the tree of life. Only the tree of knowledge was forbidden. But why place any limits whatever to Adam’s liberty? First, liberty without restrictions loses all meaning. But more importantly, Adam was a moral being and, unlike any of God’s other creations, has the ability to cross moral boundaries. In His omniscient mercy, God gave Adam the opportunity to demonstrate obedience and faith.

There we can leave the narrative for the moment but, as with the larger creation narrative, we must consider the theological implications of the passage in light of modern notions of scientific fact.

God created Adam as the first human

We have seen that many consider the opening chapters of Genesis to be an allegory or myth. However, the historical facts of Genesis are foundational to Christian theology. To remove the literal truth from these passages undermines other truths taught in Scripture.

For example, as we have seen, Luke's genealogy of Christ traces Him all the way to Adam (Luke 3:38). If Adam is a mythological figure, where does the 'true' history of the ancestry of Jesus begin? Also, Jesus referred back to Adam and Eve to defend His position on marriage and divorce in Matthew 19:3-6. If Adam and Eve were not real people, does this nullify Jesus' teaching on the matter. And what would that imply for modern notions of human sexuality? To take passages from later in Genesis, Jesus affirmed the story of Cain and Abel as historical in Matthew 23:29-36. In Luke 11:50-51, Jesus showed that Adam's son Abel was considered a real person. He also considered Noah to be a historical figure and the flood to be an actual event in Matthew 24:37-39. If the first three chapters of Genesis are myth, why should we think 'real' history began with chapter 4?

Also, Paul understood the Genesis account to be literal when he taught that sin came into the world through the disobedience of Adam (Romans 5:12-21; 1 Corinthians 15:22). He referred to Adam as the "first man, Adam, became a living soul." He obviously believed Adam to be a real person, the first man, and the story of Adam's sin to be a true account of man. As we will see, if Adam was not real, then what does that imply for the concept of original sin?

This sudden creation of man, whom God uniquely fashioned after His own image, is not only taught in Genesis 1 but it actually an important part of a proper view of mankind. That man did not evolve from a lower form of being but was specifically created is necessary in order to understand the importance of Adam's sin and rebellion against God. A proper understanding of man's sin is essential in order to understand the importance of God's forgiveness in Christ. This is a critical part of the Christian faith.

God created man from the beginning of the creation

Genesis 1:1 states that "In the beginning, God created the heavens and the earth." The phrase "the beginning" is used by Jesus to teach that God made man in "the beginning."

In Mark 10:6 Jesus says, "but from the beginning of creation, God made them male and female." This statement strongly implies that the beginning of the human race, specifically Adam and Eve, was contemporary with the beginning of all things.

The New Testament epistles give further support for a literal reading of the creation account in Genesis. Romans 1:20 says "for since the creation of the world His invisible attributes, His eternal power and divine nature, have been clearly seen, being understood through what has been made, so they are without excuse." God's attributes have been clearly seen since the time He created the world. This can be understood if man was created two days after the sun, moon and stars. If there were billions of years before man, who is clearly seeing God's invisible attributes in the creation? Paul must be referring to man, who is accountable for this revelation. Therefore, man must have existed since the creation of the world.

Hebrews 4:3 notes that “His works were finished from the foundation of the world.” Since the creation of man is certainly among God’s created works that were finished, man was created and God’s works were finished with the foundation of the world, not billions of years later. There cannot be a long period of time between God’s creation of man and the foundation of the world.

Hebrews 9:26 shows that sin must have been present from the foundation of the world, “otherwise, He would have needed to suffer often since the foundation of the world.” The writer of Hebrews was using a hypothetical argument to show that Christ’s death is sufficient for all sin. If Christ’s death was not sufficient, He would have needed to suffer often to atone for sin that has been committed “since the foundation of the world.” This hypothetical argument presupposes that man existed since the foundation of the world. Under a long time frame between the creation of the world and the creation of man, there would be no one with sin to be atoned for since the foundation of the world. Indeed, Christ could not have been present in human form from the foundation of the world except if man was created from its beginning.

Isaiah 40:21 uses both “the beginning” and “the foundations of the earth” as parallel expressions and suggests that man has known about God’s nature since that time. Other passages outside of the creation account in Genesis that imply man’s presence at or near the beginning include Proverbs 8:29-31; Matthew 13:35; Luke 11:50; John 8:44; John 9:32 and 2 Peter 3:4.

Takeaways

Adam was created as the culmination of the first week of Creation. He was created to worship and bring glory to his Creator by functioning as his regent on earth - tending and caring for the garden on Eden in which he was placed. He was given everything he needed, including clear instructions on what was acceptable and what was forbidden. Since the beginning, all that God has provided has been sufficient for all of man’s needs.