

The Great Belly-Button Controversy

The great what? Have you never heard of the great belly-button controversy with its theological implications? Then how do you know that you are on the right side of this debated issue?

About 1970 (I neglected to note the date) I clipped a humorous article on this subject from the Fort Worth Star-Telegram written by a regular columnist, Jerry Flemmons. I shall borrow freely from his observations.

Flemmons told of his amusement in listening to radio preachers from across the Mexican border, one of whom "was condemning a certain painter, Michaelangelo by name, as having been immoral and unworthy of painting outhouses and certainly not ceilings." You see, Michaelangelo had given Adam a navel right there in the Sistine Chapel! No God-fearing man, the preacher demanded, would have put a belly-button on Adam.

At one time Adam's navel was a subject to try men's souls with theologians lined up on each side of the issue, each side denouncing the conclusion of the other. The pro-navel faction contended that God made the first man perfect and that he would have been imperfect without the navel. Anti-navelists argued that Adam was created instead of being born, thus not needing the umbilical cord attachment plug.

Flemmons further explains, "Five hundred years ago, when the matter was most heated, painters of Adam had a choice. Many took a cowardly path, blocking the view with a fig leaf or some other artist's ploy. Some left off the dab of paint which would have represented a navel. Others gave him a navel. Raphael did. And Michaelangelo."

In time the debate gave way to other more current issues, except for pockets of concern here and there, such as with our Puritan grandfathers. However, the vocal war over "Adam's indention and God's intention" revived when science began popularizing the theory of organic evolution.

Paleontologists pointed to fossils that seemed to imply organic evolution. The fossils were put in the earth with the appearance of age just to damn the skeptics, some of the clergy contended, just as Adam's navel had been. Adam's lack of a belly-button was a trap for unbelievers, the other side countered. The battle was re-fought with no winners. Then it subsided.

However, in 1944___ "not an otherwise unrational year"___ the controversy arose again, this time within the halls of Congress! A subcommittee of the House Military Committee chaired by Congressman Durham of North Carolina refused authorization of a 30-page booklet for American soldiers. The booklet, *The Races of Man*, contained an illustration depicting Adam and Eve with navels. That, they ruled, would be misleading to gullible American soldiers!

The Time and Process

Fundamentalists of our day might see no humor in Jerry Flemmons's column. They continue the controversy. They just shift the issue of contention from Adam's navel to the method and length of time God used in creating us and the universe. God made the whole thing in one literal week with one day saved for rest, they insist, and if you don't accept that conclusion, you have sold out to the atheists. They fail to acknowledge that millions of believers conclude that God used a long process in making us.

Keep in mind that theologians on both sides of the belly-button controversy agreed that God made Adam. This is not an argument over whether or not God created us and all the universe. The scruple concerns how He did it and how long He took in doing it.

Actually, the entire account of creation of matter from nothing is very brief: "In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth." That's it! The remainder of the first three chapters of Genesis tells of God's arranging already made materials into various forms, both celestial and terrestrial, some of which he then endowed with a measure of His life. He is the source of all life.

God formed man of the dust. What process did he use? Did he gather mud in his hands (being Spirit, God has no flesh or bones) and pat and mold it into a form which he called man even before he endowed man with spirit? Or might he not have taken millions of years in which he continued to develop the features of his crowning creation? Either alternative can only be theoretical, for there is no proof. Each alternative acknowledges God as the Creator. If God developed his features through other life forms, would it be any less a work of God? Accounting for the "missing link" we have called for, at any stage He could have created a great species gap by perfecting the form which he would be pleased to call humans, like the metamorphosis producing the gorgeous butterfly. Here we are dealing with possibilities for which the Genesis account will allow.

Why should God's use of process and development be viewed with skepticism? He formed you and me from the dust of the earth (Ecc. 12:7) and continues to form us through the process of birth, eating, drinking, and breathing.

Sometime after God had formed man, how long we do not know, he breathed life-giving breath into him, and man became a living being. In the creation process God's action changed man into something he had not been previously. Man was enhanced and endowed above his previous state to become human with God's likeness. Jesus was formed of flesh like all mankind, but he also had a divine nature. In like manner, man was formed in commonality with other creatures, but he was endowed with the nature and image of God.

Literal Interpretation

To offer these possibilities is to abandon any literal interpretation of the creation account. Fundamentalists claim to interpret the Scriptures literally. That may sound noble, but it is an impossibility. Simple explanations are comfortable for the unquestioning. Literal interpretation comes in handy at times to prove presuppositions like six literal days of creation, but it doesn't even support that or instantaneous creation. Good people have been scared out of their senses by the thought that the first three chapters of Genesis might be an allegorical or figurative account of creation intended simply to present God as the Almighty Creator. They have made a certain, theoretical how of creation___a matter of science___into a tenet of faith essential to salvation. There is continued search for reasons and defenses to uphold the literal concept which shuns evidence on the other side. Let me ask some questions and make observations about the Genesis account which challenge the literal concept.

Many creatures are carnivorous. If they were created herbivorous, then God continued to form their bodies, digestive systems, teeth, instincts, etc. after the fall. By their consuming food, was there not

death before Adam and Eve sinned? Man was to eat of the garden. Had he not eaten, would he not have starved to death?

The creatures, including man, were told to reproduce on the day of their creation, and they did! Could they actually do that in a literal day?

The cooling of the earth and condensing of moisture to permit light, clouds, and rain on the earth's surface surely took more than twenty-four hours. So would the draining of the water from the continents.

In Eden stood the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. Can, or could, one eat knowledge? Did God want mankind to be ignorant of right and wrong? And since they were forbidden to eat of that tree, did they not already have knowledge of good and evil before eating? Man was told to cultivate the garden. If it was a place of perfection as we have assumed, why would it need dressing/cultivating? What kind of tools did he have? Not even a bone or dead branch would be there for his use! If he was taught to make and use tools, how could we account for the lack of that knowledge among aboriginals in later centuries?

Adam named the thousands of kinds of birds and animals in one day in time for his wedding! Did he know how to record the names? Eden was quite a place with every kind of bird and animal in it.

Did Adam have to learn? Or did God create a blank brain similar to a computer hard drive and then program it with knowledge, speech, language, experience, logic, and skills? Is a snake cunning, with reasoning ability and evil intent? A snake knew the will of God! Could it, without ears or voice box, converse with Eve? And does a snake eat dust? Were Adam and Eve given an unlearned culture along with shelter, vessels, and things necessary for grooming and hygiene? Does God, a Spirit, walk, and can man hear him walking? Why would a husband and wife be ashamed of their bodies before each other and their Creator? Should we be? Can one hide from God? The text says they hid, not tried to hide.

Now, do you give a literal interpretation to everything in the first three chapters of Genesis? Or is there a wee chance that some of it may be accommodative language, a saga in dramatic and allegorical depictions, to tell a polytheistic world that one God created and made the universe and every creature in it?

The Scriptures express thoughts, understandings (even misunderstandings), and emotions of their writers. God preserved them for us because they reveal Himself and His will in a manner that mankind can comprehend. In like manner, the literary account of origins must have been considered by our Creator as a satisfactory explanation of how we and our universe came from him.

The account is theistic rather than scientific. When we try to make it scientific, we elevate assumptions to the place of spiritual laws. Since one can prove by the Bible that the sun rises and sets literally, the Catholic Church made that scientific assumption a matter of faith. Their treatment of Galileo who taught otherwise embarrassed them in later times. And they have fallen into the scientific trap again in their stand against birth control. They condemn prevention of life on similar grounds as destruction of life in abortion and killing. The present-day disciple should learn from them to avoid making scientific interpretations essential matters of faith. The Genesis account teaches the theology of who rather than the science of how.

Some things in the New Testament writings, like the mention of Adam and Eve and creation in support of certain premises, seem to confirm literal interpretation. Would Jesus or Paul base a principle upon an unreal literary character? Perhaps not; perhaps so. Both Ezekiel and James mention Job, and it is often conceded that Job was a character of drama. Such allusion to unreal persons is common in our speech, like when we speak of someone having a Midas touch, the nose of Pinocchio, or a dilemma like Hamlet's, or when we draw a lesson from mythology.

We have accustomed ourselves to overlook other things like the dragons mentioned in Scripture, the mandrakes of Jacob's wives, the peeled stakes that determined the color of Jacob's goats, singing stars, windows of heaven, heaven being up and hell being down, the four corners of the earth, Moses' antagonists creating snakes, the witch of Endor raising the dead, and the curative powers of the Pool of Bethesda. Did Jesus really descend into the lower parts of the earth? Were angels literally cast down into Gehenna, a valley used for garbage burning outside Jerusalem? Are our bowels the center of pity and compassion? Are the reins (kidneys) the seat of our emotions?

Just how literal are those six days of creation? The sun and moon were not made until the fourth day. So four of the six days could not have been literal evening and morning as are determined by the rotation of the earth in the sunlight. At best, the "evening and morning" would have been a localized concept, for it is evening, morning, noon, and midnight somewhere on earth every hour of the twenty-four hour rotation.

How long is the seventh day? In it, God has rested. He continues to rest thousands of years later, and it will extend into an eternal rest! Chapter Four of Hebrews deals with that day of rest.

The seventh-day rest must be considered with limited meaning, for no one concludes that God has been totally inactive in dealing with man and the universe through the centuries.

Allegories involve metaphorical depictions and unreal representations. Hagar and Sarah are said to be two covenants with Hagar being Mount Sinai and Sarah being Jerusalem. Lazarus is said to have gone to Abraham's bosom after death as though Abraham were in charge of departed spirits. This Lazarus, not the man from Bethany, evidently was an allegorical character who depicted the Gentiles, while the rich man represented the rejecting Jews. Lazarus and the rich man were depicted as conversing across the chasm which separated the saved and the damned in the afterlife.

Evidences of Age

In drilling for oil, fossils are found thousands of feet below the ground surface. Did God put them there to trick questioning people like me? Or has he used geological changes to deposit fossils and oil? The location of the Garden of Eden is identified by the Tigris and Euphrates Rivers which still exist. That is oil-rich territory. No geological upheaval could have deposited the fossils and oil without disrupting the topography. So they were put there long before Eden, or God has played deceitful tricks on us. The earliest geographical features mentioned in the Bible are not changed radically.

If six thousand years seems like sufficient time for the earth-shaping upheavals to occur, then consider this also. There are many people living now who have lived one day for every two months since 4004 B.C.! Sixty persons who lived past one hundred years whose lives overlapped briefly could span the six thousand years back to the supposed

time of creation and Adam. From this viewpoint, the lapse of time does not seem so long.

Galaxies of our universe are millions of light years away, yet their light has reached us. Were they created millions of years ago, or is this another trap laid by God?

Man cannot fathom God, but since He gave us intelligence to probe, we should not fear to ask questions and search for answers in any and every field of study. I find it hard to believe that the Eternal and Almighty One remained quiet and dormant through unfathomable time. Then He sort of aroused and took six days, 144 hours, of eternity for a grand display of wisdom and power, only to retire again! Such a concept would tend to make God seem more remote from my daily life than would the belief in His progressively forming of His creation.

In contrast to our concept of an austere God, I like to think of the joy He must have experienced as He conceived His plans for creation. Through immeasurable aeons, as He designs unique, new stellar bodies formed from the original creation, flings them into space, suspends them, and puts them in orbits, He must gain satisfaction. He continues to expand the universe and to shape the earth by water, wind, temperature, earthquakes, volcanos, and shifting continents.

As a creative artist, He surely has taken pleasure in designing each creature and in continuing to adapt it with ingenious variations. He devised distinctive DNA, genetic code, hormones, and instincts for each. He decided to make each snowflake unique. He gave a homing instinct to the pigeon and radar to the bat. Surely, he took some pleasure in pondering how much instinct or intelligence to give a gnat, a fish, a horse, a man, etc. How would each creature reproduce, how would sex attraction be infused, and how would the offspring be nourished? God could give unlimited time to the devising of intricacies and variations in each species separately. Don't you think He had fun doing it? I can imagine His delight in making some creatures graceful, colorful, and beautiful while making others awkward, drab, and ugly. The infinite God should not be shrunk to fit our finite minds.

Mankind continues to discover exciting mysteries of God's design. Is it possible for man to discover how to create life? If we did, what would be the impact? It would only mean that man uncovered another of God's mysteries. Man would only be discovering more about God, the source of all life.

The magnitude of this universe with billions of celestial bodies is beyond our imagination. Will it ever be undone, annihilated to nothingness, so that only God and the spirit beings remain? That is a common belief based on literal interpretation of some prophetic statements. However, I feel that we have interpreted those cataclysmic passages too literally also. But that is an entirely different field of study.

This rambling essay cannot touch on all the problems of interpretation on each side of the issue that call for answers. The suggestions offered here are intended to stimulate thinking rather than to provide dogmatic conclusions.

It is not the holding of different opinions regarding creation that is detrimental. It is the making of opinions into tenets of faith and the condemning of others who differ that is destructive. Equally sincere and dedicated disciples hold these different interpretations.

Which side of the great belly-button controversy you may align yourself with is not important unless you let it destroy your faith or prevent your acceptance of disciples who differ.

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