

# Humans as Imago Dei and the Evolution of Homo Sapiens



By **J. Richard Middleton** on April 30, 2018

Can faithful Christians affirm the distinctive biblical view of humanity in Genesis 1:26-28 as created in God's image (*imago Dei*) and yet hold to an evolutionary account of human origins? On the face of it this seems like a difficult, if not impossible, task.

Our oldest possible hominin ancestor (*Sahelanthropus tchadensis*) lived about six or seven million years ago.<sup>1</sup> The Australopithecines (including the famous fossil named *Lucy*) appear in the fossil record between three and four million years ago, while *Homo habilis*, the earliest well-known example of the genus *Homo*, is thought to have lived between 1.5 and two million years ago.<sup>2</sup> Current estimates for anatomically modern *Homo sapiens* put their origin at just under 200,000 years ago, with a minimum population of somewhere between 2,000 and 10,000 mating individuals needed to explain present genetic diversity.<sup>3</sup>

Yet Genesis 2 recounts God's creation of an initial human pair, not a large population group, with no reference to earlier human ancestors. And the claim of evolutionary descent may seem to contradict the biblical idea of human uniqueness, which is usually associated with the creation of humans as *imago Dei*.

Here I'll draw on my expertise as an Old Testament scholar who has been teaching and writing about biblical creation texts for many years, though without any reference to evolution. I have now come to discern a variety of ways in which these texts, which are certainly not meant to teach science, can prime us theologically – in terms of our worldview – to be open to what evolutionary science tells us about ourselves.

## Adam and Eve as the Original Human Couple?

Let's start with what is often taken to be a major contradiction between the Bible and evolution, namely, God's creation of an initial human pair (Adam and Eve) in Genesis 2. There are two problems with the common view

that this contradicts an evolutionary account of human origins.

The first is that while we often think of the first human pair in Genesis 2 as “Adam and Eve,” the text originally designates them as “the human” (*ha’adam*) and “the woman” (*ha’iššâ*). “Adam” becomes a proper name only in Genesis 5:1 and “Eve” is the name given to the woman in 3:20. What are we to make of the fact that the name of the first man is “Human” (*’adam*) and the name of the first woman is “Life” (*havvâ*)? And who would name their son Abel (*hebel* = vapor/futility, the same word that recurs as a theme in Ecclesiastes)? These names are clearly a function of the story (Abel’s life is soon snuffed out). Given the symbolic meaning of the names “Adam” and “Eve,” we may understand the first couple in Genesis 2 as archetypal or representative of all humanity.<sup>4</sup>

The second problem with thinking that the picture of the first couple in Genesis 2 contradicts human evolution is that this is not the only account of human origins in Genesis. We need to balance the picture in Genesis 2 with that of Genesis 1, where God creates not individuals, but population groups to fill various niches – including flying creatures in the sky, swimming things in the water, and then animals and humans (designated by the collective noun *’adam*) on the land. Christians only read this account of human creation as an original couple because we retroject the account from Genesis 2 back into chapter 1. But we need to respect the different portrayals of creation in each account.<sup>5</sup> In neither case is the text teaching science; for then we would need to ask *which* account is scientifically true? Rather, both accounts teach a harmonious theological vision of being human.

## The *Imago Dei* as Vocation or Calling

That theological vision is centered on our creation as God’s image and likeness (*imago Dei*). Whereas many Christians have taken the *imago Dei* to mean that humans are unique among creatures, especially that we are radically distinct from animals, this is not the primary point of the image. Most contemporary Old Testament scholars understand the *imago Dei* not as certain capacities or features that distinguish humans from other animals, but as a calling or vocation, which involves representing and manifesting God’s presence and rule on earth by the way we live. This calling involves the task of agriculture (described as tending the garden in Gen. 2:15 or subduing the earth in Gen. 1:28) and animal domestication (Gen. 1:26, 28; Ps. 8:6-8), but it comes to include city building, music, and metallurgy (Gen. 4:17, 20-22), to name just a few examples of human cultural development. Ultimately, this biblical trajectory suggests that humans image God when they live in conformity to God’s will in all their earthly life, as stewards of this world that God has entrusted to us. Jesus is thus the image of God *par excellence* (Col. 1:15; Heb. 1:3; 2 Cor. 4:4-6) since he perfectly manifested God’s presence and will in his life, death, and resurrection. And the church, renewed in the image of God, is the new humanity (Eph. 4:24; Col. 3:9-10), meant to continue Christ’s mission in the world.<sup>6</sup>

Of course, humans would need to have certain capacities or faculties (including rationality, language, etc.) in order to be able to fulfill the calling to image God. And the Bible does, in fact, distinguish humans from other animals in a fairly commonsense way. Not only are humans granted dominion over animal life and not *vice versa*, but animals simply cannot meet the deepest human needs for interpersonal fellowship (Gen. 2:20).

## Human Commonality with Other Animals in the Bible

Nevertheless, the Bible presents a picture of significant continuity between humans and other animals. Thus humans and land animals are created on the same day in Genesis 1 (day 6). And in Genesis 2 humans and animals are not only created from the ground but they are both described by the phrase *nepesh hayyah* (Gen. 2:7, 19), which means something like a *living organism*.<sup>7</sup> Likewise, both humans (Gen. 2:7) and animals (Gen. 7:15-15, 22-22; also Ps. 104:29-30) are enlivened by God’s breath or spirit (this is not something distinctive to humanity).

Beyond Genesis, the vision of creation in Psalm 104 never mentions humans without pairing them with some form of animal life – whether cattle, Leviathan (the sea serpent), or lions (104:14-15, 21-23, 26). Further, God is said to have “formed” (*yasar*) Leviathan (Ps. 104:26), the very same verb used for God’s creation of the first human in Genesis 2:7. And God tells Job about his similarity with a creature named Behemoth, which is a plural of majesty of the usual collective noun for animals or beasts (*behemâ*): “Look at Behemoth [= the mega-beast], which I made *with* you” (Job 40:15).

Biblical texts like these, which portray the commonality of humans with a variety of other animals, should predispose Christians who take Scripture seriously to at least be open to considering the idea of common evolutionary descent.

## Human Uniqueness and Species Fixity

But even if we accept that there is great commonality between humans and other animals, doesn’t the biblical account of God creating animals (and plants) “after their kind” (almost a refrain in Genesis 1) indicate a clear distinction between species? Here we need to remember that what we mean today by “species” developed well after biblical times, so “kinds” in Genesis 1 cannot be identified with our contemporary biological categories.

Certainly, both the Bible and contemporary science recognize genuine diversity and complexity among plants and animals – some of which we understand as species differentiation. Yet the very idea that the boundaries of species are fixed and impermeable is influenced more by a Platonic idea of eternal forms or essences than by anything in the Bible or contemporary science. Given that Plato is a pagan philosopher, we should not accept this sort of essentialism uncritically. According to contemporary biology, the notion of species is less a fixed essence than a relatively stable configuration that creatures attain after a period (usually lengthy) of transformation and adaptation.

Indeed, the idea of species in contemporary science turns out to be somewhat blurry and even permeable, and breaks down at a number of points, so that there are contested definitions of *species* in biology today. Even the most common definition (associated with Ernst Mayr) of a species as a population able to breed with each other (but not with other species) is not absolute, since some animals from what we consider to be different species have in fact interbred to produce hybrids (lions with tigers, horses with donkeys, etc.). Even Neanderthals seem to have interbred with *Homo sapiens* at some time in the past (the result is that people of European and Asian descent have a small percentage of Neanderthal DNA in their makeup).

## The Calling of *Homo Sapiens* to Image God

Granted that the *imago Dei* is not equivalent to a discrete set of human faculties, but is better understood as the vocation of representing God on earth and manifesting his presence in all of earthly life, how might this be compatible with what we currently understand about the evolution of *Homo sapiens*? Since anatomically modern humans have been around for nearly 200,000 years, but archeology suggests that there was an explosion of human cultural development much later, could that be the origin of the *imago Dei*? This is, of course, only speculation. But it makes sense to think of God superintending the evolutionary process (on a classical concurrentist model of divine action) until hominins recognizable as *Homo sapiens* emerged and stabilized. Then, at some point in their development, God entered into relationship with a representative population of these hominins, calling them to the vocation of *imago Dei*.

And the rest, as they say, is history.

## Notes & References

1. Anthropologists now use the term *hominin* (rather than *hominid*) to refer to the classification of humans with their prehuman relatives (this includes the genus *Homo*, as well as distant relatives, such as the *Australopithecines*). The term *hominid* is currently used for the larger classification, including all monkeys and apes. It is currently debated whether the fossils of *Sahelanthropus tchadensis* (discovered in as recently as 2001) represent the earliest known hominin or a pre-hominin ancestor.
2. A lesser-known species, *Homo rudolfensis*, is now postulated to be a bit earlier than *Homo habilis*. There are currently fossil remains of perhaps eleven different species of early humans (preceding *Homo sapiens*).
3. The above estimates represent current views in paleo-anthropology. Science is a fallible, ever-changing project, and it is to be expected that details of these estimates will be disputed, and indeed will change over time.
4. This is true also for other characters in Genesis 1-11, such as Cain (= gift), Noah (= comfort), Shem (= name); in each case the name is a function of the story, which suggests that the early Genesis narratives have a legendary quality and should not be taken as describing historical events in any simple way.
5. Beyond the question of the initial population size, there is a different portrayal of the initial state of the world in the two texts. Whereas Genesis 1 begins with the earth inundated with water, in Genesis 2 the earth is originally a dry wilderness. Then, there is a different order of creative events in each chapter. In Genesis 2 the order is: dry land, water, a human (later specified as a man), plants, animals, a woman. In Genesis 1 the order of these same items is: water, dry land, plants, animals, humans (male and female together).
6. For a fuller exposition of the *imago Dei* in Genesis, see J. Richard Middleton, *The Liberating Image: The Imago Dei in Genesis 1* (Grand Rapids: Brazos, 2005). For the *imago Dei* throughout Scripture, see Middleton, "Image of God," in *Dictionary of Scripture and Ethics*, ed. by Joel B. Green et al. (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2011), 394-397; and Middleton, "Image of God," in *The Oxford Encyclopedia of the Bible and Theology*, vol. 2, ed. by Samuel E. Ballentine et al. (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2015), 516-523.
7. The phrase *nepesh hayyah* is used for animals also in Gen. 1:20, 24, and 30. Both the NIV and the NRSV translate *nepesh hayyah* as "living being" in Gen. 2:7 and as "living creature" in Gen. 1: 20, 24; and 2:19.

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