

**NICOLA BERRETTA****Back to the Future of Human Origins**

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In the last issue of *Science and Christian Belief*, Revd. Ernest Lucas and colleagues<sup>1</sup> presented an interesting article on human origins, addressing the scientific evidence for human evolution, before moving on to what is probably the most crucial issue on this topic – at least to scientists concerned about faithfulness to Scripture – regarding how this supposedly undisputed objective evidence harmonises with the biblical narrative on human creation and how we can deal with the possible clashes with New Testament references to a historical Adam.

Although I am a biologist, my scientific expertise in neuroscience does not grant me enough confidence to critically address what is reported as scientific evidence for human evolution, based on genetics or palaeontological data. What really concerns me, and what I wish to comment on here, are the extremely serious consequences of accepting human evolution as a fact for our biblical doctrines of the position of man in creation and of his relationship with his Creator. In fact, according to my understanding of Scripture, human evolution strikes at the very core message of the Christian faith, that is: Jesus Christ, our redeemer and eternal high priest, who two thousand years ago re-established once for all our relationship with the Father through his death on the cross and his resurrection.

**Defining what issue is at stake**

‘For there is one God and one mediator between God and mankind, the man Christ Jesus’ (1Tim. 2: 5). The manhood of Jesus Christ is a central and absolutely vital issue in our Christian faith, because it is his being fully and utterly *man* that makes Jesus the perfect intercessor between us men and God. For this reason the doctrine of incarnation is so significant for the entire doctrinal structure of man’s redemption in Jesus Christ. On this regard the author of the book of Hebrews strongly stresses the necessity of Jesus’ becoming fully a man in order to act as our redeemer:

Since the children have flesh and blood, he too shared in their humanity so that by his death he might break the power of him who holds the power of death – that is, the devil – and free those who all their lives were held in slavery by their fear of death (Heb.2:14-15).

A bridge is stable not just when it is properly constructed, but also when it connects two firm and fixed opposite ends. God is indeed never-changing,

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<sup>1</sup> Lucas, E.C., Alexander, D.R., Berry, R.J., Briggs, G.A.D., Humphreys, C.J., Jeeves, M.A. & Thiselton, A.C. ‘The Bible, science and human origins’, *Science and Christian Belief* (2016) 28(2), 74-99.

but are we not undermining the stability of the whole bridge by placing Man in a sliding and undefined position? My simple and straightforward question is then the following: What Man is granted this redeeming mediation through the Man Jesus Christ who died on the cross in his place?

I will now take this argument to its extreme in order to make clear where this question eventually leads us. According to the standard hypothesis for human evolution, the present *Homo sapiens* not only evolved from earlier hominids, but also shares common ancestors with other apes present on our planet earth. Indeed, further back in time we even share common ancestry with all Mammalians, and so on. If we accept this hypothesis, we must necessarily accept that *Homo sapiens* is not just the end point of this evolutionary process, but that evolution will continue, giving rise not only to something like *Homo hypersapiens* or *sapientissimus*, in direct line, but with a number of separate species that will evolve from *Homo sapiens*, their common ancestor. I am aware that such an outcome requires some form of regional/environmental segregation, which is hardly envisaged if we look at today's world, but if we push our fantasy a bit further and think of possible future colonisation of other planets, this hypothesis may be not so unrealistic.

My hope, as a Christian, is that Jesus will have returned long before we have to address this issue. My really deep hope is that what I am now writing won't even be read, because Jesus has come back in the meantime. Having said that, Jesus was quite clear with his disciples that it was not up to them – or to us – to know exactly when he will return. No one knows the day and the hour... and let me add, not even the geological era. Jesus' disciples were eager to know when the whole story would come to an end, up to the very last moment before his ascension to the Father, when they asked: 'Lord, are you at this time going to restore the kingdom to Israel?' (Acts 1: 6). Jesus' answer makes it perfectly clear that this is not an issue we are allowed to raise: 'It is not for you to know the times or dates the Father has set by his own authority' (Acts 1: 7). However, Jesus is equally clear in what we are called to do until that unknown future day: 'But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes on you; and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth' (Acts 1: 8).

I don't know if Jesus will be back today, or next month, or next year, or in a thousand years, or even – why not – in 100 billion years. But what I know for sure is that, also in 100 billion years' time, Jesus' disciples will boldly proclaim the Man Jesus Christ as the only mediator between God and mankind. Can we believe that this will be possible, if we accept human evolution? What Man is granted the redeeming mediation through the Man Jesus Christ who died on the cross in his place?

## Two possible counterarguments

When Christians who believe in human evolution are confronted with this issue, I think they may offer two possible answers.

One possibility is that human evolution will not proceed any further. This, for instance, is the position that has been put forward elsewhere by one of the authors of the article that I am here commenting on, Dr Denis Alexander.<sup>2</sup> He suggests that our hygienic conditions, low birth-rate due to economic prosperity and social contiguity will prevent mankind's evolving into other species.

I have great respect for Dr Alexander, because it was through his writings, together with those of Dr Lucas, that I began to gain confidence in living my Christian faith in harmony with my scientific interests as a postgraduate student. However, I must say that I find those arguments rationally unsatisfying. The reasons suggested by Dr Alexander for denying that major evolutionary processes might occur in *Homo sapiens*, as mentioned above, look to me very short sighted, because they consider possible future evolutionary pressures only according to our present day perspective. This may be true if by 'future' we mean a very limited period of time, but we have no biblical basis to assume so. This, by the way, is also the kind of argument which exposes us to the same objection from our atheist colleagues when we affirm a special intervention by God in creating a historical Adam. In fact, we are indirectly affirming that the future is not going to be long enough to allow such evolutionary changes to occur – that is to say that God will miraculously intervene to put an end to the whole story in order to avoid such an embarrassing outcome. This, in my opinion, is a way of reasoning which softly slips towards a God-of-the-gaps position, which I was taught to shy away from.

The second possibility is to totally disengage our physical/biological nature from our identity as creatures made in the image and likeness of God, with all that it means in terms of special position in creation and personal relationship with God. In other words, when God decided to establish a personal relationship with man, whatever he did to the then existing *Homo sapiens*, was done without reference to that individual's position in the evolutionary tree. He might well have done it with our tetrapod or first multicellular organism ancestor, but he decided to do it to *Homo sapiens* for no particular reason related to his biological features. Thus, the image and likeness of God will persist independent of any future evolutionary processes, in *Homo sapiens* and in all evolutionary branches ahead of us.

This position, in my opinion, is very difficult to sustain. First of all because, in assuming such a definite and autonomous separation between

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<sup>2</sup> Alexander, D.R. *Creation and Evolution: Do We Have to Choose?*, Oxford: Monarch Books (2008), pp. 232-234.

our physical and spiritual identities, it demands an anthropological concept of body/spirit relationship which is much more reminiscent of platonic philosophy than of the unifying living-soul picture of our nature, which arises from the biblical narrative of man's creation.

Moreover, it does not fit with the absolute physical and biological necessity of God's incarnation to become fully Man in order to save us. I have already mentioned how the book of Hebrews stresses the need for Jesus Christ to share our humanity. In order to do that he had to share our 'flesh and blood' (Heb. 2:14), certainly referring to our physical/biological nature. Indeed, our moral position before God, which constitutes an essential element of our image and likeness of God, is strictly related to our physical/biological nature. It is because Jesus Christ fully shared our manhood that he can 'feel sympathy for our weaknesses' (Heb. 4:15), and be our high priest for eternity.

Hebrews' argument also stresses the *limits* of that mediating role, so that Jesus Christ is not a mediator in absolute terms, but only within the boundaries of the physical/biological nature he shared:

For surely it is not angels he helps, but Abraham's descendants. For this reason he had to be made like them, fully human in every way, in order that he might become a merciful and faithful high priest in service to God, and that he might make atonement for the sins of the people (Heb. 2:16-17).

Indeed, we know that, through his death and resurrection, Jesus reconciled non only mankind to God, but 'all things, whether things on earth or things in heaven'(Col. 1:20). However, this cosmic reconciliation must be intended as an overflow of man's reconciliation, which will liberate all creation from its present groaning (Rom. 8:20-22). Thus, we cannot escape the necessity of that primary and inalienable reconciling bridge between Man and God.

*What Man* did Jesus Christ become? What Man will then be granted his redeeming mediation in the future?

## Conclusions

There are issues for which as Christians we need humbly to recognise that we have different points of view. We need to discern what is essential to our Christian faith and what is not. This certainly applies to many discussions Christians have regarding the means God used to create heaven and earth. In this regard, I agree with Dr Denis Alexander when he exposes his uncertainties on human evolution and adds: 'Least of all is it an issue that should become a bone of contention amongst Christians, as if it were some central point of doctrine on a par with the death and resurrection of

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Jesus for our sin.<sup>3</sup>

I would not have expressed my concerns here, were it not for the very issue which I believe is at stake: Jesus' atoning death for our sin. My firm conviction is that, when we affirm the biological evolution of man from earlier hominids, we undermine the biblical concept of an eternal mediating role of the Man Jesus Christ towards mankind, that will remain for ever. If we as Christians accept human evolution, we must be aware of the urgency to provide clear biblical answers, not only going back to Genesis 1-3, but much more going back to the future.

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<sup>3</sup> *ibid.*, p. 234.

## **DENIS R. ALEXANDER**

# **A Response to Berretta**

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I would like to thank Dr Berretta for the interesting points that he contributes to this discussion. Dr Berretta's main concern is that the incarnation of Christ as an authentic human being is central to his atoning work on our behalf, and that his atoning work might be called into question in the event that humankind evolves into a quite different kind of biological entity. Good question.

Dr Berretta is clearly aware of some of the standard arguments for why, under the conditions of planet Earth, it is unlikely that further significant human evolution will occur. Population geneticists will of course point out that human evolution is in process all the time in the sense that the frequency of genetic variants in different human populations is constantly changing, sometimes involving natural selection. Whilst that is certainly the case, there are good reasons why such changes are very unlikely to lead to speciation events, meaning that a population similar to us would become reproductively isolated from us.

It is perhaps worth summarising these reasons, for I think that they have more teeth than Dr Berretta indicates.<sup>1</sup> First, modern medical care, as it gradually spreads around the world, is a great 'genetic leveller', giving to all people a greater opportunity to achieve reproductive success. This tends to reduce the efficacy of natural selection, albeit without stopping it entirely, so that previously deleterious genes become more common in populations. Evolution increases at the level of world population genetic variation, but speciation becomes less likely in a small isolated population practising good medical care, which is where speciation would otherwise be more likely to occur. Second, as human populations increase in prosperity, they tend to have fewer children on average, for social reasons; so the criterion of 'differential reproductive success' becomes less significant because couples tend to have only two children anyway irrespective of their particular genetic or economic status. Third, mammalian speciation generally occurs in isolated populations, but in the global village in which we currently live, the existence of such an isolated population is highly unlikely, especially given that speciation in such populations most likely takes tens of thousands of years.

All three factors are discussable in terms of their potential impact on future human evolution but it is the third factor which is certainly most relevant. Aside from populating other planets or, a possibility that Dr Ber-

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<sup>1</sup> Alexander, D.R. *Creation or Evolution – Do We Have to Choose?*, 2nd edn., Oxford: Monarch (2014).

retta does not mention, human genetic engineering, this third factor alone is likely to block further human speciation events on Earth for the foreseeable future. But now let us start the sci-fi thought experiment whereby a separate 'human' species either evolves following colonisation of another planet or following extensive use of CRISPR-Cas to modify the human genome, in either case creating a population that can no longer reproduce with humans – in other words a new species. By either process we will call them the Namuhs. Are the Namuhs made in the image of God and did Christ die for them?

Here much depends on one's understanding of what being made in the image of God entails. At the heart of the biblical perspective is the idea that being made in God's image involves God's delegation to humankind of kingly authority to care for the earth (Gen. 1:26-27; Psalm 8), an understanding well expounded by Richard Middleton in his fine book *The Liberating Image*.<sup>2</sup> The biology of humans is clearly essential to make any sense of such a doctrine. It is relational beings with brains characterised by big frontal lobes, language and free will who are in a position to take on board such a responsibility (in the process making a big mess of it). Such qualities are necessary but not sufficient to be made in the image of God, but without them the concept makes no sense. So, yes, our particular type of human biology is crucial to bearing the image of God.

What, then, is the destiny of the Namuhs? There is an analogy with the evolutionary precursors of *Homo sapiens*. It is populations that evolve. There were numerous populations that led up to the emergence of anatomically humans around 200,000 years ago. Speciation is a gradual process in mammals. At some point, when humankind was ready, God graciously delegated to them the responsibility for caring for the earth. Was that responsibility also given to our Neanderthal first cousins? Not as far as we know, given that there is no evidence that they had religious beliefs and their capacity for language is disputed – in other words it seems that they did not have the mental capacities that would make caring for the earth a realistic possibility. Such reflections might help us in our thinking about the Namuhs. Two points are relevant here: first, the bestowal of the *imago Dei* is God's prerogative. If the Namuh Type Ones still had the basic kit of characteristics that enabled being made in the image of God to be meaningful – free will (therefore potential for *agape* love), language, moral responsibility and so on, then perhaps God would graciously delegate to them also the responsibility of caring for the earth – or whatever planet they might be living on. But, second, the negative side of the same coin, if for example genetic engineering had generated a race of brutes, Namuh Type Twos (such as the Morlocks in H.G. Wells's *Time Machine*), or some other dystopian outcome, no longer having the capacities that would en-

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<sup>2</sup> Middleton, J.R. *The Liberating Image: The Imago Dei in Genesis 1*, Grand Rapids, MI: Brazos Press.

able even in principle the practice of being made in God's image, then one might imagine that God would not bestow upon them his image (though we should clearly seek to avoid being hubristic in what we think God might or might not do).

Dr Berretta is absolutely right that the New Testament is clear that Christ, in human flesh and blood, died not for angels but for people like us. But we also need to remember John 3:16 – that 'God so loved the *kosmos* that he gave his one and only Son...' The Apostle Paul also draws attention to the cosmic consequences of Christ's death and resurrection (Col. 1: 20). Believing in God's cosmic plan of salvation does not entail being a universalist but should broaden our horizons to the wider scope of Christ's redemptive work. Furthermore, we should not impose our present scientific understanding on to the verses cited by Dr Berretta, such as Hebrews 2:16-17. The theological meaning of these verses is that the incarnation of Christ involved becoming a real human being made of real flesh, not an angelic being (angels being of particular interest to the author of the letter to the Hebrews). If Jesus had been an angel, the reasoning in Hebrews goes, he would not have been able to encounter evil on its own ground, in the flesh.

So I do not think we need to be too concerned about Dr Berretta's thought experiments. Thinking historically, God in his sovereign creative power has worked out his intentions and purposes in order to bring about beings through a long evolutionary process who have the capacity to respond to his love and come into a personal relationship with God through Christ. Just as in the past, so in the future, God will surely work out his purposes to bring into the new heavens and the new earth those cohorts of his choice saved by Christ's atoning work.

I would like to thank Dr Alexander Massmann for his helpful comments on an earlier draft of this letter

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## PETER G. NELSON

# Human origins

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In their paper, ‘The Bible, Science and Human Origins’, the authors argue that God led biblical writers to accommodate what they were writing to the popular cosmology and cosmogony of the day.<sup>1</sup> They do not consider, however, what the Akkadian creation epic *Enūma eliš* says about the origin of human beings: that one of the gods (Marduk) fashioned them out of the blood of a rebel god (Kingu).<sup>2</sup> In describing the creation of Adam out of *dust*, therefore, Genesis goes against ANE cosmogony.

Also, when discussing what Paul says about Adam, the authors do not consider 1 Timothy 2:11-15 and 1 Corinthians 11:2-16. The first passage reads:

A woman should learn in quietness and full submission. I do not permit a woman to teach or to assume authority over a man; she must be quiet. For Adam was formed first, then Eve. And Adam was not the one deceived; it was the woman who was deceived and became a sinner. But women will be saved through childbearing<sup>3</sup> – if they continue in faith, love and holiness with propriety.

In the second passage, he says (vv. 7-12):

A man ought not to cover his head, since he is the image and glory of God; but woman is the glory of man. For man did not come from woman, but woman from man; neither was man created for woman, but woman for man. It is for this reason that a woman ought to have authority over her own head, because of the angels. Nevertheless, in the Lord woman is not independent of man, nor is man independent of woman. For as woman came from man, so also man is born of woman. But everything comes from God.

In these passages, Paul follows closely the letter of Genesis 1-3 and draws practical lessons from those chapters. It is difficult to draw the same lessons from an evolutionary model of human origins. It is also difficult to reconcile what he says about the image of God with a relational understanding of this.

Also relevant is what Paul says to the Athenians in Acts 17:24-26:

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1 Lucas, E.C., Alexander, D.R., Berry, R.J., Briggs, A.D., Humphreys, C.J., Jeeves, M.A. & Thiselton, A.C. ‘The Bible, Science and Human Origins’, *Science and Christian Belief* (2016) 27, 74-99.

2 See, e.g., Heidel, A. *The Babylonian Genesis*, 2nd edn., Chicago: University of Chicago Press (1951).

3 Gk. διὰ τῆς τεκνογονίας.

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‘God who made the world and everything in it is the Lord of heaven and earth ... From one man he made all the nations, that they should inhabit the whole earth.’

Here ‘one’ is masculine, ‘one man’. Some manuscripts have ‘one blood’. Paul’s statement goes against the contemporary Greek view that Greeks had a different origin from barbarians.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> Bruce, F.F. *The Acts of the Apostles*, London: Tyndale Press (1951), pp. 336-337.

**ERNEST LUCAS****A response to Nelson**

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We are grateful that P. G. Nelson's letter gives us an opportunity to clarify and expand some points in our paper. Despite its length it was necessarily concise because of the range of subjects it covered.

The paper does not say, or intend to imply, that the inspired authors of the Old Testament drew directly on *Enuma Elish*. This text is only one witness to the ideas about creation in the ancient Near East, which had a great deal in common but were not completely uniform. In *Atrahasis*, which is an earlier text, there is an account of the creation of humans which is closer to that in Genesis 2 than is the account in *Enuma Elish*.<sup>1</sup> In it, at the instigation of the god Enki, and with his help, the womb-goddess creates seven pairs of male and female humans out the flesh and blood of a god mixed with clay. Following their creation marriage is established, 'A wife and her husband shall choose each other. Ishtar shall rejoice in the wife-husband relationship.' The similarities with Genesis 2 are: humans are made from a mixture of material from a divine source and from the earth; there is explicit mention of the creation of both sexes; marriage is instituted. There are differences from Genesis 2: the divine source in Genesis is the breath of the Creator God, because for the Hebrews there was only one God; the woman is made from the man to stress that she shares his nature and so is fitted to be his partner (2:18, 23) and is not some other kind of creature like the animals that God also created out of the ground (2:19); marriage leads to the man's leaving his parental home whereas in *Atrahasis* he stays in it with his wife. It is in these differences that we see the distinctive theological messages that God gave to the Hebrews, but the messages are clothed in cultural imagery taken from the way the creation of the world and humans was thought of in the ancient Near Eastern.<sup>2</sup>

The New Testament passages quoted by Nelson do not require a literal understanding of Genesis 1-3. If, as we suggest in agreement with Walton, God was able to reveal to the Hebrews the theological truths he wanted to within the context of the ancient cosmology and anthropology which they shared with their contemporaries in the ancient Near East, the same can be true with regard to Paul. As we note in the paper, it is possible that Paul, like many Jewish teachers of his day, understood Genesis 1-3 in a figurative way. Even if he did not, God could lead him to theological truths that were relevant to the pastoral situations he addressed based on

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1 See Dalley, S. *Myths from Mesopotamia*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, rev.edn., (2008), pp. 14-18.

2 A recent, readable, book written for 'ordinary Christians' which sets out in detail the evidence that the cosmological outlook of the Bible is essentially that held throughout the ancient Near East is: Parry, R.A. *The Biblical Cosmos*, Eugene, OR: Cascade Books (2014).

the Genesis 1-3 without needing to update the essentially ancient Near Eastern anthropology these chapters reflect. In fact, what Paul says needs to be understood in terms of the cultural situations of the churches he addresses and it is not surprising that he addresses them assuming the cultural understanding of human origins which his readers held.

In 1 Timothy 2:11-15 Paul seems to be dealing with a problem of recent women converts in Ephesus who were bringing into the church strange teaching about Adam and Eve. This may have been an early form of later Gnostic teaching, evidenced in Ephesus, in which Eve appears as a saviour figure and the creator of Adam.<sup>3</sup> Paul says that these women are not to be allowed to teach but are to be given sound teaching based on the Scriptures.

Bruce Winter<sup>4</sup> has argued persuasively that in 1 Corinthians 11:2-16 Paul has two concerns. One was that in covering their heads in worship men were behaving in a way that priests did in certain pagan rites. The other was that women converts might be bringing into the church the loose sexual mores of what historians now refer to as 'the new women', which are written about by Cicero and Plutarch and reflected in the poems of Ovid. This included rejecting covering their heads, the mark of a modest and faithful wife. Paul is addressing culturally symbolic practices of his time using the theology about the male-female relationship revealed in Genesis within its ancient Near Eastern cultural clothing. In the paper we argue that that theology, especially regarding the image of God, is compatible with an evolutionary understanding of human origins.

Nelson rightly says that the theological point of Paul's words in Acts 17:24-26 is that all humans have a common origin and therefore share a common humanity, which challenged the contemporary Greek view that their origin was special and made them superior to those they regarded as barbarians. We understand that common origin theologically, all are created by God by whatever means God chose to use, not anthropologically, that all have a single human ancestor as in the figurative account in Genesis 2.

So, these three Pauline passages are not intended to teach those he addressed science, but to make theological and pastoral points. To adapt Calvin's comment on Genesis 1, 'If you want to learn anthropology, go elsewhere,' not to these passages.

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3 See Clark Kroeger, R.&C. *I Suffer Not a Woman*, Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House (1992), chaps. 13-16.

4 See Winter, B.W. *After Paul Left Corinth*, Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans (2001), chap. 6.