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#127 How do I reconcile Evolution, the Fall and Original Sin?

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Ask NT Wright Anything - Premier

If evolution is true then physical death existed before the Fall - how do we reconcile that with scripture? How do we reconcile evolution with the concept of a first man and woman and original sin? Did the Fall also affect the rest of the universe?

Tom answers listener questions on evolution, creation and Genesis.

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Transcript

The #AskNTYanything podcast. Well hello and welcome to the podcast that brings you the thought and theology of New Testament scholar and former Bishop of Durham, Tom Wright, this is just in head of theology and apologetics for Premier Unbelievable and the show brought to you in partnership as usual with Tom's UK publisher SBCK and NT Wright online who published Tom's video teaching courses. And it's a hot and sweltering UK that we bring you this week's show from we've had record temperatures.

But I hope it's been bearable even temperate wherever you're listening to the show from and today on the show we're asking how do I reconcile evolution, the fall and original sin. Tom will be responding to questions including if evolution is true then physical death existed before the fall but how do we reconcile that with scripture and how do we reconcile evolution with the concept of a first man and woman and original sin and did the fall also affect the rest of the universe. By the way had a lovely message this week from Hannah's who said I'm thrilled to be part of the unbelievable and ask NT Wright anything family.

Although I've studied theology and also completed a master's degree in death related counseling it was really exposure to NT Wright's teaching that caused transformation in my heart and mind. I've actually followed NT Wright, John Lennox, Justin, Dallas Willard and many others on the unbelievable show. I wish to thank Justin and especially NT Wright for opening my spiritual eyes, a wonderful experience, the real Jesus, the truths about the kingdom, the background of the first Christians and refreshing perspectives on the various issues pertaining to the New Testament.

It certainly was not my experience during the time of my studies most regrettable. The wasted years must be be known but also transformed to a brand new time of understanding. Gosh I'm so grateful that the show has been helpful on your particular journey, Hannah's.

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Again that's premier unbelievable.com. For now, into today's show. Well it's a delight to be joined by NT Wright again for today's show. We're going to be looking at a couple of episodes where we look at your questions around the fall, around sin, around creation, evolution, childbirth and that sort of thing.

We've got questions from Romania and Worcester as well and various other parts of the world coming up. Tom welcome back to the show. You've been busy recently.

I know that you've been out in Texas. Tell us what you were doing there recently. This is my first transatlantic trip since I think November 2019 because of the pandemic.

Normally I would go to America three or four or five times a year but that's been all held over. And so finally I got to go and do some lectures in Houston and then Euaco, true at seminary there, which was great. Very hot, reminding myself just how different Texas is in terms of climate to where I normally live but there we are.

It was great fun and to see old trends and so on. Good wonderful stuff. And any particular projects in the timeline at the moment, Tom, I know you're always, always busy with one thing or another.

Well, the lectures I did in Euaco, I did 10 lectures covering Romans 8, 10 lectures on a single chapter. It happens to be one of the most important chapters in the Bible. And so I was able to walk through very slowly.

This was a development of lectures that I'd done at Wycliffe Hall last autumn. There they were, I think, half an hour lectures. These were more like 45 minute lectures.

So I was able to expand them a bit. And for me, having studied Romans all my life, it was fascinating to be able to spend time again getting down as the phrase now is into the weeds of it all and into the deep interconnections and discover some things which I guess we're not going to talk about them today but which are really quite important in terms of how we read Paul as a whole. Well, good.

Well, perhaps we can... I hope that's not too tantalizing. No, well, perhaps we'll benefit from the fruits of that at some point in the future. But good to see you again.

As I said, we're going to be talking about the fall on today's show. In fact, the first question from Phil Musk in the UK relates to John Paulkinghorn, who he's obviously been reading. John Paulkinghore, of course, passed away, I think last year.

Did you know John at all while he was active? Yes, I did. I did know John. We were on the Church, Bing and Doctrine Commission together.

He was a genial, obviously brilliant physicist as well as theologian, but he was a cheerful, friendly chap who's good to be around, always, always fun to be around as well as hugely intellectually stimulating. Yeah, absolutely. And if you get a chance to go and listen or watch anything that John Paulkinghore did, you'll find him a fascinating individual.

But here's Phil's question, which is I've been a devotee of your podcast since his Egyptian. Thank you very much, Phil. Although initially bewildered to learn that my faith was based on platonic dualism and not really biblical.

Thanks to the podcast, I now have a much better understanding of Christian theology and great respect for Tom's wisdom, understanding and knowledge. Now in the Paulkinghorn reader, science, faith in the search for meaning, John Paulkinghorn shows that evolutionary biology and Christian theology can quite successfully be brought together. However, Paulkinghorn seems to assume a fallen state existed when life occurred, rather than there being a specific event once humans came into being.

What is the best way to understand the fall? It seems fundamental to Christian theology

and to correctly understand the state of the world. And from Genesis, it looks to me like physical death might have existed pre fall and therefore evolution pre fall would be a possibility. So is there a biblical way of understanding the fall, which also allies it with evolutionary biology? That's Phil's question, Tom.

Go ahead. Oh my goodness. Thanks very much, Phil.

And when I read this question, when Justin sent them to me, I thought, okay, there's at least one book to be written on this, probably four or five, because quite neatly, this question has covered several enormous interlocking topics in theology, in biblical studies, etc. Let me say one thing first. We have to distinguish between the evidence for biological evolution and the worldview, which we might loosely call evolutionism.

The worldview, which is evolutionism, is a modern form of ancient Epicureanism, according to which, since God or the gods are out of the picture and don't intervene, everything that happens in the world happens under its own steam. The problem is that just at the same time, and with some of the same people who were researching biological evolution in the 18th and 19th century, there was also a drift towards modern forms of Epicureanism and evolutionism, so that they tried to claim that the things which were evidence for biological evolution within species or of species, etc. were actually evidence for essentially a god outside the picture, worldview, Epicureanism, or some form of deism, perhaps.

That, of course, was enormously popular for quite other reasons, particularly political reasons, that if God is no longer in the picture, he's not going to intervene, we can do what we like, we can run the world our way. People have then reacted against biological evolution, as though it automatically means evolutionism, which it simply doesn't. In fact, when Darwin's origin of species came out, several deeply orthodox theologians in North America and elsewhere simply said, "Well, if that's how God did it, that's how God did it." In other words, it doesn't mean that evolutionism is true, it just means we have a greater understanding into the ways of the Creator.

That would be the position that I would take now. And, of course, Genesis 1, 2, and 3, and on beyond, are very specialized, very tightly constructed. People often say poetic, not in the sense that it rhymes or scans, but in the sense that it's a vivid image of the great truth about God the Creator, making a world which is other than himself, but of which God says it is very good.

And that's a way of saying that all the things that we perceive and feel to be wrong in the world are not actually the best intention of God the Creator. However, God the Creator builds into creation right from the start, well, from the sixth day, the day in inverted commas, and this creature called humans, male and female, who are to reflect his image into the world, who are to be his co-workers in the project of creation, because creation isn't a tableau. Look here it is like a picture on the wall.

It's a project. It's going somewhere. And the problem of the fall is that where God intended it to go was aborted because the humans who were supposed to be taking the project forwards decided to rebel and to take a different project forwards, namely their own self-aggrandizement.

And you can see that then woven into biblical theology all the way through. But the truth of Genesis 1 and 2 is a way of saying this was not God's intention. This was not how it was meant to be.

Now, of course, there is plenty of evidence in the archaeological fossil records, etc., etc. That there were all sorts of phenomena long before homo sapiens appeared on the earth. And there were other forms of hominids.

I don't know very much about this, but from what little I've read, that looks to be the case. And this, of course, explains not only the giants and people later on. How do they relate to the atomic line? But also simple questions like where did Cain get his wife from and issues like that.

Which people have been aware of for years without it really troubling them. In other words, it looks to me as though what we're seeing in Genesis 1 and 2 is God's call to one particular hominid pair to become God-reflectors, to become image-bearers in God's creation. And God is saying, "Now, I want you to take forward this project of beauty and creativity and love and glory, etc., not that there weren't any other similar creatures around, but that they were chosen rather like Abraham and Sarah were chosen in Genesis 11 and 12, that God says, "Now, I've got this project for you." And that's the analogy that I see because there's lots of overlaps between what is said about Adam and Eve in Genesis 1 and 2, and what is said about Abraham and Sarah in Genesis 12 and forwards from there.

So that's where I would come at it. I think part of the problem is that our theologies in the Western world have got very rigid in terms of an analysis of the fall and then sin and death. And I think Genesis is saying it's somewhere like this, it's something like this.

These are truths which we can only really grasp by singing them, by writing poetry about them, by long meditation and so on. And remember this, evil does not have a logical, proper place in God's good creation so that all our language about evil, whether evil powers or the fact of evil or the result of evil is always philosophically speaking absurd. It doesn't actually belong within an account of God's world, the way it's meant to be.

So our dilemma about how to talk about the origin of evil and cetera reflects itself that great central truth that this is not how it's meant to be. So we don't have an easy way of factoring in what we want to say about evil and sin and death into our overall picture. And that's just the way we are.

We are ourselves being part of the problem as well as God willing part of the solution. That's a really helpful introduction to the whole area which, and you've tried to encapsulate in just a few minutes what is obviously something you can fill a whole book with. We've got other questions that continue to draw out some of these issues.

And I forgive me if I'm pronouncing your name wrong, but someone who I think is called Ionut in Romania says greetings, "How should or could we understand or interpret the biblical account about the existence of a first man and woman, especially about the origin of the woman from the side of the man, and about the original sin, especially women's implication in it, in the context or in the light of the theory and very probable existence of evolution." So again, similar is sort of question. I suppose Phil specifically deals with the issue of physical death and the fall. This one, this concept of the idea of sin going back to that first decision in the garden and so on in the story and a first man and woman.

So there's again a lot to unpack there, but how would you reconcile this concept and perhaps you want to rethink the concept altogether, Tom? I'm not an expert on what the alternative ancient views of the origin of men and women may have been at the time, but it seems to me that one of the many things that Genesis may be saying about Eve being made out of the rib of Adam is that even Adam are meant to be complementary. I know that that's a very loaded word these days and I'm not building in there anything about subsequent gender roles in ministry, etc. But they're meant to work together, in other words, over against philosophies which would see a masculinity as the genuine article and femininity as somehow a subordinate secondary, almost reprehensible reality in itself moving towards Aristotle's view.

Genesis is saying no, they absolutely belong together and the sense of joy in Adam saying this is now a bone in my bone and flesh of my flesh. It speaks of a rich, happy, effective, creative partnership rather than a subordination. And I think that's really, really important.

The trouble is again through the Middle Ages and through into Western theology and both in Catholic theology and in some forms of Protestant theology, there have been various attempts made to blame Eve for everything. You see that in some interpretations of first Timothy though I suspect we shouldn't get into that just now. But also the sense that the woman is somehow, she's not getting it, she's getting things wrong and that it's her fault that Adam is led in led Australia, etc.

Which actually doesn't make sense because if that were so, then Adam should have said no Eve, we don't eat that stuff and you know that perfectly well or whatever. So I'm not sure that we should try to take those basically ancient Near Eastern texts, texts which were probably written roughly a thousand or more years before Jesus and probably edited roughly 500 years or so before Jesus. Ideally we can take those texts and simply

try to get from them answers to questions which became important for some theologians in some circles within the last thousand years in the Western world.

I think there's a basic problem there and we have to back off, there's a certain epistemic humility required of us when we take these precious fragile texts and try and force them to fit the categories. It's like taking an electrical appliance which has a particular kind of plug and trying to force it into a socket which was made for a different kind of plug. We all know that if we have smartphones and our nearest and dearest have a different kind of smartphone, no this one doesn't work here and I want to say that about quite a lot of potential theological join-ups.

No this one doesn't actually work there. So where do you go with the question of original sin then just to come back to Inert's question, is there something that happened in the early stage? The question of what we call original sin comes into Western theology with Augustine and it's Augustine's reading of Romans chapter 5 verses 12 and following which is the real problem. That Augustine basically was reading the New Testament in Latin, he probably understood some Greek but that was not where he lived as it were and he read Romans 5, 12 in terms of Adam being the one in whom all sinned and that's not what the Greek text says and so he was trying to find a way of explaining the origin of sin by this one act which then creates a sinful species and I think that the biblical account is much more subtle than that.

When I was first reading Romans as a New Testament scholar trying to understand this stuff I realized to my surprise that there is no Jewish doctrine of original sin. The Jews who knew Genesis extremely well and soaked themselves in the Torah and in the law, the prophets and the writings, they did not develop any equivalent theology of original sin nor is it there in the second and third centuries. It's only with Augustine that he pulls it together and it's part of his battle with Pelagius and this is of course again and again a problem in theology that people are faced with one particular battle and they see all other issues in relation to that.

An American friend sent me a book that he's just written which was all about one particular battle in his particular church circles and I was reading it last night and thinking this is fascinating stuff but I don't know anyone who is involved in those battles and I don't think we have that particular battle in the UK at all or hardly noticeable and I think that happens again and again in theology. So we have to back off and say yes there is something mysterious going on here in Romans 5, 12 through 21 picking up of course the language of Genesis but it's a way of saying that ever since the original human pair called to be God's image bearers out of as I said before, the presumed hominids who were around at the time, the pair that were called to take forward God's project towards his ultimate new creation, rebel and God doesn't then say okay well we'll cut the thing right there, he nearly does with the flood and knower and all that but no he persists in saying we're going to work through human beings because that's how my

creation was designed to work and I think there's a Christological meaning to that that God creates humans in his own image against the day when he will come himself and be a human within his own creation and that's a very profound thing to say and then ultimately and this is perhaps the ultimate answer to this question. We only really discover what the problem was when we see what the solution was and when the solution comes at the climax of all four gospels when the God who became human who lived and walked among us and denounced that this was the time for God to become king when this man Jesus died on the cross and it's only in retrospect that Paul can look back and say oh my goodness now at last I can see just how devastating a plight we were in but it's not something that Paul before could have read out of Genesis one, two and three so I think that's that's the most important thing the hermeneutical issue we ultimately have to start with what God has revealed in Jesus and part of what he's revealed is that sin was that bad and death was that terrible and that this is what it required to put it right but again this doesn't give us and I think Augustin and the whole tradition of the western theology from Augustin onwards was in danger there to say we can now produce this precise theory of how original sin actually works.

Well one more question from Timothy in Worcester says we know our physical world was affected by the fall sin impacted the natural context in which we live but did it also affect the heavens when space probes bring rocks from Mars etc I find myself wondering what impact if any the fall had on the heavens the stars out to space and so on. Well just before we tackle the outer space sort of question of the rest of the heavens I mean firstly do you agree with Tim's statement there that we know our physical world was affected by the fall how do you take that Tom would you say there was a physical outworking of this rebellion that happened? I think insofar as using the standard image Adam and Eva called to look after the garden when they rebel the garden rebels as well you know it's a standard thing that God created humans to look after his world and when they say no we're going to do our own thing we're going to exploit this world for our own purposes then the garden goes to rack and ruin and brings forth thorns and thistles and that is no doubt a vivid metaphor but also I think a reality and we can see it writ large all around us at the moment with the ecological crisis etc so I do think there's a direct causal connection there even though we can't trace all the particular ramifications of it and even though there are some things in what we call the natural world you know like tiny little insects whose whole life is to prey on and eat from inside other creatures etc I mean I know about that stuff it doesn't make me think the whole picture must be wrong it merely makes me think there is more mystery there than I or probably anyone else is ever going to understand in this in this present life so that that's where I would start with that but let me say the question that uses the word the heavens in a very very much a sense of outer space within our cosmos the Bible uses the word heavens sometimes to refer to the sky but often to refer to God's space which is not another location within our cosmos but a different kind of space intersecting with our world in various complex and puzzling ways so when I first read this question I thought it was going to be about the

battle in heaven in Revelation with Michael and his angels fighting against the devil and his angels and clearly there is something going on there which again is very mysterious and it challenges our assumptions about how the cosmos actually works how the total cosmos that is our world and God's world and how they work together but it looks as though there is something about God's world which also involved subordinate beings angels etc and that there was a rebellion in that world which goes with and in some theologies actually preceded the rebellion in our world which is why there is a snake in the garden etc. Again this is a very mysterious area I know people who specialize in it and I am not one of them but that's that's kind of mapping out where the problem lies so in terms of then what we call out a space the stars the planets etc.

I don't think we have any means of knowing right now whether human sin human rebellion affected any aspects of meteorites planets stars galaxies black holes etc. I just don't think we know that I don't even think that John Polkinghorn knew that and he would have known it if anyone did but and I think this question or one of the others cited C.S. Lewis's planetary trilogy out of the silent planet Phog to Venus and then that hideous strength and Lewis was exploring that supposing in other worlds there was a perfect world and or supposing that a rebellion happened in those other worlds as well then what again these are ways of projecting ideas outwards I'm not sure that any more than that I'm not sure that we can actually say for sure this is how it actually is or was. Well thank you very much for doing what you can in you know trying to answer some of the these big questions and we will come to in a future episode of the show aliens and outer space again as you mentioned Tom so look forward to that but for now we're going to give it a pause here and we'll pick it up again next time as we continue to look at fall and sin and particularly the issue of childbirth as well a couple of people are writing in about that so we look forward to picking this up again but for now thank you very much for being with me this week Tom.

Thank you good to be here. Well thank you for being with us on today's show and next time we've more questions from you about Eden and the fall including why did God make childbirth difficult let's see how Tom handles that one. If you want more from the show including ways to support us so we can create more of these conversations around thinking faith do check the links with today's podcast or go to premierunbelievable.com for now thanks for being with us and see you next time.

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