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#58 Genesis, 6-day creation and the first humans

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Ask NT Wright Anything - Premier

Does Tom believe in 6-day creation? When did the first humans 'made in God's image' appear? These and other questions on creation and evolution are tackled by Tom. Plus a bonus song on the end of the episode! Tom and geneticist Francis Collins perform a duet of their song 'Genesis'. To hear their conversation on the BioLogos podcast: <https://biologos.org/podcast-episodes/n-t-wright-francis-collins-a-christian-response-to-coronavirus> · Book for the Unbelievable? & Ask NT Wright Anything conference on Sat 15 May · Support the show and receive a free book - give from the USA or Rest of the world · For bonus content, the newsletter, prize draws and to ask a question sign up at www.askntwright.com · Exclusive podcast offers on Tom's books and videos from SPCK & NT Wright Online · Subscribe to the Ask NT Wright Anything podcast via your preferred podcast platform

Transcript

The Ask NT Wright Anything podcast Well hello and welcome along to today's edition of the show. I'm Justin Briley, Premier's theology and apologetics editor and the person who has the privilege of sitting down with Tom Wright on a regular basis to ask the questions that you have for him and today looking at your questions on Genesis creation and evolution and today's show brought to you as usual by Premier SBCK and NT Wright online and I'll be letting you know about special offers from SBCK towards the end of today's show. You can find out more about the show, further videos, how to ask a question yourself and more resources by registering at Ask NT Wright dot com.

You can also support the show too to receive our special e-book from Tom with various questions that he's answered over the last couple of years on the show and if you're listening from the states we'd love you to do that from our new website there, premierinsight.org and click on Ask NT Wright Anything. Had some lovely feedback that was left actually as a comment on the podcast, on a review of the podcast by Michael McDavid who says I'm a big fan of NT Wright, I nearly quit being a Christian after falling away from the fundamental stiff views of my tradition when I thought all was lost until

my lovely wife Victoria gave me the New Testament in its world for my birthday last April. She said it was on her hearts to get that book after seeing it at the local Christian bookstore.

What that book did was spark a new hope in my heart and really helped me in my life. Since April I've read numerous books such as Surprised by Hope, The Day the Revolution began simply Christian and a few other books by other wonderful authors. I'm now going to Bible College in my hometown in Canada to hopefully be a light in my community and beyond.

All I can say is thank you Tom for your work, Lord bless you and Justin. Michael what a wonderful comment to receive out of the blue as feedback to the podcast. Wonderful, thank you so much for sharing that.

Great to know that your faith has been revitalised as it evidently has by Tom's writing and I hope you're getting a lot out of the podcast as well. And you can leave a comment too wherever you're listening to this on podcast. It really helps others to discover the show like Michael by leaving a podcast review and a rating wherever you're listening from.

And at Michael and anyone else listening may be really interested in seeing Tom speak at this year's Unbelievable Conference happening on Saturday the 15th of May. Unbelievable.live is the place to book your seat from wherever you are in the world and we're making it happen at a time that will work wherever you are hopefully in America especially. How to tell the greatest story ever told is our theme.

How we can tell that story afresh to a new generation and loads of other great speakers joining us for the day. Lots of ticket options a premium ticket with bonus stuff or for the first time I pay what you want option as well. We don't want anyone to find that finance stops them coming along to this year's conference.

So do book your place now at unbelievable dot live and we are looking forward to welcoming many people from all over the world for this special online conference Unbelievable the conference 2021. Well time to get into today's edition of the show. Well we're returning on today's show to issues around Genesis creation evolution Adam and Eve.

These frequently come up and as ever this isn't your main area of expertise and I'm sure you will frequently point people onto other scholars in this area Tom when it comes to these sorts of questions. So I'm sure you'll do that as we go through some of these. But let's just start with Eric in Williamsport's question he's in Pennsylvania and says do you believe in a literal six day creation event.

This is what I've always been taught but there is some teaching that the Hebrew you'll

have to help me with the Hebrew here Tom. Tohu wa bohu is it in Genesis one translated in English as without form void is in reference to millions or billions of years and possibly another civilization that may have existed before us all around with the dinosaurs and so on. Is that viewpoint supported by scripture.

So essentially I think Eric asking if if you do take a sort of literal interpretation of Genesis the early chapters is there still room for sort of a large epoch of time in which you know other civilizations and so on can exist. I want to say to Eric I understand where the six day creation stuff is coming from. I've written a little about the backstory of these debates in a couple of chapters in my book surprised by scripture and I can't possibly summarize it all here so please do get hold of that and look at those chapters because I think it's really quite important.

Also I would strongly recommend books by my friend and colleague John Walton who teaches Old Testament studies in Wheaton College Illinois and John has written several books including a commentary on Genesis but also a remarkable book called The Lost World of Genesis One where he says look let's go back to the time when Genesis one was being written and see how people in those days would have understood this idea of the six stages of something being put together and he argues very strongly that that sequence of six with them the seventh being the time of rest describes in the ancient world the creation of a temple a heaven plus earth structure very carefully ordered so one two three and then four five six kind of map on to each other in interesting ways I can't explain that in detail right now but do please read what he said because it opened my eyes and I think I think it's opened many people's eyes to the fact this text was never meant to teach a literal six day creation the idea of the literal six day creation came in particularly because of rationalist critiques of Christianity in the 17th and 18th century with then Christians saying oh dear we have to shore up our belief in the Bible it must be literally true or we're all doomed and then this idea of literalness becomes a sort of a wooden one dimensional thing and Genesis is anything but wooden and one dimensional of course part of the answer is Genesis two is also a creation narrative it doesn't sit wood and live firmly on top of or underneath Genesis one these are two great amazing epic poetic descriptions and they are meant to work together and to give us a sense that the ultimate truth of creation is something bigger than both of them to which they are both pointing and that I think is really really important so I wouldn't pin this on Tohu Bohu in Genesis one two I think nobody in the ancient world would have imagined that this referred to six periods of 24 hours for a first start the first one or two the sun isn't even created yet so how do we know what 24 hours are like and so on it's a richly poetic imaginative story which doesn't mean that it isn't true it means that the truth of God's creation is much richer than simply a kind of bare mathematical account of how it happened so that's perhaps the most important thing to say okay we'll continue digging into this with other questions that have come in here anyway Tom such as John in Sydney Australia who is an earth and environmental science and geography teacher

says I've studied earth sciences I teach biology and astronomy to year 10s but I do have uncertainties about the age of the universe and the age of the earth's timeline where humans come into that timeline and the whole evolutionary process from primordial soup to human beings seems to John at least vague and far from definitive so John's question here is human evolution a plausible scientific theory based on the scientific method and reliable data i.e. sapiens are at the end of the line from other primates for instance John Lennox in seven days that divided the world suggests there's a reasonable faith in a supernatural God bringing humans into the story or timeline by direct intervention or creation therefore in a sense separate to that evolutionary tree of life and that there could be backing for that from the Genesis text and so I'm not expecting you at this point Tom to sort of you know have a lot to say on the specifics of genetic you know well maybe you would go to your friend Francis Collins for that sort of stuff but the the he but this is an interesting question because there are those who say even within a sort of an older view and you know some sort of evolutionary story there's there are those who would say nevertheless humans are a special creation that sits outside of that and that's important often for theological reasons it might be that they believe that you know to have sort of some sort of sense of original sin you have to have a first de novo couple if you like and obviously others who say no it's just you know we are part of a group population but that you know God perhaps elected a first couple or that this is more meant to be understood as some sort of general sort of idea that humans took on some form of consciousness and moral responsibility to God and we just have a picture of a first couple given to us in Genesis so there's a number of options on the table that people have talked about the interest obviously in where you stand on this I'm sure John would like to hear that but what you make of those who maybe do suggest as he suggests John Lennox might be hinting at that there is a sort of a case for a special creation of a first human couple. Yeah thanks I mean Justin you've summarized that brilliantly and actually in some ways answered it for me but yeah I wrestled with this some years ago when I was working with the Biologos Foundation and you mentioned Francis Collins that's his brainchild and he brought me in on that which was very exciting and I started to think about the way that the book of Genesis actually works and the way in which the stories of Abraham Isaac and Jacob again and again echo the story of Adam and Eve there are all sorts of verbal links and just so it began to dawn on me that just as Abraham is chosen out of the peoples of the earth and given a very specific permission a very specific covenant and knowledge of God etc etc to carry out God's redemptive purpose for the world so it looks as though Adam and Eve are a primal couple chosen from among the proto hominids and as you say I'm not going to get into the specifics of exactly what hominids were around at a putative time but chosen and given a special vocation a special awareness of the creator a special sense of being charged with a task that both of all the creatures that were around God chooses this couple and says now I want you to look after my creation and you must be fruitful and multiply and this is an outflowing purpose it's like Israel being placed in the the holy land and being given a command Adam and Eve are given a bit of territory to launch this project from and it

remains deeply mysterious but this actually hooks up with another question that you've asked from Shirley in Hastings about where Cain's wife came from and I link those two together because the first time I thought about that I remember thinking oh yeah Cain marries a wife and has children who is this lady was it its sister did Adam and Eve have a daughter and he married there or or what and I think no it's not like that at all I think Cain goes out and there are plenty of hominids plenty of human like people out there and Cain starts a family and then before we know what's happened Cain has built a city well he hasn't got enough siblings and offspring yet to build a city so who are these people they must be other hominids who are around and the Adam and Eve project is to bring God's order into the otherwise chaotic ongoing sequence of events and again I'm not a geneticist I'm not an anthropologist I can't give you chapter and verse in terms of whose research backs this up but simply reading the Bible this seems to me to make a lot of sense I see that quote from Sydney in Australia about John Lennox saying you can have reasonable faith in a supernatural God bringing bringing humans into the story or timeline I want to raise a slight red flag there this word supernatural because up until the 18th century supernatural meant stuff that ordinarily happens but within which God does new things but from the 18th century onwards it's tended to mean well the natural world is over on one side of the table and then there's something called supernatural which is completely different which is God breaking in and rupturing the whole process and I want to say well God is God God can do whatever God wants but this seems to me more supernatural in the first sense of God working with the grain of his creation to say that within that there is now something new that I want to give something which will bring wisdom and delight and fruitfulness in a whole new way to my creation so that's how I would read it and again I would stress this is not my primary field it's not even my secondary field but this is how since the New Testament refers back to the early chapters of Genesis quite a lot this is how I've come to read those chapters and I think it behoves us all not to get caught up in the rather sterile debates of the last hundred and fifty years particularly in America but to say and Sydney is an earth and environment mental science and geography teacher earth science is great go for it and there's lots we don't know you say it seems vague and far from definitive an awful lot of sciences like that I listened to a program on the radio yesterday when I was in the car talking about how in chemistry and physics a lot of what happens happens through people immersing themselves in the data and then coming up with guesses at hypotheses which they then have to test and while that's going on it is vague and far from definitive but thank God that that's what the scientists do because that's how the whole thing advances just one final question this is my one really keying in on some of what you said there Tom I mean how important is it that we do have a sort of an idea in our head of how it works in the timeline whether it be you know a group a pair of hominids a special creation and how much does it make a difference to those issues that some people do seem to invest a lot of importance in around you have to have a first Adam for you know Jesus to be the second Adam you have to have a you know first couple in whom there there is this rebellion this sin this this original sin that which then kind of gets passed passed down

that line I think I think that's quite important which is why I why I reject the idea that Genesis one is just about gradual evolution of hominids and there are lots of them around etc that Adam and Eve is just a cipher for you know hundreds of people roaming the Middle East or wherever it is and I do think that it indicates that at a certain point out of the available hominids God actually shapes and chooses a pair who are given special responsibility and then mess it up and of course that whole narrative of Genesis three and four is itself I don't know Genesis three particularly is itself deeply richly symbolic what is this tree of life what is this tree of knowledge these are very profound and I do not have an inside track on them I wish I did but the idea that this is to people the like of which there's never been seen anything remotely like it before and that they're in a literal garden with two trees no I think this is a failure to read a failure to understand what sort of a story this is but in that sense you don't treat it as history in that sense as we would call history today but the fact that it isn't history in the sense that we would mean it and it couldn't be because we can't research that it is the you know the fact that it isn't that doesn't mean that they're kind of in a first pair who actually did mess up and who since they had been tasked with responsibility for bringing order to God's good creation in a new way then when they mess up God can't just say oh well forget that let's do it some other way God is then committed to working through Adam and Eve's descendants which is why he calls Abraham and I again I'm pressing you on things that you're welcome to say I just don't know just did but but is it important in that sense that we are then descended from that particular pair I suppose and if the science said no we've got all kinds of different you know genetic traces from from the other hominids in us is that a problem I'm sure we do and I don't know the DNA of that but I don't see that as a problem in the same way that it isn't a problem that I'm not descended from Abraham physically we are incorporated into the family of Abraham and the Adam and Eve project was intended to bring the whole creation including surviving hominids into a new way of being a new responsible wise way of looking after God's creation and in that sense we're all we're all part of that of course what that challenges which needs to be challenged anyway is any idea that sin is a kind of a genetic thing passed down through the act of sexual intercourse from father to son or mother to daughter or whatever we need to think more wisely and more flexibly about that but but yes I am here obviously not on my not on my primary field as is no doubt obvious to many listeners well I could recommend one book that's really stirred up this area recently Joshua Swamadas a book called the genealogical Adam and Eve which he's been in dialogue with people like Francis Collins and others over a very very interesting new new area of research he's a so-called computational biologist and and a Christian and has made some really interesting ideas opened up some interesting ideas about the way that we could understand the the story in the future because I'd like to see that yes I will I will anyway for now thank you very much Tom thanks for these questions as well and I hope they've been helpful in some way and we'll see you again next time. Well thank you for listening today and for your questions on Genesis and just before the podcast ends we've actually got a treat for you Tom recently teamed up with a world famous geneticist to perform a

rendition of a song that they wrote together so listen out for that shortly next time we'll be looking at your questions on evangelism and don't forget that SBCK Tom's UK publisher have some special deals on Tom's books too for podcast listeners you can find the links in the show notes you can also find out more about the show there at ask nt right calm and indeed do head over to unbelievable dot live to register for our upcoming conference with Tom you can attend live wherever you are in the world and be part of a live edition of this very show on Saturday the 15th of May that's an unbelievable dot live so now to leave you with that little Easter egg I promised Francis Collins is a world renowned geneticist and founder of Biologos now directing the US Institute for Health and working on the USA's covid response but last year around the time that Francis was awarded the Templeton prize Tom appeared with him on the Biologos podcast and as part of that they both pulled out their guitars for a duet of a song they once wrote together while at a conference is called Genesis so suitable for today's theme and any similarities with a famous Beatles song are I'm sure entirely coincidental now you may have heard actually Tom's solo version of this on a previous podcast back in the archives well here's his version with Francis Collins and thanks to Biologos for laying in his air this and do go and listen to Tom's full conversation with Francis over at the Biologos podcast too.

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