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#12 Genesis, evolution, Adam and Eve and The Fall

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Ask NT Wright Anything - Premier

Tom Wright joins Justin to answer listener questions on how to interpret the early chapters of Genesis, what he believes about the nature of Adam and Eve, whether suffering and death existed before the fall and much more... He also pulls out the guitar once more for a Genesis-themed song.

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Transcript

Hi there, before we begin today's podcast I want to share an incredibly special resource with you today. If you're like me, life can get pretty hectic pretty quickly, but one thing that helps me slow down is connecting with God in new ways. And I'd like to share a resource that has really helped me do that.

It's called Five Ways to Connect with God. And you can download it for free right now at premierinsight.org/resources. I think you'll find refreshment for your soul. So go right now to premierinsight.org/resources and download your copy.

That's premierinsight.org/resources.

[Music] Well hello once more it's Justin Briley with you theology and apologetics editor for premier. The person who gets the pleasure of sitting down every so often with New Testament scholar and prolific author Tom Wright to ask your questions here on the show brought to you by premier in partnership with SBCK and NT Wright online. And today in episode 12 we're returning to the Old Testament with your questions to Tom on Genesis, evolution, Adam and Eve and The Fall.

And Tom's going to be pulling out the guitar again for something special at the end of

today's show so stick around for that. It's a song with lots of Genesis overtones and based on Bob Dylan's shelter from the storm. Now if you'd like more episodes, updates, the bonus video content or indeed want to ask a question yourself for a future program do please register at [askNT Wright.com](http://askNTWright.com). And congratulations to all the winners of the Bible for everyone.

That was a competition we were running through to the end of March. Sign copies of that book on their way to the winners including Barry in London who was delighted when I told him he was getting a hold of a copy. Do get yourself subscribed though to the newsletter so that you're automatically entered into any future prize draws on the podcast.

Again it's [askNT Wright.com](http://askNTWright.com) to do that. Right time to get into today's questions.

[Music] Welcome back to the show.

It's the askNT Wright anything podcast with me Dustin Briley and Tom Wright. And we're back again with our Jaffa cakes and our fruit and our cups of tea. It's got to that point in the day where we're onto the tea.

And that's a rather good thing because we're going to be tackling a big old subject. Genesis, evolution, Adam and Eve, The Fall. These are the questions that I've brought together for today's podcast, Tom.

Of course in a previous podcast you played for us that song you composed with Francis Collins. I thought I had tremendous words. There's a lot of depth to it but obviously a song can only say so much and so can a podcast at the end of the day.

These are big issues aren't they? Sure. We'll do our best though. Let's start with George in Mexico.

Thank you for listening from Mexico, George. And he says it's simply the age old question, very sleep. Is it indispensable in the interest of a strong Christian faith to be able to reconcile the findings of science with the literal interpretation of the Bible? Oh my goodness.

Two big questions there. I sometimes say to people the trouble is you think the jigsaw has pieces of this shape and you're trying to fit them together like that. But actually over time that piece of the jigsaw has got out of shape and so has this piece.

So the phrase "the findings of science" is always in fact fluid. Every scientific finding is a hypothesis in need of verification and again and again it may take a generation or two but then along comes Einstein who says actually we're doing it wrong. Now we'd need to do it like this and that goes on and likewise what do we mean by the literal interpretation? And obviously over the last two centuries the question of the Bible being

quote literally true unquote has been massive particularly in North America where a particular strain of rationalism came in with the Enlightenment broadly in the 18th century and much of American Christianity seized onto that in a false war, a phony war between people saying it's all rubbish, it's all myth, it's all just made up and other people saying no it's all literally true and pinning that onto the idea of the authority of Scripture which comes through in Protestantism ever since the Reformation that if you're challenging the authority of the Pope or the Church well what you've got instead well it's the Bible the Bible must be literally true otherwise we don't know what to believe and then so the Protestant emphasis on the Bible comes together with the Enlightenment emphasis on rationalism and you've got a big problem especially when then Epicurean scientists like Erasmus Darwin, Charles' grandfather are saying we've got to look at the way the world makes itself which is ancient Epicureanism with a modern twist and then Charles Darwin eventually gets on a boat and discovers some turtles and finches and so on bingo got it this is how it all works sort of but then the new thing there is the survival of the fittest and people forget that what that means is like the idea of monkeys typing Shakespeare and you have got to imagine really rather a lot of near misses so for evolution to work you have to stretch it out of a massive millennia and the ancient Epicurean saw this as well as the modern ones it's not a modern idea but this is where the idea of evolutionary development which I think most modern Christians would happily accept in some way or form gets hooked up with a modern idea of progress that actually this is where everything is progressing and therefore we the scientists are telling you the way the world is we're telling you the way history is going that's where the problem comes because actually science doesn't do that and actually in order is a so-called literal interpretation of Genesis either and very often when we're talking about the quote-unquote literal interpretation of Genesis we're talking about the very early chapters and we're talking about the creation narrative and in that sense you know this is a question from me rather than a listener that I think a lot of listeners will be asking this question is simply if in a nutshell you were asked to say to someone who's confused how am I supposed to read Genesis if it's not a scientific description of how the world came to be what is it I am reading? There are several layers and we loosely refer to it as poetry and of course it isn't poetry in the sense that it isn't composed in the same way as say the Psalms are it doesn't have that kind of verse structure but it's poetic in the sense that as only poetry can it's saying three or four or five things at the same time and my friend and colleague John Walton from Wheaton College has written very helpful on this in terms of the ancient Near Eastern world that forms the context within which Genesis would have meant what it meant to the lost world of Genesis I think that's right he's written several books and a commentary on Genesis I think two commentaries on Genesis if I remember rightly and part of the point there is that this description of something being created in six stages ending with an image being put into it is the creation of a temple the image being humankind in Genesis one yes if you create something this structure which is a heaven and earth structure which it is and if the last thing to go in is an image and then the God who's made it takes his rest that's coming in

to take possession this is now God's home this is where he wants to be with his human creatures and so it's a way of saying look at the whole creation the way we look at a temple and then it also means turning it round look at the temple in Jerusalem as a microcosm of the whole creation and certainly the decoration of the temple indicates that as in the tabernacle and the wilderness as well so that suddenly a whole world of cosmology is opened up which has nothing whatever to do with were these six periods of 24 hours now actually most British Christians and I think most Christians around the world don't get hung up on the six periods of 24 hours in the way that some Americans still feel they have to and it's a shame it's because that major event happened in American culture the scopes trial was it 1929 something like that was somewhere around there which you know nobody else could have had that that was a post civil war northern liberals versus southern conservatives flexing their theological muscles and everyone wanted to know what was going to happen about this because it was sort of are we going to be in the modern world or the ancient world with all sorts of overtones that was a very America specific thing I never tired of saying this because these questions regularly come from American people often don't realize how peculiar that context is that needs demystify the cultural context often determines the kinds of questions people are asking but here's here's some actually from Surrey Derby and Romania places who were asking related questions and particularly to do with well how did what are the results of the fall if there is a long evolutionary process involving death and decay and so on so I'll just read all three of these are asking similar questions Malcolm in Surrey says it's said that creation and evolution are not in conflict simply different ways of describing the same thing but whereas creation teaches that death came into the world through sin evolution teaches that death was in existence from the beginning can that circle be squared if not is the gospel message invalidated Ada in Romania says I don't know how to view creation in terms of the understanding we now have of science evolution again implies death suffering fear survival of the fittest etc how does this match with Paul's teachings that through sin death has entered the world and again death came into the world through a man but also with God's declaration of the goodness of the initial creation and finally Jamie in Derby who says you believe that heaven is a restoration of the heavens and earth it was originally in the beginning you also believe in millions of years of evolution what we see in the fossil record is millions of years of bloodshed cancer disease suffering and death so according to your worldview all that horror existed before sin what exactly will a restored earth be like and what exactly was the physical punishment for sin if all of that existed before sin sorry to be blunt but your worldview doesn't seem to add up says Jamie so yeah clearly there are again if I spoke before about two pieces of judicial puzzles about 10 there and they're all in need of cleaning up and I'm not necessarily the right person or the best person to do all of that cleaning up however it does seem to me that I take the point completely if there is a long period before that primal pair of hominids find that some strange force or power or presence that they were only dimly aware of seems to be saying to them you a special I've got a job for you to do that rather does imply and many theologians have said this

precisely that the call of call them out of the same sake of argument is itself the creators act of saying now there's been a lot of mess and muddle and decay and so on but now we're going to have a garden and this is going to work out thus and so and they are called to be God's agents and instruments to bring his wise order into this creation which has hitherto been without form and void to who are born when they then rebel this is at a different level as it were so that there is yes decay and death in the fossil record in trees and plants dinosaurs whatever but when they are told on the day that you eat of it you will die there is something else going on there a different level which I think may correspond in some ways that I've not really worked this out to what you get in the book of Revelation when it talks about the first death and the second death that there may be different different levels different meanings of death and that Paul is definitely looking at the second one but the other thing we have to realize there is that as with Genesis one and the temple so with Genesis three if we assume as most people do that the Pentateuch is being edited at least during the Babylonian exile and it's seen as a whole so that there's a narrative arc from the beginning of Genesis to the end of Deuteronomy clearly the end of Deuteronomy is saying if here is the law given to Israel if you obey you will live if you disobey you will die and what will die mean it will mean exile the curse of exile in Deuteronomy 27, 8 and 9 picked up at the end of Leviticus 18 as well and then there is the prospect of restoration but that's how the narrative works and so anyone in Babylon in the Jewish community in sort of the middle of the first millennium BC writing or reading or editing Genesis three would say we know exactly what the story is about here's a family who are given a task given a lovely land to live in told to be responsible who blew it disobeyed and they get kicked out and that is the ultimate death because how can you sing the Lord's song in a strange land in other words this is already an allegory of Israel or vice versa Israel is to be seen as acting out what's happened to all the human race so you've got these different bits of the great Jewish story jangling against one another and until you've put all that back together again it's hard as it were to put the different elements into a rationalistic scheme and say well Paul says death entered so how are you going to do that so I'm not saying that solves the problem in a sense it complexifies further but I think it's a healthy complexity which then enables us to say that there are levels of death that God's choice of the humans was in order precisely to bring new life and coherence to the chaos that when they messed up this was the beginning of a new level of death which then had to have a new sort of injection of life that the work of the ultimate human Jesus has to do what Adam and Eve were supposed to do but also to rescue them in the process and that I think is why Romans 5 12 to 21 is such an incredibly difficult and dense passage Paul is saying all of that at the same time right well let's talk about that again from a different perspective Robin down dairy asks what is Genesis 3 by which I assume he means the sort of passage about the fall about Adam and Eve the rebellion trying to tell us about a fundamental fracture between God and man why does Western theology in particular appear to traditionally focus on the fall and the curse why would God curse and banish a mankind that was created in love and blessing about 20 years ago maybe even more maybe 30 years ago

there was an American called Matthew Fox who was actually a Dominican except the order then didn't like him anymore and they I think he became an Episcopalian actually as many do and he wrote a book called original blessing which was a kind of an answer to original sin and he was basically a new age proponent who used to go and stay up at the community at Fintoorn up in northern Scotland and so on and it was an odd mixture I once did a television program with him one of other people and it was an odd mixture of bits of genuine Christianity with bits of extraordinary new age stuff from it must have been the 80s actually and there the emphasis was the Western church ever since Augustin has been fixated on sin and curse and death and oh dear and how do we get out of that but in fact creation was always wonderful and good the danger with rejecting the dualism is that you buy into a monism where as with other forms of monism like stoicism it's very hard to have any critique of evil at all if there's anything you don't like in the world in other people in yourself then as Epictetus says the door stands open your free to leave in other words stoics commit suicide if they don't like the way things are it's fine to be an original blessing person when the sun is shining in your family being nice to you and you know you've got money in the bank for most of humans for some of the time and some humans most of the time is not actually like that and so most humans most of the time are faced with the question well yes there are great good impulses but things have gone horribly wrong it's like you know people say well I can't believe because of the problem of evil but if you're an atheist you have the problem of good why would anything seem other than random if you're a complete atheist and Dawkins I suppose would say it's atavistic impulses of remembering hunting rituals from when we were in the trees and so on the things which seem good to us are really related to those primal instincts or something like that I'm carrying a teary so I want to say yes God created the world and he created it good but the goodness was never static it was always Genesis one is the beginning of a project it's not a tableau this is really really important so that in the New Testament it isn't a matter of saying let's go back to the garden I can say the garden is a very famous song by Joni Mitchell who has that you've got to get back to the garden no where the garden was the beginning the garden was God's project which turned into a city was it meant to turn into a city when Cain built a city isn't that interesting the Tower of Babel says no book of Revelation says well yes actually but not like that so it isn't the Tower of Babel humans reaching up to God the New Jerusalem comes down from heaven to earth so the garden is meant to be the beginning of a community which turns into the garden city the danger is that it turns into a city which is purely human arrogance etc and those are the images we ought to be looking at because those are the things which say yes to the goodness in creation no to all that's infected and corrupted it and now where is this going to go what is the New World towards a terrain the Ask Anti-Write Anything podcast is brought to you by Premiere in partnership with SBCK and Anti-Write Online now Anti-Write Online is the place where you can find all of Tom's online theology courses taught by Tom himself in video format now if you've been around church you probably know the Lord's Prayer but have you ever really thought about it and why Jesus gave it as the model for talking to

God in his brand new course Tom will guide you through the context that informs the Lord's Prayer the deeper ideas in it you may not have noticed and practical ways in which the Lord's Prayer can shape your daily spiritual practices and podcast listeners can get it absolutely free just go to ntwriteonline.org/askentiright Anti-Write Henry and Wimborne has a question which I sort of want to add another question to you.

Henry asks did sin come into the world through Adam? Satan was already present and along with him sin if God is going to finally deal with Satan and annihilate him why didn't he do this before he created Adam? I suppose I want to go to another facet of that which is but what do you conceive is what happened when that fall whatever form it took that rebellion happened what did that sow into creation and how is that something that is responsible for the physical attributes you know this creation that is subject to decay as well as it puts it. Yes in a sense I want to say the creation was before the call of these two hominids was already decaying and going through a cycle but the human project was to take it from there and move it into the new way that God intended to be. It's very difficult to cash out Genesis 3 into any other sorts of propositions whichever things one does there will be elements missing and this is of course notorious and but I do want to say that the early pair if they were a pair and I don't much mind if there were exactly two of them but you know what I mean.

The early hominids who are given this vocation are thereby given a call to worship the creator and reflect his wise stewardship into the world and somehow there is something there is this tree in inverted commas and this snake in inverted commas which say there are other possibilities here do you have to do this and I wouldn't go all the way into the traditional quote free will defense unquote as though we had to have freedom in order for it to work but something like that needs to be said along with all the other things that are going on and part of the rationale of why there's a snake seems to be that in the lavish extraordinary creation that God made. Once you get away from sort of thinking of God simply with the six period saying I'm now I'm going to do this now I'm going to do that and I'm going to end the conversation. Once you move with something like John Polkinghorn into a much more open idea of God there we say experimenting God saying let's do giraffes why not.

Let's let's do pineapple so you just have to think around creation a bit and yes and you have to say God was having fun with this stuff but out of all of that God is a much more unpredictable God the danger is that I think ever since particularly the dayism of the 17th and 18th century we tend to see God as the clockmaker as the one who's made a machine that ought to work and if it isn't working it's his fault for making it wrong and I think that's a fundamentally wrong view of God. I mean coming back to Henry's question where he asked sort of about the role of Satan in all this and I have heard others speak of the idea of a sort of fall before the fall the cosmic fall which at some level proceeds and is kind of I've heard the the allegiance to speak of that as being that the thing that creates the nature of the universe into which Adam and Eve are this project of rest. I'm

not sure about the word nature but but but there's some sense in which the cosmic fall you know and I forget these are reference in Scripture but where we only have a very brief mention of it but the idea that there was an angelic rebellion.

It's the beginning of Genesis 6 where the watchers you know and this is where some of Milton comes from and so on the rebellious angels who get crossed because it seems that God is going to make these human beings who are going to be his primary agents and these angels think hey that's not fair we ought to be that. There is enough in Scripture about that in some of the Psalms as well actually for one to say something like that seems to be there. What we have to have again and again with Scripture is appropriate hermeneutical humility.

This doesn't mean that we can't know things it means that we just may not have very good language for this and I think they were as aware of that as we are. Just like we today we talk about there seem to be some forces unleashed you look back at the history of the 20th century and you say in the 1930s there just seemed to be demonic forces unleashed. I have no idea what that phrase actually means but what we're saying is more was going on here than simply the sum total of a few wicked human beings.

Something else was at work rather like Scott Peck says in his book *People of the Lie* that there's a certain amount that humans just do by messing up but then there is another dimension beyond that. It seems to me that to project that back onto early cosmology cautiously is quite a wise thing to do because Scripture does seem to be doing that and that doesn't exactly explain why there's a snake in the garden but I think you have to say something about the freedom of God and God's lavish letting be God saying let there be this let there be that and the things that God says let there be to are not puppets. There's a sense in which God doesn't control them like the author of a novel does and doesn't control the characters if the author of a novel tries to control the characters too much be a very bad novel.

Yes, let's get a last question in from Esther and in Texas and I think this does fall into the sort of whole free will sort of question but Esther and says one question I've never found an answer nor have seen discussed among theologians and I did study theology and philosophy and he says he understands the Bible passage may be allegorical but how could their disobedience be a punishable sin if they were created pure and couldn't tell the difference between a good and evil before committing the sin. If they committed the sin willingly it means they chose evil over good and could already tell the difference if they did it ignorantly and couldn't differentiate good from evil then God would have been unfair in his judgment. And logical answer in my view according to the story of Genesis is that they already knew good and evil.

Yeah, this is a cleverly argued little bit of sort of philosophical speculation and as an exegete as a historian I'm always wary when theologians or philosophers say this must

have meant or would have been or whatever because I want to say hang on what is being smuggled in here and I would want to take that whole paragraph and just gently unpick it and say we're sure about these moves here because when somebody addresses you and says I love you you are my people I want to reflect myself through you into my world then this isn't oh now we have a sort of a moral index of what good and evil means it means oh wow you are amazing we are your people we bask in that how delightful and the giving of a command or a prohibition implies something about this is what you ought to do obviously and you could stand back from that and say well hang on I'm going to be a philosopher for a minute and this means you're teaching me a bit about good and evil doesn't it but if they haven't got any such idea yet it says okay that's what he wants to do but then guess what there's some other way which is impinging upon us and I think the knowledge of good and evil in Genesis is just one of those very very profound things I don't think it's oh yes I know that there is a difference between good and evil I think it's actually a knowing by experience we have now found out what the difference is that good is life and evil means darkness and exile and curse so I think the knowledge of good and evil is not just a head knowledge oh yeah we've got this index and we understand that there is something called good and I think it's now you'll know what it's really all about it's the sort of experiential yeah like CS Lewis says somewhere about somebody who climbs up to a high diving board says you know you want to know what a 50 meter thing a dive is all about wait until you're standing there then you'll know what it's really all about that well thank you very much is there again a lot of ground covered there in various different ways just before we finish up you mentioned John Walton as a place to start exploring these issues any other recommendations for people who want to get get the head around the whole way to put Genesis together and the full and everything else I mean I have been very struck in the last five or six years well the last ten years really by this whole business of temple theology in Genesis Gregory Beal's book The Temple and the Church's Mission starts off with some of that and develops it in terms of forward looking way sitting back to creation the Church's mission is to be the temple of God in the world for the world against the day of the new creation etc that's been very helpful John Levinson the Jewish studies professor at Harvard who's a remarkable Jewish scholar he has a book whose title is just slipping my mind but you can say I will let people know I'm sorry this is this is just year old age kicking in plus the fact that I got up very early this morning I think I think it's creation and the persistence of evil but that that is a very sensitive and interesting Jewish reading of not any Genesis but what follows from it well I will make sure listeners have the correct title and where to get hold of it by the end of today's program for the moment Tom thank you very much thank you thank you very much and I can confirm that the book Tom mentioned there by John Levinson is creation and the persistence of evil it's published by Princeton University Press well thanks for listening to today's show but do stick around to hear some of the stories from Genesis set to another classic Bob Dylan tune in a moment's time it's also lovely to sign up to the show newsletter it's every fortnight it gets you bonus video content as well and exclusive updates and access to

book giveaways loads of opportunities if you sign up to the website also allows you of course to ask questions yourself so do go there to ask and to write dot com and get yourself subscribed Tom we've got another song from you always enjoy this part of the show where we get to hear something from the playbook of Tom Wright so this is something you've come up with again with friend of yours Francis Collins who's the well-known Christian scientist and another co-author on the front Brian Walsh I wrote the first three verses of this I had had the beginning of this song in my head for a year or two and it goes to the tune of Bob Dylan's song "Shulter from the Storm" which ought to be played in E major but my voice won't do that anymore so I'm going to play it in C just down a bit and because Brian Walsh is as well as the theologian is a great Dylan fan I sent Brian the first three or four verses and said what do you think about this and blow me by email back came another verse which I then fiddle around with and then I sent them all to Francis Francis wrote a special last verse for the biological conference which was coming up that doesn't really fit with how I'm doing it now so it was like a lot of things in life a rich collaboration sounds like the next you know Crosby Stills and Nash it's right Collins and Walsh yes yes but it tells the story of salvation from one or two unusual angles and kind of gets them scrunched up together a bit and had its first airing did you say at the Missio Alliance conference I think it had its first airing at a biological conference in Houston a couple of years ago and then I doctored it a bit and then did it at the Missio Alliance anyway let's hear it okay and the harmony of shelter from the storm is actually quite basic so there's not much guitaring it's just okay when Cain had married a local girl as they always knew he would and Seth was running the family farm and Abel was gone for good then Eve shook ahead and to Adam she said as they planted out the corn with a family to feed but what we need is a new world to be born when Cain had built him a city as they always knew he might and they planned a tower right up to the sky so the top would be out of sight then Adam sighed and to Eve replied as they faced the neighbors scorn a city means greed but what we need is a new world to be born when Noah decided to build him a boat and collect a floating zoo and it rained so hard that they called out the guard but was nothing they could do then Adam thought back to the snake and the grass on that innocent sunny morn and he muttered to Eve we've got to believe there's a new world to be born now Abraham had no family and he'd left his city behind and against all the odds he trusted in God not knowing what he would find then Sarah heard the voice of Eve a whispering in her ear it may sound funny but never mind honey the new world starts right here the new world's born in blood and pain and the birth pangs are severe when Jesus calmed the angry storm we knew that it was near as Eve stood weeping by the city wall and the temple veil was torn they watched him die with one last cry so the new world could be born so then the grave burst open and Adam sang in praise all creatures heard the good news and their victory song they raised on that Sunday morning early they blew the jubilee horn with the death of death and the spirit's breath the new world has been born one day the holy city will come down from heaven to earth a vast unnumbered family to proclaim the world's rebirth the lambs drew a bride with gates flung wide to welcome the bright new dawn with the

slaves set free and fresh leaves on the tree the new world has been born you've been listening to the ask and to write anything podcast let other people know about this show by rating and reviewing it in your podcast provider for more podcast from premier visit premier dot org dot uk slash podcasts what did that before did you know well there it is