



## We need to talk – a meander

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It happened again! On 15th March 2015, on the Yesterday TV channel the supposedly scientific observation was made which I had heard previously from David Attenborough that, in the book of Genesis, human beings were encouraged to exploit the created order at will. He, who is so meticulous and disciplined within his own large field, proved to be untutored and careless in making judgment in another field, seemingly without doing a minimal amount of homework to equip him to do so.

I am a great fan of David Attenborough. I think of him as a huge benefactor to all people of my time – with an outstanding camera crew unlocking features of our world which allow us to have greatly enlarged appreciation of the natural order on a scale never even thought of in my young days. I rejoice in his work. If he will allow it, I bless him for his capacity for engagement, sensitiveness and perceptiveness in his own field. But also, like Tom Thumb, he digs into a pie whose ingredients he seems to have failed to appreciate, and pulls out a plum without seeming to notice that it is defective. For the text of Genesis from which he quotes says the exact opposite of what he takes it to say.

I came across this form of blindness to disciplines other than one's own at an earlier point of my life. The need for different disciplines to be open and teachable before one another has been one of my lifelong concerns. The following quote is from my book on the work of Scottish Churches House, *Ecumenical Adventure*:

In February 1967, through the joint interest of Prof Ronald Gregor Smith and Principal S. C. Curran (Strathclyde University) a consultation took place on 'An Understanding of Man – Theological and Scientific'. Contributions were made from the fields of genetics, physics, sociology, psychology, and



philosophy – each speaker trying to indicate the relevance of his subject, and every listener tearing to shreds the so-called relevance of what had been expounded! It was the kind of gathering which called out for continuance; but a long illness from ‘flu which Prof Gregor Smith suffered in the following year and his death thereafter meant that the consultation process was deprived of its lynch-pin. The next consultation was to have had the relevance of theology as its main concern. It was guaranteed to get as harsh treatment as other disciplines suffered! (p. 126f.)

I remember clearly my own disappointment at the unanimity with which propounders of different disciplines expounded their own form as giving truthful access to reality, and dismissed out of hand the claims to reliability of other forms of access to dependable knowledge. In fact, a spur to write this paper came from the 22nd February 2015 *Songs of Praise* programme, where Stephen Hawking’s wife Jane spoke of how the testing of her faith showed her trust in God to be conclusively vindicated, while her husband Stephen dismissed belief in God as having no basis in reality.



### **The actual text**

Human beings are expressly forbidden to work their own will on the world in the first eleven chapters of Genesis. We humans are invited into a kind of junior colleagueship with God – in fulfilling God’s will, not ours, for the development of the world. The story of Everyman/Adam and Everywoman/Eve is of a world put all out of kilter when they refuse to seek and live by God’s will for the world – so loved as to have the Son sent by the Father to proclaim and evidence an authentic form of humanity, available to all, which would fulfil God’s purpose for it. We human beings are invited to seek, find and collaborate in that purpose as trustees of God’s intention for the world’s good and as stewards of the earth to fulfil that purpose. Otherwise the world will suffer.

To take these first chapters literally brackets David Attenborough with fundamentalists of a religious variety. The relationship of God

to the human, creaturely and natural worlds, and of these to one another, is too rich and deep to be expressed in prosaic language. Nothing other than poetry and parable will serve. The first chapter is not a primitivistic attempt to say how the world came into being and developed, but a prose psalm in seven verses. In turn there is focus on one after another of the marvels of creation: the ascription to God of the creative work and rejoicing in it; the reiterated chorus, ‘And God saw that it was good’, and, finally, ‘very good’. The device of using day and night as indicating a clear beginning and ending is used to herald a change of focus to fasten on another distinctive part of the universe. Concentration is given to each feature in turn, and then, as it were, a verse was ended and the next turned to.

The substance of each verse can provide accuracy where there might have been confusion. Jesus declared himself to be the light of the world – Genesis makes it clear that the world exhibits a foundational light, independent of the light of the sun. Sun and moon are not to be worshipped (Abraham left countries of moon worship in Haran and Ur of the Chaldees to go in search for greater knowledge of the living God). Moon, sun and stars are in place simply to fulfil a function.

That Everyman/Adam and Everywoman/Eve and a talking serpent should be taken to be anything other than a parable, beats me! A great enlightenment on the double character of human nature is given in the narrative; and an insight into God, who, faced with humans failing to live up to their calling, stays with them instead of going back to the drawing board to produce a more amenable type of partner. Finally, in the end and at cost, a new authentic humanity is shown in Jesus Christ.

David Attenborough, strangely, committed the elementary error of failing to take the whole text into account. He fastened on the word ‘subdue’ – human beings were to ‘fill the earth and subdue it, and have dominion’. But that is only part of the total text. Another angle on the role human beings were asked to fulfil in the creation is given in Chapter 2. The earth is depicted as an Eden. (In Rabbinic literature it was thought of as a place of rest, but, in origin, it was parkland of a Big House. I think of it in relation to the Grant Park in my native Forres, which was in Sir Alex Grant’s estate and was made over to the townspeople for sport and other open-air assemblies.) But the Eden in Genesis was not for layabouts. People had the assignment ‘to cultivate

it and take care of it'. That goes alongside 'subdue'. The dominion human beings were to exercise was in God's name and to fulfil God's will. It included both subduing and cherishing in fulfilment of the divine purpose. It was a mandate given only to human beings, not to animals.

I had heard Attenborough, in another presentation, say that the biblical account failed to acknowledge a close affinity between animals and humans. Untrue. The text refutes this allegation. In what is described as pertaining to the sixth 'day', a verse of the psalm brackets the animal and the human creations together. It also illustrates the difference. Human beings name the animals. Naming is an indication of 'power over'. The question is faced: can an animal provide adequate companionship for human beings? The answer is 'no'. It has to be those who are 'bone of the bone and flesh of the flesh' of one another. Animals are honoured as God's creation. Their role is subsidiary to that of human beings. We should appreciate qualities which are like our own, e.g. chimps using tools. But we must also cherish and subdue. That remains a human responsibility.

In a case where deer destroy precious growth of green plants and where deer breed at a rate disproportionate to food resources, subduing by culling will benefit them as well as the rest of the natural order. In the matter of the spread of TB, it is human beings who must make a judgment on whether to cull or resist culling badgers – do they spread TB among cattle? are they main agents? are there counterbalancing arguments to forswear culling? That human beings are responsible for making such decisions is clear in the Genesis narrative. If elephants go on the rampage, human activity must be taken into account – are human beings denying them a reasonable space, invading the reasonable space they need? It may be that it is human insensitivity which needs to be culled.

On the other hand, elephants culled for their ivory by poachers calls for responsible stewardship of the 'cherishing' order – a parallel mandate given to human beings. It is so with species deemed to be threatened with extinction. To 'cultivate and care for' also indicates the need for a sensitive use of land, avoiding pollution, balancing the competing need for space for trees and fields, and facing up to a future where inadequate food supplies might lead to a required reduction

of human reproduction. This could come into the commitment to stewardship laid on human beings.

I do not want to reduce in the slightest the debt we owe to the likes of David Attenborough and his mentor Darwin, and now Brian Cox, for enhancing our appreciation of the great variety of life on the earth. But we have to get over assumptions which have no basis in reality, such as that the Genesis text takes for granted that creatures were produced readymade – as if God acted like Tommy Cooper who would show empty cones to the audience, put them on table, then lift them to show bottles where, before, nothing had been. Beginnings could be tiny, human beings could be produced at a stage of evolution from material which seemed promising and could originally be in germ form.

One of the great movements of the Bible is from nothing much to a definitive place in the world's destiny: 'It was not because you were more numerous than any other people that the LORD set his heart on you and chose you – for you were the fewest of all peoples. It was because the LORD loved you' (Deut 7:7–8a). This accompanies the promise to Abraham: 'I will make of you a great nation [...] and in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed' (Gen 12:2–3). One person, Jesus, could say 'I, when I am lifted up from the earth, will draw all people to myself' (John 12:32). This tiny planet becomes, over billions of years, God's choice for enlightenment about the vast expanding universe. Allowance must also be made for the knowledge of the world that people had at different stages of history. Before gravity was identified and its properties made known, David Attenborough and I would both have been flat-earthers! There would at that time have been no credible understanding that the earth could be round without everything falling off it.



## The Big Bang

The brilliance of scientific investigation and discovery in our time has traced the development of the universe over billions of years to a point of initiation. Then it halts. How can the great and greatly expanding universe emerge out of nothing? There are speculations. Maybe this is only one universe and there could be, behind that

point of initiation, another universe or other universes. But that is unsubstantiated guesswork. Meantime, theological insights need to be taken into account. Two words give access to an understanding which makes sense of life. The start of the book of Genesis affirms, ‘In the beginning when God created the heavens and the earth’. What follows cannot be airily dismissed as mere imagining or fairytales – as, in ignorance, has been at times asserted; and there are plenty of scientists who are also people of faith.

The Hebrew word ‘*bara*’ (create) indicates that there are things which belong to God’s province alone. Said God to Job: ‘Where were you when I laid the foundation of the earth?’ (Job 38:4). There must be a willingness to believe that there are ‘things for us’ as human beings and things which are ‘beyond us’, in God’s domain. When the risen Christ meets with the original band of apostles and they want to know, ‘Lord, is this the time when you will restore the kingdom to Israel?’, Jesus’ reply indicates what is ‘for us’ and ‘not for us’. There is what ‘the Father has set by his own authority’ (Acts 1:6–7). That is to be accepted and worked with. It is not for disciples to probe into, but is for God alone to handle. What is ‘for them’, what they had not to get distracted from, is witnessing to the Christ they had known in his earthly life as only those could who had accompanied him throughout it.

When, using the gifts of their own disciplines, scientists trace life back to the Big Bang, what could be produced from ‘nothing’ was out of the reckoning of their discipline, in God’s province alone. Appreciation of this could lead them from further investigations, within their province, to turn to worship. God is God and that is that. The other significant word is the Latin word ‘*fiat*’ – ‘let it be done’. ‘God said, “Let there be light [...] Let there be a dome in the midst of the waters [...] let the dry land appear [...] Let the earth put forth vegetation [...] Let there be lights in the dome of the sky [...] Let the waters bring forth swarms of living creatures [...] Let us make humankind in our image, according to our likeness [...]”.’ And it was so, it was so, it was so. *Fiat!* The source is revealed. Theology must never again call the shots. Nor should any other discipline. There are times when the sciences concerned with the ‘how’ of life should be

appreciated and lifted high, but not be closed off from the disciplines concerned with the ‘why’ of life.



## Ways of knowing

Was there ever a better time for science to get into dialogue? As is the case with the word ‘catholic’ – a word of wide embrace which is changed in character when applied to one branch of the church – so, in common speech, the word ‘science’ has been limited. The word ‘*scientia*’ simply describes what we get to know, and knowledge comes in many ways. There are modern translations of the Bible which give the start of Genesis 4 as ‘Adam had intercourse with his wife, and she became pregnant’. I delight in the rendering ‘now the man had knowledge of his wife’. A deep form of knowing is involved. We know through establishing relationships and what they reveal. Richard Dawkins may be a prey to superstition, putting blind trust in one form of knowing without any evidence that it has uniquely trustworthy access to reality. He has a life-partner and he was not led to that commitment by knowledge gained by scientific investigation, but by courtship – knowing through relationship. The same words which may be translated in terms of sexual intercourse are used for knowledge of God.

Such knowledge does not come from piling up information about God expressed in all parts of the world – that gets you nowhere. Knowledge of God comes from something akin to courtship – from accepting a relationship in which you can test what is real and what is not. Agnosticism can be a reverent admission of things which don’t seem to square. Atheism can be a stance of integrity. Believers may be alerted by it to defective stances and practices which may cover up idolatries which we have sanctified. We believers need to be made aware of the danger of living a lie. Listening and waiting are gospel concerns. The hymn which says ‘O speak, and make me listen’ suggests an arm-twisting God, quite unlike Jesus Christ. He said ‘You’ve got ears to hear, use them!’ When it comes to sensitiveness to other branches of reality from those with which we are familiar, listening and expectant waiting can be gospel requirements.



## Separated worlds

From the same shared experience Stephen Hawking and his first wife, Jane, drew contrasting conclusions. His was that there is no God – human beings have to make positive use of their endowments and resources and get on with it; hers that God’s presence and power is the most real thing in life, and that God is present and can be turned to cope with whatever blessings and challenges are thrown on our paths. They took different readings of a shared life experience and left it at that. Away back in 1967 in Scottish Churches House, consistency in a group representing different disciplines was expressed by affirming confidence in their own means of access to knowledge – and dismissing such reliable access to other disciplines, though all participants shared the same era and culture. I do not believe that humanity can leave it at that. At the time when I saw the film *The Theory of Everything* the human race was being reminded of the Holocaust. I have walked through Auschwitz, the concentration and extermination camp in southwest Poland. The testimony of survivors and the provision of detailed information have brought home the horrors of viciousness to which humanity could descend.

I would not want to use all that to reject a basis for trust, of a limited kind, in human nature – because there is evidence of hope for the world in the positive use of human resources in God’s long patience with us throughout history. God stays with us. Instead of looking for an alternative, God came in Jesus Christ – not to dismiss ‘the human’ as unreliable, but to evidence a form of humanity willingly offered which the Father could work with to bring the kingdom of light and truth and peace into being. That new, true humanity can be ‘put on’, to enlarge and transform the humanity of all of us when we respond to God’s offer and become co-workers, that God’s kingdom may come and God’s will be done on earth.



## Genesis’ substantive character

The first chapters of Genesis are like a prelude to a symphony. They give notice of the themes and insights which will be developed in the Old and New Testaments and in history. We are faced with a Garden



of Eden choice – are we to take God’s way in bringing creation to its fulfilment, or reject God’s offering of collegueship? God gives us space to make genuine, not forced decisions, depicted in the narrative by God’s giving representative human beings room to make their own authentic choices. At that time God is depicted as being elsewhere. Then we are shown we must live with the result until we learn better. History is a testing ground which shows how choice of God’s way issues in its affirmation at some points and rejection at other points of a divine purpose for life.

More recently in a TV programme in the *Horizon* series, Genesis was mentioned with at least some measure of appreciation. Scientific investigation had traced back the expansion of the universe to a point, after the Big Bang which it found to be well described in Genesis 1: ‘The earth was a formless void and darkness covered the face of the deep’. The assumption was that the text was simply a primitive imagining of life’s beginnings. As such it was awarded a B-minus mark. Science would keep pressing ahead to get nothing less than an A-plus mark.



### **Five points for consideration**

1. There is need to make it clear that, in the Book of Genesis, history does not start till the end of Chapter 11, with the arrival of Abraham on the scene. Up to that point, insights into basic relationships – God to the universe and especially to humanity, humans to one another, humans to other creatures, to the created order – are communicated in poetry/song, parable and genealogies (not attempts at family trees but devices to mark the passing of time and continuity in the search for meaning in life).

2. The voice of Brian Cox is full of awe and wonder when he speaks of cosmological discoveries: an appropriate attitude. But attention needs to be given to the appropriateness of worship in a prose psalm as the setting for such awe and wonder. For worship puts all created things into appropriate perspective, e.g. the close affinity of the human and other creaturely beings and yet the distinctive status of the human, indicated in the ‘power over’ sign – giving names to all other creatures

(‘Earthman’ Adam names his wife ‘Eve’ only after the Fall – otherwise she is simply recognized to be the Life-giver); or dominion being given to human beings, not to have their own will but to discover and cooperate in the fulfilment of God’s will for creation. The goodness of God’s creation and the trust given to human beings makes sense of life and becomes a source of praise.

3. In considering the nature of human beings in handling the assignment to have dominion, their good and bad sides must be taken seriously. The challenge to humanity to make the most of life, prominent in cosmological thinking, is very much in tune with that of the Iona Community whose basic act of worship includes: ‘We affirm God’s goodness at the heart of humanity, planted more deeply than all that is wrong’. Psalm 8 could accompany the thinking at that point. I have seen in Auschwitz concentration camp the depths of human depravity.

4. There is need for disciplines concerned with the ‘what and how’ of life to engage with the ‘what and why’ of life disciplines. Those considering the primal point of creation, grateful as we should be for the marvelous work done by science, should seriously examine the ‘*fiat*’ explanation of creation out of nothing.

5. Paul’s insight in Colossians 1 needs to be given careful thought by all concerned.

*Jesus Christ ...*

*He is the image of the invisible God. He was there before all creation came to be. He is the one in whom all things in heaven and earth were created, things visible and invisible – thrones, dominions, rulers, powers – you name it. It was both through him and for him that all things owe their existence. On every count he is pre-eminent and it is in him that all things make sense and add up. THIS IS THE ONE WHO IS HEAD OF THE CHURCH! He who was first in time is also first to take on death and master it. On every count he is the supreme authority. The character of God*

*is seamlessly revealed in his earthly life. It was thanks to him and his sacrificial life, death and resurrection that the whole shooting match of all that exists can be at one with God and God's purpose.*

Good news! Go, tell it.