

THE FLAMING SWORD by Scott Hatfield ***February 17, 2008***

A flaming sword, that turns this way and that, bars the gates to Paradise. Adam and Eve, the original 'Bonnie and Clyde', are on the lam. Their crime: rebellion against God. The punishment: separation from God, suffering in childbirth, servitude to the Earth, sorrow, sickness and death. The Bible tells us a great truth: of all God's creatures, it is human beings alone who appear to know the difference between good and evil, and so we are aware, as the other beasts are not, that there is evil in the world.

Our awareness of these facts has led some to seek meaning not in this world, but in the next. We are comforted by the thought that Paradise might be restored, that in the 'Sweet By-and-By' the lamb will lie down with the lion, the spears will be bent into plowshares, and that death itself will be vanquished. To believe these things, to have hope in the next world, is part of what it means to be a Christian.

Other people seek meaning in this life, rather than the next. They search out the world as it is, with all of its sorrows and indignities, and they attempt to figure out what they can about the mysteries of the universe, in part because they wish to know about lambs, and lions, and how best to plow, and how to resist senseless violence—in short, they are engaged in a struggle against suffering and death. To commit yourself to making a difference in this world, out of love for your fellow creatures, this is also part of what it means to be a Christian.

So, from my point of view, I think we need to keep both worlds in our world-view! The gift of faith, which leads to hope in the next world, should work hand-in-hand with the gift of reason, which provides us with new means to share Jesus' love in the present world. As a science teacher, and as a person of faith, the season of Lent has deep meaning for me. We biologists know a thing or two about suffering and death, but that doesn't make us authority figures when it comes to temptation, or to sin. So, the scriptures I've chosen today talk about those things: the story of the Fall, the temptation of Christ. I'm also going to share a little science about snakes and such, and I hope you will find that perspective helpful, because frankly, in this veil of tears, we all need help.

As mentioned, the snake in Paradise is a symbol for temptation. One popular interpretation of the serpent is that it is a stand-in for the devil, that is to say, the Tempter himself. In Matthew's Gospel, Jesus goes into the wilderness and essentially denies his flesh to the limit of human endurance. As the King James Version puts it, : '...when he had fasted for forty days and forty nights, he was afterward an hungered.' To which the Scott Hatfield Version says, 'Duh!' If any of my kids were here, they'd probably tell you I can't go forty hours without a donut or a Coke. As Oscar Wilde said, 'I can resist anything except temptation.'

We can smile about that, but the truth is that hunger was just the beginning of Jesus' trial. Satan appears, and challenges him to turn stone into bread, that he might fill his gnawing stomach. Jesus declines, but the Gospel clearly implies that it was in his power to do such a thing, and yet he chooses not to. Jesus overcomes temptation, but he doesn't do it by banishing pain and suffering. He's going to the cross, to take on all the pain the world has to offer, and that's a bigger mouthful than any loaf of bread.

Who's responsible for this situation, this world we live in? Christians believe in a sovereign God, but where temptation is concerned, we seem to be like Adam and Eve, looking for some snake to blame.

Examples of young-earth creationist (YEC) claims: to the YEC, an 'originally-perfect creation' requires that lobsters not use their claws to defend themselves, that skunks not smell, nor roses have thorns until after Adam and Eve's rebellion in the Garden.

From the "Answers in Genesis" website. URL: <http://www.answersingenesis.org/aftereden>

But we can't get ourselves off the hook any more than we can avoid facing an unpleasant truth: if God is in charge, isn't he responsible? If we take the folk story which is Genesis 3 seriously, we have to admit that God **allowed** the temptation to occur. This is not an isolated episode: think about the angel who tells Lot's wife 'don't look back!' Or the Lord God himself, in conversation with Satan, 'have you seen my servant Job?' What could be plainer than Matthew's Gospel, which says 'Then was Jesus led up of the spirit into the wilderness to be tempted of the devil.'

So we can't, ultimately, blame the snake. God made Adam and Eve and all the rest of us free agents, able to choose for ourselves, and we can't be truly free unless we're free to rebel against God. And that, in a nutshell, is what sin amounts to: that we desire to set our own will above every other will, including God's will. Eve wasn't really tempted by the apple, any more than Jesus was tempted by a loaf of bread. The real object is power that doesn't by rights belong to us: we want to be in control, not God, and that's the real meaning of the Fall. Human beings were created for relationship with God, but we weren't satisfied with being higher than the angels. Communion has been replaced by rebellion, and so as a species we are so much less than what we could be, because our sin has driven a wedge between ourselves and our Creator. ***A flaming sword, turning this way and that, bars the gates to Paradise.***

Now does this mean people should long for the times when we didn't know the difference between good and evil? I don't think so, but understanding why is going to require Christians to rethink their understanding of how God has chosen to act in the natural world, where sin and death and decay holds sway. This is the where faith and reason seem to be so often at odds today. ***A flaming sword, turning this way and that, is at work in the natural world,*** but many of us remain blind to its significance. Blinded, because of a pressure felt by many believers to choose between a religious belief in creation, and a scientific theory, evolution by natural selection.

Why does this happen? There are a lot of reasons, actually. I'm sure many of us know that Christians don't agree on how to interpret Genesis. Many are hung up on the question of how old the Earth is. These 'young-Earth creationists' are bothered by claims that the Earth is really old, and so they go to a lot of trouble to convince themselves that all the evidence for an ancient Earth is misleading or deceptive.

Most United Methodists, however, are not terribly troubled by those arguments as we are aware that the Hebrew word often translated as 'day' (*yom*) can be used to refer to many different lengths of time.

However, there is a more serious objection that can be raised, and it relates directly to the Fall. To many Christians, the Fall is not just a problem for human beings, its' a problem for the entire universe, which they view as cursed. According to this interpretation, before Adam and Eve ate the forbidden fruit, there was no pain, no death, no suffering anywhere in the living world. Once the man and woman rebelled, however, the universe was cursed by their sin and at this point death entered the universe and the animals began to hunt and kill one another for food.

Now that's a pretty grim idea, but you can get a feeling for how important it is to some believers by checking out these cartoons from **Answers in Genesis**, the leading 'young-Earth creationist' outfit in North America:

So, according to this view, before Adam's fall, skunks didn't smell, roses didn't have thorns, and if lobsters had claws they wouldn't have used them to harm a fly. And, presumably, snakes had legs. Now, as it turns out, some snakes still show signs of having legs. Pythons, in particular, still have vestigial pelvic bones that protrude through the skin, often labeled spurs. 'Upon thy belly thou shalt go,' says God to the serpent in Genesis 3, and so at first glance the story of the Fall **almost** seems like a scientific explanation. "This," a creationist might easily say, "is why snakes don't have legs any more, because the serpent tempted Eve in the garden."

Like I said, it sounds almost like science, but the thing is, this story doesn't explain why pythons have spurs and other snakes don't, why some snakes live in the desert and others in the jungle, why some snakes are poisonous and others are not, why snakes differ in color and size and so forth. For nearly two thousand years, the best explanation theologians had for the diversity of life was that's just the way God did it.

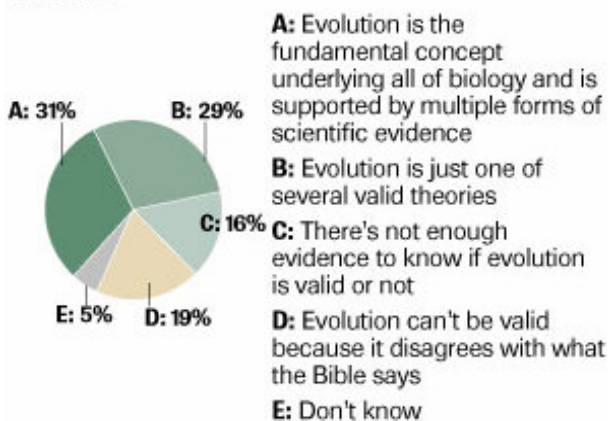
Now, I'm completely satisfied as a personal matter that God was somehow involved, but 'God did it' is not an explanation of how it happened, nor is it anything that will satisfy scientific curiosity, because we can't test it. The Almighty, it seems, has better things to do than to intervene on our behalf, by, say, hopping in a microscope or roaming on a Petri dish. But, in 1837, a British clergyman and amateur naturalist named **Charles Darwin** developed a line of reasoning that showed how new species of living things might come about on their own, without divine intervention.

Basically, populations tend to have more offspring than can possibly survive, but not all of the offspring are the same. There is variation in the population, and if being different increases the chances of an organism surviving and reproducing, then over time more members of the population will have the same variation. This process is very much like **the flaming sword** described in Genesis, turning first one way and then another, cutting down variations which are less fit in that environment, while sparing those which give their populations an advantage.

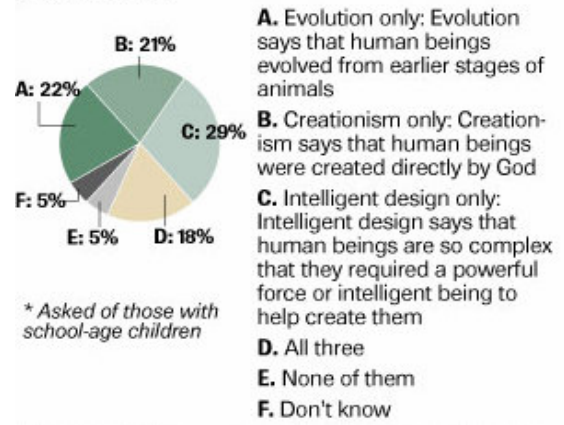
This principle, called **natural selection**, is today so well-established that it is completely uncontroversial in the scientific community. Natural selection causes populations in nature to evolve, and has even been shown to lead to the production of an entirely-new species.

Despite all of the evidence, Darwin's theory remains controversial in the general culture: here's an absolutely fresh-off-the-presses, up-to-the-minute survey from the state of Florida.

Which one of these best describes your opinion of evolution?



Which of these do you think should be taught in public schools?*



Graphs From: "Public: Faith trumps science; Proposed teaching standards are at odds with what most Floridians believe."

By Ron Matus and Donna Winchester, *St. Petersburg Times*, Feb. 15th, 2008.

There's a budding controversy there because the state is revising its science standards, in part because evolution is not even mentioned, and the science teachers are hoping to remedy that. Yet, here it is, the 21st century, but as these slides show, a hefty percentage of Floridians want to keep the Sunshine State in the Dark Ages.

Why is this theory so controversial? Many reject it simply because it contradicts their literal interpretation of the Bible. Others remain skeptical because they have a hard time visualizing how the process could've worked in the past. But perhaps the most telling objection is that, whether or not it seems factually true, evolution by natural selection just **feels** morally wrong. It's logical that there are winners and losers in the natural world, but that doesn't make it pleasant, and many worry about the philosophical implications of what has been called 'survival of the fittest.' Some argue that Darwin's thought leads to atheism, while others think evolution implies an immoral, dog-eat-dog world where only the strong, with their swords, survive.

Well, that's simply untrue. Evolution leads to competition, but it also leads to cooperation: fish that clean shark's teeth, flowers and their favorite pollinators, great reefs of coral whose bodies are home to millions of other sea creatures, and so forth. As far as atheism goes, I know from personal experience that the idea of evolution is a challenge to faith. But it's not an overwhelming challenge. The last time I checked, there are plenty of people like me who've grappled with the issues and concluded that faith and reason, religion and science, can go hand-in-hand. We don't need to be at sword's point with each other.

To me, how the world was made is one question that science continues to investigate, while how God loves the world is a mystery that can only be reached by faith. For me, that mystery begins in the life and teachings of Jesus Christ, who models for us the relationship that God wishes to restore to human kind, in this world and in the next. **A flaming sword, turning this way and that, is at work in the world today**, but that's **not** the end of the story. Ultimately, we come from God and we go to God. All the swords in this world won't change that, and how God unrolls the scroll of cosmic history, how the creation evolves, is less important than what we do with the life that we've been given. Follow Jesus, who urged us not to live our lives by the sword, but to overcome evil with good. Follow Jesus, and live to share his resurrection. Follow Jesus, and discover the life you were meant to live.