

Romans 5:12-19 February 11, 1999

Colleagues,

Last week I received the following letter. The writer, a Seminex alum, pastors a Lutheran congregation in New York state. If his question is not your cuppa tea, tune in next week. D.v., Robin Morgan will be on deck. Cheers!

Ed Schroeder

“Dear Ed, I need a little teaching now. The First Sunday in Lent is approaching and the 2nd reading is Romans 5.12-19, in which Paul writes of ‘sin came into the world through one man . . . [and] by one man’s obedience the many will be made righteous.’ This reminded me of a question that came to me when a friend of ours came over for Christmas and brought his collection of ‘National Geographic’ maps, including one of the evolution of humans.

“If Paul knew of evolution, how would he diagnose Original Sin? How can we? If we have evolved, how did we Fall? Was there something to Fall from? Sure, we may have failed to live in a Law relationship with God, so Christ creates the new relationship of Faith, but did we ever have an Eden relationship? How could we first have known God if we evolved? Was God always hidden? . . . This question has shocked me and I need bolstering. Preach to me.”

My response was:

Good question. A long time ago, Walt Bouman—retiring this year from Trinity Sem in Columbus OH—proposed a new creation “mythos” which might be useful for us folks tinted (tainted?) by Darwin. Only the basic idea of what follows is from Walt. Embellishments come from yours truly.

In the beginning God said: Let there be a Big Bang (the scientific astrophysics-mathematics of which are at least as incredible as God hovering over the “deep” that was “formless and void”). And it was so. And then God said: Let the stuff simmer a while (for what later on will be called a billion years) and then cool down in some places (another billion).

And let some of the juices in this cooling soup get together and jell into something—at least at one place in this cosmic kaleidoscope. Just for kicks let’s focus this part of the experiment in that rather smallish planet circling that modest-sized star over there in the Milky Way galaxy.

And we’ll call that new jelly-reality “living things” (another billion).

And after another billion or so (as humans now reckon it, although it was but a moment or two for the Generator) there were primates wandering the Olduvai Gorge in East Africa—and possibly other spots on the earth’s land mass.

And to one—or a pair, or a bunch—of these primates God spoke and said: “Adam!” I.e., “Humans!” And the Adam(s) looked up and said: “Huh?” [Comment: God addressing a primate as person says: I take up two-way conversation with you (or y’all). That means I thereby (i.e., by my wording to you, by my personally addressing you) trigger in you “response-ability,” i.e., both the capability to hear my address and the capability to respond. Later Hebrew writers will call this (if they ever learn to speak Latin) Imago Dei, the image of God.]

For a while (maybe just one day?) Adamic response-ability worked peachy-keen. But then something happened. It was as though these evolving anthropoids –now that they could hear and respond–started picking up signals from alternate voices (one in particular). They not only picked up signals from other voices, but they “turned” their attention toward them, they tuned in, and started following them. All of this, of course, to the dismay of the original Donor who had gifted them with this Voice-mail “special treat.”

The specs on the genesis of these other voices – especially that Arch-other-voice [where did it come from?] – with their contra-God message (“Did God really say . . . ?”) are as mysterious in this post-Darwinian mythos as they are in the Hebrew one you know so well. He, it, they, are just “there.” Thus the Hebrew tradition never explains it, especially in Genesis 3, but is content to speak of the “mystery of wickedness.” The upshot of humans (us recent ones too) listening to that other voice is that primal response-ability transmogrifies into ir-responsibility. Being responsible to the alien voice(s) = being ir-responsible to the Original Voice.

And the pitch coming from that “Alien Voice” in, with, and under all the creaturely voices he seems to have in his service is always the same offer: “Did God really say? Why not do it my way. My way is the way to go if you want to have life, life to the fullest.” Of course, it’s a lie. But that doesn’t diminish its winsomeness. To use last Sunday (Jan. 31) as a touchstone: That Anti-voice is always some “Superbowl Theology” offer–“Here’s how to be #1”–to replace THE Voice’s words in last Sunday’s lectionary texts: the beatitudes of Matt. 5 or the theologia crucis of I Cor 1. We’ll bump into that Anti-voice “big time” on the 1st Sun. in Lent when Matthew 4 is the day’s Gospel right alongside the Rom. 5 that prompted your letter. They must be related.

And the rest of the story you've not only heard before, but you like me have been enacting it.

Commentary:

We do not need an "historical Adam" to corroborate our own Adamicity. Some one, some ones, doubtless did it "live" the first time. But for us to learn all the specs on that primal/primate history is not really needed to verify that you and I experience the same "voice-over" phenomenon. Not only do we hear voices other than God's voice addressing us, we follow them too. And not just us, but the next generations we propagate do so too, even as we try to teach them not to. As Marty Marty once said: If you meet folks who do not believe in Original Sin, don't tell them about Genesis 3, just tell them to have children.

Ed Schroeder's sinfulness comes into Ed's world (and the world he intersects) NOT by the man back there in Gen. 3, but by the man born in 1930 in Coal Valley IL. The Hebrew notion of corporate personhood is, I think, in the mix with Paul's words in Romans 5. There is this one whole humanity that operates as depicted in the story of the primal pair of Gen. 3. We are all linked—both to the progenitor and to each other, not only by our biology, but by this Adamic operational theology whereby we interact and encourage one another. The uniform pattern is the same, as Augsburg Confession, Article II says: Original sinners don't fear God, don't trust God, and in place of these "don't's" we DO function "with concupiscence." Concupiscence being interpreted as "incurvatus in se," in Brother Martin's lingo, curving my life back into me. Put into more American terms, concupiscence afflicts sinners with the Old Blue Eyes syndrome: "Gonna do it, gotta do it, my way." That's the "one Adam-human" you find all over.

For that planet-wide dilemma, as you know and trust, there is another "one-human," a New Adam, also present on the planet, a new-creation "one-human." And that is not just one individual homo sapiens, although this new humanity did start with such a one, namely, that one Righteous One and his "obedience." You may remember from ancient seminary days how we parsed the term "obedience" to its Latin roots "ob-audience" (= listening-toward some voice). [The Greek "hypakoe" works the same way.] We noted in those days back at the sem (and it's still true!) that in Paul's vocabulary there were two different sorts of "ob-audiencing," it all depending on which word of God's personal address, law or promise, you were listening and responding to.

In Romans 5 Paul talks about this New Human's rightful "audiencing" [hearing and responding to] the one he called Abba. It's not just that one, it's a New corporate humanity aborning, and by virtue of the sweet-swapping of that first Righteous One, all the rest of us (= "many" in Paul's text that you cite) will wind up righteous too.

I think it is not insignificant that in AC II, the "fall of Adam" is NOT understood as the CAUSE of your and my dilemma. It is referred to instead as a point in human history, "SINCE the fall of Adam," after which all humans show up on the planet "not fearing God, not trusting...etc." For Melanchthon the big 'heresy' in being a Pelagian, i.e., fudging on sin, is not that you "got your doctrine wrong." Instead it's one side of what we used to call the "double-dipstick for heresy" when we were back at Seminex, "obscuring the glory of Christ's merits and benefits." Fudging on original sin winds up fudging on Christ.

That's why sin is worth fussing about. I'm glad you're one [of the remnant?] who still does fuss. All of the above may be more than you really wanted to know. If it's not what you need, call up Walt Bouman at Trinity Sem in Columbus OH. He mentored me

into this direction.

Pax et Gaudium!

Ed

P.S. For old stuff from Seminex days—if you've still got them around—look at Bertram's essay in THE PROMISING TRADITION (#13): "Informal Remarks on the Historicity of Adam," and Elert's section in THE CHRISTIAN ETHOS on "Image of God," p. 23ff.