

Parallel Thinking Part 25: The Formation of Man

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One of the most difficult conflicts to solve between Jewish wisdom and modern scientific thought relates to development of mankind. The Torah describes Adam as having been created on the sixth day of Creation. This was God's final act of creation before Shabbat. On the seventh day God stopped creating and rested (Bereishit 2:2). Yet the creation of man remains somewhat of a mystery. Written in the 2nd century CE, the Midrash *Seder Olam Rabbah* calculates the dates of Biblical events from the creation of Adam through to the conquest of Persia by Alexander the Great. This is the source from which we derive that the current Hebrew calendar year is 5777. This means that 5,777 years have elapsed since the creation of Adam.

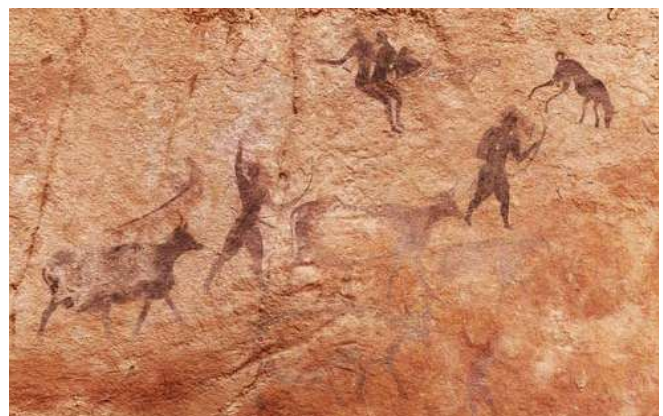
This presents a problem. According to modern anthropology, humans are from the species of *Homo sapiens*. The earliest remains of *Homo sapiens* are the Omo remains found in East Africa and date back to around 195,000 years ago. By the time the Midrash states that the creation of Adam took place, *Homo sapiens* had long become the only established branch of humans alive. Anthropologists describe this period as the middle of the Neolithic period, before metal tools were invented, but long after humans had settled into farming communities with domesticated animals. Human tools, cave art and musical instruments have been discovered dating back tens of thousands of years.

It would take a farfetched reinterpretation of the Midrash to match the dates of Biblical events and the ages of Biblical characters to the scientific origin of mankind. If so, who was Adam? What does the Torah mean when it describes his creation?

In the creation of Adam, God said: "Let us make man in our image, after our likeness..." (Bereishit 1:26). The use of the plural "us" is confusing. Surely God is the only Creator? The Ramban (Nachmanides, d. 1270) explains that man was created by God together with the earth, meaning the physical world. Man is partly physical body, just like the animals, but is also partly Divine soul. Rabbi Ovadiah Seforno (d. 1550) adds that "Adam" describes a type of animal which had already been established and was now being endowed with an extra spiritual element. This is a remarkable statement. 300 years before Charles Darwin, one of our commentators noted that Adam was not a new physical creation but the spiritual elevation of an animal-like being.

In '*The Emergence of Ethical Man*', Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik (d. 1993) explained that Adam's creation represented the development of all of mankind's ability to make moral decisions. This did not happen in one moment, but developed with time.

In light of this, the answer to our original question is that Bereishit is a theological text, not a historical or anthropological account of man's beginnings. As the former Chief Rabbi Dr. Joseph Hertz (d. 1946) wrote: "It is not so much the descent, but the ascent of man, which is decisive".



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