



A SCIENCE & RELIGION COMMENTARY

GENESIS 2:19-20

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So out of the ground the Lord God formed every animal of the field and every bird of the air, and brought them to the man to see what he would call them; and whatever the man called every living creature, that was its name. The man gave names to all cattle, and to the birds of the air, and to every animal of the field

Carl Linnaeus, a Swedish botanist, is usually credited with originating the science of taxonomy. It is to him that we owe our Latin classification system that identifies plants and animals by their genus and species (e.g., humans are *Homo sapiens* while grizzly bears are *Ursa horribilis*).

The Bible has its own birthing of taxonomy in Genesis 2:9-10. These verses follow hard on God's assessment that man has no helper appropriate to him. Eventually woman will be created as the appropriate helper (*N.B.*, God does not consider himself to be an appropriate helper, even though elsewhere in scripture God is referred to as helper, which has prompted the theological observation that God may need to become human in order to be a fitting helper). In the first instance, however, God creates the animals, whereupon God brings them to the man to see what he would name them.

Odd, isn't it? Naming would seem to be the prerogative of the Creator, so why doesn't God simply bring the animals to Adam and tell them what they are? One almost has a sense of God wanting to see what another mind thinks of these creatures, wanting to know what humans perceive in these animals, waiting to hear what people consider to be the essential character -- the place and purpose -- of each living thing. Naming is not simply appending an abstract verbal symbol to a thing. It is perceiving its place and purpose.

Needless to say, the naming of the animals was not the work of a morning, nor is it yet complete. There are approximately 4600 species of mammals, 300,000 species of beetles. We've named somewhere over 1.5 million plants and animals, but most estimates suggest that we are less than a tenth of the way there. One of the tragedies of extinction is that creatures go extinct before we've fulfilled our God-granted task of naming them. Before we can figure out their purpose and place, they are gone, leaving us unaware of the role God intended for them in the divine scheme of the biotic world.

Nor is naming an easy task. In contemporary taxonomy, discerning types and relationships is aided by genetic sequencing and computer analysis. In the popular conception, species are clearcut (the possibility of fertile offspring). Among biologists, factors like non-interbreeding population segments are part of the equation. Nor are all individuals of a species the same. The Endangered Species Act had to be amended to include protection of subspecies if they are deemed *evolutionarily significant units*. So taxonomy has its own internal debates that mirror challenges in the real world.

Taxonomy, it turns out, is facing its own extinction crisis. Positions in taxonomy are being eliminated, collections shuttered. Even as the tools for taxonomy advance, the patience of society and the willingness to give time/resources for cataloging of creatures is waning. What is getting increased attention is folk taxonomy, the study in anthropology of the ways in which various peoples classify the world, one of example of which is the Hebrew system of classification found in Levitical law.

Preaching Suggestions

This text can be preached appropriately and powerfully in conjunction with appreciation of God's diverse work of creation, as, for instance, in conjunction with Psalm 104's exclamation ('How manifold are your works, O Lord; in wisdom you made them all!'). Connect it with contemporary science and efforts to identify new species as well as to protect ones that we know. Lament extinction as an affront to God the Creator. Use great nature photographs to show the majesty, quirkiness, power, and wisdom embedded in the created world. Help people recognize that the naming of the animals is a task given to humans, not just to Adam. Avoid the wince-inducing suggestion that it must have been amazing for Adam to name the dinosaurs as they paraded before him (an anachronism of aeonic proportions). Above all, this should be an opportunity for people to participate in the words of the hymn: "Let God in his creatures forever delight."