CHAPTER 1

IS THIS WHAT LOVE LOOKS LIKE?

I was talking on the telephone in a dark room when I realized for the first time that Adam and Eve had not been actual people. I was twelve or thirteen. With one hand I held the receiver and with the other I spun the long helical cord like a jump rope, its far end lost in the light spilling in under the door to the kitchen. On the other side, activity and sound: Mom preparing supper, my siblings' voices. I suppose my presence was betrayed to them only by the to-and-fro motion of the cord under the door. Strangely, I don't remember the conversation or who was on the line. But as I stood there talking in the dark I just knew it: the First Couple were figurative.

It was a question I had been working on for a while. Not long before this, my dad had handed me a Time-Life book about natural history. It was one of a series that covered every imaginable scientific topic: meteorology, relativity, biochemistry, evolution. We had the whole set on the shelf above the stereo in the living room. The book in question featured a two-page, color-coded geologic timeline. By its lights, Dad and I located ourselves within the Holocene epoch of the Quaternary period of the Cenozoic era of the Phanerozoic eon, right up there at the top. We sat on the sofa and together peered down the well of deep time.

At its lowest and narrowest place lurked the Hadean Eon, marking Earth's assembly four-and-a-half billion years ago. Within a

billion years, rudimentary life began to stir. From there on up the chart complexified like life itself, eons resolving into eras, eras into periods, periods into epochs, epochs into ages. The atmosphere, I discovered, became oxygenated two billion years ago. The appearance of cells with nuclei followed 200 million years later. Multicellular life made its debut one billion years ago. Another half billion years passed before fungi, algae, and most modern animal phyla arrived. Then plants appeared on the land, followed by millipedes and other creeping oddities. After this, the jawed fishes emerged (I had not known there were other kinds) along with seed-bearing plants (same response). Strange kingdoms waxed and waned. Trilobites declined and primitive trees appeared. Insects took to the air. Then, 250 million years ago, 95 percent of all life was lost in a colossal mass extinction. Out of the remnant the dinosaurs rose to dominance. Nearly 200 million years later they too vanished abruptly. With the large reptiles out of the way mammals had room to flourish and flourish we did, even to the point of a tiny unremarkable pair of us sitting on a sofa in a climate-controlled ranch-style dwelling, gazing down at the spectacle of the past in a Time-Life book.

I was stupefied. The timeline seemed a thing of great elegance. The words—*Ordovician*, *Silurian*, *Eocene*—were themselves discoveries, whatever they meant. Looking over the edge of time's precipice thrilled me. I carried the Time-Life book to bed at night and pressed the structure of the past into the soft clay of my young mind, inventing mnemonics for the periods and epochs and rehearsing them to myself until I fell asleep. It was fun.

But it was also secretly scary. The details eluded me but I got the point: I was nothing. All of this had *really happened*. The thought of life and death spread over such an unfathomable span of time—without a single human witness—was hard to accept. In the face of this, what was I? What was my life? And the lives of those I loved? Why were we here now, after all of this? It made me feel like a

ghost. Sometimes as an adult I have felt the same way, usually during seasons of stress. When it happens I almost always remember the timeline.

Thus did Dad introduce me to the wonders of natural history. But his influence didn't stop with science. He also took us to church at least twice a week, and there I was handed a different book. It had no diagrams, but right up front was a story about Adam and Eve and the six days of creation. Back at home I checked the Time-Life book. And guess what? Adam and Eve and those six days were nowhere to be found in it, not on the timeline or anywhere else. Their absence was conspicuous. Were Adam and Eve the first people? If they weren't, who were? The book didn't say. Equally disconcerting was the Bible's silence regarding trilobites and stegosaurs. On which day were these created? On which day did they disappear? And why did God let them die?

What's on the Calendar?

The mystery deepened when, in my fifth-grade Sunday school class, a special visitor presented a new kind of timeline. It was on a large poster he had brought with him. Across the top it read: THE PLAN OF THE END.

It was a full-color flowchart of the future. Based on the books of Daniel and Revelation, it was divided into three main sections: the Church Age (you are here), the Tribulation (seven years), and the Kingdom Age (one thousand years). The Rapture and Second Coming demarked these segments. Featured prominently was the binding and loosing of Satan and something about judgment seats and bowls. Armageddon was in there somewhere and biblical citations were scattered throughout. The Old Testament Saints, New Testament Saints, the Unsaved of All the Ages, the Beast, and the False Prophet were all major players, as was (of course) the Lamb himself,

Jesus Christ. Arrows indicated who would go where and when. All the arrows, if faithfully traced, led to one of two terminal stations: the New Heaven and New Earth (in the upper right) or the Lake of Fire (in the lower right).

I was intrigued, but there were incongruities. Chief among them was the fact that Dad knew a lot, but he had never mentioned the Rapture or the Lake of Fire. If something so terrible was true, surely he would have briefed us. One day I found him at his desk and asked him about it.

He looked up from his work and said, "Son, that's not true."

Well, what *was* true? If the Rapture wasn't on the calendar, what was?

This time the answer came from a man named Carl Sagan. It turned out we had a copy of his new book *Cosmos* up on the shelf with the Time-Life series. On pages 228 and 229 I found, in the form of four images and a caption, what I was looking for.

The first image shows a bright seaside: the blue sky dotted with white clouds; the ocean; an abundance of green growing things along the coast; the yellow sun low on the horizon, its light amplified by reflection off the sea. It is a scene of obvious natural beauty. The caption, however, is foreboding: "The last perfect day." The following frames show the same view at progressively later times, but, thanks to the slowly dying sun, everything changes: living things die, the sea evaporates, the atmosphere escapes into space, the land dries out and cracks in the heat. Above it all the sun, having exhausted its supply of hydrogen fuel, grows redder and larger. By the final frame it's a ghastly, bloated thing filling the sky above an airless wasteland. All these things will happen, wrote Mr. Sagan, "several billion years from now."

I believed it immediately.

Several billion years is a very long time but this fact did nothing to soften the existential blow. It deepened the mark left by the

Time-Life book, and I became obsessed with the distant future. On one occasion I stood inches from my house and looked closely at the bricks and wondered: On what precise calendar date will these bricks be separated? Because one day they will be, and for a fact. I looked up. What would be the exact configuration of the clouds at the moment the bricks broke apart? When would the streets of Atlanta be emptied of cars? It seemed impossible, but I knew they would be emptied eventually, and for a fact. A few years earlier I had watched the city's tallest building at the time, the Peachtree Plaza, rise. When would it fall? I pondered these questions with complete seriousness. It was all very real to me.

At the time I had a pretty simple idea of God. Like many Baptist children I got on my knees and prayed at bedtime, sometimes with my parents, sometimes alone. I talked to God and God listened; God talked to me and I listened. It was straightforward. But this new information challenged this. God became both more and less than I had thought. More because of the practically infinite amount of space and time and life out there, places and times no human could visit and creatures no human could know, and God was the God of all that too—of archeopteryx and bacteria and galaxies and planets and God only knew what else. Less because it was hard to see how, with a past so remote and a future so bleak, God could care very much about me. I pictured God like a balloon, expanding without end to contain all things. And the more the balloon expanded, the more it seemed to fade.

Hurt by *Homo habilis*

I'm pretty sure I was already on the road to rejecting Adam's and Eve's historicity the day Dad handed me the Time-Life book. I can't say when I started questioning this particular article of Southern Baptist dogma, but November 7, 1977 is as good a guess as any. That

is the date on the cover of a certain issue of *Time* magazine. It is also the date when, for me, evolution got personal.

The magazine appeared in our mailbox and ended up in my hands. On the cover was a fellow named Richard Leakey kneeling beside what was to me a hideous-looking creature. It was apelike but also vaguely human in appearance. It had a giant head, broad high cheekbones, strangely long arms, and small dark beady eyes looking straight at the camera. It was a model of *Homo habilis*, a species that lived in East Africa several million years ago. Above the picture were the words, "How Man Became Man."

It didn't take long to figure out what Mr. Leakey and *Time* were telling me: This brute was my ancestor. Today the connection between *Homo habilis* and *Homo sapiens* is contested, but the scientific details hardly matter. What matters is that I was horrified by the thought of my family and friends and me being related to such a creature. It bothered me that Mr. Leakey seemed to be okay with this. He seemed like a nice man. I don't remember having any explicitly religious thoughts, but it all just seemed wrong. It made me sad. *Homo habilis* hurt my feelings.

Why? Why should *Homo habilis* bother a boy so much that he should find himself nearly forty years later confessing his feelings in a book? Why should an encounter with deep time make him so scared that he remembers it whenever he feels stress as an adult?

The cause may be a simple combination of ignorance and garden-variety trepidation. We arrive on Earth without knowing very much about the world, and we grow and learn in severely limited contexts. Cautious by nature, we stick with what works: our neighborhoods; our systems of education and government; our beliefs about ourselves and other people; our habits. I once read a story about a little boy who had been invited to eat with a neighborhood friend. It was his first meal outside of his own house. He noticed the silverware was somehow different than what he had at home. He was put out.

"These aren't real forks," he announced. "Can I go home and get mine?" A whole range of parochialisms need to be shed as we grow, and sometimes it hurts to lose them.

So maybe cosmic time and Leakey's hominid were just my early and difficult introductions to a larger world. But, for me at least, the problem had another dimension. I, like everyone, was born and raised to hold a certain set of beliefs. But the *fact* of my belief was only part of the problem. There was, in addition, the *content* of my belief: I had, several months before meeting *Homo habilis* and in the language of the moment, accepted Jesus as my personal Lord and Savior.

I was a newly baptized Christian, still wet behind the ears, and the cosmos was shaking me up already.

An Organ and a Vacuum Cleaner

The cosmos—deep time, *Homo habilis*, and all—presented a stiff challenge to my nascent worldview. At the time I didn't have the word for it, but I do now: *anthropocentric*. In my understanding humanity was the central feature of the cosmos. This word describes not only the rather conventional Protestantism of my upbringing, but Christianity as a whole. It, unlike many of the Eastern traditions, assigns us a pivotal cosmic role. You probably don't need convincing: Christianity says that human beings—and not other creatures—are made in the divine image; God protects Adam and Eve using the skins of dead animals (did God have to kill them?); God takes on human form and tells us we are more important than the lilies of the field and the birds of the air; and, as Shane Claiborne likes to say, scripture may begin with a garden but it ends with a city. In short, Christianity says that God is uniquely interested in human beings. God's love for us is the faith's central theme and the driving force behind scripture and tradition alike.

Accordingly, the nonhuman cosmos is not the central object of God's concern. It is true that God made the cosmos and called it good; it is true that all traditional creeds begin by proclaiming God as Creator; it is true that, in the person of Jesus of Nazareth, God entered the cosmos. But in all this the cosmos itself is only a backdrop to the real drama, a drama with only two players: God and humanity.

Christianity, in short, is not only anthropocentric; it is *irreducibly* so.

Perhaps this is how it should be. Perhaps the details of the cosmos don't matter in the end. It has been argued, sometimes by the most eminent of theologians, that religion and science are such different things that they really don't belong in the same room. Perhaps comparing them is like comparing, in the words of Karl Barth, an organ and a vacuum cleaner (I wonder which is which for Barth). In this view the anthropocentrism of Christianity is perfectly appropriate because Christianity is about nonhuman affairs like quantum mechanics is about salvation: not at all. Christianity, properly understood, is about *human* history and God's role in it.

There is a certain appeal to this view. After all, we are subjects, not objects, and in the end our concerns reduce to human ones. Therefore Christianity, a solution to a human problem, is rightfully human-centric. Moreover, because human nature shapes whatever it touches, including science, we should know ourselves first. It is unavoidably so and there is no evading it.

But what does it mean to know ourselves? Whatever else we are, we are creatures. Does not our history and our context *as creatures* matter? Can theology afford to insulate itself from science, which is, as the UK's Astronomer Royal Martin Rees put it, the one truly global culture? Should my theology of creation—and therefore my entire theology—be sealed off from our best scientific understanding of creation, even when that understanding threatens to upend my theology?

Is This What Love Looks Like?

A few years after my Adam-and-Eve epiphany, I took tenth-grade biology. The class started off nicely. I liked the smells of the labs, and the investigations into fetal pigs and sheep eyeballs were enthralling. There are surprising things going on inside animals, colorful, organized things. In biology as in much of nature, beauty begins at the surfaces and compounds rapidly beneath.

Except when it doesn't.

My desk was in the front on the far side of the chalkboard, near the tall south-facing windows. Directly in front of me stood a large wood and glass cabinet. It housed numerous dead creatures preserved in jars, many filled with formaldehyde. There were small animals: mice, chipmunks, snakes, crustaceans. Also some larger ones: a chinchilla, a ferret, a baby fox. The animals were fun to look at when my attention wandered from the topic at hand. Through the windows, sunlight fell on the cabinet and reflected off the liquid and glass, making the scene spectral and mesmerizing and strange.

One day I saw something new. It was a jar that contained what appeared to be a kitten, but the refracted sunlight collaborated with my angle of vision to produce a strange illusion: the animal appeared to have two faces. When the bell rang I walked up for a closer look.

There had been no illusion. The kitten was covered with fur and had two tiny faces on its head. Its four eyes and two mouths were clearly visible. The corner of the right face's left eye just touched the corner of the left face's right eye.

The teacher, Mrs. Feinburn, walked over and began talking about it. She told me it lived a couple of weeks before it died, mentioned the word *diprosopus*, and addressed the relevant genetics. I listened as nicely as possible but felt suddenly and overwhelmingly sad and tired, as if everything was for nothing. Looking back it seems strange that I was so affected. I had seen the two-headed snake at the