

2nd Opinion: What about the spiritual condition of extraterrestrial life?

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NASA recently announced the biggest planetary discovery outside our solar system—seven Earth-sized planets now orbiting an ultra-cool dwarf star 40 light-years away in the TRAPPIST-1 solar system in the constellation Aquarius. Each lies within a so-called “habitable zone,” where liquid water can flourish, if only on planets four through six.

“Answering the question, ‘Are we alone?’ is a top science priority, and finding so many planets like these for the first time in the habitable zone is a remarkable step forward toward that goal,” declared NASA official Thomas Zurbuchen.

So, excitement among astronomers prevails. Could this unique planetary system harbor conditions suitable for life—especially the fourth, fifth or sixth planets? Yes, they answer. Not surprisingly, pundits already are hypothesizing about potential conscious life.

Talking about extraterrestrial life on this treasure trove of planets is riskier in theological and philosophical circles, but the topic begs to travel a number of paths. Here are four:

Faith

The question of extraterrestrial life—intelligent or otherwise—is faith-based. While individuals can “believe” whatever they wish, they may be wrong. It simply isn’t known yet whether life is present on those planets. Maybe it’s there; maybe not.

But faith, misguided or real, is operative here. Faith that:

- If there's water, some rudimentary form of life must exist.
- More advanced creatures could exist there.
- Life finds a way, if you endorse the evolutionary scheme of things; I don't.
- God is free to create other life separately from human concerns; yet the specialness of human beings isn't compromised.
- Intelligent beings not made in God's image are a creative possibility.
- Intelligent beings, if made in God's image, remain unfallen, or if fallen, a redemptive plan is under way; problematic because Jesus Christ is the God-man forever.
- Any blueprint for the new heaven and earth will somehow include all planets everywhere.

Regardless, we won't be going to TRAPPIST-1 anytime soon to find answers. But wait a second. If any of the planets somehow should prove dangerous, isn't it our fault? Or at least Adam and Eve's?

Fall "out there"

Challenges arise when Christians confidently assert the fall of Adam and Eve affected the entire universe. Planet Earth, yes, to whatever degree physically. The farthest reaches of the cosmos, no. The TRAPPIST planets, no, as well. For starters, the curse of Genesis 3:17-19 doesn't even hint at a cosmos-wide fall.

True, Moses as the author of Genesis accurately recorded ancient historical events, but he understood them from the perspective of his day, not the 21st century's. God's curse on the "ground" to punish Adam must be

viewed with the principle of historical propriety in mind. Meaning what?

The author couldn't have fathomed the notion of the universe we've come to accept, one whose visible horizon is 45 billion light-years away. Nor Supernova ASASSN-15lh, the most cataclysmic star explosion ever detected. Nor Jupiter's lightning strikes 100 times more charged than anything Earth can muster. Nor the Jovian moon Io's hundreds of volcanoes, spewing fountains of lava 250 miles upward. Nor the dust storms on Mars, fierce enough at times to inundate the entire planet with dust for weeks. Nor countless other scenarios.

To wit, our universe and solar system are pockmarked by ongoing violence. Asteroids craterizing the moon so forcibly become the fault of our first parents? Really? Better to chalk it up to God's cosmic cantankerousness than some sinful solicitation on their part.

Fall "here"

Scholars disagree, too, about the extent to which earthly natural phenomena—volcanoes, hurricanes, floods, fires, etc.—can be linked to Adam's sin. Why so? Because the text doesn't teach unequivocally they're the result of Adam's curse per se. It's only a projected inference and conceivably not the sole reason they recur. Paraphrasing it, Genesis 3:17-19 merely states Adam and his progeny will have a much tougher time growing food! No more, no less.

Few, then, should contend colliding galaxies billions of light-years away are the manifest result of Adam and Eve, disobedient to God as they were, eating a piece of fruit from the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil. Proving this from the biblical text is impossible, and making the fall the justifiable cause for the way the universe, near or far, naturally functions is, well, a leap of logic unsupported by evidence, an inference out of whack.

Facts

A called confab of noted theologians and philosophers wouldn't reach a consensus about extraterrestrial life, but they would presumably concur God's special revelation doesn't read like an Encyclopedia Galactica. Scripture doesn't claim this for itself, so it's under no obligation to answer our many extraterrestrial questions. Fact is:

- The Bible is the only authoritative source of truth about the most important things in life, namely, all things associated with salvation.
- It's not the only source of truth about every existing thing, here or across the universe.
- It's not even the source of some truth about every existing thing, here or there.
- It doesn't say yea or nay about life thriving elsewhere in God's creation, and there's no solid evidence either way so far.
- Our curiosity remains unsatisfied.

Some Christians, however, grossly overstate how we should use the Bible to deduce theories about virtually all matters with which life presents us. No doubt, they much prefer to say, "Since there's no actual verse about life existing somewhere off planet, it just isn't out there!" Under their auspices, a good bit of the mystery of the universe dissipates.

For the most part, I'd rather champion Hamlet's advisory to his friend, "There are more things in heaven and earth, Horatio, than are dreamt of in your philosophy."

Accordingly, if God in his providence has placed conscious life on other planets, intelligent or not, there must be a reason, one with no real capacity to sabotage the Christian worldview and faith.

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