

# Finally setting the record straight—Christian views on the historicity of Adam through the ages

***The Quest for the Historical Adam: Genesis, Hermeneutics, and Human Origins***

William VanDoodewaard

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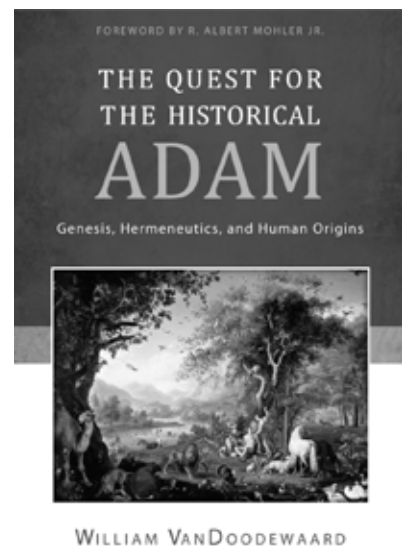
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Dr William VanDoodewaard is Professor of Church History at Puritan Reformed Theological Seminary. Even though his book is focused on theological arguments within Reformed circles, there is plenty of good material here for Christians in general. Not only does it deal fairly with both sides on this complex topic, but it does so comprehensively. The creation-evolution argument is not new. It has been part of church history, under shifting definitions, from the very beginning, but only a few are aware of this. I am keenly interested in church history, but not being a specialist there are many aspects that I have not had time to delve deeply into. This is also interesting to me for the fact that I was once publicly stumped during a radio interview on a show with a Reformed Presbyterian host. A caller made the comment that he understood what I was trying to say (concerning the reality of Adam and Eve) but wondered why no Reformed scholar of any repute agreed with me. Then, starting with Charles Hodge and B.B. Warfield, he rattled a list of about 15 scholars, all of whom I was familiar with, to make his point. I had little to say, but

did counter with “R.C. Sproul”, for during a short window of time Sproul seemed to be on our side. My mistake was that I did not reach to a time *before* Hodge and Warfield, for then I could have called on almost every scholar in their tradition. VanDoodewaard has helped me to understand this much more clearly.<sup>1</sup> For modern scholars, we have David Hall and Joseph Pipa, for example, but these able men are, to date, less well known than some of the larger figures in history, and I was unable at that time to vocalize their names when put on the spot.

To be fair, the book is about the debate in *theological* circles. Thus, there is scant mention of mainstream creationists. Likewise, and even though theology and science have overlapped considerably over the centuries, scientists who have supported the Creation account of Genesis are barely present. Yet, by filling in a giant historical gap, we can lay to rest any notion that ‘creationism’ is a modern theological innovation, and certainly does not begin with the Seventh Day Adventist, George McCready Price (1870–1963), as Ronald Numbers, a professor of the history of science, impotently tried to argue.<sup>2</sup>

And yet, we must be careful to define terms and to carefully parse the various arguments. The age of the earth, the time required for God to create, and the historical reality of Adam and Eve are separate questions. Various people have held different views on these three ideas over the centuries. Nearly all major scholars in the Reformed tradition have believed in a real Adam and Eve. On the other



hand, most of the early ones, but not most of the latter ones, also believed in a young Earth. There is certainly a ‘slippery slope’ involved in allowing secular philosophy to influence biblical interpretation, and that is amply documented in this book, but this does not mean that all scholarship has always had unanimous agreement on the big questions.

He begins with a survey of the relevant passages of the Old and New Testaments, then divides his discussion into time periods: Patristic, Medieval, Reformation, Post-Reformation, Enlightenment, 19<sup>th</sup> Century, Early 20<sup>th</sup> Century, and 1950s to present (this is my division and it does not necessarily correspond to chapter headings).

## The Patristic and Medieval eras

Throughout this historical survey, VanDoodewaard attempts to make the case that the similar arguments have been made for two millennia, with the same counter arguments. Starting with Philo of Alexandria (20 BC–AD 50), a Hellenized Jew who interpreted Genesis allegorically, he notes that Christian scholarship in that same city, notably Clement of Alexandria (c. 150–210) and his successor, Origen (c. 184–254), followed similar paths.

He adds to that list Augustine of Hippo (354–430) and Thomas Aquinas (1225–1274). There is some difficulty with this, however, and it may be that VanDoodewaard is jettisoning some scholarship too quickly. Specifically, Zuiddam<sup>3</sup> and Sibley<sup>4</sup> both make the case that, although some early people allegorized Genesis, this does not necessarily mean they thought it was not historical *at the same time*. Of course, allegorization laid the groundwork for further departures in the future, but not every scholar who leaned that way was on the edge of apostasy, and Aquinas apparently accepted the fact of a 6-day Creation Week.

Yet, the debatable positions of these scholars represent minor positions, and this is critically important. For example, contemporaneous with these were the author of 1 Clement (c. 90–100), Justin Martyr (100–c.165), Theophilus of Antioch (died c. 183–185), Basil of Caesarea (329–379), and Nicholas of Lyra (c. 1270–1349), who clearly took Genesis in the ‘literal’ sense.<sup>5</sup> Many scholars are mentioned in each time period, some lesser known and some well known to us today. However, by citing many contemporaries of the more famous writers, he ably makes the case that, at least until very late in the Christian era, a strong majority of writers accepted, and defended, a straightforward reading of the Genesis text. Also, it appears that each time the allegorical hermeneutic was attempted, it was an attempt to harmonize Scripture with Greek natural philosophy. And, it should be noted that the early allegorists were not trying to *lengthen* the duration of creation. The opposite, in fact, was true—they proposed that God created in an *instant*. Yet, by allegorizing the Creation passages, they paved the way for later dismissals of the historical reality of those passages.

The Medieval period saw similar arguments to those found in the Patristic and early-church era, with notable figures like ‘the venerable’ Bede (c. 673–675), Anselm of Canterbury

(c. 1033–1109), and Peter Lombard (c. 1100–1161) ably arguing for the traditional sense and standing against the minority position of the likes of Irish monk Johannes Scotus Eriugena (c. 815–877), and others. Anselm noted that the Augustinian allegorical view, that God would have created all things in an instant, was common in his day, but this is not borne out by comparison to the writings of the majority of his contemporaries. There is also a parallel in Medieval Jewish scholarship, with a literalist majority arguing against the allegorical minority, e.g. Maimonides (1135–1204) who was influenced by Aristotle (367–347 BC).

### The Reformation

The Reformation saw a strong and nearly unanimous appeal to the plain sense of the Scriptures. William Tyndale (c. 1492–1536) strongly rejected the late Medieval tendency toward allegorization, while at the same time anticipating the modern concept of assessing individual passages in their proper historical-grammatical context and the idea that Scripture should be used to interpret Scripture. Martin Luther (1483–1546) came out strongly in favour of the traditional, literal view. Indeed, Luther seems to be the harbinger of a nearly unanimous view among Reformation and Post-Reformation scholars, including Philip Melancthon (1497–1560), Huldrych Zwingli (1484–1531), and John Calvin (1509–1564). Heinrich Bullinger (1504–1575) wrote clearly about the creation of Adam and Eve in his *Decades*, a work popular among later English scholars.

One less well known but interesting scholar was Lambert Daneau (c. 1530–1595), a student of Calvin. Daneau attempted to create a Christian natural philosophy, using what would later be called “Mosaic physics” and appealing to the Bible for scientific insight. He seems to presage the modern creationist movement. John Woodward (1665–1728), an Englishman living in the time of Newton and writing

contrary to Newton’s views on the age of the earth, would follow a similar line of thought, using his great collection and general knowledge of fossils to support global Flood theory.

Westminster scholar John Lightfoot (1602–1675) and his slightly more famous contemporary James Usher (1581–1656) both wrote extensively on these issues, supporting the literal sense of the Creation account. John Owen (1616–1683) and Thomas Manton (1620–1677) represented the next generation of scholars following this trend. According to VanDoodewaard, the post-Reformation scholars represented by the English Puritans and Dutch Reformed movements held a strong commitment to the literal tradition. Figurative interpretations were more common among the Roman Catholics and smaller splinter groups. Should it surprise anyone that the Catholic Church, in general, seems to have little problem with evolutionary theory?

From the historical records, it is clear that most influences pulling scholars away from the straightforward hermeneutic were coming from outside the church, and these influences were both philosophical and scientific. Yet, these are really just two ends of a continuous spectrum and both always at least minor in the other, but earlier arguments were *more* philosophical and modern arguments are *more* scientific.

It was a little surprising to me to realize that modern attempts at re-writing Genesis have strong parallels in earlier eras. For example, building on Augustine, Medieval astronomer and pioneer of optics, Robert Grosseteste (c. 1168–1253), Bishop of Lincoln, essentially anticipates Meredith Kline’s (1922–2007) Framework Hypothesis, which removed any meaningful correspondence to chronology. There are also many examples of teacher-student pairs where the student takes the arguments one logical step further than his teacher was willing to go.

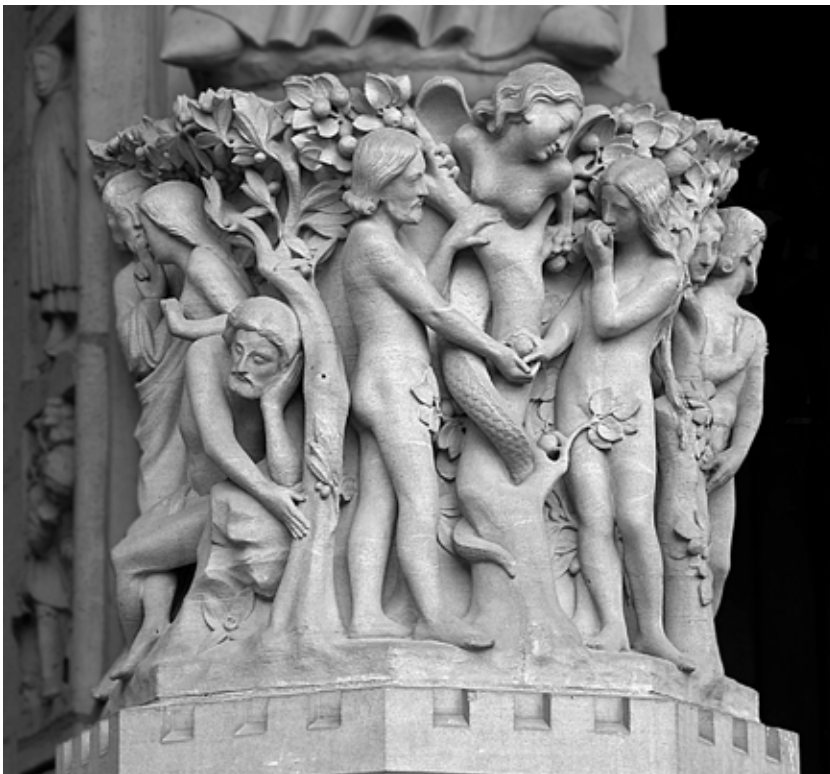


Figure 1. Adam, Eve, and the Serpent at the entrance to Notre Dame Cathedral in Paris.

### Post-Reformation challenges

About the same time Europeans began the Age of Exploration, new theologies began to pop up. Specifically, pre-Adamite theory, which had no precedent in Christian theology. Philip von Hohenheim (1493–1541) said Africans might lack souls and thus might not be human. This was restated in different ways by several others but remained a minority position until the time of Isaac La Peyrère (1596–1676). He concluded that only Jews were descended from Adam, that the world was lawless but sinless before Adam, and that the Flood had to be local. His rejection of biblical inspiration was similar to that of Thomas Hobbes (1588–1679) and Baruch Spinoza (1633–1677). However, there was a significant reaction to La Peyrère among Reformed scholars, notably from the pen of Francis Turretin (1623–1687). Modern creationists will recognize the major proof texts used by Turretin (e.g. Exodus 20:8–11, Isaiah 54:9, Mark 10:6,

and Romans 5:12–21), as well as his main arguments used in defence of the Bible. The influential lawyer-turned-uniformitarian-geologist Charles Lyell (1797–1875) also taught pre-Adamite theory, and his contemporary, Louis Agassiz (1807–1873), believed in the multiple origin of humans. The Presbyterian minister, more famous for his post-Civil War defence of slavery, Robert Louis Dabney (1820–1898) held his ground, understanding that, “If there are men on earth not descended from Adam’s race, then their federal connection with him is broken.”

The Scottish Reformed church, the English Puritans, the Dutch Reformed, and the Lutherans each kept a strong literal tradition, especially compared to the Anglicans and Roman Catholics. The *Annotations on the Whole Bible ordered by the Synod of Dort* (1637) and the *Westminster Confession* (1653) came down strongly on creation issues. He did not mention it, but the *Second London Baptist Confession of Faith* (1689) did as well, amplifying and

clarifying a brief statement about the creation of man made in the 1646 version. But the *Thirty-Nine Articles* of the Church of England (1563) did not even mention creation. Thomas Burnet (1635–1715) was an Anglican and at one point a tutor to William III. He wrote, troublingly, “‘tis a dangerous thing to engage the authority of Scripture in disputes about the natural world, *in opposition to reason*”, that Genesis is only describing the age of the *earth*, that those who believed in a young universe were doing “violence to the laws of nature”, and that Moses was not trying to describe the beginning of the world “according to the *physical truth*” [emphasis mine]. His separating of the Bible’s spiritual claims from the physical claims of science should seem familiar to the student of the modern evolution-creation debate. In a similar vein, Isaac Newton (1642–1727) wrote: “[The] distinction of the six days in the Mosaical formation of the world is no physical reality.” Newton’s successor, William Whiston (1667–1752), also a famous translator of Josephus, believed there was much time *prior* to Adam and Eve. Yet, among the “non-conformists”, including Matthew Henry (1662–1714), John Gill (1696–1771), and nearly the entirety of the Scottish Presbyterians, we see clear and unambiguous support for the orthodox view of creation. Among the descendants of the Puritans in North America, Cotton Mather (1663–1728) was somewhat ambiguous, but not about his opposition to pre-Adamite theory, while during the Great Awakening Jonathan Edwards (1703–1758) was ambiguous about nothing.

At this same time, however, the anti-Christians François-Marie Arouet, aka Voltaire (1694–1778), David Hume (1711–1776), Immanuel Kant (1724–1804), and others were writing influential works that were shaping intelligent debate. Hume included pre-Adamite ideas. It is interesting to note the intersection of the ‘Enlightenment’ with the obvious and detrimental effects of racism, especially scientific

racism and how the children of the Enlightenment have attempted to tar Bible believers with the outcome. George-Louis Leclerc, Comte de Buffon (1707–1788) was widely influential in pushing what we now call “naturalism”, and his successor, Jean-Baptist Lamarck (1744–1829), added early evolutionary ideas. James Hutton (1726–1797) added long ages of geology to the mix to complete the cycle. Charles Darwin (1809–1882) and his evolutionary biology was supported by the now-discredited but then-popular writings of Ernst Haeckel (1834–1919), who detested the Bible for teaching racial equality,<sup>6</sup> among other things, Darwin’s cousin Francis Galton (1822–1911) was pushing evolution-based ‘eugenics’ theory, and Eugene Dubois (1858–1940) was promoting fossils of supposed ape men. Christian scholarship was withering under this blast. At every turn, however, there were at least a minority of Bible-believers trying to answer these great challenges, some more soundly than others. Philip Henry Gosse (1810–1888) believed in a young Earth, but attempted to make a distinction between what he called “diachronic” and “prochronic” time.<sup>7</sup> The fact that there was no real way to discriminate between these in his theory lead some (like VanDoodewaard) to believe he was teaching that God had created fossils in place. William Cockburn (1773–1858) had a more rigorous, scientific approach, but his views did not win the day. The author does not delve deeply into the solid defence made by the ‘scriptural geologists’ at this point in history,<sup>8</sup> perhaps leaving the reader with the impression that barely any defence was made.

### Compromise creeps in

In light of the growing opposition to biblical orthodoxy, it is not surprising that many Bible scholars experimented with their theology. Charles Hodge (1797–1878), while arguing for both gap and day-age theory at Princeton,

said the relationship between fact and revelation was an open question and that if we were to take Genesis in its ordinary sense: “[I]f that sense brings the Mosaic account into conflict with the facts, and another sense avoids such conflict, then it is obligatory for us to adopt that other.” He also argued for the fixity of species, even though he acknowledged that other Christians held to the belief of variation within a kind.

Spurgeon, the most famous preacher of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, also moved toward gap and day-age theories, although he never left a belief in a literal Adam and Eve. B.B. Warfield (1851–1921), however, would seem more like a theistic evolutionist, allowing for the possibility of an evolutionary origin of Adam and Eve, as long as it was guided by “divine providence”. Yet his good friend and colleague on the faculty of Princeton Theological Seminary, Geerhardus Vos (1862–1949), adeptly defended the literal interpretation. James Petigru Boyce, president of Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, had no truckle with long ages or evolution or pre-Adamites *in general*, as long as Adam and Eve were special creations.<sup>9</sup> Yet, as in the case of Vos, there were others arguing strenuously against these changes in direction, leading to many denominational splits.

Into this milieu comes William Jennings Bryan. He is not discussed in the book, but thinking about the theological context in which the 1925 Scopes trial occurred, and several things he said, especially while on the stand, brings certain events into clarity. For example, when pressed by Clarence Darrow with the old “Where did Cain get his wife?” question,<sup>10</sup> he did not reply coherently. Why? Because he, like many Christians of the day, had no problem with an old Earth or evolution. Adam and Eve, however, or at least their *souls*, had to be divinely created.<sup>11</sup> There was a wide theological gap here, and he knew it.

For example, perhaps Cain married a soulless hominid?

### Modern times

The latter portion of the book gets more into the history of specific denominations and denominational seminaries, some of whom more or less defended the literal hermeneutic, and some of which did the opposite. This will be interesting for the student of 20<sup>th</sup> Century theological history.

Seeing names like Davis Young, Meredith Kline, Bruce Waltke, Peter Enns, or Tim Keller talking about things like “levels of knowledge”, “accommodation”, “metaphor”, “literary”, “local flood”, or “primate ancestors” takes on a new meaning when one understands that these very same arguments are not at all new. Also, knowing that each of these had or has a conservative foil, even if that scholar was not as well known, is encouraging. The fact that modern theologians cannot evade the scholarship of past centuries means that no one has the right to simply accept a position without carefully analyzing the known ramifications. According to VanDoodewaard, the historical record, “... reveals a repeated pattern toward an erosion of scriptural inerrancy, sufficiency, and historic Christian theology.” While earlier alternative theologies included a real Adam and Eve, irrespective of what may have come before, more modern ones often do not.

In the final chapter the author outlines three different models of theistic evolution, including human evolution: 1) with divine impartation of the soul, 2) with only a divine relationship, or 3) with only divine revelation. He then describes at length the ramifications of these views on 10 subjects, including ethics and human life, marriage, the unity of race, human language, God as Creator, the goodness of creation, the effects of Adam’s fall, Christ as Creator and Redeemer, biblical covenants, and moral accountability. This

Pandora's box of non-literal theologies, with little internal scriptural coherence, tends to minimize the nature of death as a divine judgment—and the corollary that Jesus' death could atone for our sin. They “remove most, if not all, of the supernatural, temporally immediate aspects of creation” and, he concludes: “the end result is the complete loss of the gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ.”

This book is recommended reading.

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3. Zuiddam, B., Does Genesis allow any scientific theory of origin?—a response to J.P. Dickson, *J. Creation* 26(1):106–115, 2012; [creation.com/images/pdfs/tj/j26\\_1/j26\\_1\\_106-115.pdf](http://creation.com/images/pdfs/tj/j26_1/j26_1_106-115.pdf).
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