

Adam's brothers? Race, science and Genesis before Darwin

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The historical connection between evolution and racism is now well known. From Darwin to Adolf Hitler, the superiority of one 'race' over another has been asserted on evolutionary principles. Creationists have been using this fact for years as a prime example of the social dangers of evolution,¹ and evolutionists have acknowledged the truth of this history.² Especially since the publication of *One Blood*,³ creationists have been in the forefront of providing a biblical refutation of racism. The account in Genesis 1–11 precludes any justification of racism. It also provides a history (the dispersion at Babel) that helps to explain the distribution of the so-called races⁴ that fits well with our understanding of genetics.

Pre-Darwinian anti-biblical racism

The question naturally arises, if the Genesis account provides a compelling argument against racism, did it counteract racism in pre-Darwinian times? (Note that creationists do not claim that Darwin 'caused' racism; it is merely pointed out that Darwin's theory was utilized to legitimize bigotry that already existed.) An historical survey reveals that the biblical creation account has always acted to counteract racism. Although there have indeed been many (now discredited) attempts to make racist arguments from the Bible⁵ there exists a very long, and largely overlooked, history in which Genesis has been recognized as an obstacle to intellectually respectable racism. As we will show, when racism becomes accepted, then biblical teaching on the creation of humans becomes displaced.⁶

Church Fathers rejected racism

We can find references as early as the Church Fathers, which state that orthodox Christianity affirmed the biblical position that so-called racial differences do not affect the unity of mankind as descendants from one created pair. Consider Augustine's statement: 'Whoever is anywhere born a man ... no matter what unusual appearance ... or how peculiar in some part, they are human, descended from Adam.'⁷ The common descent of all mankind from one man, Adam, was central. (This contrasts significantly with the views of one of the best known and most admired of the ancient non-Christian philosophers, Aristotle, who indicated that some people were slaves by nature.⁸)

The Christian view, although it remained the dominant view until the nineteenth century, did not go unchallenged. In the 1500s it was suggested that mankind consists of more than one species, descended from more than one original couple. It was the age of exploration, and discoveries led to a new form of doubt about the accuracy of Genesis. Historian of philosophy Richard Popkin explains,

'Reports from explorers wandering in America, Asia, Africa, and the South Pacific suggested the possibility that all of mankind could not be descended from Adam and Eve, and that the biblical account

could not square with the presently known varieties of mankind and their dispersion over the planet.'⁹

Consequently, Adam and Eve were not alone! But Renaissance radicals who suggested these ideas (Paracelsus, Giordano Bruno, Giulio Vanini, Jacob Palaeologus) were freethinkers and heretics whose ideas did not enter the mainstream at the time.¹⁰ When Palaeologus wrote a tract in 1570 suggesting that Adam and Eve were 'not the ancestors of all people', he was condemned as a heretic, and was later executed in Rome.¹¹ Despite the persecution, the significance of these ideas for future racism was great.

Isaac de la Peyrère and pre-Adamites

The bridge between the Renaissance radicals and the Enlightenment skeptics was Isaac de la Peyrère of Bordeaux.¹² The eccentric Peyrère revived polygenesis in the mid seventeenth century. Peyrère believed that Gentiles were created in Genesis 1, and Adam the forefather of the Jews was created separately in Genesis 2¹³ (basing his views on the fallacious 'two creation accounts' interpretation¹⁴).

In his famous book *Prae-Adamitae*, published in 1655, Peyrère argued for the necessity of pre-Adamites:

'I had this suspicion [sic] also being a Child, when I heard or read the History of Genesis, where Cain goes forth; where he kills his brother when they were in the field; doing it warily, like a thief, least it should be discovered by any: Where he flies, where he fears punishment for the death of his Brother: Lastly, where he married a wife far from his Ancestors, and builds a City.'¹⁵

Although his suspicions arose regarding Cain, what clinched the case for pre-Adamites for Peyrère was his own peculiar interpretation of Romans 5:12–14:

'For till the time of the Law sin was in the world, but sin was not imputed, when the Law was not. But death reigned from Adam into Moses, even upon those who had not sinned according to the similitude of the transgression of Adam, who is The Type of the future.'¹⁶

In other words, pre-Adamite gentiles were contrasted with the Jewish Adam. As Richard Popkin explains,

Peyrère believed that for Adam to sin ‘in a morally meaningful sense, then there must have been an Adamic law according to which he sinned. If law began with Adam, then there must have been a lawless world before Adam.’¹⁷ Obviously, however, this required extensive eisegesis of the text, destroying the plain contextual meaning.

Peyrère tried to escape the total condemnation that the heretic Bruno had received for suggesting polygenesis precisely because Peyrère claimed to be fitting Scripture with the scientific novelties of the time. But Peyrère was hardly one to reverence the biblical texts. He was a renegade Calvinist, later converted to Roman Catholicism, and was a precursor of deist rationalism with a ‘tendency to treat the Bible not as revelation but as a secular history to be critically examined’.¹⁸ It is likely that few people actually believed in the sincerity of his claim to have based his *Prae-Adamitae* on the Bible, and ‘a flood’ of refutations quickly followed its

publication.¹⁹ Historians suspect that Peyrère himself had ulterior motives growing out of his philosemitic obsession. Apparently, Peyrère was of Jewish descent and wanted to recast the persecuted Jews into a race which their French persecutors could look up to (and thus better fit with a peculiar Millenarian scheme Peyrère advocated). What better way to do this than to exclude the French from the line of descent from Adam!²⁰

Peyrère made some ripples with his theory, and as the Enlightenment blossomed in the 1700s polygenesis began to gain significant popularity. The radicals of the Enlightenment were following the path laid out for them by the radicals of the Renaissance.

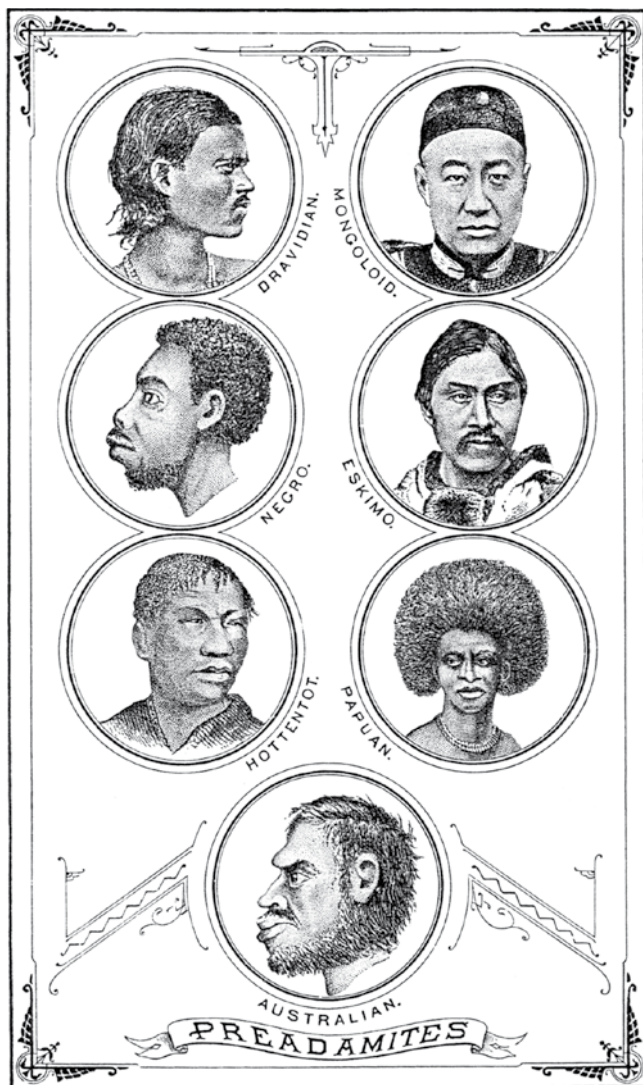
‘Enlightenment’ racism

The Enlightenment was in many ways an anti-Christian movement, but on the topic of the origin of mankind it originally stayed close to the orthodox Christian view: man was created, and all mankind is a unit.²¹ But the justification for this view was on a non-Christian basis. As historian Reginald Horsman notes, this approach resulted in increasing secularization and opened the door for revision whenever someone could come up with a plausible-sounding new theory.²² And these were not long in coming.

The new theories built directly on the Renaissance radicals. The basic point was the existence of more than one original couple. The reasoning was similar to that of Paracelsus and Bruno. It was too hard to imagine that all of humanity, from islanders to Europeans, were descended from one original couple, so there had to be other pairs of semi-humans that God created! This account of origins is termed *polygenesis*, the biblical account of a single original pair, *monogenesis*.

First an English doctor suggested, ‘Though it be a little Heterodox [unorthodox or heretical], I am persuaded the black and white Race have [each] ... sprung from different-coloured first Parents.’ More influential voices were soon echoing this sentiment. One of the best-known polygenicists of the eighteenth century was Voltaire. The infamous atheist philosopher declared that it was obvious that ‘bearded whites, fuzzy negroes, the long-maned yellow races and beardless men are not descended from the same man’, no matter what is said by ‘a man dressed in a long black cassock’ (a priest). According to historian Leon Poliakov, polygenism also furnished the basis of Voltaire’s ‘vindication’ of slavery.²³

Closely linked with the rise of polygenism was the rise of a hierarchal view of race. The so-called races were classified, and then some were viewed as better than others. Biblically, there is no basis for this and, historically, leading Christian thinkers have rejected these classifications. Augustine stated that ungodly pride ‘abhors equality with other men under Him [that is, under God] ... instead of His rule, it seeks to impose a rule of its own upon its equals.’²⁴ The moderates of the Enlightenment (distinct from the radicals, who were polygenists) at first also rejected a hierarchy. But it became increasingly common to make comparisons between Europeans and other ‘races’ (especially Africans) that were almost



Sketches of seven different ‘Preadamite Races’ claimed to be created before Adam and inferior to Adamites. Note the features of several of the illustrations are very exaggerated to look more apelike. (From Winchell⁴²).

always unfavourable to the latter.²⁵ They were not the first to make these comparisons, but they took this tendency to a much higher level than before.

For example, Jean-Joseph Virey remarked:

‘The European, called by his high destiny to rule the world, which he knows how to illumine with his intelligence and subdue with his courage, is the highest expression of man and at the head of the human race. The others, a wretched horde of barbarians, are, so to say, no more than its embryo.’²⁶

And Immanuel Kant wrote in 1755:

‘The Negroes of Africa have by nature no feeling that rises above the trifling So fundamental is the difference between those two races of men [whites and blacks] . . . it appears to be as great in regard to mental capacities as in colour.’²⁷

In 1775, Bernard Romans published a description of Florida in which the Indians received similar treatment as the Africans. He clearly connected polygenism with racial superiority (superiority of his own race, of course). He declared the Indians to be a different species from the Europeans, and wrote: ‘there were as many Adams and Eves . . . as we find different species of the human genus’.²⁸

Before long, the account of polygenesis and the superior European race was connected with a new myth that became incredibly popular among European academics in the late eighteenth through the middle of the nineteenth centuries. (This in turn was connected to a fad for linguistic research that was part of the rise of ‘higher criticism’ of the Bible.²⁹) The basic components of this now disproven claim involved India, Europe, and the anti-biblical orientation of the researchers. The claim was that the forefathers of the European race emerged from the Caucasus or Kashmir mountains in western India and headed west (hence the term *Caucasian*). They carried with them the wisdom of the ancient east—principles of freedom and advanced society predating the Jewish Old Testament. (Excluding the Old Testament was important to many of the anti-Semites connected with this new racial theory. It was one more way to dethrone the Jews, and the Scriptures, from priority in the history of ideas.) This ‘pure’ race of the first Europeans was termed the Aryan race.³⁰

Incredible as it might seem, a conglomerate of polygenism and the Aryan ‘out-of-India’ hypothesis combined to become a leading paradigm in anthropology by the 1830s. And this was more than just academic speculation. These hypotheses were directly used to both justify and promote racist attitudes and actions in Europe and the United States.

Antisemitism

In Germany, anti-Semitic scholars produced several ‘Aryan bibles’. These revisions of Scripture corrected the supposed Jewish myths prevalent in the Old Testament with Asian religious connections. An example of the changes made was the transformation of Moses into Manu, a central figure in the Vedic religion, the precursor of Hinduism.³¹ The speculation went wild as connections were made between

ancient Nordic myths, ancient Indian religion, and Aryan supremacy, all under the guise of scientific research. The theories were predicated on the polygenesis explanation of human history and the ‘out-of-India’ hypothesis. Leon Poliakov called this ‘the disconcerting phenomenon of German neo-Paganism’.³² These racial myths of Europe, including those based on polygenesis and the India hypothesis, laid historical groundwork into which Darwinian justifications of racism could be integrated. It would culminate in the Nazis’ quintessential racism edifice.³³

Effects on the USA

Returning to the early half of the nineteenth century, let us direct our attention to the effects of European scientific racism in the United States. Admittedly, some monogenists were racists, and there were attempts, all discredited, to make racist arguments from the Bible.³⁴ But the large role polygenist thought had on America’s debate over race and slavery has largely been ignored.

In the early years of the republic, the biblical and Enlightenment views of the unity of mankind predominated. A doctor, Charles Caldwell, started the first significant assault on the unity of mankind in America in 1811. Reginald Horsman documents the reaction: Caldwell was immediately attacked by Christians for calling Genesis into question. Caldwell tried to defend himself by saying that he didn’t doubt Genesis, but he didn’t believe the environment could explain the existence of the races. He suggested an unbiblical intervention of God to create racial differences. Horsman writes, ‘This usually did not satisfy the religious orthodox [Christians], who correctly surmised that any attack on the unity of the human race would ultimately bring a direct challenge to Genesis’.³⁵

From the 1830s to the 1850s, leading periodicals in America, particularly in the South, were abuzz either with reports of European racial science or (more often) Americanized versions of these theories. Polygenesis itself was often avoided—its confrontation with Genesis was too direct—but it occasionally was hinted at. In 1839, the *Southern Agriculturalist* ran an article that cautiously suggested it: ‘We are almost tempted to believe that there must have been more Adams’ than one, each variety of colour having its own original parent.’³⁶ In 1842, the interest in polygenesis was so great that it began to be discussed in the *Democratic Review*, one of the nation’s leading politically influential papers. At the start, the *Review* published an article defending the common descent of mankind from Adam and Eve. By 1850, though, the *Democratic Review* was backpedalling. They declared it to be scientifically proven that races were inherently different species. And polygenesis was acknowledged as a likely explanation.³⁷

Louis Agassiz and Josiah Nott on polygenesis

Agassiz was probably the leading scientist advocate of polygenism in America. Agassiz was widely recognized as America’s foremost zoologist of the mid nineteenth century,

and his religious beliefs were eccentric. He professed belief in the Bible, but was a progressive creationist with decidedly unbiblical beliefs. He believed that God created every animal and plant exactly where they would remain, that the earth was very old, and that natural history was divided by mass extinctions into four distinct phases (after which God had to recreate the extinct creatures). He believed that Adam was a Caucasian, and that Genesis only described the origins of whites. Agassiz's support for polygenesis went far to make this view respectable in America, and many pro-slavery advocates were glad to argue on his authority.³⁸

If Agassiz was the foremost scientific advocate of polygenesis, Josiah Nott was the great polemicist for polygenesis. Nott was one of the most vocal advocates of inequality and defenders of slavery and polygenesis was the convenient starting point for his views. His writings were published in some of the South's leading periodicals, in which he dared to challenge the Bible outright, declaring that 'the physical history of mankind is ... wholly irreconcilable with the account given in the Book of Genesis'.³⁹

The advent of Darwin provided a new theoretical context in which racism could be legitimized, but even then, fragments of polygenism remained like a vestigial organ in some circles. A few books advocating polygenism appeared in England just before and after Darwin's work.⁴⁰ Nineteen years after the *Origin of Species*, Alexander Winchell, a geology professor at Vanderbilt and Syracuse Universities, wrote a booklet, *Adamites and Preadamites*,⁴¹ which he expanded into a substantial volume, *Preadamites*, two years later.⁴² As a theistic evolutionist, Winchell declined to say whether God created Adam 'derivatively' (such that he was merely the first true man in the succession of evolutionary forms) or by an instantaneous 'fiat'.⁴³ What Winchell was intent on showing was that this first man was *not* the ancestor of the 'black race'. Winchell began by referring to Isaac de La Peyrère's pseudo-biblical arguments from two centuries earlier, and then dilated on the differences between the 'different families

and races of man'.⁴⁴ He condescendingly noted that, in his view, the 'black races' are 'coming up instead of going down. Their Adam was farther from our Adam than they are [from us].'⁴⁵ Winchell believed that the first ancestor of the 'black race' was more dissimilar from Adam than a 'Negro' was dissimilar from himself. And, considering his extreme ideas about white superiority, that was saying quite a lot.

Bible-believers vs polygenesis

Yet there were still always some willing to defend the biblical view of the unity of mankind. The Reverend Thomas Smyth was well known for his strong arguments against the polygenists. Several leading New England journals criticized the racist arguments, which they recognized as putting the whole Genesis account into question.⁴⁶ And even in the South, there were those who realized the disastrous implications of the racist theories for the Bible. William Archer Cocke wrote these incisive words in the *Southern Literary Messenger*:

'If there are distinct species of Man, then the Bible is untrue; if there are other races than the descendents of Adam, they are free from the penalty "of man's first disobedience" and the tragic scene of Calvary but a mockery and a delusion.'⁴⁷

Conclusion

The heart of the issue is that the Bible provides no basis for asserting superiority of one people group over another. We are all of 'one blood', descended from one man, Adam, who was created in the very image of God. Yet for centuries, sinful man has tried to get around this, and a longstanding tactic has been to justify racism in the name of science and scholarship. Racist science has been consistently opposed to the Bible.

As mentioned before, the connection between evolution and racism is well established. The pre-Darwinian racists may have had to wait for Darwin for some of their best arguments,⁴⁸ but the use of an anti-biblical science for racist goals was already a tradition. By looking at a sampling of pre-Darwinian theories used to justify racism, I hope to have shown how this trend has played out through history.

The unusual and bizarre rationalizations of racism have come and gone through the years. The Bible has been mocked, ignored, attacked or twisted to conform to racist ideologies completely foreign to its message. But its true message has been clear to all those whose minds have been conformed to Scripture, instead of conforming Scripture to their fallen minds. Racism, even when masquerading as science, has always been unbiblical. We have a common ancestor, Adam. And you cannot classify part of your family as animals without reflecting negatively on yourself.

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Fig. 46.—Female Hottentot.

Fig. 47.—Female Gorilla.

Drawing of a female Hottentot and a female gorilla purporting to show how close a Preadamite is to an ape. The drawings show little relationship with reality and are drawn to 'prove' the author's preconceived idea. (From Winchell⁴²).

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12. See Popkin, ref. 10 (1987), chapter 9.
13. Almond, ref. 10, p. 53.
14. For refutations, see, for example, Batten, D., Genesis contradictions? *Creation* 18(4):44–45, 1996; Batten, D., (Ed.), *The Answers Book*, Master Books, Green Forest, AR, pp. 47–48, 2000.
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16. Quoted in Popkin (1987), ref. 10, p. 43. See also *The Catholic Encyclopedia*, Robert Appleton Company, New York, 1911, s.v. ‘preadamites.’
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20. Poliakov, ref. 10, pp. 132–133; Popkin (1973), ref. 10, pp. 252–253; Popkin (1987), ref. 10, pp. 13–19, 58–59, 66–68; Almond, ref. 10, p. 55. Peyrère’s personal views were something less than racist, despite the natural tendency in that direction; see Popkin (1987), ref. 10, p. 146. See also Grigg, R., Pre-Adamic man: were there human beings on earth before Adam? *Creation* 24(4):42–45, 2002; Lubenow, M.L., Pre-Adamites, Sin, Death and the Human Fossils, *Journal of Creation* 12(2):230, 1998.
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