

# Adam as the protoplast—views from the early church in response to the archetypal view

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This paper explores teaching from the early church that relates to the nature and formation of Adam. This is in response to John Walton's claim that Adam was just an archetype of humanity and not the first-formed man and ancestor of all. Instead of speaking of Adam as an archetype, the Apostle Paul and Church Fathers use the language of protoplast (the first-formed) to define Adam. Where archetype is used by early theologians it is in the context of Christ being the archetype for Adam and humanity as a whole. It can be seen then that those who believe that Adam and Eve were the first couple, and the ancestors of all humanity, are in line with the teaching of Scripture and the traditional understanding of the early church.

Modern theologians concerned with harmonising Christian belief with the theory of evolution question the historicity of Adam and Eve as the first-formed individuals and seminal heads of the whole human race. Instead, Adam and Eve are seen as federal heads, or archetypes of humanity according to John Walton—just one couple amongst other humans alive at the time.<sup>1</sup> But are such scholars being consistent with the intention of the biblical authors and readings of the Bible from Church tradition? In his Rejoinder in *Four Views on the Historical Adam*, Walton suggests that the Church Fathers did not have access to modern interpretive tools, and their exegetical objectives are suspect. However, in holding in balance the literal and symbolic readings of Scripture they were more in harmony with Hebraic exegesis than dualistic Hellenistic readings that emphasise the figurative and reject the literal. As noted in a previous paper, Genesis 2:7 uses the Hebrew word *yatsar* (to form) to indicate the creation of Adam from the dust of the ground and this has consequences for our understanding of the text.<sup>2</sup> In the LXX *yatsar* is translated using the Greek verb *plassō* (πλάσσω) meaning to form, mould or shape, as an artist working in clay in Genesis 2:7. “And the Lord God formed [Greek: ἐπλασεν, *eplasen*] man”.<sup>3</sup> Although, in the LXX there is some fluidity in the use of words and on occasions *yatsar* is translated as *poieō* (Greek ποιέω, in English: to do, to make) in the LXX. The word πλάσσω is, however, used in the New Testament and amongst many of the Church Fathers when it speaks of Adam as the first-formed man, or the protoplast of mankind.

This paper will explore and discuss comments by the Church Fathers in relation to Adam and Eve as the first-formed individuals and ancestors of all humans. It is of course relevant to note that protoplast is used amongst the Church Fathers in a different sense than that of modern biology.

The traditional understanding and doctrine of the early church—that Adam was the first-formed individual and ancestor of the whole of humanity—presents a challenge to those who argue that Adam was one individual living amongst a wider human population. One example is Denis Alexander's assertion that Adam was merely the federal head of the human race, the *Homo divinus* called out from amongst other *Homo sapiens*. Alexander's use arises from John Stott's thinking.<sup>4</sup> Others, such as Gleeson Archer, have argued for the existence of pre-Adamic races to account for the presence of humanoid fossils, although Archer believed that all humanity descended from Adam and Eve.<sup>5</sup> Walton's position is closer to Alexander's; he has recently argued that Adam and Eve were archetypes of mankind and that Adam was not necessarily the first-formed man as the human prototype or protoplast.<sup>6</sup> Archetype is used by Walton to infer that Adam was just a representative of other human beings around at the time, and that Adam is not therefore the ancestor of all humans (archetype comes from the Greek noun ἀρχέτυπον [*archetupon*] implying an original type or pattern).<sup>7</sup> Genesis, he thinks, follows other ancient Middle Eastern literature in being interested in the couple as archetypes—that is as representatives of humanity—and that the passages of Genesis 1–3 use functional as well as archetypal language about the human position. But if so, then Adam would have had a human mother and father, and Eve could not be the literal mother of all who came from Adam.<sup>8</sup> Such a position also raises other theological difficulties, and this has been widely discussed in the creationist literature.<sup>9</sup>

## Christ as the archetype of Adam

Use of the concept of archetype in relation to the formation of Adam does at least have precedent amongst the Church Fathers. It may be noted that some of the early theologians

used the language of archetype in relation to Adam, but it was in a different context to Walton's novelty. Gregory of Nyssa (figure 1) considered this relationship along the lines of a theory of forms, with influence from a Christianized version of Platonism.

“... counsel precedes the making of man; and that which is to be is foreshown by the Maker in verbal description, and of what kind it is fitting that it should be, and to what archetype [Greek: ἀρχέτυπον] it is fitting that it should bear a likeness, for it says, ‘God said, Let us make man in our image, after our likeness, and let them have dominion over the fish of the sea, and the beasts of the earth, and the fowls of the heaven, and the cattle, and all the earth.’”<sup>10</sup>

The form of Adam therefore first existed as a perfect thought or word in the divine mind, thus drawing comparison with the Logos Son in whose image he was created as the pinnacle of creation. In other words, Jesus, the Word, later made flesh, is seen as the archetype of Adam and of humanity (even though chronologically the Messiah came later). Athanasius's view was similar, seeing the whole of creation, and Adam created by Christ, the perfect and Incarnate Word of God. Christ is the archetype of Adam. In Athanasius' writing we see Adam created first and alone as the protoplast of mankind.

“These irreligious men then having so little mind amid their madness, let us see whether this particular sophism be not even more irrational than the others. Adam was created alone by God alone through the Word; yet no one would say that Adam had any prerogative over other men, or was different from those who came after him, granting that he alone was made and fashioned by God alone, and we all spring from Adam, and consist according to succession of the race, so long as he was fashioned from the earth as others, and at first not being, afterwards came to be.

“But though we were to allow some prerogative to the Protoplast as having been deemed worthy of the hand of God, still it must be one of honour not of nature. For he came of the earth, as other men; and the hand which then fashioned Adam, is also both now and ever fashioning and giving entire consistence to those who come after him.”<sup>11</sup>

Panagiotes Nellas suggests Irenaeus, Origen and a number of other early theologians held this understanding as well, where Jesus is seen as the perfect form of mankind.<sup>12</sup> Gregory also held that Adam was made directly by the work of Christ, unlike Abel who had a natural birth. He writes: “The first man, and the man born from him, received their being in a different way; the latter by [generation], the former from the moulding of Christ Himself.”<sup>13</sup>

We can see then that the language of archetype is used here by the Church Fathers in a way that does not correlate with that proposed by Walton in relation to Adam.<sup>14</sup> But it can also be seen that the Church Fathers held to a belief that Adam and Eve were formed originally in a different manner to the rest of humanity; the former by a direct creative act by God, the latter by procreation and generation. It follows that Adam was the ancestor of all humanity and this understanding arises from the biblical text.

Athanasius is also careful to reject the beliefs of the Greek Epicureans, the Platonists and the Gnostics. Arguably, Epicurean philosophy has influenced modern naturalistic science and Darwinism with its emphasis on undirected chaotic forces. Whereas Athanasius, the defender of the Nicene Creed, challenged Greek thinking in order to uphold the supremacy of Christ as the Incarnate Word, theistic evolutionists seek to harmonize Christian beliefs with the Epicurean perspective. But, for Athanasius, creation is seen arising out of non-existence in response to the divine Word<sup>15</sup> and it is unbelief that leads those who reject Christ to return to non-existence.

“For the transgression of the commandment was making them turn back again according to their nature; and as they had at the beginning come into being out of non-existence, so were they now on the way to returning, through corruption, to non-existence again.”<sup>16</sup>

### Adam as the protoplast—the first-formed man

Paul refers to the relationship between Adam and Eve, and asserts that Adam was the one who was formed first (“For Adam was formed first, then Eve [Greek: Ἀδάμ γὰρ πρῶτος ἐπλάσθη, εἶτα Εὕα, *Adam gar prōtos eplasthē eita Eva*]” 1 Tim. 2:13). He is seen here as being formed prior to Eve and is therefore the protoplast of humanity. Of course the context here, regarding the creation of Adam and Eve, is in relation to the role of men and women in the order of serving in the Church. However, it also follows that Adam did not have a human mother (or grandmother, great-grandmother etc.) or else she would have been the first Eve, and Adam would also have had a human father. So, from this we can see that Adam and Eve were the first couple and the ancestors of all who followed.

Walton, however, denies there is any claim in these verses regarding how Adam and Eve were formed, or referencing kinship or familial relationships, or discussing mechanisms or timing of human origins.<sup>17</sup> Instead he sees it as functional language that may be seen in terms of archetypes. However, the reference to protoplast in these verses does use the same language regarding the formation (LXX πλάσσω) of Adam from the dust of the ground (Genesis 2:6–7). Walton

even acknowledges that first century Jewish readers would have held that Adam and Eve were formed at once, but suggests that they would have also held that the earth is flat—which he infers nullifies their beliefs about Adam and Eve. However, this really stems from a modern prejudice regarding ancient people and has long been shown to be an erroneous understanding of history. Jeffrey Russell points out that very few ancient Greeks, or Church Fathers, held to a flat earth. Augustine for instance discussed the possibility of a spherical earth from earlier Gentile sources.<sup>18</sup> But even if the flat earth claim were valid the rest of the argument would be a *non sequitur*.

It also raises a question of biblical inerrancy and the clarity of Scripture. Are we to believe that Paul was really mistaken about the physical history and only managed inerrancy by accident? Or was he inspired to express functional language in a literal sense, knowing that the people would misread it as literal, perhaps along the lines of a Greek exoteric-esoteric reading? Would we then be led to read Scripture falsely in a way that goes against the intention of the authors? And yet we see Paul present his message plainly, grounding it in a very earthly reality where Christ was literally crucified and later resurrected *upon the earth*. It is Greek thinking that



**Figure 1.** Image of Gregory of Nyssa from the Monologion of Basil II, produced for the Byzantine Emperor Basil II c.1000 AD. It resides in the Vatican Library, MS Vat. gr. 1613.

strongly separates the material and spiritual (and the spiritual existence is considered superior) but Paul asserted that the Gospel message of a crucified Messiah is foolishness to the wisdom of the Greeks (1 Corinthians 1:23). Although Walton may seek to retain a commitment to biblical inerrancy his position does not fully adhere to biblical teaching that is very much grounded in reality. Theistic evolutionist Lamoureaux is at least more straightforward. He also suggests that Scripture was intended by the authors to be read literally, with Adam formed *de novo* (newly, at once), although he thinks the biblical writers were in error in light of modern science.<sup>19</sup>

In 1 Corinthians 15:45–46 there is also a reference to Adam as the first man (πρῶτος ἄνθρωπος Ἀδάμ, *prōtos anthrōpos Adam*) in comparison to the eschatological Adam (ἔσχατος Ἀδάμ, *eschatos Adam*), Jesus Christ. The first Adam was physical (ψυχικόν, *psychikon*), being of the dust of the ground but raised into a living being. The second is spiritual and a life-giving spirit. The context here is speaking of fallen man in relation to the Resurrection, wherein all (πάντες *pantes*) die because of Adam’s sin, while all may be made alive because of Christ (1 Corinthians 15:22).<sup>20</sup> The interpretative framework used here is from the natural to the spiritual and this challenges those who would claim that the creation narrative should be read primarily in spiritual terms. Walton argues that this is archetypal language and seeks to deny any necessary ancestral link in the passage but the statement that in Adam all die seems to imply a clear physical link. The statement is that Adam was formed into a living being and that the reference to death is physical. This raises questions of those who would hold that the calling of Adam as *Homo divinus* was spiritual and the subsequent death was spiritual.<sup>21</sup> It lends itself to Greek dualistic mindsets that separate too strongly the physical and the spiritual. Instead, we can see from this passage of Paul’s that there is an order, that early physical reality signifies later spiritual truths, and it would be wrong to over-spiritualize the text of Genesis, as forms of theistic evolution require. The text of Genesis tells us that Adam would die physically because of sin, even as there also seems to be a spiritual separation from God as well because they were clothed and driven from the Garden of Eden. So, the first Adam prefigures the new, as many of the Church Fathers understood (and is discussed further below).

Paul also speaks of the human race descending “from one blood” (ἕξ ἑνός αἵματος, *ex henos haimatos*)<sup>22</sup> in Acts 17:26 (KJV), therefore highlighting the unity of humankind. However, Walton suggests Acts 17:26 really refers to Noah and the table of nations of Genesis 10 because the word used for nations is *ethnos*. In response we may note that, in addressing the Athenians, Paul was speaking to the Gentiles, the *ethnos*, and asserting a common ancestry of humanity. One issue was the elitist mindset of the Athenians who elevated the Greek scholar above the common people and foreigners,

and this helps understand the context. Furthermore, the primary Old Testament reference of the Athenian speech is to Isaiah 42:5–6, a creation reference from the LXX as Fudge has pointed out.<sup>23</sup> “This is what God the LORD says — the Creator of the heavens, who stretches them out, who spreads out the earth with all that springs from it, who gives breath to its people, and life to those who walk on it” (Isaiah 42:5). In this context Paul saw himself as one called to spread Christ’s “light to the nations [Greek: ἔθνῶν, *ethnōn*]” from Isaiah 42:6, and there are several references to the *ethnos* in this passage (i.e. Isaiah 42:1, 42:4).<sup>24</sup> Given the creation reference of the Isaiah passage it is more likely that Paul had creation and Adam in mind in this speech.

Many of the early church theologians also spoke of Adam as the first-formed man and the father of humanity, thus echoing Paul’s literal understanding and language. Irenaeus saw Adam as the ‘protoplast’ of humanity, ‘the first-formed’ out of virgin soil where God used the pristine dust from the ground. From this it followed out of necessity for Jesus to be born without a human father and in a virgin’s womb to fulfil his calling as the last Adam.

“And as the protoplast [Latin: *protoplastus*] himself Adam, had his substance from untilled and as yet virgin soil (‘for God had not yet sent rain, and man had not tilled the ground’), and was formed by the hand of God, that is, by the Word of God, for ‘all things were made by Him’, and the Lord took dust from the earth and formed man; so did He who is the Word, recapitulating Adam in Himself, rightly receive a birth, enabling Him to gather up Adam [into Himself], from Mary, who was as yet a virgin. If, then, the first Adam had a man for his father, and was born of human seed, it were reasonable to say that the second Adam was begotten of Joseph. But if the former was taken from the dust, and God was his Maker, it was incumbent that the latter also, making a recapitulation in Himself, should be formed as man by God, to have an analogy with the former as respects His origin. Why, then, did not God again take dust, but wrought so that the formation should be made of Mary? It was that there might not be another formation called into being, nor any other which should [require to] be saved, but that the very same formation should be summed up [in Christ as had existed in Adam], the analogy having been preserved.”<sup>25</sup>

We see here that the metaphor relating to the virgin birth of Christ must be based upon physical reality. Tertullian, the Latin theologian writing perhaps several decades later, makes similar comments regarding the virgin birth and asks us to “remember that Adam himself received this flesh of ours without the seed of a human father [Latin: *recordentur Adam ipsum in hanc carnem non ex semine viri factum*]. As earth was converted into this flesh of ours without the seed

of a human father, so also was it quite possible for the Son of God to take to Himself the substance of the self same flesh, without a human father’s agency.”<sup>26</sup> And in the next chapter we read:

“Accordingly, a virgin did conceive and bear ‘Emmanuel, God with us’. ... But the whole of this new birth was prefigured, as was the case in all other instances, in ancient type . . . . The earth was still in a virgin state, reduced as yet by no human labour, with no seed as yet cast into its furrows, when, as we are told, God made man out of it into a living soul. As, then, the first Adam is thus introduced to us . . . .”<sup>27</sup>

Although Origen had a tendency to spiritualize biblical truths, he also recognized that these spiritual truths, as they applied to the church, stemmed from the corporeal, or bodily, lineage of Israel. The physical is a type and shadow of a later spiritual reality where Christ is compared to the first Adam, who is seen as the father of all men. Eve is compared to the church.

“Do not, then, the ‘corporeal’ Israelites refer their descent to the rulers of the people, and the rulers of the people to the patriarchs, and the patriarchs to Jacob, and those still higher up; while are not the ‘spiritual’ Israelites, of whom the ‘corporeal’ Israelites were the type, sprung from the families, and the families from the tribes, and the tribes from some one individual whose descent is not of a ‘corporeal’ but of a better kind,—he, too, being born of Isaac, and he of Abraham,—all going back to Adam, whom the apostle declares to be Christ? For every beginning of those families which have relation to God as to the Father of all, took its commencement lower down with Christ, who is next to the God and Father of all, being thus the Father of every soul, as Adam is the father of all men.”<sup>28</sup>

### Adam was one man

Ambrose (figure 2), who was a mentor to Augustine, also spoke of the origin of Adam and Eve in a literal sense, noting the importance of the unity of humanity as a theological necessity. Eve was formed out of Adam, and God made them male and female to establish the human race.

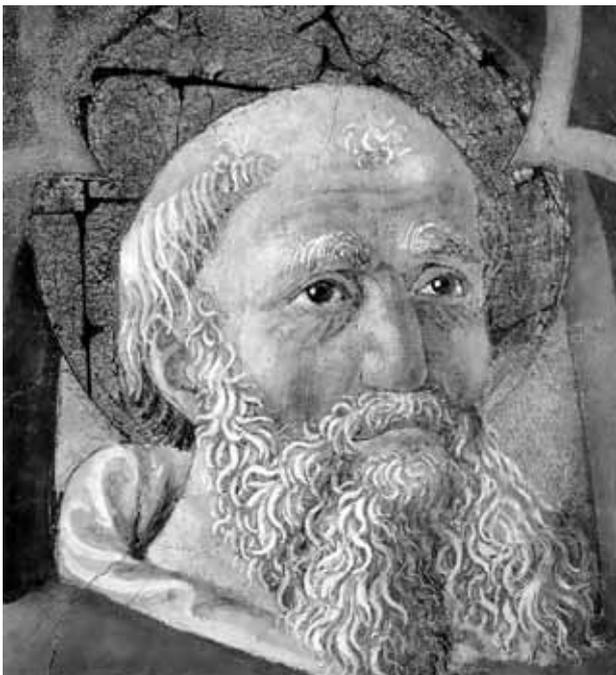
“Not without significance, too, is the fact that woman was made out of the rib of Adam. She was not made of the same earth with which he was formed, in order that we might realize that the physical nature of both man and woman is identical and that there was one source for the propagation of the human race. For that reason, neither was man created together with a woman, nor were two men and two women created at the beginning, but first a man and after that a woman. God willed it that human nature be established as one.

Thus, from the very inception of the human stock He eliminated the possibility that many disparate natures should arise.”<sup>29</sup>

Augustine also believed that Adam was formed as a single individual, and that Eve was taken from him, thus reflecting similar comments to those of Ambrose relating to the necessary unity of the human race.

“... it is easy to see how much better it is that God was pleased to produce the human race from the one individual whom He [first] created, than if He had originated it in several men [Latin: *ex uno homine, quem primum condidit, multiplicaret genus humanum, quam si id incohasset a pluribus*] ... . And therefore God created only one single man, ... that by this means the unity of society and the bond of concord might be more effectually commended to him, men being bound together not only by similarity of nature, but by family affection. And indeed He did not even create the woman that was to be given him as his wife, as he created the man, but created her out of the man, that the whole human race might derive from one man [Latin: *ut omnino ex homine uno diffunderetur genus humanum*].”<sup>30</sup>

Augustine also addresses the question of possible monstrous races (Latin: *monstrosa hominum genera*) such as the *Cynocephali* and *Skiopodes*. These are beliefs about creatures, some mythological, that arose in Gentile accounts of history (Latin: *gentium narrat historia*). He offers three



**Figure 2.** Fresco of St Ambrose by Giovanni di Piamonte c.1456-1466. It is located in the Basilica di San Francesco, Arezzo.

possibilities as explanations: asking whether we are to believe the reports; or if they are true then such races are not human; or if they are human then they are descended from Adam. As part of his argument he points out that if we did not already know that “apes, and monkeys, and sphinxes [Latin: *simias et cercopithecus et sphingas*] are not men, but beasts, those historians would possibly describe them as races of men, and flaunt with impunity their false and vainglorious discoveries”. He comments that:

“But whoever is anywhere born a man, that is, a rational, mortal animal, no matter what unusual appearance he presents in color, movement, sound, nor how peculiar he is in some power, part, or quality of his nature, no Christian can doubt that he springs from that one protoplast [or ‘that one first-formed origin’; the Latin reads *ex illo uno protoplasto originem*].”<sup>31</sup>

As with other examples, this passage speaks clearly of the one protoplast, the origin of all humanity, even in its diversity, suffering and frailty. And Augustine is keen to elevate the rationality of Christian thought out of the muddle of ancient mythology. Augustine also discusses the belief that men may live on the other side of the world [Latin: *antipodas*]. Epiphanius, Bishop of Constantia in Cyprus, also noted that it was necessary for the human race to have been formed from the one man Adam, and not two, on the sixth day of creation. Eve was later formed out of Adam’s side.

“Two men were not formed (at the beginning) but one man, Adam, and from Adam came Cain, Abel and Seth. And the human stocks up until the flood cannot derive from two men but must derive from one, since all the stocks have their own origins in the world from Adam.”<sup>32</sup>

The belief that humanity began with the single man Adam is also reflected in the thinking of Hippolytus from the pre-Nicene era, again arguing for the importance of acknowledging the unity of the human race in Adam.

“‘And God formed man of the dust of the ground.’ And what does this import? Are we to say, according to the opinion of some, that there were three men made, one spiritual, one animal, and one earthy? Not such is the case, but the whole narrative is of one man. For the word, ‘Let us make’, is about the man that was to be; and then comes the word, ‘God made man of the dust of the ground’, so that the narrative is of one and the same man. For then He says, ‘Let him be made’, and now He ‘makes him’, and the narrative tells ‘how’ He makes him.”<sup>33</sup>

## Summary

There are a number of points raised in this paper to the archetypal view. Although some of the Church Fathers used

the theological language of archetype, it was in the context of Christ being the archetype of Adam and mankind. This is then different to the primary way that Walton has used it to suggest that the Bible speaks functionally of Adam being an archetype for the whole of humanity—one man as representative of other men alive at the time.

Instead the literature shows clearly that the leading Church Fathers saw Adam and Eve as individuals created first, and in a special way by God, that was different to the normal process of generation. Adam is seen as the protoplast of humanity, a term that is used by both Latin and Greek speaking Fathers. This follows from the teaching of the New Testament. Adam is the first-formed man, and Eve created separately from his side. He was created as one individual, so that the whole human race might share in one single human character. The Fathers are clear that there was only one Adam thus implying the unity of one family of nations, and all humanity is descended from that one man.

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- Although in fairness Walton does acknowledge that Christ is the ultimate archetype in discussing 1 Corinthians 15.
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- Alexander, ref. 4, pp. 246–253.
- Not all Greek manuscripts have αἱματος, *haimatos* ‘blood’, although it is in the KJV and in some early manuscripts. Those that follow this reading come from the 5<sup>th</sup> century, only a century after the other major reading. Irenaeus quotes this verse as *ex henos haimatos* in *Against Heresies*, book III, 12.9. Clement of Alexandria quotes *ex henos* around the same time (*Stromata*, book I.XIX). The word *haimatos* is not important to the reference to Adam as *ex henos*. Ruckman, P.S., *The Bible Believer’s Commentary Series, Commentary on the Book of Acts*, Bible Baptist Bookstore, Pensacola, FL., p. 505, 1974.
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