

The vital importance of the historical Adam

Adam, the Fall, and Original Sin: Theological, Biblical, and Scientific Perspectives

Hans Madueme and Michael Reeves (Eds.)

Baker Academic, Grand Rapids, MI, 2014

Lita Cosner

Increasingly, scholars and pastors who otherwise fit neatly within the evangelical spectrum are reinterpreting creation, Adam, and the Fall to fit in with long-age or evolutionary views. However, in *Adam, the Fall, and Original Sin*, 14 contributors from a wide range of specializations in biblical studies, and one anthropologist, come together to present a powerful argument in favour of the historical Adam and Original Sin. The editors are theologians at Covenant College (Georgia) and Wales Evangelical School of Theology, respectively.

Many times, defences of a historical understanding of the first chapters of Genesis are written by people who have dedicated their careers to specializing in creation apologetics—and, many times, these are people with scientific, not biblical studies, specializations. So one advantage of this book is that it is written by people who come from a broader range of backgrounds, as professors, pastors, and Bible translators. As such, they can testify to the importance of biblical creation in their contexts.

Adam and Eve in the Old Testament

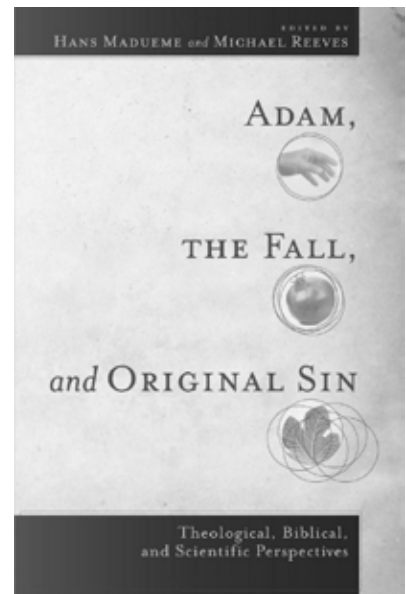
It is often claimed that Adam and Eve, while they play a huge role in

the first chapters of Genesis, play a small role in the rest of the Hebrew Bible. Scholars also point to parallels in Ancient Near Eastern creation myths to cast doubt on the historicity of Genesis. However, C. John Collins presents the case that Adam and Eve have an enormous explanatory role to play.

First, Genesis is composed as a coherent whole—it is impossible to divorce Genesis 12–50 from its preceding chapters because of the *toledot* structure running through the whole book as well as other grammatical indicators. Thematic elements also tie Genesis together—particularly the theme of being fruitful and multiplying, which even extends into Exodus (1:7 states: “But the people of Israel were *fruitful* and increased greatly; they *multiplied* and grew exceedingly strong, so the land was filled with them [emphasis added].”)

Second, even though Adam and Eve do not play a prominent role in the Old Testament after Genesis 4, the consequences of their actions do. “The descendants of Adam and Eve (Gen. 4 and onward) exhibit sad and shameful behavior . . . This cries out for an explanation, and we need some version of the traditional reading of Genesis 3 to make sense of these facts” (p. 21).

Third, references to Adam and Eve are only rare if you define ‘reference’ in such a way as to exclude any but the most obvious references. There are subtler echoes, where they are suitable to the authors’ purpose and could thus be expected, throughout the Old Testament; “there are numerous references to creation (e.g. Pss. 8; 104) and to marriage (e.g. Mal. 2:15, using Gen. 2:24). Human rest on the Israelite Sabbath imitates God’s rest after his



work of creation (Exod. 20:11, echoing Gen. 2:2–3)” (p. 23).

Collins comes to the conclusion that “The author [of Genesis] was talking about what he thought were actual events, using rhetorical and literary techniques to shape the readers’ attitudes toward those events” (p. 31). Sadly, he is not a biblical creationist but seems to embrace an old-earth view. However, his contribution on Adam in the Old Testament in this book is useful for the biblical creationist, nonetheless.

Adam and Eve in the New Testament

Only seven verses in the New Testament explicitly refer to Adam. However, the historical Adam and doctrine of Original Sin plays a much larger role in the New Testament. Robert Yarbrough shows that

“... paucity of direct reference to Adam is no necessary indicator of his significance. However many times his name is mentioned, he serves centrally in the role in which the Old Testament casts him: the starting point of human existence, flourishing, and sin, with all its attendant woes. And because his sin was met with the seed of

divine saving promise (Gen. 3:15), he is also at the root of human redemptive hope” (p. 41).

Adam and modern science

This chapter is the only one authored by a contributor with scientific, rather than theological, qualifications. He is also the only one to submit under a pen name, “William Stone”. The editors say that this is because his position (which is a prestigious one) would be threatened were his colleagues to know his true views. He believes that Adam is historical, but one statement leads us to believe he may be a biblical creationist regarding the timescale of earth history, as well.

Stone weighs evidence for cultural expression, bipedalism, brain size, and more to attempt to place Adam in the fossil record. He places the division between humans and non-humans “at the root of the *Homo erectus/ergaster* to *Homo sapiens* lineage around 1.8 million years ago” (p. 78). He argues that the variations within the *Homo* genus are well within the variation we see in other species.

He notes:

“An important problem concerns chronology: did Adam live about 1.8 million years ago, the conventional date for the origin of *Homo erectus*? If so, what does that mean for our reading of the genealogies and the apparently Bronze or Iron Age context of Genesis 4–5? Or do we need to consider a radical revision of the scientific chronological framework?” (p. 81).

This is a question one would expect only a biblical creationist to raise, which might point to this scientist believing not only in the historical Adam, but the biblical chronology.

The most instructive part of Stone’s chapter is actually his use of a pseudonym (though his chapter

is very well-written, he introduces subjects that would be new to a lot of specialists in the biblical studies field, but not so much to people well-versed in creationist interpretation of the human fossil record). There is at least one anthropologist in a senior position in the field, who nevertheless feels he has to hide his true views. How many William Stones are there in science in various fields, who believe the Bible, and that science supports the Bible, yet must hide their true beliefs to preserve their careers?

Original Sin in patristic theology

Augustine is generally thought to be the first theologian to clearly lay out the doctrine of Original Sin. However, Augustine’s own writings vehemently deny that the doctrine originated with him. “It is not I who made up original sin! The catholic faith has believed it from its beginnings. But you who deny it are undoubtedly a new heretic.”¹ In fact, many believed it before Augustine: Irenaeus, Gregory, Basil, and Cyprian all referenced it in their writings (p. 88).

Peter Sanlon shows in his chapter that while Augustine developed and systematized the doctrine of Original Sin, particularly in response to the Pelagians, he did not invent it. Furthermore, the doctrine depends on Adam as a historical person whose sin affects all his descendants.

The Lutheran doctrine of Original Sin

Robert Kolb argues that “Luther simply took for granted that, because Scripture says that all sin is due to Adam and Eve (Rom. 5:12), and also because God does not create or cause evil and so could not be responsible for original sin, children receive this root sin just as they receive body and soul from their parents,

through conception and birth. No other possibility fit with his understanding of human existence since the fall” (p. 110).

This is significant, because as a student he had been taught by his instructors that “after the fall of Adam the natural powers of the human being have remained whole and uncorrupted and that each human being possesses by nature sound reason and good will” (p. 110).

Kolb traces the maturation of Luther’s thought in this area, and that of his partner and successor, Philip Melancthon, as well as later influential Lutherans. He points to the “definition of the original sin—at the beginning of human history in Eden and in every individual’s daily experience—as doubt of God’s Word, denial of his lordship, and destruction of love for him and trust in him” (p. 127). This directly affects how one interprets Jesus’ work of salvation.

Original Sin in Reformed theology

Reformed theology affirms that people were created “very good”. One distinctive of this system is that it views the relationship between God and man as being defined by covenants from the beginning. Donald MacLeod traces the thought of Calvin, Zwingli, and other Reformed theologians on the Covenant of Works, and how Adam’s sin can be imputed to his descendants. Unanimously, Reformed theologians have followed Augustine’s doctrine of Original Sin, but also in their belief that this Original Sin could not be the Creator’s responsibility.

Original Sin in Wesleyan theology

Thomas McCall covers the doctrine of Original Sin in Wesleyan theology. John Wesley “was convinced of the universality and power of sin”

(p. 148). In fact, Wesley even affirms that, because Adam was a “public person”—to use the wording of the Westminster catechism—Adam represented his descendants when he sinned (p. 149). Christ was similarly a representative, in his obedience, of those who believe in Him. Wesley’s primary contribution was that, because of his belief in prevenient grace, he used that parallel to support universal atonement.

Wesley’s successors insisted that Adam was a historical person, and that his fall was a historical event. Their doctrine of Original Sin led them to reject Pelagianism, semi-Pelagianism, and Socinianism with respect to hamartiology. However, by the latter 19th century, Methodist theologians were beginning to shift in their understanding, emphasizing the freedom of the will. “A predominately *theological* emphasis on holy love was traded for a predominately *anthropological* emphasis on freedom of the will” (p. 165).

Original Sin and modern theology

Carl Trueman takes on the treatment of the doctrine of Original Sin in modern theology, and how it has largely been ignored by liberal theologians. Trueman chooses six theologians who have jettisoned a belief in the historical Adam and Eve and Original Sin, and shows what happens to one’s overall theology when this foundational doctrine is rejected. He gives a brief summary of the beliefs of Friedrich Schleiermacher, Walter Rauschenbusch, Karl Barth, Rudolph Bultmann, Reinhold Niebuhr, and Wolfhart Pannenberg. He notes similarities in their theology:

“First, all of them repudiate any notion that humanity stands guilty before God because of the imputation of an alien guilt, the guilt of a historical man called Adam, to all

of his descendants. ... Second, all of the theologians reject the relevance of the historicity of Adam” (p. 184).

This has disastrous consequences for the theology of all of the surveyed theologians, and serves as somewhat of a cautionary tale for those who would compromise in this critical area.

Original Sin in biblical theology

James Hamilton examines Original Sin through the lens of biblical theology. He notes that the Torah teaches an originally ‘very good’ world, marred by Adam’s sin. And the

consequences of Adam’s sin are shown in the narratives immediately following Genesis 3:

“... when Cain murders Abel, the reader knows that in Adam’s sin the dam was breached, burst, and the water can never be put back. The flood of sin has rushed out, leaving death in its wake (Gen. 4); then the genealogy in Genesis 5 repeats again and again the awful refrain, ‘and he died’” (p. 192).

In other words, Adam’s sin is the explanation for all the sin and death we see reigning throughout Genesis and the rest of the Torah. Likewise, the rest



Figure 1. Denying a historical Adam creates massive theological problems across a range of disciplines.

of the Old Testament does not spell out *why* humans are sinful—because Genesis has already done that—but they *assume* humans are sinful.

The New Testament “assumes Adam was a historical person whose initial transgression had devastating consequences for all his descendants” (p. 206), which is especially clear in the writings of Paul. Furthermore, Revelation presents the defeat of the serpent, the ultimate triumph of Christ, and the restoration of creation to be even better than Eden was. Hamilton concludes: “Followers of Jesus will follow him in his understanding of the world’s origins, the world’s problems, and the resolution to the sin of Adam in the obedience of Jesus even unto death” (p. 208).

Original Sin in systematic theology

In their chapter, Michael Reeves and Hans Madueme show that the denial of a historical Adam and Original Sin entails significant “theological fallout” (p. 210). First, the belief in the historical sin and fall of Adam is necessary because otherwise evil, rather than a very good creation (which later became corrupted), was its original state. The idea that we all inherited Adam’s sin in some sense is necessary, because it means that all humans have the same problem—and that Jesus is equally the Saviour of all people. In fact, “The doctrine of original sin directly affects what it means to say that Jesus is Savior” (p. 223). If the Fall was not a historical event that corrupted the human race, Jesus becomes more like an example or a teacher, not a Saviour in the sense of reversing the Curse.

Original Sin and modern science

Hans Madueme shows that theistic evolution rejects a historical Fall of mankind, and thus must introduce

other mechanisms to “fill the void” (p. 230). Some use nature and nurture, others use human freedom, and still others point to entropy to explain sin. However, without a historical Fall, God is in some sense the author of evil, which is a huge theological problem.

Others retain a historical Adam; some old-earth creationists retain a special creation of Adam, and view earlier hominids as non-human pre-Adamites. An evolutionary view says that Adam was actually descended from these pre-Adamites. A federal headship view has a group of humans evolving together with Adam as the federal head of his *contemporaries* as well as his descendants. However, there is a problem with the timescale—‘Adam’ is moved farther and farther back to conform with new anthropological discoveries, thus undermining the biblical genealogies. All attempts to make the biblical account fit with the evolutionary view end up undermining inerrancy.

Madueme proposes first that evangelicals should affirm biblical inerrancy, meaning that as the Word of God, Scripture is true in all that it affirms. Second, he encourages evangelicals to embrace what he terms ‘pneumatic certainty’, meaning the testimony of the Holy Spirit to the Christian that Scripture is true. Third, he proposes an eclectic approach to scientific theories, leaving the Christian free to affirm scientific theories that do not conflict with the teaching of Scripture, while rejecting those that do.

Original Sin in Pastoral Theology

Daniel Doriani shows that the widespread rejection of the doctrine of Original Sin poses substantial challenges for pastors. Most people today believe that man is essentially good. ‘Evil’ is a category reserved for people like Hitler and Stalin—most people are either seen as ignorant,

short-sighted, mentally ill; ultimately victims, not sinners. This failure to accurately identify the problem leads to ‘solutions’ that encourage people to be better, without pointing them to Christ, or pointing them to Christ as an afterthought. Doriani says that pastors especially have to understand the doctrine of Original Sin, and its effects on themselves and their church in order to lead effectively: “a robust doctrine of sin is central to gospel preaching and discipleship because it insists that we place our hope, our trust, in Jesus alone” (p. 268).

Original Sin and original death

Thomas Schreiner gives a detailed exegesis of Romans 5:12–19, which shows that people die because of both personal sin and Adam’s sin.

“Adam’s typological and foundational role, however, is emphasized. Sin and death came into the world through him, and personal and individual sin find their roots in Adam’s sin. All human beings are sinners, dead, and condemned before God because of Adam’s one sin” (p. 287).

He interacts with other views and shows how they do not do justice to Paul’s statements in this passage.

The Fall and Genesis 3

Noel Weeks, theologian and scholar of ancient history, shows how a denial of Adam leads to attempts to explain Genesis 3 as a reconfiguration of other ancient texts. He surveys the most common candidates and shows how they all fall short. Next, he examines what many see as a key conundrum in Genesis 3: though death is threatened as the consequence for eating from the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil, Adam and Eve do not die that day; Adam lives to be 930 years old. Weeks gives the interpretation of “dying you shall die” that is

the common biblical creationist understanding of the passage. Weeks examines the serpent's temptation, Adam and Eve's roles in the Fall, and God's judgments on the serpent, Eve, and Adam.

Adam, history, and theodicy

One of the questions often asked of apologists is: "If God is all-good and all-powerful, how can there be evil in the world?" In the final chapter, William Edgar shows how the account of Creation and the Fall answers that question, but only if it is taken as historical. Any approach that attempts to explain the account in an evolutionary scenario falls short.

A useful work

While there are some arguments presented in this book that the informed creationist will already know, there are many arguments from theology and church history which will likely be new. Many of the contributors to this volume are not biblical creationists. However, timescale is not the focus of this book and the compromising views of the old-earth authors do not come through for the most part. This is a book that creationists can read profitably. I was personally encouraged and informed by many of the chapters.

References

1. Augustine, *Marriage and Desire* 2.12.25, cited on p. 86.