

# Beyond original sin?

Dominic Statham

According to Denis Lamoureux, the early church was wrong in teaching the doctrine of Original Sin. This error, he claims, arose from the Apostle Paul's mistaken view that Genesis contains a historically accurate account of creation. Science, he says, has shown that there never was a real Adam and therefore there never was an original sin. Hence, he believes, modern theologians should base their beliefs about sin and salvation on 'evolutionary psychology'. Lamoureux's arguments, however, are self-contradictory and ignore counter arguments.

Denis Lamoureux is an Associate Professor of Science and Religion at St Joseph's College in the University of Alberta. He describes himself as an 'evolutionary creationist' and believes that God used the Darwinian process to create people.<sup>1</sup> Moreover, despite identifying as 'an evangelical Protestant', in an article published in *Perspectives on Science and Christian Belief*, he denies the doctrine of Original Sin.<sup>2</sup> Science, he believes, has shown that there never was a historical Adam and therefore there never was an original sin.<sup>3</sup>

## What is the doctrine of Original Sin?

According to the *Westminster Confession of Faith*:

"Our first parents ... sinned, in eating the forbidden fruit. By this sin they fell from their original righteousness and communion with God, and so became dead in sin, and wholly defiled in all the parts and faculties of soul ... . They being the root of all mankind ... the same death in sin and corrupted nature [was] conveyed to all their posterity."<sup>4</sup>

The Bible teaches that Adam and Eve were created, fully formed, on the sixth day of creation (Genesis 1:26–27). Along with everything else, they were "very good", i.e. physically and morally perfect (Genesis 1:31). However, despite God showing them much goodwill—giving them a beautiful place in which to live and offering them His friendship—they disobeyed Him, "eating from the forbidden fruit", and embraced evil (Genesis 3). Consequently, they "fell from their original righteousness" and "became dead in sin", meaning that they lost their "communion with God" and became sinful, "wholly defiled in all the parts and faculties of soul". Hence, they came under God's righteous judgment which, on Earth, would culminate in physical death (Genesis 3:19 and Romans 6:23). Due to Adam and Eve being the "root of all mankind"—i.e. progenitors of all humanity (Acts 17:26, Genesis 3:20)—they passed this fallen nature to "all their posterity", i.e. to every man, woman and child who has ever lived. Particularly, Adam acted as our 'federal head', representing the whole of humanity. Hence, the Apostle Paul

wrote: "sin came into the world through one man, and so death spread to all men because all sinned" (Romans 5:12).

Throughout church history the doctrine of Original Sin has been considered foundational to the Christian faith. It makes clear that all are sinners, even from the moment of conception (Psalm 51:5), and explains why even babies and the unborn may suffer and die. It enables us to understand ourselves—why we behave as we do—and why so many mind-boggling atrocities have been committed throughout history. It also points us to Christ as the only solution to our sin; as the Apostle Paul wrote: "For as by the one man's disobedience [i.e. Adam's] the many were made sinners, so by the one man's obedience [i.e. Christ's] the many will be made righteous" (Romans 5:19).

The Bible teaches that a person is either 'in Adam' or 'in Christ'. If we are 'in Adam' we are still in sin and under God's judgment; if we are 'in Christ' we become partakers of His righteousness and escape judgment (Romans 5:18–19). There was a literal Adam, through whom we literally became sinners and die; and there is a literal Christ through whom we may literally become righteous and receive eternal life. There is no other way of salvation presented in Scripture, and Lamoureux's rejection of a historical Adam undermines the Gospel at its heart.

Moreover, if the New Testament is wrong about these matters why should we consider it to be authoritative in anything else? If the Apostle Paul was wrong in believing in a historical Adam then, presumably, so too was Christ. Should we then also question what the Son of God taught about marriage? (See Mark 10:5–9.) Once we begin to think like this, it is only a matter of time before every biblical doctrine becomes open to debate.

## How does Lamoureux argue his case?

Remarkably, Lamoureux begins by setting forth the biblical basis for a historical Adam and Original Sin, acknowledging that both are clearly taught in Scripture. For example, he quotes nine verses from Paul's letters

which confirm this to be apostolic teaching (Romans 5:14–19; 6:23; 1 Corinthians 15:21–22) and concludes:

“In the light of these passages, there is little doubt that Paul accepted that (1) Adam was a historical person, (2) sin first entered the world through Adam, (3) Adam’s sin resulted in all humans becoming sinners, (4) death entered the world as the divine condemnation for the sin of Adam, and (5) Adam’s sin resulted in the divine condemnation and death of all humans.”

At the same time, Lamoureux accepts that the *Council of Carthage*, the *Thirty-Nine Articles* of the Anglican Church and the *Westminster Confession of Faith* all affirm this Pauline doctrine. Moreover, he writes: “To summarize, the doctrine of original sin is deeply entrenched within the Western Christian tradition ... everyone should feel the weight of challenging this historic doctrine, as I do.” Despite this, he confidently asserts that the Apostle Paul was mistaken and argues that this error arose from Paul’s understanding of Genesis 1–11 as referring to real, historical events.

### A self-refuting argument

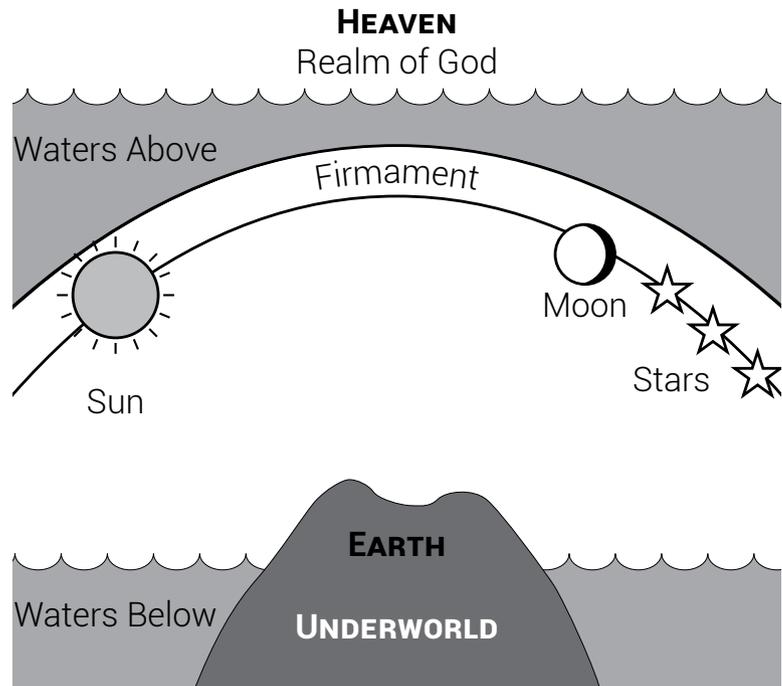
According to Lamoureux, some of the Bible’s teaching reflects ancient views of cosmology and biology which we now know to be wrong. Since Genesis is not true scientifically, he argues, it should not be understood to be true historically. The explanation for these errors, he says, is that:

“[T]he Holy Spirit, by inspiring the biblical writers, descended to their level and allowed the use of the science-of-the-day in order to reveal inerrant spiritual truths.”

In other words, God affirmed that which is false in order to help people grasp that which is true. This, however, is plainly absurd; and even more absurd is that, according to Lamoureux, the policy backfired, as it led to the Apostle Paul misunderstanding Genesis and the Christian church teaching error for two thousand years. Could the all-knowing, all-wise God not have done better than this?

### Does the Bible teach faulty cosmology?

According to Lamoureux, “Ancient science is unmistakably present in the Genesis 1 account of creation”



**Figure 1.** According to Denis Lamoureux, the Bible teaches that the universe is made up of an underworld, the earth, a solid dome (the ‘firmament’) and a heavenly sea.

which, he says, reflects the ‘scientific’ model of the universe generally accepted at the time. This stipulated that there was a solid dome surrounding the earth which contained the sun, moon, and stars and which supported a heavenly sea above it (see figure 1). Lamoureux uses the word ‘firmament’ to describe this dome, following the King James translation of the Bible:

“And God said, Let there be a firmament in the midst of the waters, and let it divide the waters from the waters. And God made the firmament, and divided the waters which were under the firmament from the waters which were above the firmament: and it was so” (Genesis 1:6–7).

“And God made two great lights; the greater light to rule the day, and the lesser light to rule the night: he made the stars also. And God set them in the firmament of the heaven to give light upon the earth” (Genesis 1:16–17).

The word ‘firmament’ comes from the Latin *firmamentum* which generally refers to a physical support or prop, i.e. something solid. The Greek translation of the Old Testament known as the Septuagint (c. 200–300 BC) uses the word *stereoma* which, again, suggests something solid. However, the focus of our attention should be the meaning of the original Hebrew word, i.e. *raqiya*. Other Bible versions—e.g. ESV, NASB and NIV (1984)—translate this as ‘expanse’, a term that reflects the sense of something having been ‘expanded’, i.e. stretched abroad. This would

seem reasonable as the root of *raqiya* is the Hebrew word *raqa* which means to beat, stamp, beat out, or spread out, and is used, for example, to refer to the hammering out of thin sheets of gold (Exodus 39:3). According to Genesis 1:8, God called this expanse *shamayim*, which is Hebrew for ‘sky’ or ‘heavens’, and is specifically stated to be something that God “stretched out” (e.g. Job 9:8, Isaiah 42:5, Jeremiah 10:12). It is also the place where birds fly (e.g. Genesis 1:20, Deuteronomy 4:17) and God placed the stars (Genesis 1:15). Hence, the context indicates that *raqiya* is not intended to be understood as a solid object but an expanse which includes our atmosphere and space beyond it.<sup>5</sup>

The question might be asked: ‘If the “waters above” are not a heavenly ocean supported by a solid dome, what are they?’ A view once popular among creationists held that they were a vapour canopy surrounding the earth which collapsed to provide rain during the Noahic Flood—however there has been less support for this in recent years.<sup>6</sup> Another view is that they surrounded the solar system as ice bodies, many of which fell to Earth during the Flood, causing numerous impact craters. Others understand them to be the clouds; still others, a watery shell surrounding the universe.

Lamoureux claims that the ancient Hebrews generally, along with many in the Christian church, held to a cosmology based on the existence of a firmament. However, even if completely true, all this misses the point. The issue is not how people may have interpreted the Bible in the past, but what the Hebrew text actually says. The view that *raqiya* refers to something solid probably did arise from ‘scientific thinking’ prevalent among ancient peoples and may well have influenced the choice of the word *stereoma* by the translators of the Septuagint; but this does not demonstrate that *raqiya* originally carried this meaning or that this is how it was understood by the people for whom Genesis was first written.

Similarly, Lamoureux justifies his rejection of biblical inerrancy by arguing that the Bible teaches that the sun revolves around the earth and that this was the view held by Luther and Calvin. However, just because some have understood the biblical reference to the sun ‘standing still’ (Joshua 10:12–13) as affirming geocentrism does not mean that, in such passages, the Bible intends to make scientific statements about the relative motions of the heavenly bodies. Meteorologists today speak of ‘sunrise’ and ‘sunset’ even though they are not geocentrists.<sup>7</sup>

What is relevant, however, and does merit a response, is the contention that aspects of the *Apostle Paul’s* teaching were derived from a faulty Hebrew cosmology—if so, biblical inerrancy would be in question. Here Lamoureux argues that Philippians 2:9–11 reflects an acceptance of the ancient belief in a three-tier universe made up of heaven, the earth and an inhabited underworld:

“Therefore God has highly exalted him  
and bestowed on him the name that is above  
every name,  
so that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow,  
*in heaven and on earth and under the earth*,  
and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord,  
to the glory of God the Father [emphasis added].”

Many, however, understand these verses to be written in poetic form and think that Paul may be quoting a Christian hymn—hence the name *Carmen Christi* for this passage.<sup>8,9</sup> Poetry is surely not the place to look for scientific statements as to the physical nature of the earth. An alternative understanding of the text is that Paul is using figurative language: those ‘in heaven’ are angels and redeemed people and those ‘under the earth’ are demons and condemned people.

### Does the Bible teach faulty biology?

Lamoureux correctly states that the view of humanity as having been originally created from earth was held generally by people in the ancient Near East. For example, he states that, in the *Epic of Gilgamesh*, a pinch of clay is used to create a man; in the *Myth of Enki and Ninmah*, seven humans are made from moist earth; in the *Epic of Atrahasis*, seven males and females are made from a mixture of clay and the blood of a god; in the *Memphite Theology*, a god forms babies from clay on a potter’s wheel and then places them in their mothers’ wombs. We might add that similar accounts are found worldwide.<sup>10</sup>

According to Lamoureux, God inspired the writers of Genesis to adopt this ancient ‘scientific’ explanation for how God made people. He writes: “Clearly, the creation of Adam is based on an ancient conceptualization of human origins.” But how can he know this? Surely there is an alternative explanation, i.e. that Genesis contains the first (and historically true) account, which was passed down by Noah to his descendants. This then became distorted in extra-biblical writings due to it having been retold to subsequent generations with variations and embellishments.

One of the arguments for Original Sin comes from two verses in Hebrews which comment on a passage in Genesis where Abraham pays a tithe to Melchizedek:

“One might even say that Levi himself, who receives tithes, paid tithes through Abraham, for he was still in the loins of his ancestor when Melchizedek met him” (Hebrews 7:9–10).

Here Levi, being a descendant of Abraham, is deemed to have paid a tithe to Melchizedek. This is because, despite being born many years later, he is understood to have been in Abraham’s body at the time the gift was made. Just as Levi was ‘in Abraham’ when Abraham paid the tithe, so

also the whole of humanity was ‘in Adam’ when Adam ate of the forbidden fruit. As pointed out by Lamoureux, this was the interpretation taught by the celebrated church father, Augustine. However, according to Lamoureux, Augustine misunderstood these verses because of his erroneous belief in ‘seminal principles’—the ‘scientific view’ that the original animals created by God grew from seeds. Lamoureux’s claims about Augustine and his ‘biology’, however, are irrelevant. As I keep saying, the issue is not what the ancients believed about science or how this may have influenced their interpretation of the Bible. What matters is what Scripture itself teaches.

### Lamoureux’s ‘science’

Undoubtedly the main reason for Lamoureux’s rejection of a historical Adam is his belief in evolution. “Physical anthropology,” he writes, “reveals an incontestable pattern of transitional fossils from pre-humans to humans.” Furthermore, he claims: “Genetics demonstrate that humans were not created *de novo*, but evolved from a population of about 10,000 pre-humans.” Fossils and genetics, however, demonstrate nothing of the sort.

According to Bernard Wood, Professor of Human Origins at George Washington University:

“There is a popular image of human evolution that you’ll find all over the place . . . . On the left of the picture there’s an ape . . . . On the right, a man . . . . Between the two is a succession of figures that become ever more like humans . . . . Our progress from ape to human looks so smooth, so tidy. It’s such a beguiling image that even the experts are loath to let it go. But it is an illusion . . . [P]aradoxically, the more we discover about our origins, the less we know.”<sup>11</sup>

Professor Chris Stringer is a paleontologist at the British Museum of Natural History. Commenting on the museum’s recent (2015) ‘human evolution’ exhibition he made a very significant admission:

“Well, we’ve attempted here to represent about 7 million years of human evolution on one diagram and you’ll notice a lot of skulls there with different species names . . . . But you’ll notice also, unlike many of these depictions, we haven’t joined them up with lines of ancestors and descendents and that’s a reflection of the uncertainty about how these forms are related.”<sup>12</sup>

In other words, despite there being ‘a lot’ of different species, he had found it impossible to put them in an order showing a clear evolutionary progression from ape-like creatures to man. This is a far cry from Lamoureux’s “incontestable pattern of transitional fossils from pre-humans to humans”. A perfectly reasonable understanding of ‘hominid’ fossils is that they are either true apes or true humans.<sup>13</sup>

According to Lamoureux, the variation in our genes proves that we cannot be descended from just one couple, i.e. Adam and Eve. Geneticist Dr Robert Carter, however, argues that the data *can* be seen to fit within such a creationist framework. Most genetic variation comes in two versions and these are found distributed throughout the world’s population. Where greater variation is seen, it is generally restricted to specific groups and can be explained by mutations occurring after humanity dispersed from Babel.<sup>14</sup>

Lamoureux argues: “If Adam is the reason suffering and death entered the world, then human bones should be at the bottom of the fossil record. But humans appear at the very top.” However, if the fossil record is largely the consequence of the Genesis Flood, which arose due to the bursting forth of the “fountains of the great deep” (Genesis 7:11), we would not expect to find human fossils in the lowest sedimentary rocks. These are more likely to contain the remains of marine creatures living on the sea floor, as these might be expected to be the first to have been buried by sediments deposited by the Flood waters.<sup>15</sup> It may well be that no human fossils lie buried in rocks laid down during the Flood and that those we do find are all post-Flood. If so, we would expect there to be human fossils only at the top of the geological column.<sup>16</sup>

### Sin and the atonement

Having dismissed the Bible as his authority, Lamoureux turns to ‘evolutionary psychology’ in his attempt to understand sin. The evolutionary process, he says, led to behavioural tendencies being deeply embedded in our brains, some being “self-preserving inclinations” and others “group-bonding inclinations”. The former are Lamoureux’s version of sin and the latter his version of righteousness. Hence, he replaces the Apostle Paul’s cry, “Wretched man that I am! Who will deliver me from this body of death?” (Romans 7:24) with “Who will rescue me from my evolutionary self-preserving inclinations?” Similarly he replaces Paul’s commands, “[B]e transformed by the renewal of your mind . . . [and] put on the Lord Jesus Christ, and make no provision for the flesh, to gratify its desires” (Romans 12:2, 13:14) with “Let Jesus be the Lord over our evolutionary past, encouraging our pair- or group-bonding inclinations and denying our self-preserving inclinations.” Are we to understand, then, that Christ died to conquer a nature we inherited as a result of the process of ‘evolutionary creation’?

All this has the most serious implications. First, if sinfulness arose through a God-ordained evolutionary process, then God, not man, is responsible for it. This is nothing short of heresy. Second, this thinking appears to have led Lamoureux to misunderstand the true nature of

sin. For example, he criticises Augustine for portraying it as “an unnatural and disordered condition”. Astonishingly, Lamoureux states a preference for views of morality taught in Cherokee folklore and modern Buddhism. These, he claims, more accurately depict the “turmoil we often experience between our evolutionary behavioral proclivities”.

Even a cursory study of history, however, makes clear that the orthodox Christian view is the correct one.<sup>17</sup> In the Soviet Union, it is estimated that about 26 million people were killed simply for ‘political reasons’. This included about six million Ukrainian citizens who died from forced starvation, the *Holodomor*. In December 1937, the Japanese army raped, tortured, and murdered over 300,000 Chinese in the city of Nanking. People were used for bayonet practice and in decapitation contests. Some of the tortures and depravity are too awful to describe. During World War II, millions of Jews were transported to ‘death camps’ travelling for days without food or water, crammed together in sweltering rail carts, packed so tightly that there was no room to sit. Those who survived the journey were worked to death, or used for hideous ‘human experiments’, or sent straight to the gas chambers. Human cruelty is truly unimaginable; yet, as noted by Dr Clay Jones: “[E]very genocide researcher and genocide survivor concludes that it is the average member of a population that commits these horrors.”<sup>15</sup>

### Conclusion

There is one point on which both Lamoureux and I would agree. Scholars of the past who have used science to interpret the Bible have been mistaken. However, this is exactly what Lamoureux himself is doing. His contention that Adam never existed, and that the doctrine of Original Sin is wrong, is underpinned by his belief that science has demonstrated special creation to be false and evolution to be true.

Lamoureux’s case rests on the premise that Scripture undoubtedly teaches erroneous science. However, he accepts arguments used to cast doubt on the Bible uncritically, and ignores counter arguments. Particularly, the evidence he presents for a faulty cosmology is very weak, relying largely on how Genesis has been interpreted historically, rather than on a careful consideration of the texts themselves. Neither paleontology nor genetics support his rejection of a historical Adam.

Lamoureux’s theology suffers from his very low view of Scripture which arises from his placing ‘science’ over the Word of God. In consequence, he rejects apostolic authority (and presumably that of Jesus too, though he seemingly avoids stating this outright) and formulates ‘Christian doctrine’ on the basis on his own opinions. His ‘evolutionary creationism’ would lead one to conclude that God is responsible for sin which is a most serious heresy.

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