

Humanity, Sin, and the Historical Adam: Historical, Biblical, Theological, and Philosophical Considerations

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In recent decades and centuries, the historicity of Adam and Eve has been questioned in ways that the historical church never did. A major part of this comes from science “proving” an old Earth and thus creating distrust regarding the historicity of the first eleven chapters of Genesis.¹ The widespread buy-in to Darwinian evolution has necessitated, in every case, a reinterpretation of Genesis 1-3.² Most main Christian doctrines have their foundation in these chapters of Scripture. Thus, it is imperative that Christians properly defend Genesis 1-11 as being historical. Otherwise, one risks undermining a huge number of doctrines.³ The doctrines of sin and humanity hinge directly on the historicity of Adam. This paper argues that the historical Adam is necessary for a biblical view of sin and humanity, doing so by engaging with historical, biblical, theological, and philosophical perspectives.

Historical

The first area to be engaged is the historical side. What did the historical church believe regarding the historical Adam and how that affects humanity and sin? The evidence in the early church overwhelmingly suggests that they believed in a literal Adam and Fall. C. John Collins states, “Traditionally Christians, like the Jews from whom they arose, have read the story of Adam and Eve in the opening chapters of the Bible as describing the first human beings, from whom all other humans descend.”⁴ Even Origen, who is known for such things as upholding the preexistence

¹ Wayne Grudem, ed, *A Biblical Case Against Theistic Evolution* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2022), 30. Though obviously arguing against theistic evolution, John Currid shows that the views for taking Genesis 1-3 as non-historical are ultimately “unpersuasive”.

² J. P. Moreland, Stephen C. Meyer, Christopher Shaw et al., eds, *Theistic Evolution: A Scientific, Philosophical, and Theological Critique* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2017), 69. Wayne Grudem notes that, while some do accept a “historical” Adam and Eve, none in the theistic evolution camp hold that all human life can be traced to just those two individuals.

³ Kyle C. Dunham, “The Role of Biblical Creationism in Presuppositional Apologetics.” *Detroit Baptist Seminary Journal*, 25 (2020): 5. Dunham argues that each area of systematic theology “to one degree or another” touches on God being the creator and humankind being in his image.

of souls and an allegorical reading of Genesis,⁵ affirms that Adam was the first man, and he does so in a way that is exceptionally useful for the present topic. He says:

“For if, hypothetically, the woman had not been deceived and Adam had not fallen, the man created for incorruptibility would have grasped that incorruptibility, Christ would not have gone down ‘to the dust of death’ (Ps. 21:16 [22:15]) or died, since that sin on account of which he had to die out of love of humanity would not have existed.”⁶

Origen directly ties the need for Christ to come down and die to the fact that Adam had fallen and Eve was truly deceived, going so far as to deny that sin would have existed if Adam had not sinned. In a similar fashion, Augustine argues that all mankind has been born through Adam and connects this to mankind’s sin nature.⁷

The Reformation also had its exegetes holding to a literal Adam and grounded their understanding of sin and human nature in him. John Calvin, for example, notes that Adam is the “root” of the corruption that is in all mankind,⁸ and argues that original sin is passed on from parents to children and makes all mankind guilty even before the “fruits” (actual sins produced by the corruption of original sin) themselves appear.⁹ Although I would disagree with his conclusion, it seems evident that one of the titans of the Reformation adhered to a historical Adam, through whom the entire human race was born and fell. Additionally, the tradition position for the origin

⁴ C. John Collins, “Adam and Eve in the Old Testament,” in *Adam, the Fall, and Original Sin*, ed. Hans Madueme and Michael Reeves (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2014), 3.

⁵ Roger E. Olson, *The Story of Christian Theology: Twenty Centuries of Tradition and Reform* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1999), 99 and 106.

⁶ Joseph W. Trigg, *Origen* (New York: Routledge, 1998), 137.

⁷ Augustine, *The City of God: Selections and Introduction by Hans Urs Von Balthasar* (San Francisco, CA: Ignatius Press, 2021), 92.

⁸ John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, translated by Henry Beveridge (Peabody, MA: Henderson Publishers, 2008), 150.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 152-53.

of evil and sin is that of human freedom (limited by God's command) to choose to go against God, not that it preexisted with God.¹⁰

From Origen's of a historical *and* allegorical reading of Genesis 1-3 to Augustine's emphasis on original sin and Calvin's insistence on Adam as the root of corruption, the historic church has consistently treated Adam as a literal, historical person. The symbolic or mythological readings of Genesis 1-3 are a modern innovation, largely arising in response to evolutionary science rather than out of exegetical necessity.

Biblical

The next pertinent area to address is what Scripture itself says regarding Adam. This section will be primarily focused on Genesis, with the theological section focusing more on how Adam is used in other passages. The first key piece is that Genesis functions as a historical narrative and not poetry or myth. Genesis 1 and 2 state that Adam and Eve were directly created by God in a unique way. The rest of creation is created simply by God speaking; however, Adam is "formed from the dust of the ground" and given the breath of life by God breathing (blowing) into his nostrils (Genesis 2:7). Eve is then created from Adam (Genesis 2:21-22). Adam is given a command not to eat from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, or he will "surely die" (Genesis 2:17). From there, Genesis 3 presents Eve, and then Adam, doing exactly the thing they were commanded not to. After Adam eats, the effects of their disobedience are immediately apparent. They realized they were naked and hid themselves from God because of their shame (Genesis 3:7-10). Additionally, God shows how this has now changed how things work in the world. The very ground is cursed, and man will toil all the days of his life until he returns to dust, and wives' desire will be contrary to their husbands, and they will experience extreme pain in

¹⁰ Thomas H. McCall, *Against God and Nature: The Doctrine of Sin* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2019), 136.

childbirth (Genesis 3:16-19). One even sees the first Christological prophecy in what God said to the serpent. From here, the focus shifts to Adam and Eve's descendants, and one quickly sees that something has changed. The first interaction seen in Genesis 4 is between two brothers, Cain and Abel, who are providing sacrifices to God. Abel did so in a worthy manner, while Cain did not. Cain was warned by God that sin was "crouching" and needed to be conquered. Cain does not listen, sins, and is promptly punished. By Genesis 6, God has already committed to destroying the Earth and everything in it and starting over. Thus, Genesis reads as though these are actual events that happened, and it explicitly shows how humanity was directly made by God, propagated through Adam, and fell into sin through Adam as well, ultimately devolving into a world "filled with violence" (Genesis 6:13).

Theological

Given that the historical section has shown how the church has typically dealt with these topics, this section is going to be a biblical theology focus. What does the rest of Scripture say regarding Adam and his effect on sin and humanity? Obviously, this section cannot engage this question exhaustively. As such, the focus will be on Jesus and Paul's use of Genesis and Adam.

It seems evident that Jesus viewed Adam and Eve as historical people and Genesis historical as a whole. He directly appealed to Genesis 2:24 in Matthew 19:4-6 when challenged on divorce. He treats the creation narrative as a foundational principle that supersedes what was allowed in Moses because of man's "hardness of heart" (Matthew 19:8).¹¹ This makes very little sense if he did not hold to a literal and historical view of Adam and the initial marriage instituted by God.

¹¹ R. T. France, *Matthew: An Introduction and Commentary* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1985), 284.

Paul also delves into creation theology to determine various theological problems. For example, Romans 5:12-19 speaks of Christ as the “second Adam”. John Calvin argues, “Adam was not merely a progenitor, but, as it were, a root, and that, accordingly, by his corruption, the whole human race was deservedly vitiated. This is plain from the contrast which the apostle draws between Adam and Christ [in Romans 5:19-21].”¹² Theological coherence of humanity and sin, then, depends on Adam’s reality. Without Adam, Paul’s parallel in Romans 5 becomes merely rhetorical rather than a real reversal. Likewise, if death is not historically traced to Adam, the resurrection of Christ as a reversal of death loses its grounding. Jesus as the ‘last Adam’ (1 Cor 15:45) presupposes that there was a first, real Adam.

Philosophical

Theological coherence is not the only thing threatened when one drops the historicity of Adam. Sin (and, more broadly, evil) and humanity must be grounded in something real. Philosophically, the denial of Adam undermines coherence. If Adam is a myth, then humanity’s universality in sin is either a statistical inevitability or a cultural construct, neither of which grounds true moral responsibility. A historical Adam, however, accounts for sin as a moral act of rebellion whose consequences are both inherited and imitated.

Based on Scripture, Christianity regularly ascribes qualities to God, like being good and just. However, it is difficult to see how he can be these things, or have these qualities, if sin is not grounded in something real that deserves punishment. If Adam was an actual human being who caused sin (both the act itself and the desire/propensity to sin) to enter the world as the father of all mankind, and all mankind does end up sinning, then coherence is maintained. If, on the other hand, God simply made humans as sinners from the beginning, then God is not loving, just, good,

¹² Calvin, *Institutes*, 150.

etc. Again, one must have a historical Adam who is the progenitor of the whole of mankind and who opened the metaphorical door to sin to account for this.

Conclusion

The historicity of Adam is not a dispensable doctrine. Without it, the historical church's teaching collapses, the biblical witness becomes incoherent, theological anthropology unravels, and philosophy is left with an inexplicable universality of evil. But with it, sin is intelligible, Christ as the second Adam is coherent, and the gospel holds together.

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