

## Must we Believe in an Historical Adam?

There is nothing new about the question of how science relates to the Bible – it as old as the Copernican Revolution of the 16<sup>th</sup> Century and older. There is, however, an increasing urgency to the question in our present age when science is being exalted to an almost supreme status as the arbiter of what we can know and are to believe.

There are many areas in which this question affects Christian and non-Christian alike through the claims science makes and the way this affects our understanding of life, most notably when it comes to how we frame our concept of good and evil and our views on whether or not there is a spiritual dimension to life.

It affects people at different stages and in different circumstances of life. For those in school and college, it is something they are forced to face because, in secular institutions at least, only one perspective on these issues is taught: one that has no place for ‘god’ or any concept of the supernatural. For Christians who teach in such institutions, or who wish to venture into the working world of the applied sciences it may well become an employment issue that will determine whether or not they will be offered a job.

The specific focus of this paper is to examine one particular area that is posing a major challenge within the professing Christian church. It is the question of whether or not the Bible requires us to believe in an historical Adam.

Although this question has been debated for many decades in the broader Christian church, it has come home to churches that are more conservative in their theology with increasing force in recent times. Well-known Christian scholars have been publishing articles and books (not to mention influencing successive classes of seminary students) in which they openly challenge the notion of Adam’s historicity.

It would be naïve to pretend these views are not in wide circulation, or to think that we do not need to meaningfully engage with them. That is what we will attempt to do in what follows; but in a way and at a level that is designed to raise awareness as opposed to exhaustively answer.

### 1. The Bible vs. Science on the Origins of Human Beings

Ever since Charles Darwin first published his thoughts about evolution in *Origin of the Species* in 1859, there has been significant debate over the relationship between science and the Bible with regard to understanding human origins. This debate has intensified in more recent times in part as theories of evolution have themselves been developed, but perhaps especially because of the emboldened ‘New Atheism’ popularized by, among others, Prof Richard Dawkins and the late Christopher Hitchens. The publication of major research findings in relation to the Human Genome Project, as well as the level of publicity surrounding the CERN Project on the Franco-Swiss border in Europe have taken the debate to a new level.

The debate has been met with different responses from within the conservative Christian community during the larger timeframe. Some have distanced themselves from the modern scientific community entirely, arguing for a strict literalist approach to the first two chapters of

Genesis. Others have embraced a so-called ‘concordist’ approach which seeks to bring the Bible and science into alignment. Both broad groupings sub-divide into particular emphases and approaches reflected in a range of opinions about the age of the earth, the length of the creation ‘days’ and the processes God may or may not have used in the act of creating.

Presbyterian churches (and others) have recognized a degree of latitude as to which of these views are acceptable within the confines of confessional orthodoxy. However, the question faced in a growing number of churches is whether or not it is acceptable to claim respect for the authority and inerrancy of Scripture while at the same time denying that Adam and Eve were a special creation of God at a particular point in history as described in Genesis (1.26-31; 2.4-23).

Whereas there has been longstanding acceptance of the traditional interpretation of these passages which affirms the special creation of the first pair of human beings, this view has been challenged in light of the claims of evolutionary science.

The alternative view being posited is that of God’s ‘adopting’ a pair of pre-existing hominids or a tribe of hominids who would become *Homo Sapiens*. This is not a new interpretation: it has long been held by those who hold to some form of Theistic Evolution which sees the creation account as God using evolutionary processes to bring the world as we know it into being. Historically this view was deemed to lie outside the range of views on the creation account that take the text of Scripture seriously. It is, however, increasingly gaining wider acceptance among conservative evangelicals.

The question facing a growing number of serious-minded Christians is how they should respond to this view.

## **2. Recognizing that Science has its Limits**

A key component in this response needs to be the recognition that science has its limits, at least in terms of how it has come to be defined in a contemporary sense. The Merriam-Webster Dictionary offers five definitions of the term as it has been used through the ages, but the one that reflects its predominant current usage is:

knowledge or a system of knowledge covering general truths or the operation of general laws especially as obtained and tested through scientific method.

The latter part of this definition is its controlling element: ‘...obtained and tested through scientific method.’ Although this is not a new concept, what is novel is the way in which this approach to ‘knowledge’ has effectively displaced all other approaches that have equal validity. Since when did a couple grow to ‘know’ each other through courtship, engagement into marriage by subjecting each other to a variety of laboratory tests to ascertain their mutual compatibility!

The even bigger weakness of this approach to knowledge is the huge (and arrogant) assumption that what is ‘knowable’ is confined to what is tangible and measurable. By definition it excludes and denies the possibility of a spiritual realm or dimension to existence because such a realm lies beyond the scope of scientific method.

The even bigger weakness bound up with this view is that it makes human beings the ultimate reference point to what can be known and assumes that whatever can be known must somehow fit within the confines of our human understanding.

A more subtle and serious variation on this approach, however, comes from within the Christian community. Some, Like Dennis Lamoureux in his book *Evolutionary Creation*<sup>1</sup>, argue that God has given us two books to read: ‘the Book of God’s Words and the Book of God’s Works’<sup>2</sup>. This is absolutely true (John Calvin expressed the same idea, but in different language and it has been accepted by the church through the ages); but what is different in the claim that Lamoureux and others like him make is that they see these two sources of divine revelation as having equal ultimacy and authority. In that sense they put theology and science on the same footing in terms of what governs our knowledge (though, in reality, they make theology subordinate to science because they place greater emphasis on rational investigation than supernatural revelation.)

So, even though this approach is coming from a ‘Christian’ perspective, it is by no means clear that it is a biblical perspective. And, to his credit, Lamoureux does not claim biblical support for his view on this point.

Regardless of whether we approach science from a secular or Christian perspective, it needs to be acknowledged that science is not an omniscient discipline: it has very definite limits.

### **3. Recognizing the Limitations of the Bible**

Having made comment about the limits of science, it is only appropriate that we acknowledge that the Bible also has its limits. That may come as a surprise to some sensitive Christian ears, but it is actually self-evident: the Bible does not pretend to say everything that can be said about everything! Its specific focus, as the Westminster Shorter Catechism helpfully reminds us, is to tell us ‘what man is to believe concerning God, and what duty God requires of man’<sup>3</sup>. So there are many areas of history, geography, politics and much more besides on which it is either silent, or that it addresses from a very particular perspective.

At a more technical level, when the Bible does venture into the kind of areas alluded to above, it does so from the perspective of the cultures of its day. So, in terms of the subject matter we are considering in this paper, the ‘science’ of the opening chapters of Genesis should not be perceived as though it were ‘science’ in the way we use that term is used today.

The Bible is God’s self-revelation spoken into specific points in history over a 1,500 year period that reflects the languages, thought-forms and worldviews of the cultures of those times. In other words, we need to appreciate God’s revelation within the context into which it was originally given.

Does that mean that the Bible is flawed or somehow inadequate because of this? Not at all, because the truths God was revealing about himself and about our world and its need are not altered by the language and limitations of the times in which he made them known. It does,

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<sup>1</sup> Lamoureux, D.O., *Evolutionary Creation: A Christian Approach to Evolution* (Wipf & Stock; Eugene, OR) 2008

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid* p. xiv

<sup>3</sup> *Westminster Shorter Catechism* Q.3

however, mean that it would be wrong for us to try and make the text of Scripture speak ‘scientifically’ in the opening chapters of Genesis in a way that was never intended.

Some of the positions that have been appearing through the writings of men like Dennis Lamoureux and, more recently, Peter Enns<sup>4</sup> have come as a reaction against a naïve and un-nuanced handling of Scripture that does not do justice to its unique nature and character.

Just as it is wrong to try and press science beyond its appropriate limits, so too it is equally wrong to attempt to press the Bible beyond the limits of what God intended it to reveal and how he intended it to function.

#### **4. The Working Relationship between Science and Scripture**

Given what has been said about God’s revelation of himself through his works as well as his words, how are science and Scripture meant to function in harmony? There can be no question but that they can and must do so, since ‘all truth is God’s truth’; the issue is what that should look like in practice.

At the most basic level it must mean recognizing that the Bible is the ultimate revelation that God has given of himself for all time. Even though he has indeed made himself known in the works of creation (Ps 19.1-6; Ac 14.16-17; Ro 1.18-23), the knowledge of God provided in through this sphere is not enough to bring people to a saving relationship with him; only to leave them ‘without excuse’ (Ro 1.20). We see enough in the created order to know there is a God and to appreciate something of his power, character and attributes; but not enough to appreciate the depth of our need as human beings or what is required in order for us to have fellowship with God.

The Bible itself tells us why God has also chosen to make himself known in a propositional and written form to provide us with ‘all we need for life and godliness’ (2Pe 1.3) and that he has done so through his word in Scripture, the written expression of his self-revelation through his Son, the Lord Jesus Christ (2Ti 3.14-17; He 1.1-4; 2Pe 1.20-21). It is important to be clear on what this does and doesn’t mean.

We have already noted that the Bible does not tell us all we need to know about everything and we have just said that its primary focus is knowledge that leads to life and godliness. There are, however, many other things that can only be learned through ‘scientific’ (in the older broader sense of that term) observation of our world and universe. We should be eager to expand our knowledge and understanding on both fronts.

It stands to reason that the knowledge we need for salvation must take precedence over what we simply learn about our world and everyday life, because our eternal destiny hangs on the former, not the latter. Add to this the fact that the Bible makes the claim of being free from error and being worthy of our utmost trust because it comes from the God who is true and reliable and we begin to see that it demands the kind serious consideration that rises above that attention we give to other areas of life. Indeed, when we realize that its central message is all about the eternal Son

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<sup>4</sup> Enns, P. *The Evolution of Adam* (Brazos Press; Grand Rapids MI) 2012

of God supernaturally entering our world in order to bring redemption by means of his death on the cross, it elevates this book to a place of its own in terms of the knowledge it imparts.

So in all the spheres and categories of knowledge to which we are exposed – including those of science – the knowledge that comes through Scripture is supreme.

When we look at the alternative spheres of knowledge, particularly those of the natural sciences, we find ourselves in very different territory. For one thing the knowledge that comes through science is ‘empirical’ – it is constantly growing and being refined from one generation to the next. What is accepted dogmatically by one generation is frequently revised and corrected by those that follow! But more than that, how we process what we learn through these avenues of investigation does not take place in a vacuum. Our understanding as human beings is affected by the fact we are flawed as human beings. Leaving aside for a moment what the Bible says about our being fallen and sinful in our natural state (and therefore fundamentally damaged in our ability to understand things as they really are) the scientific community is full of rivalry and professional jealousy that inevitably affects its ‘findings’ and the way they are communicated.

The critical issue to grasp in all of this is that when the ‘findings’ of science are clearly in conflict with explicit statements in Scripture – which are not open to differing interpretations – then the ‘findings’ of science need to be revisited.

When it comes to what many scientists and the Bible say about human origins at this point, there is a very definite conflict. As we noted at the beginning of this paper, evolutionary science is adamant that human beings – *Homo Sapiens* – evolved from less sophisticated human-like creatures which themselves had evolved from even simpler life forms. At some point in the evolutionary chain the human species emerged.

The Genesis account could not be more explicitly different. It tells us, ‘the LORD God formed the man from the dust of the ground and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life, and the man became a living being’ (Ge 2.7). The critical component in this verse in view of the current debate is the fact that, prior to this action on God’s part, Adam was not a living being. The biblical statement leaves no room for God’s adopting some already living being, because the Hebrew does not allow that interpretation.<sup>5</sup>

Even though there is a degree of latitude in how we interpret the detail of the early chapters of Genesis in relation to the age of the earth and the nature of life on earth before the fall of man, there is no latitude at the point of how the human race came into existence.

## **5. The Historicity of Jesus and the Historicity of Adam**

There is, however, another crucial strand in this whole discussion: it is the way the New Testament handles material from the Old Testament when it comes to Adam and the role he played, not just in the history of the human race, but also in the history of redemption.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> This point is argued classically by Prof. John Murray, *Collected Writings of John Murray* Vol 2 (Banner of Truth; Edinburgh) 1977 pp. 5-9, especially p. 8

<sup>6</sup> This is discussed helpfully by J.P. Versteeg in *Adam in the New Testament* (P&R Publishing; Philipsburg, NJ) 1977, 2012

The critical issue that comes to light when Adam is viewed from a New Testament perspective, especially in the writings of Paul (Ro 5.12-21; 1Co 15.44-49), is that the historicity of Adam is equated with the historicity of Jesus. In other words, if Paul is merely using Adam as a ‘teaching model’ (as liberal scholars have argued in their comments on these passages) then Paul’s argument about Jesus as a real historical redeemer collapses.

### **6. A Gospel that is Believable**

The bottom line in this whole debate is whether or not the Bible presents us with a gospel that is credible. This means not only understanding the ‘solution’ Jesus came to bring, but also the problem he came to solve. More than that, it especially means understanding why everything about his conception, birth, life, death, resurrection and ascension – as recorded in the gospels – was a necessary part of that solution. It means appreciating why it was necessary for Jesus not just to be man, but the God-man in order to be our Savior.

Paul’s explanation of this in the two passages referenced in the previous section links all that Christ was and did to all that Adam was and did – both as real historical figures. He links the origin of sin and the entrance of human death into our world to Adam’s first sin (Ro 5.12). And he links the gift of new life and forgiveness to the obedience of Christ (Ro 5.17).

Theologians describe this as the ‘federal headship’ of Adam and Christ. That is, that neither were acting merely in their own interests or for their private ends; both were acting on behalf of countless others whose destinies were bound up with their respective faithfulness or failure.

If Adam was not a real historical person and his act of disobedience bringing death to him to his race was not an actual moment in history, then it negates the central plank of the gospel that finds its focus in the actual sufferings and death of Christ on the cross as means by which he secured salvation for all who trust him.

### **Conclusion**

It would be very easy for us to dismiss a debate like this as belonging to the world of the academy, having little to do with the issues of everyday life. Nothing could be further from the truth: this issue is a crucial component of the gospel itself. The church cannot afford to get it wrong.