The Search for the Historical Adam

The center of the evolution debate has shifted from asking whether we came from earlier animals to whether we could have come from one man and one woman.

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Secularist brows furrowed in 2009 when President Obama chose prominent atheist-turned-Christian Francis S. Collins to be the director of the National Institutes of Health (NIH). Under the Los Angeles Times headline "Fit to Head the NIH?," Skeptic magazine's Michael Shermer fretted that Collins's beliefs might somehow corrupt America's biggest biomedical research agency. In a New York Times piece, atheist Sam Harris was similarly "uncomfortable," fearing in particular that a Collins administration might "seriously undercut" fields like neuroscience. Jerry Coyne, a University of Chicago expert on evolution, carped that the nominee's "scary," "bizarre," "inane," and "snake oil" ideas "pollute his science with his faith."

Nonetheless, Collins won unanimous U.S. Senate confirmation, thanks to sterling achievements in biomedical research and leadership of NIH's human genome research. Under Collins, this historic effort in 2003 finished mapping the complete sequence of several billion DNA subunits ("bases") and all of the genes that determine human heredity.

Collins, one of the most eminent scientists ever to identify as an evangelical Christian, staunchly defends Darwinian evolution even as he insists on God as the Creator. And he now stands at the epicenter of a dispute that increasingly agitates fellow believers. At issue: the traditional tenet (as summarized in Wheaton College's mandatory credo) that "God directly created Adam and Eve, the historical parents of the entire human race."

Collins's 2006 bestseller, The Language of God: A Scientist Presents Evidence for Belief—which so vexed those secularist critics—reported scientific indications that anatomically modern humans emerged from primate ancestors perhaps 100,000 years ago—long before the apparent Genesis time frame—and originated with a population that numbered something like 10,000, not two individuals. Instead of the traditional belief in the specially created man and woman of Eden who were biologically different from all other creatures, Collins mused, might Genesis be presenting "a poetic and powerful allegory" about God endowing humanity with a spiritual and moral nature? "Both options are intellectually tenable," he concluded.

In a recent pro-evolution book from InterVarsity Press, The Language of Science and Faith, Collins and co-author Karl W. Giberson escalate matters, announcing that "unfortunately" the concepts of Adam and Eve as the literal first couple and the ancestors of all humans simply "do not fit the evidence."

The Adam account in Genesis has long been subjected to scientific challenges, but "there was a lot of wiggle room in the past. The human genome sequencing took that wiggle room away" during the past decade, said Randall Isaac, executive director of the American Scientific Affiliation (asa), which has been discussing Adam issues for decades. The organization's 1,600 members, Collins among them, affirm the Bible's "divine inspiration, trustworthiness, and authority" on "faith and conduct," though not on scientific concepts.

The unnerving new genetic science was assessed with considerable detail in last September's issue of the ASA journal Perspectives on Science and Christian Faith. The articles were elaborated versions of papers
delivered at the ASA's 2009 annual meeting at Baylor University, the organization's first major discussion of
the Adam question that included religion scholars as well as scientists.

Two of the Perspectives writers, biblical exegete Daniel C. Harlow and theologian John R. Schneider, teach at
Calvin College. As a result of their writings, a personnel panel has been investigating whether they violated
the doctrinal standards that the college's sponsoring Christian Reformed Church requires of faculty. (The
investigation follows procedures that were established when Calvin astrophysicist Howard J. Van Till stirred
an earlier ruckus over creation—though not Adam and Eve—with his 1986 tome The Fourth Day.) Harlow
and Schneider could face discipline from the board of trustees, and revived denominational debate about
evolution seems inevitable. Meanwhile, Calvin scheduled 18 lectures on human origins this past academic
year.

Giberson, a physics professor at Eastern Nazarene College, downplays the potentially vanishing Adam and
Eve as "a secondary or peripheral disagreement that shouldn't cause us to hurl accusations of infidelity at
one another." He thinks "this will percolate along as an issue and more of the evangelical church will become
fine with it, despite Main Street objections. I don't see this issue splitting the church in some major way."

However, Michael Cromartie, the evangelicalism expert at Washington's Ethics and Public Policy Center,
sees high stakes, calling the new thinking an "urgent" and "potentially paradigm-shifting" development with
"huge theological implications .... How this gets settled is extremely important."

What May Be at Stake

Foundational confessions of faith from the Protestant Reformation assume a historical Adam, and official
Roman Catholicism defined this teaching at the 1546 Council of Trent, in the 1950 encyclical Humani
Generis of Pope Pius XII (who cautiously allowed leeway for humanity's bodily evolution), and in the 1992
Catechism of the Catholic Church. The broader public is intrigued, more so than by many other biblical
topics; a 2005 Gallup Poll found that 40 percent of Americans think the various competing concepts of
human origins matter "a great deal."

So, is the Adam and Eve question destined to become a groundbreaking science-and-Scripture dispute, a
21st-century equivalent of the once disturbing proof that the Earth orbits the sun? The potential is certainly
there: the emerging science could be seen to challenge not only what Genesis records about the creation of
humanity but the species's unique status as bearing the "image of God," Christian doctrine on original sin
and the Fall, the genealogy of Jesus in the Gospel of Luke, and, perhaps most significantly, Paul's teaching
that links the historical Adam with redemption through Christ (Rom. 5:12-19; 1 Cor. 15:20-23, 42-49; and his
speech in Acts 17).

The rethinking on Adam is an outgrowth of mainstream evolutionary thought that has long been the object
of evangelical hostility (though the hostility has always been hotter at the grassroots than among
professional scientists). One option, which consistently enjoys support from at least 40 percent of the
general public in Gallup surveys, is "young earth" creationism. As writers with Answers in Genesis, in
commenting on recent developments, insisted, "God created the mature, fully functioning creation in six
literal days about 6,000 years ago." If substantiated, this would of course demolish Darwinism because such
a brief chronology offers no time for evolutionary processes to occur. Questions about that sort of time frame
have provoked renewed defense of young earth creationism in Southern Baptist Convention circles. But even
the late James Montgomery Boice, founding chair of the International Council on Biblical Inerrancy, which
insisted on a historical Adam, thought various scientific findings make it "hard to believe" in a recent
creation.

A second competitor, the "old earth" version of creationism, is far more prevalent among evangelical
intellectuals. It basically rejects evolution but affirms science's longstanding and lopsided support for the
planet's vastly ancient age.

A third alternative is the newer "intelligent design" approach, which deems the Darwinian "natural selection"
model of evolutionary theory to be improbable and posits that some designing force lies behind nature, but does not explicitly define this as the God of Judaism and Christianity.

Collins and his colleagues dismiss those three views in favor of "theistic evolution," which affirms that the biblical God was the creator of all earthly organisms, humanity included, and used as his method the standard evolutionary scenario of gradual natural selection among genetic mutations across eons. A non-random Internet survey of teachers at evangelical seminaries in 2009 showed that 46 percent accept that concept. Giberson estimates that "the overwhelming number in biology departments at Christian colleges would be fine with this," though a 2005 survey found that only 27 percent identified as evolutionary creationists. In a mail survey of ASA scientists last year, 66 percent of respondents affirmed that "Homo sapiens evolved through natural processes from ancestral forms in common with primates," while 90 percent agreed that the Earth is some 4.6 billion years old.

In late 2007, Collins launched the San Diego-based BioLogos Foundation to promote theistic evolution, especially among evangelicals. He sought not only to embrace what he considers to be the best evidence, but also to bolster Christian credibility among people who are knowledgeable about mainstream scientific thinking. This initiative has won endorsements from both scientists and such evangelical figures as authors Os Guinness and Philip Yancey, Books & Culture editor John Wilson, and retiring Gordon College President R. Judson Carlberg. (Collins, who resigned as BioLogos president upon his NIH appointment and was succeeded by Point Loma Nazarene University biologist Darrel Falk, is declining interviews about his new book. Giberson, his co-author, is vice president of BioLogos.)

The Genetic Argument Made Simple

Dennis R. Venema, the BioLogos senior fellow for science and the biology chairman at Trinity Western University, is among the BioLogos writers who are not only advocating theistic evolution but also rethinking Adam. He has presented the relevant genetic research in Perspectives and in postings on the BioLogos website that provoked lively feedback. The argument is necessarily technical, studded with genetic charts and terms like telomeres, alleles, homology, syntenic locations, single nucleotide polymorphisms, and linkage disequilibrium. But the basic claims are understandable by non-experts.

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—Randall Isaac, executive director of the American Scientific Affiliation

The first claim concerns the old man-from-monkeys fuss as refined by new research on the genetic makeup of other animals, especially chimpanzees. Venema writes that the chimp genome (total genetic heredity encoded in DNA), which was fully mapped by 2005, displays "near identity" with the human genome as detailed by Collins's team, with a 95 to 99 percent match depending on what factors are included. The detailed analysis involves sequences of genes and the makeup of individual genes. But especially important are the locations of "pseudogenes" that are apparently no longer active. The cumulative evidence, Venema concludes, shows that "humans are not biologically independent, de novo creations, but share common ancestry" with prior primate species. (Many biologists estimate that the biological branches separated from that common ancestor some 5 or 6 million years ago.)

Venema has engaged in vigorous online debate about this with biochemist Fazale Rana, the vice president for research with Reasons to Believe, a ministry that champions old earth creationism. Rana questions the 95 and 99 percent figures, but asserts that in any case common sense tells us "these types of genetic comparisons are meaningless" because they do not explain the "fundamental biological and behavioral differences" between chimps and humans. Rana also says close genetic similarity does not require shared ancestry.

The second—and perhaps more troublesome—issue treated by Venema involves "population genomics."
Over the past decade, researchers have attempted to use the genetic diversity within modern humans to estimate primordial population sizes. According to a consensus drawn from three independent avenues of research, he states, the history of human ancestry involved a population "bottleneck" around 150,000 years ago—and from this tiny group of hominids came everyone living today. But the size of the group was far larger than a lonely couple: it consisted of several thousand individuals at minimum, say the geneticists. Had humanity begun with only two individuals, without millions of years for development, says an ASA paper, it would have required God's miraculous intervention to increase the genetic diversity to what is observable today. A BioLogos paper by Venema and Falk declares it more flatly: The human population, they say, "was definitely never as small as two .... Our species diverged as a population. The data are absolutely clear on that."

But caution is in order, argues Covenant Theological Seminary Old Testament scholar C. John Collins (no relation to Francis), another Perspectives author. He spells out a conservative response in the timely new Crossway title Did Adam and Eve Really Exist? On the bottleneck headcounts, he cites 2006 research from Canada, France, and Japan that indicates ambiguity about the rate of changes in genetic diversity that have been used thus far to calculate primordial population sizes. Genetic theorizing is rapidly—shall we say—evolving.

And, like Rana, John Collins remarks that "when you start talking about what it means to be human, much more than molecular biology is involved." Whatever the genetic match, humanity's communication and tool-making are obviously incomparably different from chimpanzee achievements; neither do primates worship or create masterworks of art and music. Darwin himself recognized this mysterious gap, which is described poetically in Psalm 8.

BioLogos not only promotes the current scientific consensus on human origins, but ways in which Scripture can be reinterpreted to accord with evolutionary theory. Its staff biblical expert is Peter Enns, whose interpretation of the Old Testament led to suspension and eventual departure from Westminster Theological Seminary in 2008 (though the Adam-and-Eve question was not at issue in that case). To Enns, a literal Adam as a special creation without evolutionary forebears is "at odds with everything else we know about the past from the natural sciences and cultural remains." As he reads the early chapters of Genesis, he says, "The Bible itself invites a symbolic reading by using cosmic battle imagery and by drawing parallels between Adam and Israel."

The New Testament passages are different, he allows. Enns has little doubt that Paul indeed thought Adam was "a real person." But Enns suggests that the apostle was reflecting beliefs about human origins that were common among the ancients. After scanning various interpretations of Genesis, Enns joins those who see the Genesis passages on Adam as "a story of Israelite origins," not the origin of all humanity, in which case there is no essential conflict with evolutionary theory.

Another BioLogos writer, Denis Lamoureux of the University of Alberta, the author of Evolutionary Creation (2008), thinks that "Adam never existed, and this fact has no impact whatsoever on the foundational beliefs of Christianity." In his view, "the Holy Spirit descended to the level of the biblical author of Genesis 1 and used his incidental ancient science regarding biological origins" to reveal "infallible messages of faith about the human spiritual condition." As with Enns, he sees Paul's epistles as reflecting the common biological understandings of that era. (Articles on the BioLogos website typically include a disclaimer that the views are the writers' and not necessarily the foundation's, but they are generally consistent on evolution and Adam.)

In yet another BioLogos article, Tremper Longman III of Westmont College admits, "I have not resolved this issue in my own mind except to say that there is nothing that insists on a literal understanding of Adam in a passage [Gen. 1-3] so filled with obvious figurative description." He is similarly open-minded on the question of Paul's epistles because "it is possible, even natural, to make an analogy between a literary figure and a
historical one." After BioLogos promoted Longman's views in a video last year, Reformed Theological Seminary ended Longman's role as an adjunct faculty member.

That dismissal was overshadowed at the seminary by a related dustup over noted Old Testament scholar Bruce Waltke. The administration abruptly accepted his offer of resignation due to a BioLogos video in which Waltke remarked that "if the data is overwhelming in favor of evolution, to deny that reality will make us a cult." Waltke began teaching at Knox Theological Seminary this year.

Though that dispute concerned theistic evolution, not the historical Adam, Waltke is open to the new thinking. In an interview, the former president of the Evangelical Theological Society affirmed the "inerrancy of the Bible, but not of interpretations." He sees Adam and Eve as historical individuals. But if genetics produces the conclusion that "Scripture has a collectivity represented as an individual, that doesn't bother me," he said. "We have to go with the scientific evidence. I don't think we can ignore it. I have full confidence in Scripture, but it does not represent what science represents." Waltke insists, however, that if a collective interpretation of Adam is established eventually, then fidelity to the Bible still requires "an origination point" with "a historical reality of man rebelling against God."

**The Bible without an Original Pair**

The embattled professors at Calvin mull more adventuresome theological possibilities, although their *Perspectives* articles were generally couched as what-if-this-pans-out speculations. For instance, Schneider, who sees conservative Protestantism as being on "the brink of crisis" on this topic, wrote that the evidence "seems to discredit" the Fall from original righteousness as a historical event. Vices we associate with consequences of the Fall and original sin, such as self-serving behavior, exist in lower primates and would have been passed on via evolution to humans. Thus Eden "cannot be a literal description of how things really were in the primal human past."

Harlow proposed that understandings of the Fall may need to be "reformulated" and the church must be willing to "decouple original sin from the notion that all humans descended from a single pair." In his view, the early chapters of Genesis should probably be regarded as "imaginative portrayals of an actual epoch." Whether or not Adam was historical, he asserted, is "not central to biblical theology." Paul and Luke may have thought Adam was a literal man because they had no reason not to, he explained. But "we have many reasons" to interpret Adam as a literary figure.

Before the genetics eruptions, the scholarship that undermined literal readings of the Genesis Adam was based largely on archaeological remains and fossils. Specialists projected that proto-humans appeared as early as 200,000 years ago, based on evidence of primitive stone tools. The Upper Paleolithic era (which began around 40,000 years ago) was a notable advance culturally, with more sophisticated tools and weaponry, higher population densities, and art. To John Stott and others, Genesis chapter 4 appears to root Adam's son Cain in that time frame—referring to the introduction of settled agriculture, music, and the forging of bronze and iron. However, Stott added, the ancient evidence is "anatomical rather than behavioral," so it's hard to say just when hominids became biblical humans. Hard textual evidence for humanity's hallmark of complex language communication was necessarily lacking until writing was invented a mere several thousand years ago.

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The Adam issue is hardly new. In 1940, C. S. Lewis wrote in *The Problem of Pain* that "for long centuries, God perfected the animal form which was to become the vehicle of humanity and the image of himself." Lewis thought that in the process God eventually caused the new divine consciousness to descend upon this organism, but "we do not know how many of these creatures God made, nor how long they continued in the Paradisal state."

A 1967 InterVarsity Press commentary on Genesis by British evangelical Derek Kidner proposed a "tentative" concept that could fit with geneticists’ theory of human origination with a larger population. He thought it conceivable that "pre-Adamites" and "Adamites" from the same genetic stock existed simultaneously but with "no natural bridge from animal to man." After God conferred his image upon Adam, he did the same with the others who then existed, "to bring them into the same realm of being." In Kidner’s view, Adam’s "headship of humanity extended, if that was the case, outwards to his contemporaries as well as onwards to his offspring, and his disobedience disinherited both alike."

An ASA paper likewise observes that some Christians who understand Adam and Eve as symbols or allegories suppose that Genesis describes what happened to a particular grouping of humans during the "bottleneck" period, so that "maybe God transformed everyone in this group into the first biblical humans." The ASA notes another variant in which humanity’s creation and fall happened within different groups over time, as God added moral responsibilities and spiritual revelations.

In his book-length conservative rejoinder to the new interpretations, John Collins warns against "pure literalism" in reading Genesis, arguing that the book "intends to use imaginative description to tell us of actual events." This is essentially what J. I. Packer contended in his 1958 classic, *'Fundamentalism' and the Word of God*. But Collins comments that if Adam and Eve lacked "an actual existence we nullify so many things in the Bible it results in a different story." To him, the pivotal point is that "however God produced the bodies of the first human beings, it wasn’t a purely natural process." If genetics eventually forces reconsideration, Collins remarks, he could perhaps reconceive of Adam and Eve as "the king and queen of a larger population" and thereby preserve Genesis’ historicity.

**If Paul is Wrong on History**

Last November, BioLogos held a workshop at New York City's Harvard Club where church leaders and Christians in science deliberated on evolution, creation, and Adam. The meeting issued an accord that endorsed theistic evolution and affirmed "without reservation both the authority of the Bible and the integrity of science" as two paths of divine revelation. The paper declared that "several options" can achieve a synthesis between Scripture and science, "including some which involve a historical couple, Adam and Eve." Participants in the discussions that produced the statement included Francis Collins, Cromartie, Enns, Falk, Giberson, Guinness, Isaac, and Yancey.

Another participant, much-respected local pastor Tim Keller, offered a workshop paper laying out in irenic but firm terms a conservative stance on Paul’s view of the first humans. "[Paul] most definitely wanted to teach us that Adam and Eve were real historical figures. When you refuse to take a biblical author literally when he clearly wants you to do so, you have moved away from the traditional understanding of the biblical authority," Keller wrote. "If Adam doesn’t exist, Paul’s whole argument—that both sin and grace work 'covenantally'—falls apart. You can’t say that ‘Paul was a man of his time’ but we can accept his basic teaching about Adam. If you don’t believe what he believes about Adam, you are denying the core of Paul’s teaching."

Back when genetics played little part in Adam disputes, physicist John A. Bloom, director of Biola University's science and religion program, wrote that if there was merely a population of pre-Adamic hominids that "collectively evolved into modern man, then the theological foundation for the nuclear family, sin and death appears to be eroded. The credibility of the Bible when it speaks on these issues seems to be damaged: If it does not correctly explain the origin of a problem, why should one trust its solutions?"

South Carolina pastor Richard Phillips, a blogger with the Alliance of Confessing Evangelicals and chair of
the Philadelphia Conference on Reformed Theology, sees serious doctrinal danger if the historical Adam disappears. "Can the Bible's theology be true if the historical events on which the theology is based are false?" he asks. If science trumps Scripture, what does this mean for the virgin birth of Jesus, or his miracles, or his resurrection? "The hermeneutics behind theistic evolution are a Trojan horse that, once inside our gates, must cause the entire fortress of Christian belief to fall."

What next with Adam and Eve? "It seems urgent that the best people stop trading emails and get together for a real meeting in the same room," Cromartie said. He wants leading evangelical thinkers in science and Scripture to jointly work out an accord, because otherwise this problem "could produce a huge split right through the heart of conservative, orthodox, historic Christianity."

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