

Editorial: Debating the Historicity of Adam: Does it Matter?

Stephen J. Wellum

SINCE THE RISE of the Darwinian theory of evolution and its acceptance by the larger scientific community, the early chapters of Genesis have come under increasing debate and criticism. Many Christians, who have sought to maintain their commitment to Scripture while accepting “the assured results of science,” have wrestled

with how to interpret the creation account, especially the question of whether Adam and Eve should be understood as real, historical people. Throughout church history the majority view, though varied in details, has maintained that even though Genesis 1-3 is not a scientific treatise, it accurately teaches us how God created the universe and the first couple. In fact, until recent times, to deny the creation account as truthful and historical,

was viewed as undermining the authority of Scripture and undercutting the theological grounding to the entire redemptive plan of God centered in

Christ. That is why a crucial test of orthodoxy, especially within evangelicalism, was centered on the question of whether one accepted as reliable the space-time creation of Adam and the fall.

However, for those who accepted the evolutionary theory as a scientific “fact,” the way to reconcile Scripture with science was through what Paul Tillich later labeled the “method of correlation.” Theoretically, in such a method equal weight is given to general and special revelation, namely the “book of nature” (science) and the “book of Scripture,” but inevitably it is always Scripture which seems to get re-interpreted in light of current thought. Instead of questioning the “assured results of science,” the Bible is recast in such a way that it now teaches something different than what it says. So, for example, in the case of Adam and the fall, a variety of re-interpretations were given, but all of them inevitably agreed on this point: Genesis is an accommodated account to the mindset of the ancient Near East and as such it does not tell us how God actually created the world including the creation of Adam. We now “know” what the

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ancients did not know, that Genesis is *not* an accurate, historical account. Instead it is an ancient document which reflects the false beliefs of that day, yet God has chosen to use a flawed, accommodated account to disclose “theological truth” to us. If we interpret it in this way then it has *value* for us; it reveals *spiritual* truth in a symbolic way.

This way of “reconciling” Scripture and science was adopted by nineteenth-century classic liberal theology, twentieth-century neo-orthodoxy, and now various strands of postmodern theology. However it was consistently rejected by evangelical theology as unacceptable on at least two grounds. First and most important, it was rejected because it does *not* do justice to Scripture. Even though there may be legitimate debates over the literary form of Genesis 1-3 and how “scientific” its account is, it is nigh impossible to deny that the Bible itself, views the creation of the world and of the first couple, as occurring in space-time history. Whether one thinks of the genealogical structure of Genesis which presents Adam in continuity with other historical figures; or, the biblical genealogies which treat Adam and Eve as historical (1 Chron 1:1; Luke 3:38); or, Jesus’ and Paul’s teaching on marriage and divorce which assumes the historical existence of the first couple (Matt 19:4-6; Mark 10:6-8; Eph 5:21ff; cf. 1 Tim 2:13-14); or, most significantly, the entire Bible’s understanding of the entrance of sin into the human race, the nature of the human problem resulting from Adam’s disobedience and thus requiring the need for the last Adam to undo the work of the first man (Rom 5:12-21; 1 Cor 15:22-23, 45-47; cf. Heb 2:5-18)—it is clear that the Bible presents the early chapters of Genesis as factual, historical, and reliable accounts.

In fact, to deny otherwise is to undercut the very rhyme and reason for the gospel. Why must God the Son become incarnate, live our life, die our death, and be raised for our justification? Scripture’s answer is clear: We need a redeemer because Adam as the first man and covenantal head of the human race brought sin, death, and destruction into this world, and it is only by the

last Adam, our Lord Jesus Christ, that it can be paid for and reversed. The fact of human sin and death is grounded in a real, historical Adam who was created upright and morally good, but in history revolted against God and by that action took down the entire human race with him. If this is denied, the basis for the gospel is undercut, and the entire Christian position is destroyed.

Second, this approach is rejected because many of us are *not* convinced that it does justice to science. In interpreting the “book of nature” (general revelation) we must do so carefully. We must not pit science against Scripture since both are the revelations of God, and we must make sure that our interpretations of the “facts” of science are accurate.

Unfortunately, however, in recent years a growing number of evangelicals are now adopting the approach of “liberal” theology and re-interpreting Scripture in light of the perceived “facts” of science. In so doing, the Adam of the Bible is either being denied outright as an historical figure or re-interpreted as a symbol for Israel, or something along these lines. Along with this denial is a re-interpretation of the fall. Instead of grounding the human problem in space-time history, Genesis 3 is treated as a symbolic representation of the human problem. But as Augustine noted many years ago: If Adam had not sinned in history the Son of Man would not have come. Ultimately, what is at stake is the grounding for the gospel itself.

In light of these recent debates, we are devoting this issue of *SBJT* to this crucial topic. We are seeking to stake a claim that to deny an historic Adam and fall and go the way of recent evangelicals is not only unnecessary, it is unbiblical in the strongest of terms. In the end, it will lead to a denial of other parts of Scripture, and ultimately it will undercut the glorious gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ. That is why our wide-ranging essays and forum pieces are seeking, in some small way, to demonstrate that from Scripture, theology, science, and more, debating an historic Adam matters.