

Does It Really Matter Whether Adam Was the First Man?

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Evangelical Christians have generally resisted the demythologization of the Gospels whereby, for example, the resurrection of Jesus is interpreted as a mythical portrayal of the principle of new life. Indeed, they have argued strongly that it's the very historicity of the resurrection that is so vital. However, when it regards the biblical figures of Adam and Eve, there has been a far greater willingness to interpret them as mythical or symbolic.

The simple aim of this article is to show that, far from being a peripheral matter for fussy literalists, it is biblically and theologically necessary for Christians to believe in Adam as a historical person who fathered the entire human race.

Adam Was a Historical Person

Textual Evidence

The early chapters of Genesis sometimes use the word *'ādām* to mean “humankind” (e.g., Gen. 1:26–27), and since there is clearly a literary structure to those chapters, some have seen the figure of Adam as a literary device, rather than a historical individual. Already a question arises: must we choose? Throughout the Bible we see instances of literary devices used to present historical material: think of Nicodemus coming to Jesus *at night*, or the emphasis in the Gospels on Jesus's death *at the time of the Passover*. Most commentators would happily acknowledge that here are literary devices being employed to draw our attention to the theological significance of the historical events being recounted. The “literary” need not exclude the “literal.”

The next question then must be: does the “literary” exclude the “literal” in the case of Adam? Not according to those other parts of the Bible that refer back to Adam. The genealogies of Genesis 5, 1 Chronicles 1, and Luke 3 all find their first parent in Adam—and while biblical genealogies sometimes omit names for various reasons, they are not known to *add* fictional or mythological figures. When Jesus taught on marriage in Matthew 19:4–6, and when Jude referred to Adam in Jude 14, they used no caveats or anything to suggest they doubted Adam’s historical reality or thought of him any differently than they did other Old Testament characters. And when Paul spoke of Adam being formed first, and the woman coming from him (1 Cor. 11:8–9; 1 Tim. 2:11–14), he had to be assuming a historical account in Genesis 2. His argument would collapse into nonsense if he meant Adam and Eve were mere mythological symbols of the timeless truth that men preexist women.

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Theological Necessity

We can think of these passages as circumstantial evidence that the biblical authors thought of Adam as a real person in history. Circumstantial evidence is useful and important, but we have something more conclusive. The role Adam plays in Paul’s theology makes Adam’s historical reality integral to the basic storyline of the gospel. And if that is the case, then the historicity of Adam cannot be a side issue, but part and parcel of the foundations of Christian belief.

The first exhibit is Romans 5:12–21, where Paul contrasts the sin of “the one man,” Adam, with the righteousness of “the one man,” Christ. Paul is the apostle who felt it necessary to make the apparently minute distinction between a singular “seed” and plural “seeds” (Gal. 3:16), so it’s probably safe to assume he was not being thoughtless, meaning “men” when speaking of “the one man.” Indeed, “the one man” is repeatedly contrasted with the many human beings, and “oneness” underpins Paul’s very argument—which is about the overthrow of the one sin of the one man (Adam) by the one salvation of the one man (Christ).

Throughout the passage, Paul speaks of Adam in the same way he speaks of Christ. (His language of death coming “through” Adam is also similar to how he speaks of blessing coming “through” Abraham in Galatians 3.) He is able to speak of a time *before* this one man’s trespass, when there was no sin or death, and he is able to speak of a time *after* it—a period stretching from Adam to Moses. Paul could hardly have been clearer: he supposed Adam was as real and historical a figure as Christ and Moses (and Abraham). Yet it is not just Paul’s *language* that suggests he believed in a historical Adam; his whole *argument* depends on it. His logic would fall apart if he was comparing a historical man (Christ) to a mythical or symbolic one (Adam). If Adam and his sin were mere symbols, then there would be no need for a historical atonement; only a mythical atonement would be necessary to undo a mythical fall. With a mythical Adam, then, Christ might as well be—in fact, would do better to be—a mere symbol of divine forgiveness and new life. Instead, though, the story Paul tells is of a historical problem of sin, guilt, and death being introduced into the creation, a problem that required a historical solution.

To remove that historical problem of Adam’s sin wouldn’t just remove the rationale for the historical solution of the cross and resurrection; it would transform Paul’s gospel beyond all recognition. Where did sin and evil come from? If they were *not* the result of one man’s act of disobedience, there seem to be only two options: either sin was there beforehand and evil is an integral part of God’s creation, or sin is an individualistic thing, brought into the world almost *ex nihilo* by each person. The former is blatantly non-Christian in its monist or dualist denial of a good Creator and his good creation; the latter looks like Pelagianism, with good individuals becoming sinful by copying Adam (and, presumably, becoming righteous by copying Christ).

The second exhibit that testifies to the foundational significance of a historical Adam to Paul’s theology is 1 Corinthians 15:21–22 and 45–49. Again, Paul unpacks a tight parallel between the first man, Adam, through whom came death, and the second or last man, Christ, through whom comes new life. Again, Adam is spoken of in the same way as Christ. Again, Adam is seen as the origin of death, as Christ is the origin of life.

At this point in 1 Corinthians, Paul is at the apex of a long argument dealing with problems the Corinthian Christians had with the body. As the ultimate answer to their pastoral problems, Paul set out to give them confidence in the reality of their future bodily resurrection by demonstrating the historical fact of Jesus’s bodily resurrection. The historical reality of Jesus’s resurrection is the linchpin of his response. That being the case, it would be the height of rhetorical folly for Paul to draw a parallel between Adam and Christ if he thought Adam was mythical. For if the two could be parallel, then Christ’s resurrection could also be construed mythically—and Paul’s whole letter would lose its point, purpose, and punch.

If I have accurately represented Paul’s theology in these passages, then it is simply impossible to remove a historical Adam from Paul’s gospel and leave it intact. To do so would fatally dehistoricize it, forcing a different account of the origin of evil requiring an altogether different means of salvation.

Is There a Third Way?

Denis Alexander has proposed—substantially elaborating on a theory put forward by John Stott (*Understanding the Bible*, 49)—that there is a way of avoiding the sharp dichotomy between the traditional view of a historical Adam and the view that such a position is now scientifically untenable (Alexander, chs. 9–10). That is, while we should definitely see Adam as a historical figure, we need not believe he was the first human. According to Alexander’s preferred model, anatomically modern humans emerged 200,000 years ago, with language in place by 50,000 years ago. Then, around 6,000 to 8,000 years ago, God chose a couple of Neolithic farmers, and to them revealed himself for the first time. Thus he constituted *Homo divinus*, the first humans to know him and be spiritually alive.

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It is an ingenious synthesis, to be sure, deftly sidestepping the theological chasm opened by denials of a historical Adam. But it has created for itself profound new problems. The first is raised by the question of what to make of Adam’s contemporaries, those anatomically modern humans who, Alexander says, had already been populating the world for tens of thousands of years. He wisely maneuvers away from understanding them as anything less than fully human, emphatically affirming that “the whole of humankind without any exception is made in God’s image, including certainly all the other millions of people alive

in the world in Neolithic times” (238). To have stated otherwise would have landed him in a particularly unpleasant quagmire: the aboriginal population of Australia, who, according to Alexander, had already been living there for 40,000 years before Adam and Eve were born, would otherwise be relegated to the status of non-human animals. And presumably the parents of Adam and Eve, also being non-human animals, would then—along with the Australian aborigines—be a legitimate food source for a hungry *Homo divinus*.

In avoiding all that, Alexander’s proposal founders on, if anything, even more hazardous terrain. The crucial move is made when he explains what exactly set Adam and Eve apart from their contemporaries. When they were born, he suggests, there was already a vast Neolithic population to be found in God’s image. What then happened to set Adam and Eve apart as *Homo divinus* was simply that “through God’s revelation to Adam and Eve . . . the understanding of what that image actually meant, in practice, was made apparent to them” (238). It was not, then, that Adam and Eve were now freshly created in God’s image; they had already been born in God’s image, children of a long line of bearers of God’s image. The difference was that they now understood what this meant (a personal relationship with God).

The first problem with this is biblical. In Genesis 1 and 2, it is quite specifically Adam and Eve who are created in God's image (the event of Gen. 1:27 being presented afresh in Gen. 2:18–25). It is not just that *some* beings were created in God's image, and that this could later be realized by a couple of their descendants. Quite the opposite: Genesis 2:7 seems to be an example of the text going out of its way to emphasize a direct, special creative act to bring the man Adam into being. That problem might be considered surmountable, but it has created a second theological problem that seems insurmountable. It is that, if humans were already in the image of God before Adam and Eve, then we are left with one of two scenarios. Either there was, before Adam and Eve, a first human endowed with the image of God—at which point we are left with two Adams: the first creature actually to be in God's image, and Adam, the first human in God's image to realize what that meant. Or, if the image of God was something that slowly evolved in humanity, then we are left with a collection of first humans in God's image and multiple Adams.

Quite apart from the sheer awkwardness of such a position, its consequences would quickly snowball. If, as Alexander maintains, being in the image of God is about having a personal relationship with God, then all those humans in God's image who had *not* received the revelation of what that meant must have been sinning. Created in God's image to relate to God, they were not relating to God. In fact, though he does not use the word, the picture Alexander paints is one of humanity immersed in idolatry. For, he says, “religious beliefs existed before this time [of Adam and Eve], as people sought after God or gods in different parts of the world, offering their own explanations for the meaning of their lives” (237). Thus the model has sin before the fall.

Presumably God ignored that sin (though on what basis, we are not told). But if he did so, that would clash with what Paul says in Romans 1:18–32. There Paul explains that God's wrath stands against all humanity—not due to a failure to heed a specific revelation of the meaning of being in God's image, but due to a refusal to acknowledge the revelation of God made plain in creation since it was created. In fact, given Romans 1:18ff., it seems Alexander's religious/idolatrous pre-Adamic *Homo sapiens* must have been under the wrath of God. But even if Romans 1 can be squared with this model, it does at the very least seem strange that God should create the opportunity for sin and idolatry without yet providing any possibility for righteousness and true knowledge of God, as he would later do for Adam.

And what of Adam himself? When he was chosen to receive the revelation of what being in God's image means, he must have been sinful already. He was not relating to God as he was created to do. Was he then declared temporarily sinless? Or was he always sinful, the only change being that in the events of Genesis 3 he sinned for the first time *knowingly*? And if the latter, why was Adam's previous, unconscious sin excusable when later, even unconscious sin is said to bring guilt (Lev. 5:17; Ps. 19:12)?

The fact that God creates the opportunity for sin long before creating any opportunity to know him reflects what is perhaps most troubling about this synthesis: here is a God somehow constrained to work with a less-than-ideal situation. Indeed, throughout the proposal, one gets the sense that God is having to work by someone else's rules, as if in someone else's universe.

This comes out clearly in Alexander's comments on the creation of woman. According to him, Eve was a person with human parentage as real as Adam. She was not taken physically from Adam's side. Instead, the purpose of [Genesis 2:21](#), he says, is to affirm male-female complementarity (197). Undoubtedly that is one of the purposes of that text; however, by making [Genesis 2:21](#) only mythical/symbolic, he becomes unable to ground that male-female complementarity in any ontological reality. If Eve had a physical origin independent of Adam, then while God might for his own inscrutable reasons want to affirm male-female complementarity, he would have no ontological basis for doing so. In other words, his affirmation here (and, one must assume, at least some of his other affirmations) floats independent of reality. God, in effect, pulls his theology out of thin air. But a God who is forced to graft meaning onto events (or non-events) that do not themselves carry any such meaning does not look like a sovereign Creator.

Finally, the way Alexander's model compels him to read the Genesis text leads one to feel he is trying to fit a round peg into a square hole. The creation of woman again serves as a helpful example: "When Adam recognised Eve as 'bone of my bones and flesh of my flesh,' he was not just recognising a fellow *Homo sapiens*—there were plenty of those around—but a fellow believer" (237). Not only does this ignore the specifically physical content of what is being said (something essential to later biblical references to this passage, cf. [1 Cor. 6:16–17](#); [Eph. 5:28–31](#)); it also makes little sense of the previous search for a "helper" for Adam. If [Genesis 2:18–20](#) indicates anything, it's that no other member of Adam's kind was present. If it was merely a search for another believer, why look among the beasts of the field and the birds of the air? Why not mention the humans being brought to Adam? And could God not simply have revealed the meaning of being in God's image to any one of the *Homo sapiens* around, and so produced the required "helper"?

A similar rationale drives his interpretation of [Genesis 6:2](#), where the sons of God intermarry with the daughters of men. As Alexander sees it, this is a simple case of the spiritually alive family of Adam intermarrying with contemporary *Homo sapiens* who hadn't received the revelation of God and so were spiritually dead. The application is clear: "Then, as now, don't marry unbelievers," for "it is clear that judgement follows, as described in 6:5ff with the account of the flood" (199). Yet if [Genesis 6](#) were about the godly marrying unbelievers from outside Adam's line, why did the judgment of the flood not follow when "godly" Cain took a wife from outside Adam's line, as Alexander holds (241)?

My suggestion is that, for all its ingenuity, Alexander's "third way" of holding to a historical Adam—but without believing him to be the first human—is unable to provide a coherent reading of the Genesis text, and creates more theological problems than it solves. Some of those problems (such as his reading of [Genesis 6](#)) are admittedly small, little more than indications his model is probably internally incoherent and jarring with the biblical account. Others (such as the implications for his understanding of God as sovereign Creator) are so serious they make his argument seem incurable.

Adam Fathered the Entire Human Race

Adam's Headship over Humanity

Debates about Adam's relationship to the rest of humanity always tend to come back to the old debate between Augustine and Pelagius. Pelagius hadn't called the physical connection between Adam and the rest of humanity into question. But he argued, for the purposes of salvation, any such connection was almost entirely irrelevant. According to Pelagius, salvation and damnation are determined by the individual from start to finish: a person is damned, not by virtue of any underlying connection with Adam, but by imitating his sin; likewise, a person is saved, not by virtue of any underlying connection with Christ, but by imitating his righteousness. In other words, salvation and damnation are not about having another's status, but imitating the one whose fate you wish to share. Augustine's response showed (among many other things) that this simply could not be squared with Romans 5:12-21, where people are said to be condemned on the basis of Adam's sin and justified on the basis of Christ's righteousness. As Augustine understood Paul, God deals with all humankind through one of two men: Adam, the original man and original head of all humanity; or Christ, the first and head of God's re-created, new humanity.

Why should questions about the identity of Adam and his connection to the rest of humanity keep coming back to the Augustine-Pelagius debate? There seem to be two reasons: (1) the issues of the debate are inescapably foundational, in that they really represent a debate between the Christian gospel and an entirely different approach to God and salvation; (2) the terms of the debate still manage to address even the most sophisticated modern formulations. Take, for example, the notion that Adam and Eve are symbols of what was, in fact, a whole (probably Neolithic) population, and that sin emerged in that population and from there spread to all humankind. Here the problem of Pelagianism has simply been shunted away from the bulk of humanity to a primordial few so far removed in time that the problem appears negligible.

It seems that the terms of the Augustine-Pelagius debate are so hard to evade that denials of Adam as the destiny-determining head of humanity inevitably lead toward construing personal destiny individualistically, at least to some extent. And the greater the extent of personal self-determination, the greater must be the tendency to regard Christ as more example than Savior.

Headship Has Ontological Roots

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Once again, Denis Alexander has shrewdly avoided such pitfalls in his synthesis. Proving he is well aware of the imperative theological need to acknowledge Adam as the head of the old humanity, he proposes a different way of integrating that theological fact with his view that Adam was not the first human. The way he does this is simply by divorcing Adam's legal or federal status as head of humanity from any notion that Adam was the natural head or father of the human race. At some point, then, God constituted Adam as the federal head, not just of every *Homo divinus*, but of every *Homo sapiens*. As such, when Adam sinned for the first time (knowingly), God could impute that sin to every *Homo sapiens*, regardless of their lack of ontological connection to Adam. At that point, the unenlightened *Homo sapiens* of Australia (to pick one previously mentioned people group unconnected to Adam's Neolithic community) became guilty before God.

However, by divorcing Adam's federal headship from his natural, physical headship, Alexander runs into what are now familiar problems. The first is that, once again, God is making theological affirmations that have no ontological basis. Adam is being declared to be something (the head of humanity) that he, in physical reality, is not. As a result, God's imputation of sin to the unsuspecting Australian aborigines looks arbitrary. There is no basis for a connection between Adam and the *Homo sapiens* at the other end of the earth from him, and so God's declaration that they should share Adam's guilt rests on nothing other than divine whim.

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This, though, is not how the concept of headship functions scripturally. It is specifically the *offspring* who are affected by how God judges individuals in the Bible (hence the Old Testament preoccupation with genealogies). In choosing examples one is spoiled for choice, but take how the blessings on Abraham, Jacob, and David affect their offspring, or how the curse on Jehoiachin affects his. Conversely, Levi is considered to have acted “in” Abraham only because he was “still in the loins” of Abraham (Heb. 7:9–10). In other words, an individual's headship or corporate nature is never portrayed as being detachable from real connections.

If we were to move from talking about how we are born “in Adam” to how Christians are “in Christ,” the necessity for real connection should become clearer. In the New Testament, Christians are never given new birth or righteousness on the basis of a divine decree that has no grounding in what's actually happened to them. Instead, by the Spirit, a real ontological union is established with Christ, and the believer is incorporated into Christ's body. If the Spirit did not establish any such union, the Christian's righteousness really would remain a legal fiction. And the principle works both ways: in both union with Christ by the Spirit and union with Adam by the flesh, what is essential is the relevant ontological connection. Neither can be a legal fiction if the Judge of all the earth is to do

right.

There is another problem with suggesting God could establish federal headship (for either Adam or Christ) without providing any ontological basis for it. Let's take again the example of the Christian's union with Christ as the parallel of union with Adam. Imagine God establishing the righteousness of an individual by a free divine fiat, but without the Spirit actually uniting the Christian to Christ. What would be lacking? The Spirit. The model thus wouldn't be Trinitarian. If Paul's Adam-Christ parallel holds, then the suggestion that a *Homo sapiens* could be united to Adam without any real connection lands us in a sub-Trinitarian understanding of salvation.

It's worth noting how the logic of [1 Corinthians 11:3](#) implies that, just as it would be odd to allow a husband to be head of his wife without any ontological connection with her, so it would be worrying to suggest that God the Father, as head of Christ, need have no ontological connection with his Son. To import such an ontologically light view of headship into the Trinity would tip one into Arianism or tritheism. Of course, in both cases nobody is seeking to do any such thing. But we're surely entitled to ask why headship is treated so differently in different instances.

Biblically and theologically, then, it seems that if Adam was not in physical reality the father of all, he could not have been head of all. Thus, quite apart from circumstantial biblical evidence that seems to suggest that Adam is the one man from whom all humanity came ([Acts 17:26](#)), theologically we are compelled to say that since Adam clearly is seen as the head of all humanity, he must be the father of all humanity.

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Christ Took on *Our* Humanity

Even before Gregory Nazianzen neatly articulated it, a good part of the Christology of the early post-apostolic church was shaped by this thought: whatever Christ did not assume in his incarnation could not be “healed” or saved ([Schaff](#), 438). In essence it was an attempt to systematize the thought of [Hebrews 2:11–17](#), that Jesus had to be *one* with those he came to save, sharing their flesh and blood so that this very flesh and blood could be taken through the curse of death into the new life of the resurrection. Thus in the incarnation Christ did not take on angelic flesh—that would do us no good—but our flesh, so that he might truly be like us and truly save us. It was this theology that protected the church from those heresies that undermined Christ's real humanity and so undermined the salvation he brought.

If, however, Adam was not the progenitor of all humanity, but merely a member of one of any number of disconnected branches of *Homo sapiens*, then Nazianzen's maxim begins to look rather worrying. If Christ did not assume my flesh, but the flesh of another humanity, then he is not my kinsman-redeemer. For if the post-apostolic church was right in its reading of [Hebrews 2](#) and its understanding of the incarnation, what was important was not that Christ assumed any humanity, but quite specifically *our* humanity.

“If Christ did not assume my flesh, but the flesh of another humanity, then he is not my kinsman-redeemer.”

Verdict: The Historical Adam Matters

When theological doctrines are detached from historical moorings, they are always easier to harmonize with other data and ideologies. And, of course, there are a good many doctrines that are not directly historical by nature.

It has been my contention that the identity of Adam, and his role as the physical progenitor of the human race, are not such free or detachable doctrines. The historical reality of Adam is an essential means of preserving a Christian account of sin and evil, a Christian understanding of God, and the rationale for the incarnation, cross, and resurrection. His physical fatherhood of all humankind preserves God’s justice in condemning us in Adam (and, by inference, God’s justice in redeeming us in Christ), and it safeguards the logic of the incarnation. Neither belief can be reinterpreted without the most severe consequences.

Editors’ note: This article is adapted from Michael Reeves’s chapter in *Should Christians Embrace Evolution?: Biblical and Scientific Responses*, edited by Norman C. Nevin (P&R, 2011). Used by permission.

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