

C. John Collins's *Did Adam and Eve Really Exist?*

A.J. McKitterick

Moorlands College, Sopley, Dorset, UK

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It was a real pleasure to read John Collins's book. It is well-written, and Collins has made his arguments very accessible for a broad readership. My review will focus on the way in which Collins has positioned his discussion within the academy. As a kind of summary statement, I would say that Collins is a Janus, looking at the same time to the modern advances in theory and science, and looking back to the classics and the traditional readings of Genesis. He is at home both in discussion with geneticists and Assyriologists, with anthropologists and linguists.

No doubt a major motivation for such a broad intellectual basis is to avoid the charge of naiveté. He wants to be known as a 'grown up reader', p18. He is not willing to simply follow authority, and is quite comfortable critiquing some of the established figures of Old Testament theology, such as Barr, Walton, Enns, and so on. Although very able to engage with these and other scholars, he is primarily drawing from the fruit of his own labours over several years.

What Collins does in this book, as I see it, is to reframe the debate about the proper hermeneutical approach to reading Genesis 1-3. What he will not allow his reader to do is to label his argument as simply a return to traditional, pre-modern categories, or as giving up on modern critical approaches and adopting a naive literalism. Collins tackles the commonly held view in the academy that Adam and Eve are symbols and that the accounts of Genesis 1-5 (for example) are mythical, and does so using the same intellectual resources of his opponents. His book is therefore full of the language of modern research but instead of simply critiquing the position of others he puts forward a much more difficult thing, namely a positive argument alongside a series of self-critiques. This is a major achievement, because to reintroduce into the academy's discourse the category of 'history' to Genesis is a radical and difficult thing to sustain.

The main thing that Collins achieves in this book is to challenge

the habit of theologians and philosophers to treat Genesis as an abstract document. Many, perhaps most, deny the historicity of the early chapters of Genesis, and instead treat it as myth, or timeless truth, or poetry. They want to maintain the discussion about Genesis in universal and symbolic terminology. In many instances, this attitude towards Adam and Eve is simply assumed rather than defended, and the fact that Paul considers Adam as a real historical person is seen as the problem to be explained away. Reading Genesis as myth has the effect of taking the focus off the particularity and specificity of the text itself and instead tends to make the reader interpret it as a more theoretical and abstract discussion of pain, identity, or theodicy. The 'fall' of Adam and Eve becomes something like a paradigm of how we all respond to temptation, and Adam becomes an 'Everyman'.

Collins withstands this pressure to abstract Genesis in two main ways. Firstly, he emphasizes the particularity of the text, calling upon the literary insights of Alan Jacobs to support his argument, (Collins 2011, p. 39). The text of Genesis is replete with a good deal of what some linguists call indexicality, or deixis, namely those features of the text that call attention to specific people, specific time and specific place. The author intends us to understand that the events narrated took place in space and time and are not works of fiction or fantasy or philosophy. Instead of the genre of the anecdote (did you hear the one about the man who went into a bar...) it is the genre of reportage (Abram was seventy-five years old when he set out from Haran, Gen 12:4b). There is no doubt huge metaphysical importance attached to these accounts, but they are first and foremost to be understood as fundamentally historical.

The second way that Collins responds to the pressure of abstracting the text is by drawing an analogy with the similar tendency to abstract the Gospel to personal existentialist experience, dealing with my own crisis of guilt and need for

personal freedom. He quotes Ladd approvingly:

All of this happened in history; and it is only because certain events first happened in history that other results were experienced in the existential dimension. Existential import results only from historical event. (Ladd 1968, p. 64; cited in Collins 2011, p. 41)

That is, the solution to the existential problem came through the historical events of Jesus Christ; the *cause* of the existential problem came through the historical events of Adam and Eve. This is, of course, just what Paul argues in Romans 5.

Another move that Collins rejects is a kind of unthinking fideism, a mere assertion of the truth or historicity of Genesis on the basis of faith or creed. His turn towards the historicity of Genesis has taken the path through the critical path of science and been guided by the insights brought to bear by modern linguistics and hermeneutics. That is, Collins does not accept the historicity of Genesis out of any sense of mere tradition but rather defends his position on the basis of the fruit of the academy.

An important debate that Collins enters into is the framing of Adam and Eve as inherently good or inherently sinful. Did Adam sin because he was sinful, and was Eve so easily deceived because she was herself inherently deceptive? James Barr answers in the affirmative for two reasons: firstly, for the same tendency to abstract Genesis and make Adam everyman; and secondly, because of a broader understanding of God creating out of chaos. Opposition to God's creative activity was present at the beginning in the conflict motive that Barr sees in the mention of the darkness and the deep in Genesis 1. Since such opposition to God was present at the beginning, it is inevitable that Adam and Eve should also contain within themselves sinful tendencies because such imperfection is part of the natural order, according to Barr. Collins rejects such a view, seeing it as an imposition on the text, rather than a reading out of the text. In this he follows David Tsumura's important linguistic work on the meanings of key terms such as *tehom* and *tohu vabohu* in Genesis 1.

Having taken on the theme of 'conflict in creation' or *chaoskampf*, I was surprised to see Collins accept that Mesopotamian literature had a significant influence on Genesis. Even though he is at pains to point out the many differences between Genesis and the various Mesopotamian cosmologies and flood stories, he limits his comments to differences of emphasis, or theology, or detail. So, for example on p. 58, Genesis is said to be different to Mesopotamian prehistories because they present the creation of humanity as a group, as opposed to the biblical portrayal of the creation of two individuals. At this point Collins writes that the biblical author has been 'persuaded' to tell a different story to those that the Mesopotamians told. Or, on p. 109 Collins says 'Genesis sets itself over against other origins stories from the ancient Near East, especially those from Mesopotamia.' That is, Genesis is portrayed as being written in light of, and responding to, other ancient near Eastern texts.

The main difficulty this presents, it seems to me, is that it sustains one of the key reading strategies of those who would deny the historicity of Genesis, namely that it was written as a polemic to trump the claims of the gods of other cultures (McKitterick, 2009). Why does God create the sun on day four? In order to relegate other cultures who believe that the sun represents their god. Why does God bring out land from out of the deep? To show

that the biblical God easily triumphs over the threatening water, unlike the Babylonian god Marduk who had to defeat the chaotic sea-monster Tiamat first before he could create human beings to serve him.

This is a difficult question to resolve, because obviously the subjects of such texts overlap significantly: creation of the world, creation of humanity, accounts of global flooding. The issue that needs to be clarified is to what extent the overlap is due to textual dependency of some kind (one author responding to cultural claims of another culture) or historical dependency (both cultures responding to the same historical events through their own cultural worldview). Collins does touch on this issue from a different direction in a poignant quotation from Kass's commentary:

No matter how sophisticated and civilized we have become, most of us respond to this portrait of our mythical remotest past with *something that feels, in fact, like nostalgia*. (Kass, 2003, p58–61; cited in Collins 2011, p. 103)

Collins responds by pointing to the need for real history because the genuine sense of nostalgia requires a real point of history to explain it. 'With all due respect to Kass, if we fail to read the Genesis story as some kind of history, we fail to persuade the perceptive reader, because we fail to do justice to this nostalgia' (Collins 2011, p. 103). That is, Collins argues throughout the need for real historical references for the text, and so to my mind undercuts the need to accept the literary dependencies so often assumed but never proved.

I finally want to comment on the way Collins brings together the different academic voices of science and theology. Collins brings together the two spheres of science and biblical theology with considerable skill and confidence. He recognizes the problems that arise from the two kinds of languages that the different disciplines speak, as well as the common problems with concepts of literalness and metaphor, (Collins 2011, p. 110).

However, as he will no doubt recognize, at some point one sphere will dominate and will form the basis of one's worldview. In accord with modern academic expectations, the scientific data is simply given a higher status and therefore expected to control the conversation between the dialogue partners. Collins may demur at this point but it seems to me that this has happened. He acknowledges that some might not accept the hominid descendency for humans, but it is still the various dates from geology or anthropology that govern the timeframe for the biblical discussion. That is, the discussion is in what time period should we put the original pair of humans. The different scenarios that are proposed are evaluated as being better or worse if they can accommodate more or less of the biblical material (such as Rana's model being able to accommodate the great flood of Noah). Ultimately, the direction of the conversation is such that the scientific disciplines are the 'given' and the biblical data is incorporated as well as it might. However, palaeontology and evolutionary biology suffer from the same problems of interpretative paradigms and inference as does biblical interpretation. That is, it is reasonable to expect the biblical data to operate with as much of a control on the discussion as the scientific data.

Of course, it is not as if Collins doesn't discuss such biblical data extensively, drawing on Kitchens' work extensively to defend the reliability of the text and to locate it in its historical

milieu. However, in order to understand Collins' argument fully we need to see the cascade of decisions that follow from the initial decision to give priority to the scientific data. The evolutionary disciplines argue for the existence of hominids at an age that is at least an order of magnitude greater than the biblical data will allow. Therefore Adam and Eve must be refurbished hominids, transformed into the image of God, rather than a totally new and unprecedented entity. Therefore the genealogies in Genesis 5 can be only indicative and must contain many gaps. This then suggests that the Sumerian King list is a much more significant comparison, and that Genesis was therefore written in light of, or as a response to, the Mesopotamian texts.

However, it is notable that a good deal of Collins' material works against that interpretation. He cites Barr's observation that the author of Genesis intended his readers to know that from only this one human pair the whole world was populated, (Collins 2011, p. 56). His discussion of the relevant ancient Near Eastern texts in Appendix I argues for very little connection with the Mesopotamian texts to the point of saying that when it comes to the flood story, 'I do not see how we can be sure that Genesis and the Sumerian King List are referring to the same event' (Collins 2011, p. 151). The best understanding of the meaning of 'Eve' is the 'mother of all living', a definition that rules out Adam and Eve being a kind of representative head of humanity. And of course, Collins' argument about the Pauline understanding of the origin of death depends upon the historicity of Adam and Eve being, in NT Wright's words, 'a single first pair', (Collins 2011, p. 87). All

this argues away from polygenism or any view that Adam and Eve were simply homo divinus amongst other homo sapiens.

It seems, therefore, that the outcome of any discussion on this subject is predetermined by whichever discipline is deemed to have greater authority, because the discipline that determines the boundaries of acceptable discussion will inevitably win the argument. Whilst Collins has been fair about the extent to which the text can flex and accommodate the scientific data, it has always been that way round; Genesis has been stretched to fit the demands of science.

Overall, this is a landmark book and one that will set the agenda for the debate for years to come. Its overwhelming merit is its integrity and relevance to a dispute that has usually lacked the kind of even-handed fairness displayed in this book.

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