

Adam's Paradise Lost

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C. John Collins. 2011. *Did Adam and Eve Really Exist? Who They Were and Why You Should Care*. Crossway, Wheaton, Illinois. ISBN 978-1-4335-2425-7, 192 pp, \$15.99.

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I. Content

Historic Christianity believed in a literal Adam and Eve, a six-day creation, and a geocentric view of the universe. Not all these beliefs are still found acceptable today. In the past several hundred years, the earth lost its place in the center of the universe. Creation is something that occurred over millions of years, not mere days. Death and suffering existed as part of the reality of living things since their first appearance on earth. Most recently, advances in DNA indicate that the human race needed to have at the minimum 1,000 members—not a primordial pair—to account for the current genetic diversity in the human genetic code. In view of this evidence Collins asks whether there is anything inherently destructive to Christianity to divest itself of beliefs that do not stand up under a close reading of the scriptures. In a bold introductory paragraph he potentially dismisses many long-held biblical beliefs with the suggestion that they are not really that important.

He sketches out four basic positions regarding the author's attitude toward the Genesis narrative (pp. 16-17): 1) The author intended Genesis as a straightforward historical account of the origins of man; 2) The author thought the events of *Genesis* were real and shaped the reader's views accordingly; 3) The author recounted an imaginary story to convey timeless truths; 4) The author did not care about the historicity of the Genesis story and was bent on conveying only theological truths. Most traditional Christians including especially 'young earth creationist' fall under rubric one. Most critical scholars fall under rubric three or four (though their actual position is often unclear even to themselves). Collins prefers to stake his claim at position two over against young-age creationists and biblical historicists both of whom he would fit under rubric one for different reasons. In other words the writer of Genesis believed he was writing about historical events but may have been mistaken.

In chapter two Collins addresses the historical and theological question of Adam and his fall. Specifically he asks whether

Genesis truly needs to be a historically-based narrative instead of a collection of timeless truths or interesting stories. He furthermore asks whether the traditional understanding of the Genesis narrative of the fall provides a better answer for the human intuition and experience with sin or whether some already offered interpretation of the biblical narrative or alternative philosophy offers a better understanding.

Collins in chapter three, as he puts it, turns from the forest to the trees with a detailed look at the texts which treat the theme of Adam and Eve. This is his strongest chapter. The scope of his analysis includes traditional sources from the Christian scriptures (both Old Testament and New Testament), but also Jewish apocryphal works from the Second Temple period. He begins naturally with the Genesis narrative. His approach to the Genesis narrative is very traditional. Genesis is a unified narrative, not a compilation of disparate sources. He offers many useful insights on Genesis 1-5 on the topics such as the creation of one man and woman as the head of humanity, the existence of death before sin, the presence of folklore elements such as magical trees and talking snakes, etc., in the narrative. Collins next addresses references to the creation narrative in the rest of the Old Testament (pp. 66-71) and Second Temple Jewish literature (pp. 72-76). In short he concludes that these collected works have numerous references to Adam, Eve and Eden and that they all assume the historicity of these figures.

Collins next addresses New Testament references. He discusses Christ's statement on marriage in the Gospels which assume a historical Adam and Eve and who serve as the template for the institution of marriage (Matthew 19.3-9 and Mark 10.2-9, pp. 76-78). But Collins spends most of his time summarizing Paul's approach to Adam (pp. 78-92). In Paul, references to Genesis 1-3 appear in 1 Corinthians 15.20-23, 42-49; Romans 5.12-19 and Acts 17.26. In these passages Collins argues Paul not only assumes a historical Adam, but also implies that the argument depends on a historical Adam for validity. His argument boils down to three points. First, all humanity is mired

in sin through their participation in a broken covenant initiated between God and Adam. For this, Adam needs to be a historical, not a symbolic, figure (pp. 79-80). Second, there is a narrative relationship between Christ and Adam. Christ is a historical figure with a historical purpose of correcting the error of sin. He must, therefore, correspond to a historical Adam who committed the initial error (pg. 81). Third, the thrust of contemporary prominent scholarship (C. K. Barrett, Cranfield, N. T. Wright and F. F. Bruce) on Paul's key passage in Romans 5.12-19 is to concur that Paul accepts Adam as a historical figure who introduced the sin that Christ must rectify.

The final portion of the book addresses science. The difficult ground of science and faith in chapter five begins with the question of interpretive difficulties. At the outset, Collins rejects both a concordist approach to the text and its opposite extreme anti-concordism. Therefore, the Genesis text was never intended to convey historical detail, nor did the author of Genesis seek to avoid history. For Collins the solution lies in a *via media*. The text of Genesis was written to convey timeless truths, on the one hand, but was also written in such a fashion that the author deemed them "more true" than parallel Mesopotamian accounts. Genesis, therefore, reflects both realities. Another way to state this is that Genesis conveys historical referentially wrapped in "imaginative description."

With some core historical truths delivered through imaginative description, the true purpose of Genesis becomes one of "worldview formation." For example, Collins would say that the term "kind" was not intended to convey scientific reality as much as common knowledge. Indeed, this common knowledge was communicated to ancient agrarians who, as farmers today, planted either wheat or barley while fully cognizant of the distinctions. So too, Genesis has little to say of the inherent nature, much less origins, of wheat or corn; the message is about God and his goodness. From this standpoint, Genesis can then speak to our universal human experience where believer and unbeliever alike can sense a "dissonance between what we feel the world should be and our experience."

Once the Scriptures are properly understood in light of the above we can "read the Bible well" and begin to ask the scientific questions. As for a minimal Scriptural requirement he establishes four key criteria. The position one ultimately takes is less important than these criteria. The criteria are (1) human origins are not "merely natural"; (2) Adam and Eve were at the "headwaters" of the human race; (3) the fall was both historical and moral; and (4) if the fall involved more human beings than Adam and Eve, then Adam would be "the chieftain of this tribe" in order to preserve solidarity in representation.

The result of this is several scenarios that he approaches with a nuanced neutrality reflective of the book's ethos ("mere-historical-Adam-and-Eve-ism").

1. Young-age creationism, which Collins rejects.
2. Fazale Rana's "sophisticated" genetic model.¹ Rana traces humanity back to a single woman (Eve) and later historical male (Noah) with the origin of humanity dated somewhere between 10,000 and 100,000 years ago (though likely 50,000-70,000 years ago).
3. Pre-Adamic hominids. Both Gavin Basil McGrath and the late John Stott held to the existence of hominids prior to Adam.

This would place Adam at 45,000 B.C. (McGrath) or in the Neolithic at 10,000 years B.C. (Stott). One may add to this Derek Kidner's suggestion that the original human population consisted of "refurbished" hominids. God may have then transferred his image to Adam's "collaterals" to raise their status to human.

4. Biological continuity between human and animal species, an option proposed by Denis Alexander. Alexander rejects a special act of creation for humanity. Collins also rejects this scenario.

5. Special mention went to C.S. Lewis in the *Problem of Pain*. Lewis viewed Genesis as describing humans existing in a Paradisal state but later embracing a forbidden level of autonomy by an unknown action. Collins views this scenario with sympathy, though not outright endorsement.

In the end, Collins concludes with a "modified monogenesis, which keeps Adam and Eve" that can "do the job." He notes many uncertainties at the conclusion.

II. Critique

First, it is fair to say that Collins's approach to preserving a historical Adam is probably as good as can be expected for evangelicals trying to merge an understanding of contemporary science with modern biblical scholarship. However, what is particularly interesting—and confusing—is then to ask, through the lens of "mere-historical-Adam-and-Eve-ism," what the Genesis text in chapters 1-4 *really* means. Untangling the historical references of Genesis from their "imaginative descriptions" leaves the actual historical kernel of Genesis 1-4 as:

1. God is the Creator of all things.
2. God is responsible for the appearance of a man, Adam, who was at the headwaters of humanity.
3. Humanity fell from a once loftier peak. This explains mankind's universal realization that things are not the way they are supposed to be.

Comments on page 111 (and footnote 8) give Collins's most clearly-stated view of a young-age hermeneutic. He states, "However, one purpose of these chapters in Genesis is to help us hold on to good common sense,...." This is clarified in footnote 8 by saying, "This should make it clear how I differ from Marcus Ross and Paul Nelson, who think that it is the young-earth [sic] creationists who really attend to Biblical authority in scientific theorizing." Then, "Since I consider the insistence on young-earth science to be based on a misinterpretation of the Bible, I do not agree that it actually is employing Biblical authority!" The young-age position is then a violation of common sense based on a Scriptural misinterpretation. If so, one wonders why so many throughout the history of the church have so frequently made the same misinterpretations. Ironically, Collins's seminary adheres to the Westminster Confession of Faith—a confessional document that associated many in the Reformed community with the same "misinterpretation" for four hundred years. Regardless, it appears that whatever "mere-historical-Adam-and-Eve-ism" becomes, the CBS/CGS do not seem welcome to the table.

In addition to elucidating the historical particulars Genesis *intended* to convey (stripped of literary elements, above) one may then utilize science to construct the narrative Genesis implicitly supported all along. The actual historical account of Adam and the fall looked something like this:

Adam and Eve appeared between 100,000 and 10,000 years ago (likely from 70,000 to 50,000 years ago) through means that were not necessarily naturalistic. Adam was either an individual or a tribal chieftain; genetic evidence suggests he was overseeing a tribe that may have consisted of 1,000 individuals. Adam, by an action unknown to us, then led the human race into a moral transgression that may have resulted in death for all. The guilt of Adam's rebellion was laterally conferred upon his human associates by way of his federal headship. The subsequent loss that the human race now senses is a result of this single moral rebellion.

If the summary above is the historical referent to which Genesis has pointed all along, this leads to a concern. Though we agree the author successfully demonstrated his main purpose (defense of a theological Adam) we are not at all convinced his approach to the biblical text is warranted.² The interpretation of the Genesis passages appears to be by stipulation rather than demonstration. Though the author rejected both concordism and anti-concordism at the outset in favor of a *via media*, it is hard to escape the impression that this new *via media* is not so much new as a repackaging of the approaches he wished to discard.

What drives this hermeneutic? Let's be honest. The synthesis of several historical scientific disciplines (cosmology, geology, archeology, etc.) now form—in literary terms—something of a controlling metanarrative for Old Testament hermeneutics, particularly for the first 11 chapters of Genesis. This reflects evangelical scholarship as a whole and is not a criticism of Collins (whose scholarship, motives and academic colleagues we respect). Given that the scientific metanarrative is held in high authority, one need only assume that conflicting elements of the Genesis text are literary—this resolves the conflicts. At least, this is what *appears* to happen in the book.

This said, “mere-historical-Adam-and-Eve-ism” also has as much of a sociological role as theological. That is, it appears to be an attempt to forge a consensus among conservative evangelical scholars who are facing more serious threats—such as those proposed by Peter Enns through BioLogos. Again, speaking as an outside observer of evangelical theologians, one would imagine the BioLogos “mythic history” proposal cuts far too deeply into evangelical theology—including inerrancy—in an attempt to reconcile the same scientific data and models. In both cases one must explain why the Genesis text was so far off; Collins provides a more orthodox alternative. In contrast, the BioLogos approach would say that Genesis borrowed heavily from Ancient Near Eastern (ANE) literature and was simply mythic (dare one say wrong?). Collins's approach would shield the Genesis texts by assuming they were literary all along, and thus were never wrong. To date, the church simply missed a correct understanding of the Genesis text. Thus, “mere-historical-Adam-and-Eve-ism” appears to be a good-faith effort to minimize the blows to deeper historical doctrines (e.g., inerrancy) that the zealous sword thrusts of a Peter Enns have all-too clumsily inflicted (Carson 2006).

What is the warrant³ for this new literary approach? Well, to most CBS/CGS members it will not look impressive. (At the same time, CBS/CGS members should remember that many in the evangelical community will greet this with arms wide open.) As cited in the book it appears that several authors now look to verses like Genesis 4:14 where Cain says, “every one who finds me will

kill me.” Here we find a suggestion that other people existed in addition to Cain. Scattered passages like these lend credence to the assumption that deeper meanings lurk beneath the surface of the text—meanings that have heretofore been unseen. Passages like these serve as literary fulcra that move heaven and earth in Archimedean fashion. (At the same time, an *Accordance Bible Software* computer survey of the first 300 years of church history reveal that no one raised an eyebrow over Genesis 4:14—much less anticipated its now critical role.)

We end with two concluding thoughts; the first on the implications of the author's approach. After realizing how much of the Genesis narrative—places, names, geography, apparent chronological information—really did not deal with the actual historical events, one wonders why Adam himself is not just a literary symbol too. (Yes, this can sound overly critical but we say this in good faith; with the depth of imaginative description in Genesis assumed by the author, why not assume Adam was a literary figure too and be done with it? Won't our children just take that step anyway, given the foundation presented?) The answer to this question would likely appeal to the councils, creeds or other expressions of historic Christianity. True. Yet could not one still reply, “but wasn't their adherence to Adam in the creeds *also* simply an extension of the same hermeneutic error?”

The author closed the work with his own personal narrative regarding a funeral; we affirm that illustration but close with our own that takes it a step toward our direction. One of the authors of this review had a defining encounter that ultimately sent this review careening down a different pathway (and for which I apologize to my co-author)! Coming home late, and in the dark, I noticed that my daughters improperly aligned the Christmas lights in some bushes outside my house. So, on a very dark night, I approached the bushes to correct the problem—using only the very dim light of the bulbs themselves as a guide. To my surprise, I felt a pain on the middle knuckle of my left hand. Upon feeling the knuckle (in the dark) I felt something embedded within it that I quickly extracted. I forgot about this incident for about a day until my hand started to swell; this swelling lasted for days. My wife informed me that there were some roses growing among the bushes and that I must have picked up a rose thorn. Upon telling a physician what had happened—thinking this was all so trivial—I was informed that rose thorn injuries were not always inconsequential. Pathogens associated with rose thorns can deliver a substantial bacterial—or even fungal—infection that (in rare instances) could result in the loss of a hand. Needless to say, I still have swelling in my hand as I type this but hope it heals soon under the double prescription I am now under—both an antibiotic and an anti-fungal medication.

Why bring this up? Genesis 3:18 mentions that part of the curse of Adam is thorns and thistles. Using the approach to the text that the author provides seems to make this otherwise difficult passage even more obscure. First, under the conventional scientific framework it is clear that the introduction of thorns cannot be literal. Though hard to track in the fossil record, groups related to roses go back to the Eocene (at least 44 million years ago). Thus, such plants were in existence long prior to Adam. So if not literal, then the “thorns and thistles” must be literary shorthand for something else. Yet what? Here too is a problem. Traditionally, “thorns and thistles” would likely be the trials, frustrations, pain

and suffering associated with the labor men would henceforth endure; life would offer futility under Adam's newly chosen dispensation. But how does this fit in with Collins's model? The history of *Homo sapiens* is filled with suffering and death, including that of *Homo* species not mentioned by the author: *H. habilis*, *H. heidelbergensis*, and *H. erectus*.⁴ One may wave off these pre-Adamic *Homo* lines due to lack of artifacts,⁵ but certainly one contemporary of *H. sapiens*—and one pre-dating Rana's 100,000-year lower time limit—was *H. neanderthalensis*. Neanderthal is a species known to exhibit an arthritis-like condition. Thus, if thorns and thistles represent pain and suffering in some general sense, it is entirely unclear from this work how humans relate to a longer pre-history of remains—conventionally designated *Homo*—that show in excess of one million years worth of pain, suffering and death all prior to Adam's fall (all in beings at least similar to *H. sapiens*, if not contemporaries—once even speculated to interbreed). Though we are certainly open to literary understandings of Genesis references, it appears to us that the stretching of some literary aspects of the text would render others (e.g., 3:18) not only unclear, but possibly without meaning—even for the most broad stretch of imagination.

In summary, the author has done a commendable work in saving the theological status of Adam. But one can legitimately ask at what cost. Adam is preserved, but paradise is surely lost.

Notes

¹ It is unclear why this is a sophisticated model. Collins values John Bloom's opinion on the genetics since his "background in both physics and ancient Near Eastern studies makes his opinions worthy of attention." Footnote, p. 122. At the same time contributions by biologists, geneticists, or paleontologists holding

a different model did not receive comment—these include Siegfried Scherer, Sigrid Hartwig-Scherer, or Kurt Wise.

² The author has defended his approach to Genesis 1-4 elsewhere yet, in this work, there is an assumption of the validity of the approach to the text without a convincing demonstration as to how this approach is better, or why such an approach is so clearly better amidst 2,000 years of other interpretive schemes.

³ Again, hermeneutics not being our area we know the term "warrant" may have discipline-specific overtones that we hope we are accurately capturing.

⁴ The author mentions the lack of artifacts in the one-million year history prior to *H. sapiens* and certainly refers to *H. erectus*. Yet there is no explanation of why the physical evidence of the remains do not merit human status, nor are the proliferation of *Homo* species prior to *H. sapiens sapiens* addressed. Beings at least similar to humans were certainly having a hard go of it prior to the declaration of thorns and thistles in Gen. 3.

⁵ This in spite of the fact that *H. erectus* appeared to be cooking food in caves, having mastered fire one million years prior to the assumed first appearance of Adam, above (Berna et al. 2012).

References

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