

Asking the Right Questions

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Asking the right questions is as important as finding the right answers. This is particularly the case in the origins debate. Hence I am very grateful that Collins has devoted a book length treatment to the question of Adam – his place in biblical theology and history. In the past most evangelical theistic evolutionists would have affirmed that Adam and Eve were real, historical individuals (although not necessarily the physical ancestor of all human beings), but increasingly today their historicity is questioned.¹ Collins helpfully resists this trend. His argument is thoughtful and measured and there is an impartiality that ensures everyone, wherever they stand in the debate, is challenged at some point. I found it particularly refreshing that Collins was ready to question the common assumption that the presence of literary features in a text count against its historicity (e.g., pp. 17-18, 33-36).

Collins is also right to deal with Adam in terms of his place in the storyline of the Bible. Thus the argument is not merely about the interpretation of isolated texts, but how the ‘plot’ in the Bible’s story coheres. I agree with Collins that it is these doctrinal arguments that provide the most compelling case for a historical Adam. But the weakness of Collins’ work comes from not considering sufficiently just how much our understanding of Adam depends on our understanding of other aspects of the biblical storyline. For example, Collins briefly raises the question of whether animal death is a consequence of human sin, but he dismisses that possibility noting (rightly) that the curse of Genesis 3:19 refers to human death, not that of animals (p. 116). But the question deserves a deeper investigation because if in fact animal death post-dates Adam’s sin,² then the fossil record, a systematic catalogue of death, must also post-date Adam, in contradiction to how it is understood in evolutionary history. If the Bible’s story is so massively out of step with evolutionary history on the issue of death it doesn’t make much sense to look for ways the Bible and evolutionary history might cohere on Adam, or indeed anything else.

When it comes to human death Collins rightly sees it as an enemy, not something Adam and Eve as the first humans could

expect as a ‘natural’ end (p. 116). He thinks this is the case even if Adam and Eve could trace physical descent from animal ancestors that were subject to death. But such a scenario is filled with massive difficulties. If humans can trace physical descent from animals then human and animal death cannot be as neatly separated as Collins imagines. For example, Adam’s parents would be physiologically identical to Adam yet, if Adam was not subject to death, he would not be susceptible to the same diseases as his parents. Thus he could not have inherited any genetic diseases carried by his parents. If by some supernatural means Adam was prevented from inheriting certain defective genetic material from his parents then the evidence of genetic similarities between humans and chimpanzees that Collins discusses (p. 118ff) is irrelevant to understanding Adam since not all Adam’s genetic code (and that of modern humans descended from Adam) would have been derived from an animal ancestor. In addition, given Adam’s parents would have similar mental and emotional faculties to Adam, the suffering entailed by say, a cancer, would be similar for both Adam and his parents. Yet that suffering in his parents would be a matter of indifference for Adam since they are merely animals for whom such things are ‘natural’, whereas the same suffering in his wife Eve would be a horrific experience inconsistent with a world described as ‘very good’ (Genesis 1: 31) if, as Collins argues, human death was not part of the original creation.³

There is a second vital area in which Collins fails to consider Adam in relation to the wider biblical story: the flood. The extent and significance of the flood is one of the great unexplored questions in the origins debate. Yet how it is answered largely determines how every other question about origins will be addressed. Collins doesn’t think the question of the extent of the flood matters (p. 57). This ambivalence is untenable for the following reason. If the flood was a global catastrophe occurring several thousand years ago such that every human being today is a descendant of the eight people on the ark, that must affect how we understand attempts to link modern humans with ancestors from a

small population of *Homo sapiens* over 100,000 years ago. In fact there is even more at stake than understanding human ancestry. The evolutionary history of life on earth has no place for a global flood in human history. A global flood that produced a large portion of the fossil record would undermine the evolutionary understanding that the geological column provides a ‘time-lapse’ record of biological change over vast periods of time. In other words, if we believe the Bible does teach a global flood, there would be no evolutionary history into which Adam need be fitted. I’ve explained elsewhere why I believe the Bible’s storyline *does* require a global flood (Lloyd 2009); my point here is that it is not a question that can be left to one side as of minimal relevance.

At this point alert readers might feel a question needs to be directed to the reviewer. Am I not being a little unfair – basically criticising Collins for not writing a different book? After all, any author is limited in the ground they can cover, particularly so in the vast topic of origins. My criticism would be unfair if Collins was simply writing a book discussing the Bible’s teaching about Adam. But Collins (rightly) wants to examine that in the context of contemporary scientific understanding.

The reason there is an ‘origins debate’ at all is the perceived conflict between the Bible’s teaching and evolutionary history of life on earth. So the central question in the debate becomes, “Can we find a way to understand the Bible’s teaching and evolutionary history such that they cohere?” Along with most other Christian writers on origins Collins is asking this question, but I would suggest it is the wrong question. Imagine the Bible’s teaching and evolutionary history as two posts fixed in the ground, widely separated, each with an elastic rope attached. The question is asking us to see how much flexibility there is in our interpretation of these two authorities such that we can get the elastic ropes to stretch to meet in the middle, or at least to minimise the distance between them. Collins’ question, I suggest, is trying to *minimise* the apparent gap between the Bible and the scientific consensus.⁴ And his answer is better than many. He rejects a strict complementarity between ‘science and faith’ because if the Bible does refer to real historical events then there is overlap with what a scientist investigates (pp. 107-108). In addition, he sees some clear limits to how far the biblical text can be ‘stretched’ (e.g., Adam and Eve are historical individuals⁵), and refreshingly, he thinks the evidence cited in support of evolutionary history has more flexibility of interpretation than is usually granted (e.g., pp. 118-119). Nevertheless finding flaws in a model is not the same as looking for an entirely new model. As a result Collins’ position is inherently unstable – for what happens if new scientific developments require the biblical ‘elastic rope’ to be stretched a little further? Any harmonisation is held hostage to scientific advance. Despite his warning against ‘concordism’ for precisely this reason (p. 106), Collins falls into the same trap.

If I am right that the Bible’s storyline requires a global flood and no death before Adam then evolutionary history is not telling the same story as the Bible. There is no reason to try to minimise the ‘gap’ between our reading of the Bible and evolutionary history. There is no reason we should expect to fit Adam into the evolutionary story.⁶ Our starting point in building a scientific understanding of human origins (or the origins of anything else) can be the historical framework of the Bible rather than the evolutionary consensus. This does not mean ignoring

the often excellent work of scientists operating within that consensus, but incorporating their data and analysis into a whole new model consistent with the storyline of the Bible.⁷ That is a huge undertaking, and one that has barely been started. But it is a tremendously exciting project that inspires new questions and new research.⁸

The right question is: “Can we build a new, robust and satisfying scientific model of origins, that incorporates all the available data, and that is founded on the storyline of the Bible?” This question charts a better route to provide the coherence between our scientific and biblical understanding of Adam that Collins, and the rest of us, are seeking.

Notes

¹ For example, Denis Lamoureux (2008, pp. 309-319) argues that although the Apostle Paul almost certainly believed Adam was a historical individual, we have no reason to accept that now because Paul was following contemporary beliefs that we now know are mistaken.

² There is a large body of biblical evidence that points to a close connection between animal suffering and death and human sin some of which is discussed in Lloyd (2009).

³ There are further difficulties with postulating the existence of ‘pre-Adamic man’ when Adam’s status as a representative head of the human race is considered (e.g., Reeves 2009).

⁴ You would not necessarily get this impression from the title for chapter 5: “Can science help us pinpoint ‘Adam and Eve’?”, but from the content it is clear Collins is only considering the scientific evidence as understood within an evolutionary framework. In particular, he is unwilling to question the *dating* used by evolutionists.

⁵ However, it is important to note that Collins is only affirming the historicity of Adam’s *existence*, not the details of his life given in Genesis. For example, Collins questions that Adam actually lived 930 years (p. 151), but cannot provide any exegetical reason for why this lifespan should be understood as any less historical than the lifespan of, say, Abram (175) or Moses (120). For the latter two examples the New Testament writers clearly take the chronology of their lives given in the Old Testament as historical (Acts 7:23, 30; Romans 4:19).

⁶ This is why none of the scenarios surveyed in section 5.d, all based on evolutionary history in some form, seem satisfactory – even to Collins (p. 131).

⁷ Inevitably this will involve a reconsideration of the dating. To give one example: hominid fossils thought to be tracing the evolutionary pathway towards Adam, can be better understood as humans *after* Adam spreading out over the world post-Babel (Wise 2002, p. 238; Wise 2008).

⁸ For example, outside the evolutionary paradigm Wood (2006) sees no difficulty with proposing that human and chimpanzee genomes might have been created to be 100% identical because the differences between humans and chimpanzees need not be merely genetic.

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