

Replies to Reviews of *Did Adam and Eve Really Exist?*

C.J. Collins

Covenant Theological Seminary, St. Louis, MO

Editor: J.W. Francis

Received September 29, 2012; Accepted October 1, 2012; Published October 29, 2012

It is a pleasure to have read these reviews and to have the opportunity to offer a few remarks in reply to them. I thank Professor Francis for arranging this, and the reviewers for their willingness to be part of this exchange.

As a preliminary, let me note that all the reviewers drew attention, in one way or another, to my belief that Genesis does *not* require its readers to hold to young-age science, which is why I do not contend with “conventional” schemes of dating the earth’s origin and development. I did not develop this in the book, since that was not my purpose; I referred to other things I have written in which I make the case using *exegetical* arguments. I recognize that the reviewers, and probably most readers of this journal, consider the “young” age of the earth to be a matter of theological importance. Nevertheless I sought to make my argument not depend on this one way or the other.

As I explained in the book, it began as an invited paper for a conference. I determined to keep certain issues very much in focus, and to leave other issues (on some of which I have pronounced opinions) for other occasions. Hence I made “mere Christianity” my theological framework, and argued for what I dubbed “mere historical Adam-and-Eve-ism.”

In taking this approach I was self-consciously working under the influence, not only of C. S. Lewis — whom I cited explicitly in the book — but also of Francis Schaeffer and his idea of “freedoms and limitations” — which I did not explicitly cite, and now wonder whether I might have improved the book if I had done so. Let me therefore explain this notion of Schaeffer’s more fully. According to Schaeffer, there is a range of reasonable scenarios by which we may address the apparent conflicts between the Bible and the sciences, and yet there are limits to this range, limits set both by basic Biblical concepts and by good human judgment.¹

Schaeffer was willing to consider, among other freedoms, the possibility that Genesis 1 describes God creating a “grown up universe” (nowadays called the “appearance of age hypothesis”); or that God was reforming a creation that had been partially deformed by Satan’s fall; or that the “days” refer to long ages. He

concluded, sensibly and generously:

I urge you again to remember that I am not saying that any of these positions are my own or that they will prove to be the case.

I am simply stating theoretical possibilities as we consider the correlations between what the Bible sets forth about cosmogony and what we can study from general revelation.

At the same time he insisted on God’s special *creative* activity at certain key places: at the original creation, and then at the creation of conscious life, and at the creation of man, the result was discontinuous in some way from what had preceded. He also thought it essential to say that Adam was the first man and that Eve was made from him. This left him with a careful view of what is called “theistic evolution”: he saw no support for the molecule-to-man sort of naturalistic evolution, and he imagined that anyone who held to his limitations would not be an evolutionist in the fullest sense of the word (a point that will be pertinent in due course).

(This is one reason why I give space to assessing C. S. Lewis’ own proposed scenario for human origins in his *Problem of Pain*: Lewis is too important a thinker, and is — illegitimately in my opinion — claimed by people who are more purely “evolutionary” in what Schaeffer considered “the fullest sense of the word.”)

I commend Schaeffer’s approach in an essay for a forthcoming volume: he was motivated by a generosity of spirit and a desire for Christians to be able to get along with one another. This approach also recognizes that a well-functioning Christian has a hierarchy of commitments: he will insist more strongly on the tenets of “basic” Christianity — say, the Trinity, or the resurrection of Jesus — than on some other matters that are important, but not quite so vital — say, the number of sacraments and their exact effects. My admiration for Schaeffer grows even greater when I add into the mix some insights from C. S. Lewis, the literary scholar. In my judgment, these insights show that the very nature of the material we have in Genesis leads to some sort of freedoms and limitations rubric, since the material both resists a purely literalistic reading, and invites a recognition of its historical impulse.²

My point in saying this is to emphasize that the guidelines I

develop in chapter 5 (§5c), to which the reviewers have referred, are the means by which I assess, consider, and even *modify* the various “scientific” scenarios (§5d). Hence:³

In keeping with my plan of outlining “mere-historical-Adam-and-Eve-ism,” I am not arguing for my own preference out of all these. Indeed, my four criteria in section 5.c are what counts; but I have shown what I prefer and why in *Science and Faith*, 267–69; *Genesis 1–4*, 253–55.

As it turns out, my first three guidelines are almost identical to Schaeffer’s; and the fourth, regarding a larger population than just two, stems from my respect for Derek Kidner as a Bible scholar and Christian.

Dr Wood’s review shows that he clearly perceived my purpose. As he puts it (emphasis added),

Following his misinterpretation of Collins’s argument, Lamoureux (2011) concludes that Collins must be arguing for Adam as a tribal leader, where *I see Collins offering this idea as one understanding among others that are consistent with his theological argument for a historical Adam*. As a non-scientist, Collins emphasized that his intent in this chapter was not “to assess the science but to display how to keep the reasoning within the bounds of sound thinking” (p. 130). Given Collins’s limited treatment of science, I think he succeeds in that goal quite well.

In the same context, Dr Wood shows how Denis Lamoureux, in his review of my book, had seriously misunderstood my purpose.⁴ (I do not think that the other reviewers quite caught my point about freedoms and limitations — which is one reason why I wonder whether I should have made more of it.)

Dr Wood goes on to offer his own discussion of scientific scenarios from the perspective of a specialist in the biological sciences. All I can say in response is, “Go for it!” I am willing to listen. At the same time, the scientific reconstructions are a moving target, so I do not consider it appropriate to rest my confidence in the historicity of Adam and Eve on our ability to nail down the exact details of when they lived and how they relate to other hominids.⁵

Dr Wood’s review is so complimentary that I can only thank him for his kind words. Indeed, he more than once calls me “humble,” and I am sure that I would forfeit any right to that adjective if I said anything more than thanks. I should note that I share his discomfort with the prospect that “early humans committed bestiality, had half human, half animal offspring, and that offspring mated with other humans to such an extent that modern humans carry around perhaps as much as 4% animal genes,” and hope that it is not so.

Besides what I have already said about freedoms and limitations, let me make a few preliminary remarks about the other reviews. Of course I must focus on their critiques, and I am sorry for that, since, in general, the reviewers felt that I have made a worthwhile contribution on the theological and exegetical end. Having thanked them for that, however, I am obliged to reply to their disagreements and misunderstandings.

Mr McKitterick offers two main lines of critique to go along with his generally favorable review. First, following an argument he develops elsewhere, he thinks I am mistaken in making much of the “parallels” between Genesis 1–11 and other ancient Near Eastern (particularly Mesopotamian) stories.⁶ Based on

what he says in the review and in his earlier article, I think he misunderstands the import that I find in these parallels.⁷ To begin with, his article is responding to what I would count as an *improper* appeal to the “parallels,” made by Denis Alexander, who is definitely not a specialist in this subject. But Alexander appeals to *Enuma Elish*, which I explicitly reject as having a bearing on Genesis (see *Did Adam and Eve Really Exist*, 154–57). Hence McKitterick’s mention of Marduk and Tiamat has no connection with what I have actually suggested. Thus my first reply is the Latin maxim, *abusus usum non tollit* (“abuse does not take away proper use”). Then I would point out that I found (along with many in the Assyriological disciplines; see *Did Adam and Eve Really Exist*, 140 n. 5) parallels with material that is much older than *Enuma Elish*, which was part of the background of the originally Mesopotamian family of Abraham. These parallels, as I use them, support both the Mosaic origin of Genesis and the historical referentiality of Genesis 1–11 (albeit with allowance for literary devices; more on this below).

Further, McKitterick writes as if he thinks I have argued *literary dependence*, where I am not aware of having said that (see *Did Adam and Eve Really Exist*, 146). Finally, I have not really joined those who call Genesis “a polemic to trump the claims of the gods of other cultures”; I have observed that, instead (*Did Adam and Eve Really Exist*, 148–49),

It is probably more accurate, then, to describe Genesis 1–11 as providing the front end to an alternative worldview story—a story whose purpose is to shape Israel’s stance toward God, the world, and the rest of mankind. . . . The Biblical alternative story certainly does reject or correct many elements of the other stories available (and perhaps attractive) to Israel.

The other main critique he makes concerns his conclusion regarding ultimate authority in the tension between science and theology:

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.

I do indeed demur, and have actually given reasons in the book that apparently escaped notice. First, as I have already said, I did not endorse *any* of the scenarios. Second, I spent pages 106–11 on the subject of what role the Bible has in scientific theorizing, and concluded that it *should* have a role here. We show the most honor to God when we use the Bible according to its intended purposes, to the best we can ascertain them.⁸ Mr McKitterick comes to different conclusions than I do on the question of what those intentions were. Fair enough, but I count this as one of those many differences in judgment that we cannot legitimately resolve by declaring that those who disagree with “our side” do not accord the Bible as much authority as “our side” does.

Dr Lloyd is appreciative of my work, but he also has more criticism of what I have done. In particular, he poses only two real options, the young-age reading (which tends to favor a closer connection than I do between historicity and a higher level of literalism in its reading of Genesis)⁹ and what he calls the “evolutionary” view. I guess that by his reckoning I fall in

his second category, but that categorization obscures a pretty wide diversity of viewpoints (see my comment about Schaeffer above).¹⁰ Further, he considers the Bible to require that there be no animal death before the fall of Adam and Eve. I do not take that view; I have developed my arguments elsewhere on that point, since it was not within the scope that I had set for myself.¹¹

Further, he considers the flood to be a key element in the discussion, and counts my disagreement as a failure. I gave my reasons for not pursuing the subject on pages 151-52 of my book. In sum, I think that Dr Lloyd has a higher level of confidence in his reading than I would consider *myself* entitled to, and thus I wonder if *he* has gone beyond what the evidence warrants.

Finally, he suggests that I am “trying to *minimise* the apparent gap between the Bible and the scientific consensus.” In saying what I am “trying” to do, apart from what I have myself said, he has gone beyond evaluating my arguments to writing a part of my biography. Surely a reviewer (who has no access to inside information anyhow) should restrict himself to showing where my exegesis is wrong.

The fourth review, by Drs Doran and McRoberts, has the strongest level of criticism. In some places I think that they misrepresent what I have said, and in others I would say that we simply have different judgments.

An example of misrepresentation would be their summary of my attitude toward the Genesis narrative: “In other words the writer of Genesis believed he was writing about historical events but may have been mistaken.” How that derives from my actual words, “The author was talking about what he thought were actual events, using rhetorical and literary techniques to shape the readers’ attitudes toward those events” (*Did Adam and Eve Really Exist*, 16), I do not know. Further, since I am critical of finding “timeless truths” as over against actual events in Genesis (e.g., *Did Adam and Eve Really Exist*, 36), it surprised me to learn from them that “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.” They also failed to perceive my purpose in examining scenarios under the freedoms and limitations rubric, thinking that the “modified monogenesis” represents my conclusion. As I have already indicated, I am willing to be convinced that this is my fault as a writer.

In another place, they respond to the way that I disagree with those who think that it is young-age science that really attends to Biblical authority. Here is what I said (*Did Adam and Eve Really Exist*, 111, n. 8):

This should make it clear how I differ from Marcus Ross and Paul Nelson, who think that it is the young-earth creationists who really attend to Biblical authority in scientific theorizing. In my view, the proper question is the intention of the Biblical authors, which I see as worldview formation. 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! See Marcus Ross and Paul Nelson, “A Taxonomy of Teleology: Phillip Johnson, the Intelligent Design Community, and Young-Earth Creationism,” in William Dembski, ed., *Darwin’s Nemesis: Phillip Johnson and the Intelligent Design Movement* (Downers Grove, IL:

InterVarsity Press, 2006), 261–75, at 266–67.

Since this is a footnote to the place where I say, “one purpose of these chapters in Genesis is to help us hold on to good common sense, to the knowledge we all share as humans (such as what I covered in chapter 4 above)—though many suppress that knowledge—as we think about ourselves and about others,” they conclude that I have actually implied that “The young-age position is then a violation of common sense based on a Scriptural misinterpretation”! They go on to conclude, “it appears that whatever ‘mere-historical-Adam-and-Eve-ism’ becomes the CBS/CGS do not seem welcome to the table.” I do not know what to say in response to that, other than I don’t see the logic in it, or at least it doesn’t represent my own position.¹² And I do mention the young-age position in my scenarios, and I do not spend much time on it (or, for that matter, on the common progressive creationist position that Adam is a *de novo* creation, literally made from dirt) because there isn’t all that much to say.

I am not sure from their text whether the following section is supposed to be a summary of my position:

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 it is, then they have again failed to read me well. And if that is what they think I have argued for, I wish they would cite the passages from my book that support such a reading.

They think they can discern “what drives this hermeneutic,” namely:

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 be happening in the book.

The expression of respect, and the ending qualification, “what *appears* to be happening,” do not deflect my impression that I have been psychoanalyzed. Again, I would have thought that the reviewer’s task is simply to discuss what the author wrote, not guess at why it was written.

They seem to be displeased with the “new literary approach,” unaware (I suspect) of where it comes from. (I give some background early on: *Did Adam and Eve Really Exist*, 23-25.) Much to my surprise, they couple it with this:

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.)

I am afraid that they have missed the fact that I use the “new literary approach” to show why this “suggestion” from Genesis 4:14 actually does not follow (see *Did Adam and Eve Really Exist*, 111-13). As a matter of fact, I cannot tell exactly what they think is involved in such a “new” approach, or how it differs from skeptical criticism or postmodern readings.

Based on their summary (*literary and historical boundary lines lack clear demarcation*) I gather that Drs Doran and McRoberts do contrast literary artifice with historical referentiality, and further that they are uncomfortable with allowing much in the way of what I have called “imaginative description” in a genuinely historical text. Further, by raising the question of what “our children” will do, they are framing a kind of “slippery slope” argument. However, since I actually do set out some guidelines for such questions (*Did Adam and Eve Really Exist*, 19), and since they do not interact with these, I do not know what to say except I disagree.

The matter of the thorns and thistles is a topic for another day. I have dealt with Genesis 3:18 in a commentary and in a more popular work, and will simply summarize.¹³ The issue here is that the land will bear these when people work it, rather than the food crops they had looked for. Since “thorns and thistles” are in fact the proper food for some creatures (though not for us), there is no reason to suppose that the text is describing their *first creation*.

Drs Doran and McRoberts place a great deal of stock in what they take to be “long-held biblical beliefs.” (Since they use this term in the context of my willingness to abandon a geocentric view of the universe, I will leave it to them to explain themselves more fully.) In reply I would like to point out two things: first, the “consensus” is not so monolithic as they portray it; and second, we really do know more about the Hebrew language and the world of the Bible than many previous generations did, and we are under obligation to use this knowledge well and wisely. My application of the “new” linguistic and literary tools generally supports very traditional positions on the coherence of Biblical materials (for example, Mr McKitterick’s article, though not his review, references with approval one of my studies in Hebrew grammar that helps us to read Genesis 1 and 2 as complementary and not contradictory),¹⁴ and vindicates the New Testament writers’ readings of Genesis.¹⁵

They close with this remark:

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. The “paradise” that has been “lost” is their particular take on it. I think the narrative invites a different reading (*Did Adam and Eve Really Exist*, 44):

I agree with those who see the original task of man to have been to work outward from Eden, spreading Edenic blessings

throughout the earth, turning the whole world into a sanctuary. Human sin interfered with man’s ability to carry this out, but did not deter God from holding fast to this plan. The book of Revelation portrays the final victory of God’s purposes, using Edenic and sanctuary imagery to describe glorified human life—for believing Jews and Gentiles.

Let me again thank Dr Francis and the reviewers for this opportunity to have iron sharpen iron. The unique privilege of one who publishes is the opportunity to continue his education in public.

Notes

¹ Francis A. Schaeffer, *No Final Conflict* (London: Hodder and Stoughton / Downers Grove, IL: Inter Varsity Press, 1975), ch. 3. This appears also in Francis A. Schaeffer, *The Complete Works of Francis A. Schaeffer* (Westchester, IL: Crossway, 1982), vol. 2.

² C. John Collins, “Freedoms and limitations: C. S. Lewis and Francis Schaeffer as a tag team,” to appear in *Firstfruits of a New Creation: Essays in Honor of Jerram Barrs* (Mark Ryan and J. E. Eubanks, eds.). A briefer treatment of these themes appears in my essay, “A peculiar clarity: How C. S. Lewis can help us think about faith and science,” in John G. West, ed., *The Magician’s Twin: C. S. Lewis on Science, Scientism, and Society* (Seattle: Discovery Institute Press, 2012), 69-106.

³ Collins, *Did Adam and Eve Really Exist?* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway / Nottingham: Inter-Varsity Press, 2011), 122 n. 31. I refer to my books, *Science and Faith: Friends or Foes?* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2003) and *Genesis 1–4: A Linguistic, Literary, and Theological Commentary* (Phillipsburg: P & R, 2006).

⁴ Denis Lamoureux, review of Collins, *Did Adam and Eve Really Exist*, in *Perspectives on Science and Christian Faith* 63: 4, 277-278. Lamoureux uses the term “concordist” to describe my process of considering scenarios, and Wood has stated my objection perfectly.

⁵ Dr Wood observes, “Or perhaps, considering his otherwise humble approach to the scientific evidence, Collins would not have a definite opinion about Neandertals.” Well, he can be the judge of whether I am truly humble, but this is indeed where I land.

⁶ Alistair J. McKitterick, “The language of Genesis,” in Norman C. Nevin, ed., *Should Christians Embrace Evolution? Biblical and Scientific Responses* (Nottingham: Inter-Varsity Press, 2009 / Phillipsburg: P & R, 2011), 27-42.

⁷ I will note that he writes, “At this point Collins writes that the biblical author has been ‘persuaded’ to tell a different story to those that the Mesopotamians told.” I do not know why he put scare quotes around “persuaded”; but, just so it is clear, that is the word that appears in an essay written by James Barr, and does not represent my own way of describing the process of inspiration.

⁸ See *Did Adam and Eve Really Exist*, 111 n. 8 (discussed below).

⁹ Observe what he says in a footnote: “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 (p151), 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 7v23, 30; Romans 4v19).” He has conflated “historical” with “literal,” without argument; he has also not allowed for any distinction between Genesis 1–11 and the rest of Genesis in communication style. Rather, what I focus on is not simply the *existence* of Adam and Eve, but also the reality of their crucial role at the very beginning of humankind, of being the entry point of sin and dysfunction.

¹⁰ In this regard, he misunderstands my examination of scenarios. I have approached them from the angle of, “If you are inclined to think this way [say, some kind of animal ‘predecessors’ to Adam and Eve] then you must at least not cross this boundary [say, by accepting a purely natural transition from animal to man].” I thought I had made that clear, but maybe I did not emphasize it enough. Be that as it may, in my discussion on page 96, I do say, “We should observe that, in view of the *embodied* image of God in Genesis, if [God used the body of a preexisting hominid, simply adding a soul to it] it involved some divine refurbishing of that body in order for it to work together with the soul to display

God’s image.” Hence I do *not* agree that Dr Lloyd has accurately represented my position in his conclusion that “Adam’s parents would be physiologically identical to Adam” or that “Adam’s parents would have similar mental and emotional faculties to Adam.”

¹¹ See my *Science and Faith*, chs. 9, 10, 13; *Genesis 1–4*, ch. 6, §§C.5, E.3.

¹² They draw attention to my employment at a seminary that “adheres to the Westminster Confession of Faith,” which they find “ironic.” I can only refer them to my church’s report of its Study Committee on Creation, of which I was a member, for the options we consider acceptable in reading Genesis.

¹³ See my *Genesis 1–4*, 162-66; *Science and Faith*, 150-52 (see also 164-65, 381: the thorns and thistles *are* the proper food for some animals, but not for us).

¹⁴ McKitterick, “The language of Genesis,” 40.

¹⁵ In *Did Adam and Eve Really Exist*, for example, I show that the skeptical approach of James Barr is tied to a poor literary reading; I will argue similarly in forthcoming responses to Peter Enns.