

Adam and Eve

By Santiago Lange

The answer below was spawned by recent exchanges I have had with parties interested in the „origins question“, particularly with issues connected to the historicity of Adam and Eve.



Regarding the question whether Adam was an actual person there are number of thoughts that could be raised. I will try to summarize these points as simply and briefly as possible, realizing full well, that my comments do not represent a detailed explanation. Please, see below.

Arguments with some plausibility can be made for both a historical and a non-historical individual Adam. Such arguments depend upon assumptions about the purpose of the biblical accounts given in the first couple of chapters of Genesis and the particular hermeneutical/interpretive approach used. Those who approach Genesis with an apologetic purpose, to defend against objections to Christian faith, tend to take it in one way. Those who regard its primary purpose to be theological, for the sake of the community of believers, tend to take it in another way. Those who use the passage for apologetic purpose tend to reach their conclusions by means of chains of logical inferences based on their assumptions. Those who see the purpose being primarily theological pay careful attention to the linguistic form of the writing and to what the original author of Genesis intended to communicate to his original audience in ancient Israel.

Evolutionary biology and the modern scientific understanding about DNA point toward Adam being, if he was indeed a historical figure located in ancient Mesopotamia, not the absolute first individual human (or humanoid, an organism with a human type physiology and DNA make-up). Many Christian scientists understand the current evidence to favor regarding the designation of "Adam" in Genesis as applying to particular group of human or humanoid beings God specially selected to relate to by his Spirit, so that they became truly human (capable of having a relationship with God) as we know humans today. Or, perhaps Adam was indeed an individual specially chosen by God out of a group of humans for a particular relationship and a unique purpose. Alternatively, perhaps "Adam" is a term (a collective noun) representing in some way all of humanity and human experience, including our own, a kind of Hebrew "Everyman". Another proposal makes a difference between the „genealogical Adam and Eve“ and the „genetic Adam and Eve“. And there may be other viable explanations.

In these cases what is maintained is the theologically crucial element of a history of God's interaction with and special relationship to humanity at its ontological roots, that give humanity, as we now know it, its original nature and purpose. Genesis then establishes a prescriptive history of relationship. But Genesis, in that case, is not regarded as providing us a detailed empirical (and so strictly scientific) description of the "how" or the exact bio/physical mecha-

nisms involved in the absolute origins of human (or humanoid) being. A distinction is recognized between empirical description and historical prescription. Genesis can be regarded as being historically prescriptive without being empirically (scientifically) descriptive. Consequently the question of how the prescriptive and descriptive elements fit together remains open and flexible since they involve different levels of explanation that don't (and inherently can't) directly come into conflict with one another. Genesis answers a question about the nature and purpose of humanity that a scientific/empirical description cannot ever answer, one way or another.

However, yes, some do insist that Genesis involves empirical or scientific description, or at least that by means of logical inferences Genesis entails empirical or scientific descriptions—and ones that conflict with the current scientific descriptions.

It should be pointed out that when scientists (think Carl Sagan or Richard Dawkins) make prescriptive theological or philosophical claims about human nature and purpose, they cannot legitimately do so on the basis of descriptive empirical/scientific grounds. When they do so they leave behind their scientific facts and expertise and cross over into disciplines and levels of explanation in which they have no special expertise and upon which scientific facts have no necessary bearing. Scientists who do so should first be criticized for attempting to speak authoritatively in a field in which they have no authority, not for getting their "facts" wrong. And they should first be called out and disciplined for misrepresenting their profession by their own professional colleagues, not by religious persons, biblical scholars, theologians or philosophers. Of course Christians ought to be able to recognize when scientists cross these disciplinary boundaries.

The chosen/preferred hermeneutical interpretation of the Book of Genesis, and in particular chapters 1-11, then, plays a decisive role in understanding the relationship between biblical teaching and scientific description. Consequently, we do caution about being overly dogmatic regarding issues that cannot be fully settled by the currently available information and the nature of the case. Therefore, we respect personal opinions about the issue of how the Genesis account relates to scientific descriptions.

Let me emphasize that we would like to underscore that the belief in the actual historicity (or better, empirical description) of Adam, while not unimportant, is not a salvific issue. We are not saved in Adam, but in Jesus Christ, whose historicity we absolutely affirm and proclaim. As Paul says, what occurred in and through the incarnation of the Son of God completely supersedes what is true of humanity linked to the first Adam (whoever and whatever he was). The history and destiny of all humanity is now under the Lordship of Jesus Christ, the new Adam.

It is also our conviction that science and theology do not need to be seen in a conflicting role. On the contrary, "good science" and "good theology" can give us a deeper appreciation and understanding of the greatness of our God. Science and theology are separate, although not necessarily disconnected, disciplines. These disciplines should be appropriately respected for that they can or cannot contribute. Science is more able to focus on the "how" and "what" questions while theology focuses on the "why" (questions regarding meaning, purpose and values).

I hope that you will find this basic framework helpful as you continue to explore the origins questions. Please, do not hesitate to let me know if more clarification is needed on any of the mentioned points. Thanks much. □