

How many ways can one compromise on creation?

Original Sin and the Fall: Five views

Stump, J.B. and Meister, C. (Eds.)

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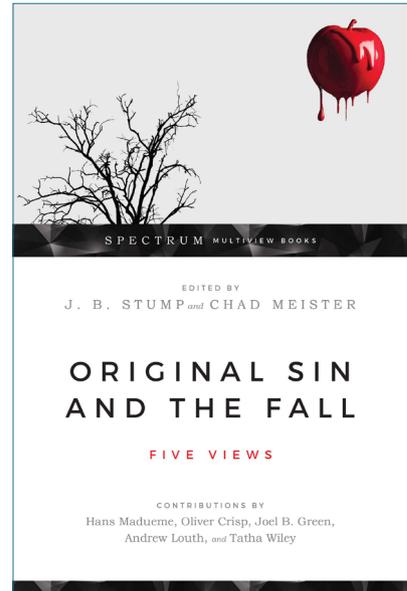
Lita Sanders

Salvation by grace through faith in Jesus Christ is the central tenet of Christianity. So the question of why we require salvation in the first place is very important. This ‘five views’ book explores a range of views regarding Original Sin and how we find ourselves in the predicament that Christianity purports to solve.

This book gives each of the contributors the chance to present their own view on the topic at hand in their own chapter, then to respond to the other views in a further chapter. This format has strengths and weaknesses. They give different perspectives on the same issue, but it can be hard for the layperson to weigh the different perspectives to see which is more biblically faithful.

The editors are J.B. Stump, vice president of BioLogos, and Chad Meister, professor at Bethel University. The five views are described as Augustinian-reformed, moderate reformed, Wesleyan, Eastern Orthodox, and Reconcived.

Someone unfamiliar with the theology of the various contributors might come away with the unfortunate notion that only the Augustinian-reformed camp has those who are interested in the historical aspect of Genesis and the importance Paul and the other biblical writers place on Adam as the first genealogical link on the human



family tree. In fact, there are those in the reformed, Wesleyan, and Eastern Orthodox camps that hold strongly to a historical Adam, so the differences in the conceptions of Original Sin could have been more clearly defined if the contributors had the same view of the historical Adam. The ‘moderate reformed and reconceived’ views seem to exist solely to harmonize Genesis with evolutionary biology.

Augustinian-reformed

Hans Madueme represents the Augustinian-reformed view and is the only one who takes a strong stand for a historical Adam, and makes statements questioning the primacy of evolutionary scientific consensus. He points out that the rest of the OT and NT takes Genesis 1–3 as historical (p. 13), and even that Christian eschatology requires a historical Fall:

“The Christian conviction that suffering, sin, and death will disappear

at the eschaton hinges on the same divine revelation that affirms the goodness of prelapsarian creation. If we deny the latter, on what grounds can we hope for the former?” (p. 16).

Madueme also points out the concerning implications of theistic evolution:

“Evolutionary creationists instead reimagine suffering and death not as a lapsarian affliction but as the necessary cost of the freedom God gave creation to be itself; or, as some put it, this vale of tears was the only way for God to secure the beauty, complexity, and diversity of nature. ... Such evolutionary hamartologies render natural evil (and possibly moral evil) intrinsic to divine creation, or alternately, evil becomes a dualistic reality existing alongside God and intruding itself into his creation.” (p. 17).

Furthermore:

“Evolutionary doctrines of sin also raise difficult christological and soteriological questions. If human beings inevitably sin because of underlying biological forces, then Jesus Christ either was not completely free from sin (i.e. deny his impeccability) or did not fully participate in bodily human nature (i.e. deny his humanity)” (p. 31).

Moderate reformed

Oliver Crisp represents what he called a “moderate reformed view”. It seems differentiated from Madueme’s chiefly by the refusal to make any historical claims whatsoever from the biblical text, particularly any which would contradict evolutionary orthodoxy. For instance:

“The moderate Reformed doctrine of sin does not require an original pair, nor does it require monogenism (the notion that we are descended from an original pair). However, it does not deny that there was an

original pair from which we are descended either. Instead it is a doctrine that makes *no* judgment about this matter” (p. 37).

However, the only reason to take this ahistorical view is to capitulate to the evolutionary view. It is also foreign to the thought of the NT authors to speak of theological truth divorced from the way God has acted and revealed Himself in *history*.

Wesleyan

Joel Green represents the Wesleyan view, but unlike Wesley (figure 1) himself, does not necessarily view a historical Adam as integral to that. Green himself says, “Wesley understood Genesis 3 as a fall narrative. With this story of sin’s etiology, he could underscore the need for a new birth” (p. 61). Green, however, is

not content with what Wesley actually believed, or even with how later Methodists and Wesleyans developed the doctrine of Original Sin. Rather, he engages in a ‘what-if’ scenario:

“Given his [Wesley’s] methodological commitments, we might more easily imagine his rethinking the doctrine than anticipate his outright rejection of either Scripture or science.

“Taken together, these data and ruminations prove to be hospitable to a fall narrative, although not the one traditionally associated with the doctrine or original sin. In this alternative account, we might imagine our early ancestors as creatures whose lives were not yet clouded by the haze of spiritual darkness or the muddle of decisions that eventually would envelop the human

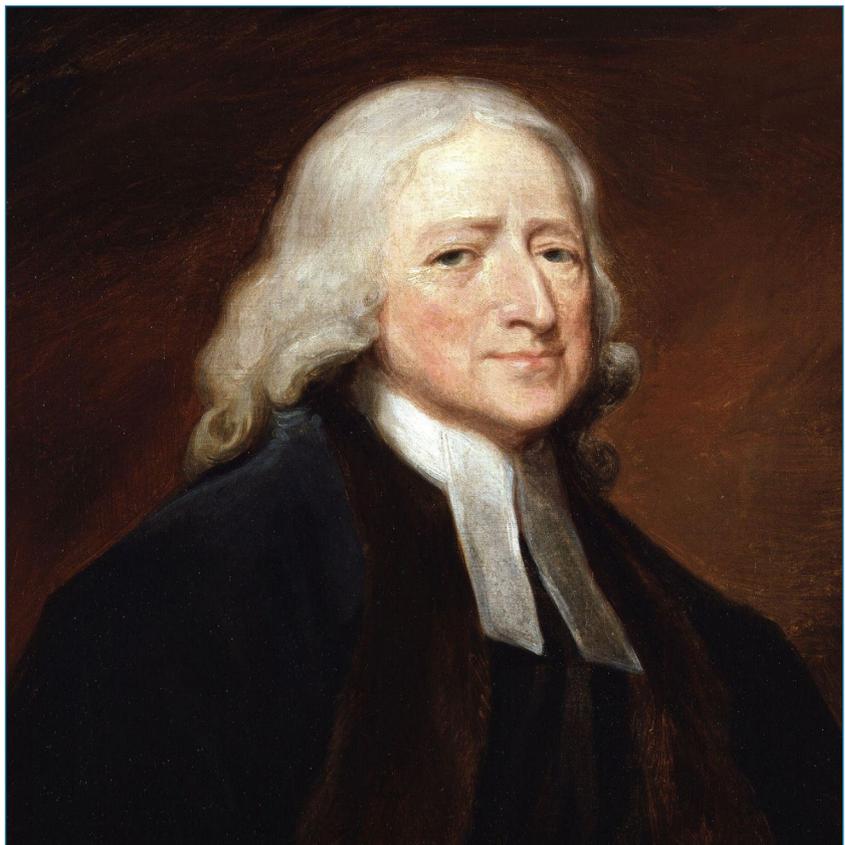


Figure 1. John Wesley’s view of Original Sin rested on a historical interpretation of Genesis 3.

family as it turned away from God” (p. 76).

The problem with this is that Wesley himself never showed an inclination for such theorizing about Genesis. And if Green wants his fellow Wesleyans to adopt this evolution-friendly interpretation, he needs to offer some evidence that it is compatible with the NT authors’, let alone Wesley’s, interpretive framework.

Eastern Orthodox

Louth’s Eastern Orthodox chapter shows many differences between the theology of the other four contributors and his own theological outlook. Rather than ‘Original Sin’, he prefers the term ‘ancestral sin’. He believes that

“Western theology tends to narrow the focus of theology to the redemption of fallen humanity. How does Orthodoxy escape from this? Fundamentally, I suggest, by beginning in the beginning—with creation, and within that creation the fashioning of the human” (p. 80).

Orthodox anthropology says: “The purpose of the incarnation is not just to overthrow the entailment of Adam’s sin but to bring humankind to share in the divine life, to make humans ‘participants of the divine nature’ (2 Pet 1:4). As St. Athanasius famously put it, the word of God ‘became human so that the human might become God’” (p. 80).

As Madueme counters in his response to Louth:

“Not so helpful, however, is his insistence that humanity moves from a lower (created) to higher (deified) state. This picture, so central to Eastern Orthodoxy, invites the worry that God gave us less than his best at creation. Louth renders God partly responsible for the deficient condition of original humanity, for Adam and Eve were imperfect from the beginning and thus needed to ascend to a higher

state. Part of the genius of the fall doctrine is that it sidesteps this troubling scenario” (p. 138).

‘Reconceived’

The most radical chapter is by Tatha Wiley, who writes from a Roman Catholic perspective. As Madueme characterizes her chapter in his response:

“I am mystified, however, that Wiley feels the need at all to reconceive a doctrine of original sin. She believes Adam and Eve never existed, Genesis 1–11 is not historical, Paul’s views about Adam should be rejected, and so on, thereby denying the canonical data that informed the doctrine of original sin in the first place. Wiley wants the key insights of original sin without the historical and metaphysical baggage, having her cake and eating it too. I am delighted she still cares about original sin, but it is not clear to me why she does. Her own commitments sever the roots from which the doctrine first bloomed” (p. 128).

He continues:

“She takes as a given that doctrine *must* change in light of the scientific consensus, although she never wrestles with the implications of her position for doctrinal development. Her method gives science unprecedented dogmatic power and threatens the very idea of Christianity as a revelatory faith. In Wiley’s defense, some of my other interlocutors resonate with her on this point (although less radically); she is just the most forthcoming” (p. 128).

Historical Adam vs evolutionary orthodoxy

This is a book about how people from different theological positions view the doctrine of Original Sin. While not directly about the historical Adam or how to interpret Scripture

in an era where evolutionary biology challenges us to defend the Bible’s history regarding origins, it is not surprising that every contributor felt the need to address the historical Adam.

It is unfortunate that only Madueme even raised the possibility of maintaining a historic interpretation of Genesis even if that entails rejecting ‘modern scientific consensus’. This gives the erroneous appearance that only some of the reformed defend the historical Adam. I personally know those in all the traditions represented in the book who strongly affirm a historical Adam.

This book is interesting, and it may be useful for creationists to read the theological perspectives of eloquent scholars who disagree with our perspective, as well as Madueme’s excellent responses. It is disappointing, however, that one of the most glaring takeaways was of the wholesale surrender of many theologians to the evolutionary view of human origins.