

Adam obscured by novel interpretations

Perspectives on the Historical Adam and Eve: Four views

Kenneth D. Keathley (Editor)

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Keaton Halley

Over the last fifteen years, new books wrestling with the historical Adam have proliferated. In 2013, Zondervan published *Four Views on the Historical Adam*, reviewed in this journal.¹ Why, then, was it thought necessary to have another ‘Four Views’ book only a decade later? Kenneth Keathley explains in the introduction, “the debate has shifted dramatically in the last decade” (p. 2). He specifically cites the innovative viewpoints proposed by Joshua Swamidass and William Lane Craig as the major reasons for this shift.

This book stems from a colloquium on Adam’s historicity held in 2022 at Southeastern Baptist Theological Seminary, North Carolina, where Keathley is Professor of Theology. The four contributors to this volume initially presented papers at this event, fielded questions from an audience of invited scholars, and engaged in dialogue with each other. CMI scientist Jonathan Sarfati has interacted with William Lane Craig’s report on the conference.²

The contributors and their positions are as follows. Kenton L. Sparks defends the view that Genesis is in error, and there likely never was an Adam and Eve. William Lane Craig defends the view that Genesis belongs to the genre of ‘mytho-history’. For Craig, this means Adam and Eve were

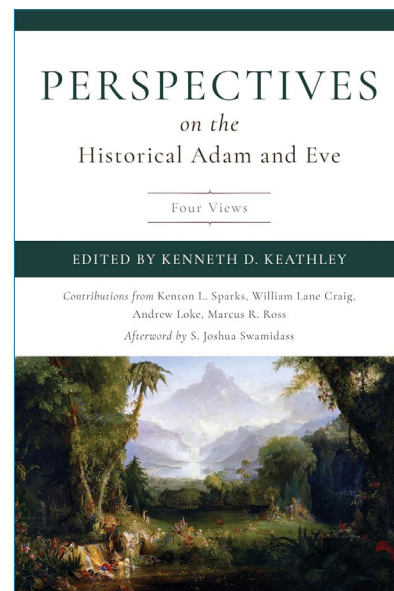
historical individuals whose sin did impact the world, but virtually every other detail Genesis relates about them should be understood as non-historical myth.

Andrew Loke defends a ‘genealogical Adam’ position he derived from Joshua Swamidass, in which Adam and Eve were an historical pair, but their descendants merged with a wider population of unrelated, evolved people who are biologically indistinguishable from humans. According to Loke, only those descended from Adam and Eve are image-bearers, which includes all people alive today. But that wider population (sometimes called ‘people outside the Garden’) were not made in God’s image, and their offspring did not become so until they mixed with the lineage of Adam and Eve and therefore had Adam as an ancestor.

Last, Marcus Ross defends the traditional view of Adam and Eve, including a young-earth interpretation of Genesis. This means Adam and Eve were created supernaturally just a few thousand years ago, they had no ancestors, and all of humanity descended from them.

Since these dramatically different perspectives on Adam are already in circulation, it is helpful to have a book in which scholars debate them. This enables the participants and the public to accurately understand the views, weigh the arguments, and hopefully advance toward the truth.

However, it is lamentable that this is the state of the debate today within the church, with so many Christian thought-leaders rushing to abandon the church’s historic understanding of Adam and Eve. Three of the four participants in this debate embrace



an evolutionary account of the origin of mankind, despite the formidable scientific challenges this notion faces. These same three contributors have also reduced Adam and Eve to a very minimalist shell that would be unrecognizable to most Christians over the past two thousand years. Even today, I suspect most people in the pews would be shocked to learn that some of our best and brightest evangelical scholars are advocating such radical proposals about Adam, Eve, and the origin of humanity.

In what follows, I offer a few comments about the Introduction and Afterword, followed by engagement with each of the four perspectives presented.

Bias in the Introduction and Afterword

It is a shame that the debate chapters were bookended by sections written by non-neutral parties. As mentioned, Kenneth Keathley wrote the Introduction. Joshua Swamidass was chosen to write the Afterword.

Keathley is an old-earthier with a history of opposition to the young-earth creation views he once held. Some of his criticisms have been

inflammatory. For example, he suggested the ‘most likely’ explanation for the difference between old- and young-earth perspectives was that “at least one side has an almost pathological inability to see the truth.”³ We know the side to which Keathley thinks that statement applies. In 2016, Keathley also misleadingly accused Ken Ham of believing in evolution, because Ham accepts speciation—just as creationists have since before Darwin.⁴ This mud-slinging strategy backfired, since it only exposed Keathley’s ignorance of the elementary distinction creationists have long made between the innovative uphill changes required for transforming microbes into men and the downhill changes within a kind that simply sort, copy, or degrade genetic information already present.

It was precisely Craig’s choice of a non-neutral editor such as Keathley, and Craig not budging from this choice, that explains why CMI declined to participate in the conference and book. This must be stated, because Craig accused CMI of being ‘paranoid’ for refusing to participate.² But Keathley’s record shows he is far from impartial.

In his introduction, Keathley lays the groundwork by informing readers of various challenges to the traditional view of Adam and Eve. But he frames it as though it were only ‘discoveries’ (p. 3) and ‘empirical scientific findings’ (p. 9) that challenged the traditional viewpoint, neglecting worldview shifts and naturalistic biases that governed how data were interpreted. He even presents what he claims are ‘formidable’ genetics-based pro-evolutionary arguments (p. 7) with no acknowledgment of existing creationist responses and offering no opportunity for the sole creationist contributor to answer them.

Swamidass is likewise hardly an unbiased observer, being the inventor of the genealogical Adam view

championed by Andrew Loke in this volume. In Swamidass’ Afterword, he has a dramatically overinflated view of his own achievement, asserting that, thanks to his genealogical Adam proposal, “the conflict between evolutionary science and these traditional readings of Adam and Eve is largely resolved” (p. 207).

Swamidass also appears so interested in extending olive branches to both secular scientists and theological liberals that one wonders if faithfulness to God’s revealed truth hasn’t taken a back seat. For example, without presenting any evidence that Kenton Sparks is genuinely born again beyond his affirmation of the bodily resurrection of Jesus, Swamidass lectures us that “we must receive Kenton as a fellow follower of Jesus too” (p. 205). By this loose standard, Swamidass should embrace myriads of cult members, prosperity gospel preachers, and other unregenerate folk as brothers in the Lord. Furthermore, Swamidass reveals how far he is willing to go in severing the Gospel from Genesis when he sermonizes, “Whether or not Adam and Eve were real, *Jesus is greater* [emphasis added]” (p. 205). Why not let readers draw their own conclusions about whether the New Testament teaching about Jesus still holds together without Adam, rather than trying to pacify us with sanctimonious maxims?

Sparks dismisses Adam

It is debatable whether Kenton Sparks qualifies as an evangelical, as he, himself, admits (pp. 19–20). He has a low view of Scripture, denies inerrancy, and says the Bible contains mistaken ethical judgments (p. 24). Sparks is also the provost at an ostensibly Christian school, Eastern University, that welcomes an LGBTQ+ faculty and recently removed gender from the definition of marriage in their official student handbook.⁵

Sparks’ essay does not begin well, since, in his first footnote, he favourably cites Andrew Dickson White’s book as evidence for the longstanding tensions between science and the Bible. But White’s book and its associated ‘conflict thesis’ have long been discredited by historians,⁶ which is why Sparks has been criticized for appealing to this before.⁷

The basic position Sparks carves out is that the Bible, though often opaque or internally inconsistent, does contain affirmations of many things young-earth creationists say it does, like an ‘earth-wide flood’ (p. 29) and Adam and Eve as our real, historical progenitors. But, Sparks demurs, these biblical affirmations can be dismissed because the scientific evidence goes against them and because there is no theological requirement that Scripture is free from error. According to Sparks, the Bible “is a product of divine agency but also marred by fallen human agencies” (p. 63).

He tries to support his view by citing errors in the Bible, such as Genesis 1 allegedly asserting “that the cosmos was covered by a dome” (pp. 36–37, 41). Sparks also argues that Jesus exercised authority over Scripture by contradicting it (p. 45). But he is mistaken on both counts. The solid dome sky has been shown to be a misreading,⁸ and Jesus was rightly interpreting and fulfilling the law, not objecting to it. He explicitly said, “Scripture cannot be broken” (John 10:35) and rebuked opponents with “have you not read what was said to you by God?” (Matthew 22:31). Since Sparks blatantly contradicts Jesus, in what sense can he rightly be called a Christian?

Craig mythologizes Adam

William Lane Craig presents his view that Genesis is mytho-history, offering a brief synopsis of the arguments from his recent book on

Adam.⁹ He believes the Bible tells us hardly anything more about Adam besides that he “was a progenitor of the entire human race through whose disobedience moral evil entered the world” (p. 82). The details in the Genesis narratives about Adam and Eve have instead “been clothed in the garb of the metaphorical and figurative language of myth” (p. 77). From this perspective, which disconnects Adam from a 6,000 year timeline, Craig examines the paleoanthropological fossil record to determine how far back in time distinctive human characteristics can be found. He uncritically accepts the conventional evolutionary interpretations of the hominid record. Craig concludes that Adam and Eve likely lived around 0.75–1 Ma ago, and they were perhaps members of the species *H. heidelbergensis* (pp. 88, 90).

To demonstrate that Genesis 1–11 is largely mythological, Craig lists a number of ‘family resemblances’ these biblical chapters allegedly share with ancient Near Eastern myths (p. 71). But these criteria are highly debatable and inconclusive, especially since Craig acknowledges they are neither necessary nor sufficient to identify a piece of literature as myth (p. 103). Most, or all, are arguably true of the rest of the Old Testament, yet Craig says that from Genesis 12 onward, “the historical interest is obvious and not in dispute” (p. 75). Actually, plenty of scholars would treat these narratives as a mixture of myth and history, exactly as Craig does to the earlier chapters.

Craig puts special emphasis on the criterion of ‘interest in etiology’, calling it “the very heart of myth” (p. 71). But an account of creation that is historical rather than mythical will, by its very nature, be an account of how present realities came to be. Also, there is abundant use of etiology throughout Genesis and elsewhere in the Old Testament, yet Craig does not call these texts ‘mytho-history’. Examples from

the patriarchal narratives include: the covenant of circumcision (17:9–10); the ruins of Sodom and Gomorrah (19:24); the unseemly origins of Moab and Ammon (19:30–38); the origin of the expression “On the mount of the LORD it shall be provided” (22:14); the struggle between Jacob and Esau as two nations in the womb (25:23); Edomite connections to the colour red (25:25, 30); dietary practices related to Jacob’s wounded hip (32:32); Jacob’s prophecies about his sons (49); and the origin of various personal and place names.

Further problems for Craig’s view include the evidence that other biblical books interpreted Genesis as history. Details from Genesis 1–11 are often cited as though they really happened, not as though they are merely parts of a sacred story. Hebrews 11 is one such example, which seems to place events in the early chapters of Genesis on an equal historical footing with events involving Abraham and other later biblical figures.

Craig’s discussion of the evidence for humanity among the fossils is more persuasive, as far as it goes. He lists four characteristics which he says are jointly sufficient to establish human behaviour (pp. 82–83). This leads him to classify Neanderthals, Denisovans, and *H. heidelbergensis*

as human. He therefore agrees with young-earth creationists in this regard, and pushes back against the likes of Hugh Ross and Andrew Loke, who find it acceptable to deny the humanity of these individuals.

However, creationists typically see *H. erectus* (and most other *Homo*) as human too, because they are likewise anatomically and behaviourally human (figure 1). This means the human fossil record extends much further back than 1 Ma by conventional dating.



Figure 1. Turkana Boy from Kenya (replica), classified as *Homo erectus*, dated to 1.6 Ma, London Natural History Museum



Figure 2. Acheulean hand axes from Africa, likely made by *Homo erectus*, dated to 0.7–1.4 Ma, London Natural History Museum

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Photos by Keaton Halley

Craig is dismissive, saying *H. erectus* “was mired in a million-year-old tool industry with no meaningful advance” (p. 104). This assumes the accuracy of the dates and ignores the evidence that these people built huts, for example.¹⁰ Their Acheulean toolkit (figure 2) is also nothing to sneer at. Other long-age advocates, such as Casey Luskin, disagree with Craig here and affirm that *H. erectus* was likely human.¹¹ So, despite the exceptionally ancient age Craig assigns to Adam, his Adam is still nowhere near old enough in the evolutionary scheme to be the ancestor of all humans.

Loke redefines humankind

Andrew Loke presents his genealogical Adam view in similar style to his book on human evolution, which I have critiqued.¹² According to this view, anatomical *Homo* evolved from ape-like ancestors. Adam and Eve were either born out of this group or supernaturally created to be reproductively compatible with this group (pp. 109, 118–120). As the descendants of Adam and Eve thoroughly mixed with the wider population, eventually all living anatomical *Homo* could trace their ancestry back to Adam and Eve. From that point on, Adam and Eve became the universal, though not exclusive, ancestors of living people.

Loke’s variation of the genealogical Adam concept insists that only Adam and Eve and their descendants bear the image of God and are true humans. So, until the mixing was complete, the world still contained hominins biologically identical to human beings, but who were not ‘theologically human’ (p. 129). Even Cain’s wife may have been non-human, according to Loke (p. 123).

Loke is open to a range of possibilities about when Adam lived. He could have lived in the ‘recent’ past, “around 10,000 years ago”, or the ‘ancient’ past, “earlier than the

Neolithic era” (p. 108). But in this chapter he primarily defends the ‘recent Adam’ variant of his model, perhaps because (I speculate) that is what he was asked to do, to more sharply contrast his view with Craig’s.

The major problem with Loke’s model is that his invented category of human-like non-humans is a fabrication, which dehumanizes many individuals that ought to be understood as image-bearers. He has the same problem Craig does with *H. erectus*. Plus, assuming Adam lived more recently, then Loke is also treating Neanderthals and even loads of *H. sapiens* as non-humans, despite the fact that he agrees they had offspring with humans and exhibited characteristically human behaviours. Craig rightly dismisses this as “scientifically absurd”, “unbiblical”, and “morally unconscionable” (p. 136).

Even worse, how does Loke know that all people alive today are descended from Adam and Eve? Loke insists they are, but says he has no obligation to demonstrate this, since he is only arguing that his model is consistent with Scripture and *possibly* true (p. 108, 122). “An omnipotent God has the power to ensure that this is true”, he says (p. 122). But, unless he has some reason to believe that God did ensure this, the stipulation is arbitrary. Loke appeals to Acts 17:26, which says that God “made from one man every nation of mankind [ἕθνος ἀνθρώπων] to live on all the face of the earth” (pp. 110, 122, 145). But this is no help. Loke has already told us that his ‘mere anatomical *Homo*’ are not men descended from Adam, so they are not addressed by this verse. Acts 17:26 only says that Adam gave rise to multiple ethnic groups, not that the human-like hominins were entirely subsumed by Adam’s offspring. So Loke’s claims do, in fact, open the door to racism. The only barrier is his personal proclivity, not any principle essential to his model.

Ross affirms Adam

The contributions by Marcus Ross are quite refreshing compared to the others. He maintains that “Adam is our sole progenitor, sin brought death into the world, and the flood was worldwide” (p. 150). He first unpacks biblical evidence for these claims and then defends a young-earth interpretation of the scientific data consistent with them.

Ross concludes, from “the wide-ranging correspondence of statistical baraminology’s findings with the evidence for intelligence, language, interbreeding, and evil found among so many members of *Homo*”, that humanity cannot be restricted to a subset of *Homo* (p. 184). He also says that the Phanerozoic record post-dates Adam (being largely a consequence of the Flood), and the Pleistocene hominin fossils post-date the Flood (p. 173).

One fly in the ointment is that Ross leans heavily on statistical baraminology, which he admits clusters *H. habilis*, *H. rudolfensis*, and *Australopithecus sediba* with clearly human species (p. 176). He does explain, in a footnote, that these inclusions are controversial and may result from limitations in the available data. But this problem weakens his appeal to baraminological studies as they currently stand. Craig picks up on this, saying that the value of baraminology “is seriously called into question by its lumping human species ... with nonhuman species” (p. 192). It would have been better not to appeal to studies that are so counterproductive.

Conclusion

This book is not an easy introduction to its four perspectives on Adam. But for those interested in the in-depth debate, it is informative. I encountered some interesting particulars in this book that I had not come across before.

My hope is that the young-earth perspective will win more adherents as a result of debates like this and be developed further. It would also be nice if the flawed proposals of Sparks, Craig, and Loke were recognized as such by the church.

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