

Challenges: What about Adam and Eve?



The world's first book club.

Genesis 2-3

First, let's start with a brief history lesson! It's tempting to think that Christians have had the same view for the past 2000 years, but that's not the case! Even in the case of Adam and Eve, there were theologians in the Early Church that disagreed on them.

The history of the Theology of Adam and Eve

Irenaeus (130–202 AD) - Literal: Emphasized the historicity of Adam and Eve, linking them directly to Christ's redemptive work.

Origen (184–253 AD) - Allegorical: Believed in the spiritual interpretation of Scripture, though he did not deny a historical core.

Gregory of Nyssa (335–395 AD) - Allegorical/Spiritual: Focused on the spiritual and moral lessons of the Genesis story, though not denying its historical aspects.

Augustine (354–430 AD) - Literal: Strongly advocated for the historical reality of Adam and Eve, particularly in his later works, tying it to the doctrine of original sin.

Thomas Aquinas (1225–1274 AD) - Literal and allegorical: Emphasized the literal sense of Scripture as foundational but explored allegorical meanings in his theological works.

John Calvin (1509–1564 AD) - Literal: Advocated for the literal and historical truth of Adam and Eve, emphasizing the doctrine of original sin.

Karl Barth (1886–1968 AD) - Theological/Literal: Reaffirmed the historical necessity of Adam and Eve within a Christocentric framework, emphasizing their theological significance.

And who could be found so silly as to believe that God, after the manner of a farmer, 'planted trees in a paradise eastward in Eden', and set therein [a tree], that is, a visible and palpable tree of wood, of such a sort that anyone who ate of this tree with bodily teeth ... would get a knowledge of 'good and evil'? *Origen On the First Principles*

Rudolf Bultmann (1884–1976 AD) - Mythological: Argued that the Genesis accounts should be demythologized to uncover existential truths about human nature.

Karl Rahner (1904–1984 AD) - Philosophical/Theological: While acknowledging the doctrinal necessity of a historical Adam and Eve, he was open to understanding their story in a broader existential and salvific context.

John Walton (1952–Present) - Functional/Cosmic Temple: Argues that Genesis describes functional origins rather than material creation, seeing Adam and Eve as archetypes within a cosmic temple inauguration narrative.

Discussion question:

What is your view on Adam and Eve? What other views (both Christian or non-Christian) have you interacted with?

A brief overview of what we have learned.

Three ways to read Genesis.

1. Literal: Adam and Eve were literal people, the literal progenitors of us all. All truth gleaned from Genesis is literal truth.
2. Allegorical: The creation account, including Adam and Eve, are not to be read literally, but through which we find truth in the symbolism. Much of the truth in Genesis therefore is understood symbolically.
3. Accommodation: Given the cultural and anthropological contexts, God revealed himself in a way that those receiving the revelation would have understood. Therefore, the truth of Adam and Eve would have been presented in a way that the ancients would have understood.

Two ways of interpreting Adam and Eve vis a vis Science

1. Concordist: science and the story of Genesis are synthesized. The stories written down in Genesis have scientific support for its literal reading given our scientific understanding now.
2. Non-concordist: the creation stories in Genesis were not intended to provide scientific explanations but rather to convey truth about God and his creation to a specific people at a specific time. Through the Holy Spirit, those truths are spoken to us as well.

Three ways God might have created Adam and Eve

1. Young Earth Creationism: Adam and Eve were specially created 6-10 thousand years ago, were initially righteous, but lost it due to the original sin. The sin nature is conferred upon us by our association with them.
2. Progressive Creationism: Adam and Eve might have been created 6-10 thousand years ago (some variants say 150-200 thousand years ago). Evolution leading to Adam and Eve must have been miraculously directed.
3. Theistic Evolution: Adam and Eve existed 150-200 thousand years ago as a result of the natural evolutionary processes. God either specially modified them (or a group of people) or picked them (or a group) out of the already existing hominids of the time.

Are Adam and Eve really that important?

Yes! Scripture is primarily a story, the story of God and his work in and through humanity, and the Creation of Adam and Eve and their fall are critical parts of the introduction to that story. The Creation of Adam and Eve, their disobedience and fall, and the start of God's plan of redemption point to some critical world view questions that the original hearers would have had, and that we still have today.

Who am I?

Why am I here?

What is wrong with the world?

Who will fix the problem and how?

Discussion question:

What would your responses be to the previous 4 questions?

What are some alternate views you have encountered?

How did (would) you respond to those alternate views from a Christian perspective?

You come of the Lord Adam and the Lady Eve," said Aslan. "And that is both honour enough to erect the head of the poorest beggar, and shame enough to bow the shoulders of the greatest emperor on earth. Be content. C.S Lewis

5 Scenarios with different interpretations of Adam and Eve

These are not exhaustive views but are 5 of the most common interpretations of Adam and Eve. Each of them strive to provide a view regarding:

Scientific issues:

1. There is fossil evidence of hominids going back 5+ million years and modern looking humans at least 120 thousand years.
2. There are significant similarities in gene sequences between humans and other animals. This suggests a common ancestry.
3. Given current observations on genetics and genetic drift, the diversity in the human gene pool is larger than what one would expect from a population descended from 2 forebearers.

The Image of God

God chose humanity to have the capability of a personal relationship with Him. As a necessary part of that relationship, we have been gifted / created with mental and social capabilities above those of animals. Finally, God gave humanity dominion over the earth and designated us his representatives.

Inheritance of Sin

No one is righteous besides Jesus, the sin status is somehow transmitted to us either biologically, socially (through social interaction and imitation), as a spiritual status, or a combination of the options. Adam and Eve (or the representative group) may have been originally righteous, but it was lost upon sinning.

The Problems with Cain and with incest

Whom does Cain marry (or Seth and first generations of people)? What people does he fear that God marks him in Genesis 4? The population of humanity appears to increase significantly over one chapter, to the point where a city is mentioned.

What is the Human Soul? (mutually exclusive options)

1. The soul is immaterial, the body material, and the two are separate.
2. The soul is immaterial, the body material, but they are connected (ensouled flesh)
3. The soul consists of our mental and relational abilities, plus God's spirit within us. Our soul is inextricably linked to our bodies.

Human Mortality before the Fall (mutually exclusive options)

1. The fall resulted in spiritual death only, humans were naturally mortal before the Fall.
2. The Fall resulted in both spiritual and physical death, humans were naturally immortal before the Fall.
3. The Fall resulted in both spiritual and physical death, humans were naturally mortal but potentially immortal before the Fall.

Scenario 1: Adam and Eve were Recent Ancestors.

In this scenario, God created a pair of humans around 6,000 to 10,000 years ago. They were the first and only people at the time, and all humans have descended from them. From them all humans inherited their sinful status and Image of God.

Benefits:

1. Many Christians have held this view throughout church history.
2. It is compatible with most of the important theological issues (image of God, inheritance of sin, mortality, etc.)

Questions that come up:

1. What about Cain and incest (and Seth, and at least the first few generations of people)?
2. It seems there are many people very quickly (the people that Cain feared and cities within a generation or two).
3. The genetic similarities between humans and other animals. Why would God make uniquely make humans and yet make them so genetically close to a variety of animals?
4. Ten thousand years runs contrary to the evidence that has been found archaeologically and biologically.
5. When we read Genesis in a way that we arrive at Adam and Eve as recent ancestors, are we reading those passages in the way they were intended to their original audience?

Scenario 2: Adam and Eve as Recent Representatives.

In this scenario, God created humans around 150,000 – 200,000 years ago either using evolutionary creation or miraculous modification. Then, around 10,000 years ago, God selected a pair of humans, Adam and Eve, to represent all humanity. With their sin, that status was applied to all humanity. We are therefore descended, not just from Adam and Eve, but from a plethora of other ancestors.

Benefits:

1. Resolves issues such as incest and the large population in Genesis 4
2. Fits within an interpretation of Genesis 1 that links it with the initial creation of humanity and Genesis 2 as the selection of Adam and Eve.
3. No issues with various theories of Evolution within a Christian paradigm.
4. Fits with various views regarding the soul.
5. Mortality before the Fall for humanity, but possible immortality when Adam and Eve were in the Garden of Eden.
6. Partially resolves issues with parts of Scripture that imply Adam and Eve as an actual couple.

Questions that come up:

1. How is sin transmitted? Biological (potentially lots of humans not descended from Adam and Eve) and through social interaction don't really work, so it is probably spiritually, especially if we take into consideration Romans 5:12-20.
2. What about the moral and spiritual status of people that lived concurrently to, or before, Adam and Eve?
3. How was the Image of God imparted?

Scenario 3: Adam and Eve were Ancient Ancestors (either a pair or a small group)

God used the processes of Evolution to create humanity and then around 150,000 years ago, miraculously modified either a pair or a small group of hominids. The transformation included spiritual and physical changes, so that they became a different species. All humans are descended from them and inherited their sin natures (either biologically, socially, or spiritually).

Benefits:

1. Resolves some of the biological questions (animals with similar genetic makeup as people, age of fossils, etc.). The group variant might answer issues regarding the current genetic diversity in humanity.
2. God's acting via miraculous intervention in order to develop humanity as a distinct species from what was already created resolves how we come by God's image and our soul / spirit.
3. Resolves the Cain issue.

Questions that come up:

1. If God chose (and changed) a pair of people, it still does not account for the genetic diversity in humanity today.
2. If God chose (and changed) a group of people, the tribes around 150,000 years ago would likely be too small to account for God revealing himself to one such band, and it creates issues when considering a revelation to multiple bands.
3. There are problems in the narrative of Genesis 2-4 that would be difficult to account for the language, cultural, and physical changes that 150,000+ years between Adam and Eve and the civilization in Genesis 4.
4. As we move along scenarios, we're forced to read more and more of the Genesis account allegorically, which bothered Irenaeus (opening the door to the Gnostics!)

Scenario 4: Adam and Eve were a group of Ancient Representatives.

God created humanity in this scenario, 150-200 thousand years ago through Evolution. God then revealed himself to a group of people and they became representatives of humanity as a whole. When they sinned, that status was then applied to all of humanity.

Benefits

1. No conflict with scientific finds, issues with Cain, etc.
2. Allows for the Fall to be a single, distinct historical event.

Questions that come up:

1. How is sin transmitted? Biological (potentially lots of humans not descended from the group) and through social interaction don't really work, so it is probably spiritually, especially if we take into consideration Romans 5:12-20.
2. What about the moral and spiritual status of people that lived concurrently to, or before, Adam and Eve?
3. How was the Image of God imparted?
4. Multiple Scripture writers speak of Adam and Eve as actual people.
5. Irenaeus' complaint: making Scripture primarily allegorical and symbolic opens the door for Gnostic heresies.

Scenario 5: Adam and Eve are symbolic.

The symbolic position views the Adam and Eve narrative as a myth or a symbolic story conveying moral, spiritual, and existential truths, rather than historical facts. Humanity was created 150,000 by God using evolutionary processes, and over time developed both a moral sense and sinful nature. No one moment heralded humankind's breaking with God, but rather many events occurred where individuals and groups broke from God.

Benefits:

1. No conflict with scientific finds, issues with Cain, etc.
2. Compatible with views on the soul and body being inextricably linked.
3. Image of God developed over time alongside sin nature.
4. Sin is transmitted socially or biologically.

Questions that come up:

1. By making both creation and the fall a process, the possibility of a single revelatory event is removed. A number of revelatory events by God are required for humanity to advance morally and by necessity, humanity to sin after each one.
2. There can never have been a state of original righteousness, which flies against centuries of Christian theology.
3. Multiple Scripture writers speak of Adam and Eve as actual people.
4. Irenaeus' complaint: making Scripture primarily allegorical and symbolic opens the door for Gnostic heresies.

Question for discussion:

Other than the position you hold (if you have one), which position makes the most sense to you?

What are the things that most Christians can agree upon in the story of Adam and Eve?

1. God desires relationship: *"The man and his wife heard the sound of the LORD God as he was walking in the garden in the cool of the day..."* God created humanity to be able to comprehend and have relationship with Him. We see a sharp distinction in the treatment of Adam and Eve versus the animals. The implication of the Genesis 3:8 passage above is that God didn't just create the humans and leave them be, but regularly walked (*mithallech*) with them, a word which figuratively can mean "live with".
2. The Image of God *"So God created mankind in his own image, in the image of God he created them; male and female he created them."*¹ God imbues something of himself into us, his Creation. Being an image bearer grants all humanity dignity and worth.
3. Marriage: *"That is why a man leaves his father and mother and is united to his wife, and they become one flesh."*² Marriage ties into the first two points: because God desires relationship

¹ Genesis 1:27

² Genesis 2:24

with us and because we are given his image, we too desire relationship, not just with God, but with each other. The primary human relationship given to us is that of marriage, and it is instituted right at the beginning. It is through marriage that procreation is intended, and the family unit is therefore built.

4. Sin: *“Therefore, just as sin entered the world through one man, and death through sin, and in this way death came to all people, because all sinned—”*³ Sin is not just something that Adam and Eve committed, it was charged to them, and that was it. As they represented all of humanity in some way, that sin affects us even to this day.

“Dear Sir, I am.” G.K Chesterton’s response to the Times of London’s question (circa 1910) “What is wrong with the World?”

5. God’s Judgement on sin: *“For the wages of sin is death...”*⁴ God warned Adam and Eve of the consequences of sin. That consequence was at least spiritual death in separation from their Creator, but might also have been, depending on one’s interpretation, physical death as well.
6. God’s redemptive plan: *“For just as through the disobedience of the one man the many were made sinners, so also through the obedience of the one man the many will be made righteous.”*⁵ In God’s curse against the snake, we see the first hint of the redemptive act of Christ in the crushing of the serpents head. In Jesus’ incarnation, perfect life, death, resurrection, and ascension we see the action that God took to pay for our sins and restore us to relationship with Himself.

³ Romans 5:12

⁴ Romans 6:23a

⁵ Romans 5:19

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