

Essay Book Review

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Discussions about Dispersals: Questions Rising from the Search for Historical Adam

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IN QUEST OF THE HISTORICAL ADAM: *A Biblical and Scientific Exploration* by William Lane Craig. Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2021. 439 pages. Hardcover; \$38.00. ISBN: 9780802879110.

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In his book, *In Quest of the Historical Adam: A Biblical and Scientific Exploration*,¹ William Lane Craig splits his time between arguing for the importance of Adam to “orthodox” Christianity, and the inability of science to falsify the notion of two humans being the progenitors of all living humans (and Neanderthals and Denisovans). We have thus also split our review into these two areas, contextualizing the importance of Eve and Adam to orthodox Christianity, and considering the evolutionary anthropological evidence of our lineage’s evolution during the mid-Pleistocene; however, we want to start with a few points about which our reviews clearly overlap.

While we don’t share Craig’s concerns about orthodox Christianity needing a historical couple, it doesn’t bother us that he is worried about this. Could Jesus have died for all “hominins”? Of course! Could God love all of God’s creation?

We are pretty sure the Bible says that God does. We are also confident, as were the Wesleys, that both of our dogs will be in heaven (sorry, Richard Middleton!), so it does not bother us to think that Neanderthals will be there too. But precisely because we believe that God’s love “covers” everyone, we don’t need a historical Eve (or Adam) to trust in the truthfulness of scripture, or to know that God is interested in the salvation of the world, or to affirm that humans have sinned and need atonement. Simultaneously, we do have some concerns with the ramifications of Craig’s analysis of the situation as it impacts biblical hermeneutics, biological anthropology, and people of faith.

Craig begins with a chapter titled, “What Is at Stake,” in which he seeks to answer that question. He then proceeds to discuss the topic, Biblical Data Concerning the Historical Adam, in a series of chapters which include fairly robust conversations about the nature of myth, the classification of Genesis 1–11 as myth or “mytho-history,” and the relationship between myth and truth. This section concludes with a chapter on Adam in the New Testament.

After setting the table by considering “biblical data,” Craig writes about

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Scientific Evidence and the Historical Adam, including chapters on “The Evidence of Palaeoneurology” and “The Evidence of Archaeology” in two parts. His final chapter is titled, “Putting It All Together.”

At several points in the book, Craig allows room for readers who do not believe in a literal, historical Adam. For example, he acknowledges early on that the question of the historicity of Adam was never addressed by any ecumenical council (p. 3), and that the theological truths taught in Genesis 1–11 “do not depend on reading the narratives literalistically” (p. 202).

However, Craig ultimately argues for the existence—and importance—of a historical Adam. And, we should note that he means a historical Adam who is also the genetic primogenitor of all humans—in contrast to people who believe in a historical Adam who, with Eve, act together as the spiritual origins of God’s relationship with humankind. Craig connects belief in the historical, primogenitor Adam to believing in (1) the truthfulness and reliability of scripture (p. 6); (2) the doctrine of atonement, especially as presented by Paul (pp. 4–6); and (3) the person and reliability of Jesus Christ, asserting, “Thus, as crazy as it sounds, denial of the historical Adam threatens to undo the deity of Christ and thus to destroy orthodox Christian faith” (p. 8). In the concluding chapter, Craig makes a similar move, writing:

While these narratives [Genesis 1–11] need not be read as literal history, the ordering presence of genealogies terminating in persons who were indisputably taken to be historical and the teaching of Paul in the NT about Adam’s impact on the world, which bursts the bounds of a purely literary figure, oblige the biblically faithful Christian to affirm the historicity of Adam and Eve. (p. 363)

In other words, lest a Christian wants to find themselves outside the group of “biblically faithful,” that Christian is *obliged* to affirm the historicity of Adam and Eve, based on certain names within genealogies in Genesis 1–11, and Paul’s teaching about Adam.

Craig is an apologist, and his website includes several articles and videos about the persuasive nature of historical truths in Christianity and the Bible. Yet in this volume, despite a lengthy discussion about the literary genre of myth, it seems that he defaults to an Enlightenment understanding of “truth” that

equates it with historical fact. Moreover, Craig seems to make certain assumptions without interrogating them. For example, Craig spends chapters 2–6 contextualizing the narratives of Eve and Adam within the larger literary context of the book of Genesis, as well as in the historical and cultural world of the Ancient Near East. After discussing similarities and differences between the creation accounts in Genesis and those from ancient Mesopotamia and Egypt, he concludes that much of the material in Genesis can fruitfully be read without insisting on its literal nature. But then, in chapter 7, he makes a pivot, arguing that when Adam appears in Jewish literature as a theological example, “all the texts concur in assuming Adam to be a historical person” (p. 204). Is this accurate? How would we know? These Jewish authors need not assume Adam as a literal historical person in order to write about him theologically.

The same is true about Paul; Craig himself acknowledges that only three texts—Acts 17:26; 1 Corinthians 15:20–23, 40–49; and Romans 5:12–19—seem to require a historical Adam (p. 224). Two recent articles in *Perspectives on Science and Christian Faith* demonstrate that the word “Adam” does not actually occur in Acts 17:26: “Acts 17:26: God Made of *One [Blood]*—Not of *One Man*—Every Ethnic Group of Humans,” by Fred S. Cannon, reviews the textual evidence from early manuscripts;² and “From One Person? Exegetical Alternatives to a Monogenetic Reading of Acts 17:26,” by William Horst, explains that the verse does not present a problem vis-à-vis polygenism.³ It could be that the existence of just one text in the New Testament is enough to convince a person about the historicity of Eve and Adam, but it is surprising that whereas Craig seems to allow that someone can read the narratives in Genesis in nonliteral ways, he insists that the Pauline texts must be read literally. Craig seems to be either conflating Paul’s theological arguments about humans with a historical and literal reading of “Adam,” or making Paul’s theology dependent on the historicity of a literal Adam. In doing so, he ties Christian belief to unnecessarily improbable and even problematic assumptions.

Interestingly, Craig’s own preference for the genetic primogenitor status of Adam and Eve limits other theological possibilities for the first two created humans. For example, Eastern Orthodox traditions about Adam and Eve emphasize their role and function as priests in creation. One could argue for

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a literal Adam and Eve whose vocation it is to be mediators of God's grace for the created world, a role that would not be solely focused on their genetic ancestry for all humans and/or other closely related species.

There are further tensions in this volume between what is falsifiable from a scientific perspective and what is likely. For example, on the one hand, Craig somewhat belittles anthropologists for his own expectation that biological species concepts should work for fossils while simultaneously suggesting that it doesn't matter what we call mid-Pleistocene *Homo*; he will just use *Homo heidelbergensis* as a place keeper for the population which wrought historical, primate-generitor Eve and Adam. All fossil species' names are place keepers while we apply living morphological variation to guide our expectation for breeding in extinct species. For example, we reject the name *Homo heidelbergensis* to explain what is happening in Africa during this time, following instead Robin Dennell's exhortation that we should return to using *Homo rhodesiensis* for this group; Mirjana Roksandic prefers *Homo bodoensis*. However, we also do not think it is good science to say that Neanderthal brains have essentially the same function and functional properties as our brains. This is an intense misunderstanding of how evolution works.

Neanderthals do not have an expanded frontal and prefrontal cortex. They have an expanded occipital lobe. In all vertebrates, this is the area of the brain in which visual processing occurs, not executive functioning or creativity: large brains are not all created equal, and it hurts our understanding of evolution to conflate size with function. It is useful for us to understand that Neanderthals have enlarged sinuses, eye sockets, nasal passages, and occipital lobes; that their inner ear has a different shape and pattern during development than ours; and that they practiced a different form of bipedalism than we do.

If we really want to understand God's creation, understanding the evolutionary processes that created these creatures with whom we had numerous interactions is imperative. Calling everyone a good-enough human is not appropriate. In addition, homoplasious convergence is clearly at play all over the place, and assuming the similarities are homologous prevents new discoveries.

Furthermore, using the evidence we have is not "self-contradictory." There is accumulating evidence that the terrestrial bipedalism that characterizes hominins of our lineage evolved from arboreal bipedalism that was diverse and plentiful during the Miocene. As we learn more about these creatures, we will be able to fine-tune our definition of hominin, our definition of bipedalism, and our definition of our lineage. These are all decisions we make to better frame our research questions and to guide our discussion of the patterns and processes of evolutionary mechanisms. We are not trapped by the definition of hominin as being a bipedal ape with certain pelvic and dental characterizations. Defining the hominin helps us quantify a niche, and then a population, and then a set of relationships with other species around it, in order to understand how evolution may have happened in the past. If one is going to make a claim that these questions are scientifically testable, then simultaneously one has to make a commitment to follow this through to the mechanisms that are also taking place.

This is exactly true in the chapter about "locating the historical Adam" and obviously Eve (who could use a few more mentions, in that she is giving birth to quite a few future species in this model). For example, in the section on genetic problems with a historical couple, Craig gives Dennis Venema a hard time for "fixating" on the genetics. But, the entire section and justification for two genetic ancestors is about genetics. If you want to discount genetics entirely and say humanness is not in the genes, then theoretically, that is fine, but the chapter should be arguing that genes don't matter for humanness. It makes no sense to accuse the people testing the allele hypothesis for focusing too much on alleles. It is further confusing to say that Eve and Adam are *Homo heidelbergensis sensu lato*, but then say that they completely replaced all other *H. heidelbergensis* members without any death: people died without passing on their alleles; that is what descending from only two people living in a giant population means.

On a more functional note, and as an idea for a sequel written by Craig or someone else who wants to take up this argument, why and how would Eve and Adam's descendants immediately spread throughout the world without behavioral modernity to diversify into all these different niches in such a short amount

of time? Why didn't all of Eve and Adam's descendants reach behavioral modernity at the same rate, and some not at all? Complete and total replacement of a substantial number of very successful hominin species with a few individuals who look remarkably like the hominins who have been in those areas for a million years is driven by what evolutionary mechanisms and pressures?

We have elegant hypotheses for what causes dispersal, and nearly all of them rely on population pressure. If the *H. heidelbergensis* population is down to two reproducing individuals and their immediate offspring at 750kyr (when we have an excellent fossil record for lots of things happening all over the world at the same time), what evolutionary pressures drive the expansion of *H. heidelbergensis* populations? Why is the takeover of all other species by this *H. heidelbergensis* population invisible in the fossil record? Since *H. heidelbergensis* is "not-modern" without any obvious behaviors or features that might explain such a rapid takeover, what evolutionary pressures might explain this hypothesis? This definitely requires an additional explanation and would be a worthy focus of the next text. Such a sequel could include theological implications about the descendants of Eve and Adam as well. For example, Genesis 4 contains the first occurrence of the word "sin" in Hebrew (*ḥata'*), through Cain's choice to murder his brother Abel. Is there a historical Cain? And if so, what do his moral choices suggest about the choices Christians can and do make today? ▶

Notes

¹This book is available through the ASA Virtual Bookstore at: https://convention.christianbook.com/Christian/Books/easy_find?Ntt=in+quest+of+a+historical+adam&N=0&Ntk=keywords&action=Search&Ne=0&event=ESRCG&nav_search=1&cms=1&ps_exit=RETURN%7Clegacy&ps_domain=convention.

²Fred S. Cannon, "Acts 17:26: God Made of *One [Blood]* – Not of *One Man*—Every Ethnic Group of Humans," *Perspectives on Science and Christian Faith* 74, no. 1 (2022): 19–38, <https://doi.org/10.56315/PSCF3-22Cannon>.

³William Horst, "From One Person? Exegetical Alternatives to a Monogenetic Reading of Acts 17:26," *Perspectives on Science and Christian Faith* 74, no. 2 (2022): 77–91, <https://doi.org/10.56315/PSCF6-22Horst>.

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