



Patrick S. Franklin

Theodicy and the Historical Adam: Questioning a Central Assumption Motivating Historicist Readings

Patrick S. Franklin

In this article, I aim to show, first, that theodicy tends to be a major motivating factor grounding biblical-theological arguments in favor of historicity; and second, that a historical Adam/Fall fails to address adequately the questions theodicy raises. I do not argue here for or against the historicity of Adam; nor do I seek to offer a new theodicy. My intended contribution is more modest: to critique the strong impact that theodicy has on the question of the historicity of Adam/the Fall and to open space for nonhistorical interpretations. I conclude by commending Dietrich Bonhoeffer's exposition of Genesis 1–3 as theologically fruitful.

Keywords: theodicy, historical Adam, hermeneutics, evolution, concordism, incarnation anyway, eschatology, Trinity, Bonhoeffer

Theodicy as a Key Motivating Factor

Recently, debates over the historicity or nonhistoricity of Adam/Eve and “the Fall” have become central to faith-science discussions concerning human origins (that is, the implications of evolution), in light of advancements both in science and in biblical scholarship. This question has drawn the attention of the ASA, as evident in two recent annual conferences (2020 and 2021) and in previous issues of *Perspectives on Science and Christian Faith*.¹ A concern that arises is that the understandable desire to align scientific advancements with scripture and theology, especially when accompanied by unexamined biblical and theological assumptions, might press scientifically minded interpreters prematurely to accept concordist readings of scripture. One such assumption is that the biblical figures Adam and Eve are crucial for

addressing theodicy problems raised by evolutionary biology.

A major motivation and impetus for affirming a historical Adam and Eve is the perceived need for a historical Fall. This, in turn, is thought to be necessary to ground and explain (give an account for) the universality of sin and thus also the universal human need for salvation in Christ. Further, it is often argued that “the Fall” must be historical in order to safeguard the goodness and sovereignty of God. If a real, historical Adam and Eve are responsible for abusing their free will and thus introducing sin and evil and death into the world, then God is not responsible for it. God is not the author of

Patrick Franklin, PhD (McMaster Divinity College), is an Associate Professor of Theology at Tyndale Seminary (Toronto). He is President of the Canadian Scientific and Christian Affiliation and was formerly Book Review Editor for PSCF. His own first book was *Being Human, Being Church: The Significance of Theological Anthropology for Ecclesiology* (UK: Paternoster, 2016).

Article

Theodicy and the Historical Adam: Questioning a Central Assumption Motivating Historicist Readings

evil. So, this doctrine is motivated, in no small part, by *theodicy*.

For example, in a recent book defending the historicity of Adam and the Fall, Michael Reeves and Hans Madueme write,

Traditionally, belief in a historical sin and fall of Adam has been an essential part of Christian theodicy. That is, because Adam and Eve committed the first sin *at a particular point in time* and so fell with all the creation they had been appointed to rule, we can say that God did not create an inherently fallen world. He is not the author of evil.²

On the following page, Reeves and Madueme go on to insist that the consequences of denying the historicity of Adam and the Fall for Christian faith and belief are dire:

Christians can affirm both the absolute sovereignty of God, that he is truly the Lord and creator of all, and the absolute goodness of God, in that he is not himself the source of evil. But if there was no historical Adam and no historical entry point of evil into the world, then those are things we cannot affirm, *and our very Christian confidence must be shaken to its foundations*.³

While this way of stating things is rather extreme (do the *foundations* of Christian faith really rest on *any* position about the historical Adam?⁴), this connection between theodicy and historical Adam/Fall is common and widespread. James K. A. Smith, for example, writes that the doctrine of the [historical] Fall offers “a theological account of human origins that doesn’t jeopardize the goodness of God or human responsibility”⁵ and cites the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* which states that “The doctrine of original sin is, so to speak, the ‘reverse side’ of the Good News ...”⁶ Peter Enns notes that “For many Christians ... it is theologically necessary for there to be some sort of Adam somewhere in human history who is personally responsible for alienating humanity from God.”⁷ Oliver Crisp reports that “historic accounts of the doctrine [of original sin] are usually deployed in order to ... provide a theological explanation of how it is that human beings are in their current vitiated moral condition.”⁸ Donald Macleod considers the historicity of Adam/the Fall to be “a fundamental part of Reformed theodicy” since “God could not be the author of sin; neither, then, could

he be the creator of a depraved creature.”⁹ C. John Collins summarizes: “Christian theologians use the ‘fall’ to explain the need for sacrifice and redemption, and thus the purpose of Christ’s incarnation; they also use it to account for the problem of evil (and some extend that to include all manner of ‘natural’ evil, such as earthquakes and mosquitoes).”¹⁰ This is but a representative sample of the common connection made between historical Adam/Fall and theodicy.¹¹

The Problem with the Theodicy-Historicity Connection Demonstrated

The problem with using the traditional doctrine of original sin in this way is that it fails to provide an effective and convincing solution; *original sin fails as an answer to the theodicy problem*. Before explaining why, allow me to clarify what I mean by “the traditional doctrine of original sin.” By this expression, I mean the idea that an original historical couple—Adam and Eve, as two specific persons in real history, traditionally believed to be the first two human beings that God created—committed the first sin(s), fell from a state of original righteousness, and thereby infected the human race with sin by somehow transmitting a sinful nature or condition to their offspring.¹² While there are variations on the doctrine of original sin, this summarizes the most common traditional elements.¹³

As discussed above, many appeal to the necessity of this doctrine in order to explain why there is sin and evil in the world without attributing their origins to God. Many fear that abandoning belief in the historicity of Adam, Eve, and the Fall, would leave God vulnerable to the charge of being the author of evil: God would be either less than perfectly good or less than perfectly sovereign and powerful. I do not believe that denying historicity necessarily leads to this kind of choice, but the purpose of this article is not to argue that point. Instead, I will focus on why a historical Adam/Fall does not even solve the theodicy problem very well. Please note, I am not suggesting that God is, in fact, responsible for sin and evil. I am instead suggesting that the historical Adam/Fall defense does not succeed, as many assume it does.

Eschatological Considerations That Complexify the Problem

Consider eschatology, specifically our future glorified state.¹⁴ In that state, we will be perfected, fully sanctified, no longer capable of sinning or experiencing a “Fall” like the one depicted in Genesis 3. Otherwise, the pattern of fall and redemption could go on infinitely and Christ would have to be crucified and risen repeatedly. Instead, the redemptive work of the triune God will be truly *finished*; more precisely, what God accomplished decisively in Jesus will be fully consummated, the between-the-times eschatological tension of *already – not yet* will be fully resolved. What we received by our reception of the Spirit as a foretaste, down payment, and shadow will be fulfilled, completed, and made fully and holistically *real* or actualized. The ultimate will take up and transform the penultimate.¹⁵ We will finally see things clearly, as they truly are, and experience the unhindered and unveiled presence of God as never before. We will be remade to be like Jesus in our hearts, minds, relationships, character, motivations, and desires; in short, we will be fully transformed into his image, refashioned perfectly into the image of Christ who is the perfect image of God the Father. Consider the following representative New Testament texts related to our future glorification:

For now we see only a reflection as in a mirror; then we shall see face to face. Now I know in part; then I shall know fully, even as I am fully known. (1 Cor. 13:12)

Listen, I tell you a mystery: We will not all sleep, but we will all be changed – in a flash, in the twinkling of an eye, at the last trumpet. For the trumpet will sound, the dead will be raised imperishable, and we will be changed. For the perishable must clothe itself with the imperishable, and the mortal with immortality. (1 Cor. 15:51–53)

Now the Lord is the Spirit, and where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is freedom. And we all, who with unveiled faces contemplate the Lord’s glory, are being transformed into his image with ever-increasing glory, which comes from the Lord, who is the Spirit. (2 Cor. 3:17–18)

Do not lie to each other, since you have taken off your old self with its practices and have put on the new self, which is being renewed in knowledge in the image of its Creator. (Col. 3:9–10)

But our citizenship is in heaven. And we eagerly await a Savior from there, the Lord Jesus Christ, who, by the power that enables him to bring everything under his control, will transform our lowly bodies so that they will be like his glorious body. (Phil. 3:20–21)

Dear friends, now we are children of God, and what we will be has not yet been made known. But we know that when Christ appears, we shall be like him, for we shall see him as he is. (1 John 3:2)

And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying, “Look! God’s dwelling place is now among the people, and he will dwell with them. They will be his people, and God himself will be with them and be their God. He will wipe every tear from their eyes. There will be no more death or mourning or crying or pain, for the old order of things has passed away.” (Rev. 21:3–4)

Then the angel showed me the river of the water of life, as clear as crystal, flowing from the throne of God and of the Lamb down the middle of the great street of the city. On each side of the river stood the tree of life, bearing twelve crops of fruit, yielding its fruit every month. And the leaves of the tree are for the healing of the nations. No longer will there be any curse. The throne of God and of the Lamb will be in the city, and his servants will serve him. They will see his face, and his name will be on their foreheads. There will be no more night. They will not need the light of a lamp or the light of the sun, for the Lord God will give them light. And they will reign for ever and ever. (Rev. 22:1–5)

In addition to being fully perfected and glorified, we will also be fully free – *freer*, in fact, than ever before. “Losing” the capacity to sin is not actually a loss, but a gain. To be able to sin is not freedom in the fullest sense, because sinning is a negation of our being. It is a closing down and restraining of our potential and possibilities. It causes us to resist loving God and neighbor, enslaves us to spiritual and systemic powers (Rom. 6:17–18; Eph. 6:12; Col. 2:15), and distorts our thinking (Rom. 1:28; 2 Cor. 4:4; Col. 1:21) and acting (Rom. 1:24ff; Gal. 5:16–21). It is a turning-in-on-ourselves, *cor curvum in se* (the heart turned or curved in upon itself) as Bonhoeffer put it, drawing from Luther.¹⁶ The enthronement of self is, ironically, the distortion of self and the captivity of the self to itself. The reason for this is that God created the self to find its meaning, identity, alignment, and

Article

Theodicy and the Historical Adam: Questioning a Central Assumption Motivating Historicist Readings

eschatological completion or consummation beyond itself, in God. As Pannenberg argues, the human self is inherently *exocentric*, centered transcendentally beyond itself (to find completion in God) as an intrinsic structural feature of its being.¹⁷ The capacity to sin does not add anything freeing or liberating to this; rather, it offers a counterfeit “freedom” that ultimately detracts from, distorts, constrains (worse, enslaves), and kills the self’s true being. It offers freedom-*from* (freedom as radical autonomy, ultimately isolation) but not freedom-*for* God and others, or even freedom-*for* being and becoming one’s own true self.¹⁸ In all of this, the temptation to sin is subtle and deceptive: as in Eve’s experience, sin draws us by appealing to what is genuinely pleasing, desirable, and good, but then corrupts by using the good as a means to attaining ungodly and evil ends. It offers to make us “like God” but in such a way as to live without God.¹⁹

Now, in light of this brief consideration of our glorified state, a troubling question arises: If it is possible for us to be made fully free and yet totally incapable of sinning, as our future glorified state revealed in scripture suggests, then *why did God not create us in this state to begin with?* Why create human beings that are vulnerable to sin and evil? Why create us “corruptible,” though not yet corrupted, as Athanasius put it?²⁰ This question, though not in itself insurmountable, reveals the failure of “original sin” (as defined above) as a fully effective theodicy. Original sin is a solution that only pushes the problem back a step, where we confront a larger problem: If God is capable of making us totally good and totally free, if God is capable of renewing us and refashioning us into the image of Jesus Christ such that we are destined to become totally good and totally free in our glorified state, why did God not begin this way and so avoid all the sin, evil, pain, suffering, sickness, corruption, violence, destruction, and all other forms of ungodliness that human beings have caused and experienced?

There seems to be some awareness of this problem in the theological literature. First, many scholars have noticed and pondered the striking fact that in the Genesis narrative, God’s good creation goes off the

rails very quickly — almost immediately, in fact.²¹ This seems rather strange and unlikely, given Christian convictions about God’s absolute goodness, wisdom, and sovereignty (for a skeptic or atheist, it potentially raises questions about God’s competence and/or love for humanity and for creation). Was the immediate intrusion of sin and evil really unavoidable? Yet, the “immediacy” of sin seems to be something that the biblical narratives emphasize, as observable in the way that later revelation draws on Genesis 3 to describe the patterns of sin in Israel’s history. As Gary Anderson notes,

By attending to how the biblical story expanded over time, we can see that the text is more interested in establishing the immediacy of human disobedience than it is in creating a seamless whole that can be read with a minimum of friction. Indeed, “immediacy” may be the best way to define “original sin” in its Old Testament context. As soon as Israel receives the benefaction of her election, she offers not praise and gratitude but rebellion.²²

Second, theological commentators have noticed that there seems to be something inadequate about human beings in Genesis 2–3. For example, Philip Hefner, wrestling with the idea that the first humans would have carried within them certain effects of the history of evolution (including some habits and tendencies that favored survival yet would later — with the emergence of moral consciousness — be viewed as morally problematic, sinful), writes, “The symbols pertaining to the doctrine of Original Sin render the primal experience of being intrinsically inadequate, while that inadequacy is key to the process that makes life possible and enriches it — the *vitium originis*.”²³ James K. A. Smith argues that God’s repeated pronouncement of the *goodness* of creation in Genesis 1 should not be taken to mean *perfection*. Rather, goodness is associated with creation, while perfection is the eschatological goal toward which creation is moving, its *telos*.²⁴ This is a helpful and theologically meaningful distinction to make. However, the question still remains: Why did God not make creation *perfect* to begin with? Moreover, it is not just Christians who struggle to explain the origins of sin and evil and the apparent inadequacy of the original humans to resist. The Jewish rabbinical tradition also speculates on the origins of the good and evil

“inclinations” or “impulses” (Hebrew: *yetzer hatov* and *yetzer hara*) within human beings, troubled by the assumption (which many accept) that God must have created the evil impulse within human beings. Stan Porter summarizes, “The rabbis seem to conceive of the *yetzer hara* as generally a bad influence, placed within individuals by God, and to be treated objectively as a thing to be rejected, although the law is seen as a means given by God of controlling it.”²⁵

Third, the Reformed theologian Donald Macleod offers a theological explanation. He ponders the question: how is it possible that Adam could fall, when we consider that Adam was a holy and righteous man, unaffected by sin, evil, suffering, or oppressive or malevolent social structures and influences, and living in an idyllic paradise with all his needs and desires met? It is an important and difficult question. In my view, it is one that those who appeal to the historicity of Adam/the Fall for the purposes of theodicy tend not to address adequately. Drawing on the historic Reformed tradition, Macleod provides three basic answers. First, the persuasiveness of Satan influences Adam and Eve (the tradition makes an interpretive assumption here, since, as Old Testament scholars often point out, the text does not identify the serpent as “Satan,” though Revelation 12:9 might set an interpretive precedent for this; moreover, attributing sin and evil to Satan succeeds only in pushing the problem back a step). Second, Adam and Eve abuse their free will. Third, and most striking and relevant to the present discussion, *God withheld efficacious or restraining grace*, that is, the grace necessary to enable Adam and Eve to resist temptation to sin. To define efficacious or restraining grace, Macleod appeals to William Ames (a seventeenth-century Reformed theologian) who describes it as “the strengthening and confirming grace by which the act of sinning might have been hindered and the act of obedience effected was not given to him—and that by the certain wise and just counsel of God.”²⁶

While Macleod’s argument succeeds in providing a logical theological rationale to explain how it was possible for Adam and Eve to sin (within his stream of the Reformed tradition), it seems to me to

be inadequate as a theodicy, raising at least as many problems as it solves. God is affirmed to be good, because God grants to Adam and Eve their own free will and seemingly equips them with everything they need to flourish. However, problematically, God withholds the one thing necessary for them to succeed in arguably the most important aspect of being human, theologically speaking: the efficacious or restraining grace required to resist sin and to fully acknowledge and submit to the Creator God as Lord. The problem is not logical (given a compatibilist understanding of freedom), but moral: Why would God do this? I am not suggesting that God lacks sufficiently justified reasons for allowing sin and evil into the world. (While I do not fully understand God’s reasons, God is God and I am not, and I trust him because of his Word, character, saving acts in history, and present guidance, comfort, and calling!) I am simply suggesting that the traditional belief in a historical Adam/Fall does not itself resolve the theodicy problem.

Finally, many acknowledge that the origins of human sin and evil are ultimately veiled in mystery. As Haynes observes, even a theologian as important to the traditional doctrine of original sin as Augustine acknowledges this: “In *De libero arbitrio*, Augustine plainly states that he does not know why Adam would choose a nothing, a *nihil*, like sin. There is not an efficient cause that can explain the choice of disobedience rather than the Good itself. All that he can say is that it must be a kind of *defectious modus*.”²⁷ And while theodicy is central to their argument for a historical Adam/Fall, Reeves and Madueme nevertheless admit, “*Why* the hearts of Adam and Eve should have turned to sin is of course a mystery. There we seem to be dealing with the impenetrable obscurity of darkness, the illogicality of evil.”²⁸ One wonders why it is theologically acceptable to Reeves and Madueme to see this aspect of the problem as being hidden by the “impenetrable obscurity of darkness” but unacceptable to read the Genesis 2–3 narrative as theologically and existentially informative and authoritative though not explanatory in a literal, historical, or causal kind of way. The line they draw to constrain the degree of allowable mystery is arbitrary.

Article

Theodicy and the Historical Adam: Questioning a Central Assumption Motivating Historicist Readings

In addition, the Genesis 3 account itself shows no interest in providing a theodicy to explain the mystery of evil's origins, neither explicitly nor even implicitly. Rather, its concern is to disclose the nature and workings of sin and how God responds to and deals with it. Moreover, its purpose is not simply explanatory but existential-theological: it calls its readers to make a choice in the midst of their own experiences of temptation: to trust and obey God or not. We will return to this theme at the end of this article.

The Difference between Our Present and Future States

So, what accounts for the difference between our present sinful state and our future glorified state? Two things, I suggest.

First, in our glorified state, our union with Christ is perfected. The doctrine of union with Christ is central to Christian soteriology (and to other important doctrines, such as theological anthropology and ecclesiology²⁹) and is closely connected to Trinitarian theology and its emphasis on human participation in God's activity: by the Spirit we are drawn to participate in Christ's relationship with the Father and in Christ's ministry and mission in and to the world.³⁰ This Trinitarian-participatory emphasis transcends problematic dichotomies concerning human agency such as passive vs. active and works righteousness (or Pelagianism) vs. cheap grace (or antinomianism). Instead, God's initiative awakens and empowers human willing, choosing, and doing; our agency is drawn into God's own activity. We can see this dynamic at work in passages such as Philippians 2:12-13, "Therefore, my dear friends, ... continue to *work out your salvation* with fear and trembling, for it is God who works in you to will and to act in order to fulfill his good purpose," and Philippians 3:12, "Not that I have already obtained all this, or have already arrived at my goal, but *I press on to take hold* of that for which Christ Jesus took hold of me" (the underlined text indicating God's initiative and action, italics indicating our participation by the Spirit). Participation flows from union: we participate with/in Christ by the Spirit because we are

united to Christ (and thus also to the Father) by the Spirit.

One key scriptural passage that depicts union with Christ is John 14-17, especially by its use of "in" language (italicized in the following passages).³¹ In John 14:15ff, Jesus promises the disciples that the Father will send the Holy Spirit and this Spirit will "live with you and be *in you*" (v. 17). Then he says, "On that day you will realize that I am *in my Father*, and you are *in me*, and I am *in you*" (v. 20). We see this pattern again in chapter 17, when Jesus is praying for his disciples, specifically for their unity. He prays "that all of them may be one, Father, just as you are *in me* and I am *in you*. May they also be *in us* so that the world may believe that you have sent me" (v. 20). So, to synthesize, the Holy Spirit will come to indwell, be *in*, the disciples; and, by that act of indwelling, the Spirit will thereby place them *in Christ* who is *in the Father*.³² The previous two chapters draw implications from this union leading to Trinitarian participation: first, that only by remaining *in Christ* will disciples bear much fruit (as branches connected to the vine), and second, that the Spirit (who is one with the Son) will remind them of everything Jesus said and guide them into all truth (John 16:13). Importantly, the Spirit does not do this autonomously, but speaks only what the Spirit hears, just as Christ says and does only what he hears and sees the Father saying and doing (John 8:27-28). The Pauline epistles also make frequent use of "in Christ" language, which occurs in different ways about 216 times in Paul³³ (more than any other expression), though I will not survey that material here.³⁴

By our union with Christ, we come to share in some very important qualities, benefits, and experiences that could not otherwise be fully attained or realized. Two are particularly relevant. First, by this union we come to share in God's own Life. To say that Life is an attribute of God is to say more than simply "God is alive," which is rather obvious. It is to say more fundamentally that life is an attribute that belongs characteristically and necessarily to God alone.³⁵ God alone has infinite, eternal, immortal, necessary/noncontingent, underived and self-sustaining Life; all other life is creaturely life, and thus

finite, temporary, mortal, contingent, derived, and dependent on God for its existence and sustenance. In the Garden of Eden, the Tree of Life depicts not the immortality of human beings (their being made from the dust depicts their inherent mortality³⁶) but, rather, their radical dependence upon God—who transcends them—for life: eternal life is a gift that God offers, not a quality that human beings intrinsically possess. And the New Testament reveals that God makes this gift available through Christ in the Spirit such that, as 2 Peter 1:3–4 puts it, we become “partakers of the divine nature.” Trinitarian participation in the divine life is, in this way, the fulfillment of what the Tree of Life symbolizes in the Garden.

Second, by our union with Christ we come to share in God’s own Goodness. Like life, goodness is an attribute of God, a property that is proper to the divine nature. As Jesus says in Mark 10:18 (cf. Luke 18:19), “Only God is good.” We do not become good, in the fullest sense of glorification and total sanctification, simply by imitating God (Pelagianism); rather, we become good by sharing in God’s own Goodness through our union with Christ by the indwelling Good and Holy Spirit. By this indwelling, we are fully sanctified, made holy and complete. We attain fully transformed hearts and wills that overflow into rightly ordered and directed desires and actions. We also gain true wisdom. As Paul writes in 1 Corinthians 2:10–16, “we have the mind of Christ,” an amazing statement! Theologically, what Paul affirms is that we participate by the Spirit in the mind of Christ. Perhaps this is a fulfillment of what Jeremiah prophesied concerning the coming new covenant when God would write his law onto our hearts (Jer. 31:33), a fulfillment by the Spirit’s presence and activity of what the law demanded but could not empower, the law being a preliminary shadow of the real thing to come (Heb. 8:10; 10:16). And perhaps this is the ultimate fulfillment of what the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil signifies in the Garden—namely, access to knowledge and wisdom to live rightly, not in abstract terms but in relationship with God and in alignment with God’s own heart, aims, character, wisdom, and presence.

It is important to affirm that our union with Christ has always been the goal of God’s creation. As

Athanasius once put it, human beings were created “by nature corruptible, but destined, by grace following from partaking in the Word [that is, union with Christ], to have escaped their natural state, had they remained good.”³⁷ This affirmation finds support in so-called “incarnation anyway” theologies, which are currently growing in influence but have important precedents in the historical Christian tradition (for example, Karl Barth in western theology and many in eastern theology, such as Rupert of Deutz, d. 1135, the first to propose incarnation without the Fall according to Georges Florovsky).³⁸ These theologies propose that the incarnation of the Son was always part of God’s plan, because human union with Christ by the Spirit was always God’s goal, irrespective of the Fall. The evangelical theologian Oliver Crisp makes a compelling case for “incarnation anyway” in a recent article in the *Journal of Reformed Theology*. He offers the following summary of the rationale for this view:

God desires to create a world in which there are creatures with whom he may be united, so that they may participate in his divine life. Indeed, participation of creatures in the divine life is a final goal of creation, perhaps even the ultimate goal (though we need not commit ourselves to that claim for present purposes). To that end, God conceives of human beings as creatures ideally suited to such a relationship ... (On the Christological union view I am expounding here it is not possible for sinless human creatures to take the initiative and unite themselves to God independent of an act of divine condescension and accommodation such as that envisaged in the incarnation. Even sinless human beings are not capable of this feat of metaphysical bootstrapping!)³⁹

By means of the incarnation, human beings are first united to Christ and then formed into the image and likeness of Christ, both by means of the Spirit.⁴⁰ Thus, we come to “image God as we are conformed to the prototypical image of God in Christ.”⁴¹ As hinted at above, the Fall is not the primary reason for the incarnation, nor is it even necessary for the incarnation to take place. As Crisp argues,

Union with God is not contingent upon human sin. It is independent of any fall. In fact, it is independent of any creaturely action. On this view, God

Article

Theodicy and the Historical Adam: Questioning a Central Assumption Motivating Historicist Readings

desires union with his creatures so that they may participate in the divine life.⁴²

Of course, given the existence of sin and evil in the world, the incarnation (in conjunction with cross, resurrection, and ascension) does also *necessarily* address the sin problem. But strictly speaking, the incarnation does not require the Fall; rather, its primary purpose is to bring human beings (fallen or not) into union with Christ and make them fit for the kingdom of heaven.

The second feature that accounts for the difference between our present sinful state and our future glorified and perfected state is our transformation via resurrection. In 1 Corinthians 15:35ff, Paul teaches that “flesh and blood cannot inherit the kingdom of God” (v. 50).⁴³ In saying this, Paul is not referring only to our sinful flesh (or sinful nature); he is referring to our earthly nature.⁴⁴ This is made clear by his citation of Genesis 2:7 (note: *before* the Fall) to refer to Adam as a representative of perishable human nature (1 Cor. 15:45, larger context vv. 42–50). In order to inherit the kingdom, we need a new body, one that is neither simply earthly nor ethereal or ghostly, but what Paul calls a “spiritual body” (thus coining the term *sōma pneumatikon*), one—as Gordon Fee puts it—“adapted to the new conditions of heavenly existence.”⁴⁵ Or, as Scott Nash explains, Paul’s point is that “everyone who inherits the kingdom must be transformed into a kind of being appropriate for existence in that realm. Death of the body is not required, but transformation beyond flesh, blood, and corruption is.”⁴⁶ Receiving a new spiritual body requires the transformational work of God to bring about our resurrection.⁴⁷ David Garland stresses that “Paul wants to emphasize that the body that will be raised is radically different from its earthly counterpart.”⁴⁸ Fee explains that, according to Paul, the earthly body (Adam) belongs to the present age while the heavenly body (Christ) belongs to the life of the Spirit in the age to come. Paul thus points to “two orders of existence,” with Adam and Christ as their respective representatives and the two types of bodies as the concrete expressions of existence.⁴⁹ Paul’s point is that “one can assume full *pneumatikos* existence only as Christ did, by resurrection, which includes a *pneumatikos* body.”⁵⁰

Drawing these insights from 1 Corinthians 15 into the argument of this article, I wish to make two connections. First, the transformation of our embodied existence via resurrection distinguishes our present sinful state (and even the innocent but perishable state depicted in Genesis 2–3) from our future glorified and perfected state. Second, I believe that Paul’s reflections on resurrection add further support to the “incarnation anyway” proposal outlined above. Even without sin and the Fall, the incarnation and resurrection of Christ were necessary to transform perishable and corruptible human creatures vulnerable to sin into imperishable and incorruptible beings transformed into the image and likeness of Jesus, sharing in his everlasting Life and perfect Goodness via participation by the Spirit, and therefore invulnerable to sin and death.

Moreover, the reflections I have offered on union, incarnation, and resurrection prompt an alternate narration of scripture’s theological plot. Most often, when Christians narrate the basic theological plot of the Bible, they do so chronologically, or at least diachronically, according to the sequential unfolding of the biblical narrative. In this approach, the basic narrative structure is: Creation → Fall → Redemption → New Creation (fig. 1).

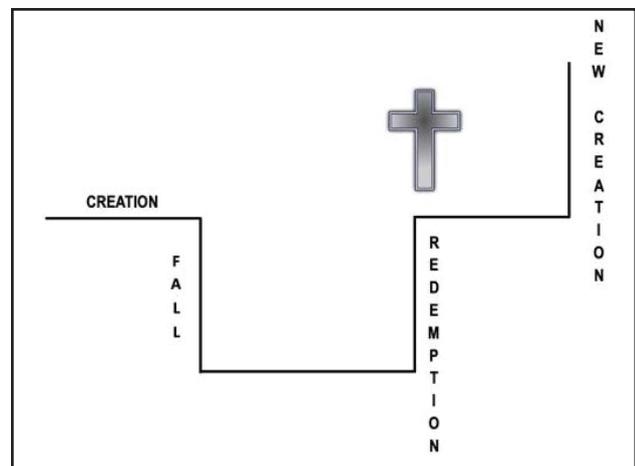


Figure 1. Diachronic or Chronological Narrative

But, following David Kelsey’s suggestion in his magisterial two-volume work on theological anthropology, there is another way to narrate the theological plot of the Bible without losing any of these categories.⁵¹ Let’s call this a *theological narration* of the plot’s narrative: it envisions the whole story

from an eternal or divine perspective, or *synchronically* rather than diachronically (fig. 2).

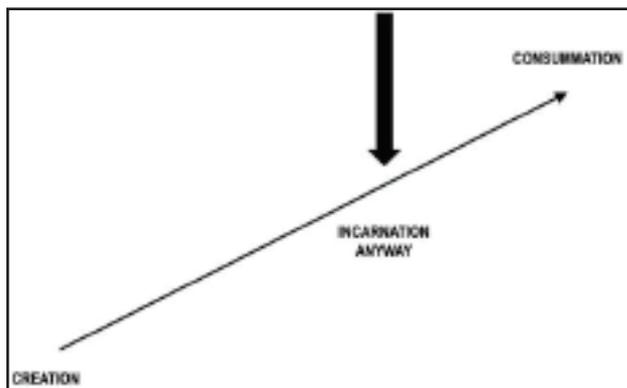


Figure 2. Theological or Synchronic Narrative (Incarnation Anyway)

First, God acts to create all that is not God. Second, God acts to perfect, complete, and consummate all that God has created. Third, when creation (human beings in particular) deviates from God’s plan and sin and evil enter the world with devastating and destructive consequences (fig. 3), God intervenes in

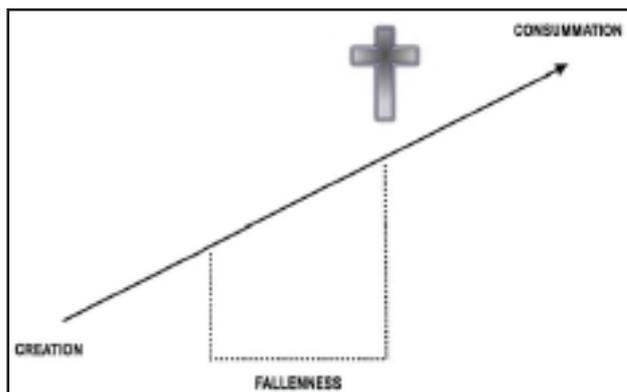


Figure 3. Incarnation Anyway (Intrusion of Sin)

order to redeem, restore, heal, reconcile, and realign creation with its originally intended trajectory, toward eschatological consummation (fig. 4). So, this

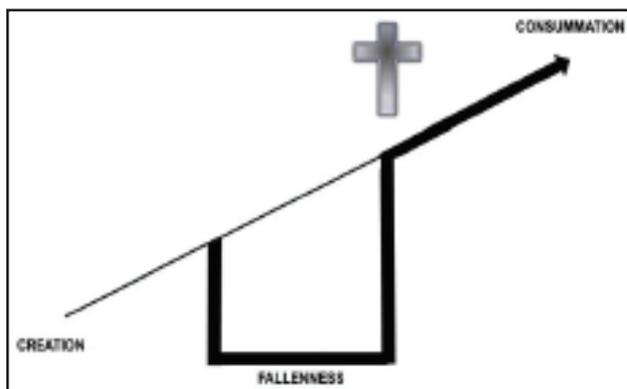


Figure 4. Incarnation Anyway (Sin, Incarnation, and Atonement)

theological/synchronic narrative plot moves from Creation toward Eschatological Consummation, with Redemption as a set of intervening acts culminating in Christ’s saving work by the Spirit, which restores creation on its path toward the New Creation. The theological/synchronic narrative has the advantage of depicting an “incarnation anyway” theological framework while also accounting, secondarily, for sin and redemption. Its primary benefit is to show that human *sin/fallenness* does not drive the logic of *eschatological consummation*; creation does (along with incarnation, the divine assumption of humanity).

Implications for Re-reading Genesis 1–3

I have intentionally limited the scope of this article and sought to keep its intended contribution modest. My primary aim has been to demonstrate that appealing to the historicity of Adam/the Fall to explain the origins of sin and evil does not sufficiently address the theodicy problem. I have not ventured to provide an alternate theodicy or argued in favor of a nonhistorical interpretation of Adam/the Fall. Rather, by challenging the theodicy-historicity connection as unhelpful, I have sought to make space for the possibility of nonhistorical interpretations. Theodicy is not the only reason that people argue for historicity,⁵² but it *is* a significant and widespread motivating factor that influences how and why many interpreters read certain biblical texts in that direction. So, by bracketing out questions of theodicy, I hope to encourage fruitful theological perspectives and readings of scripture.

To conclude, I offer five brief, mutually related suggestions for reading Genesis 1–3 without assuming the historicity of Adam and Eve or the Fall (I recognize that Genesis 1–3 is rich in content and significance well beyond what I can represent briefly here). I have proposed that a fruitful way to read scripture’s plot is to frame it theologically/synchronically, whereby we read the beginning (creation) in light of the end (eschatology) and the center (Christology).

First, within this perspective, it is possible to read Genesis 1–3 as a theological narrative of “creation,

Article

Theodicy and the Historical Adam: Questioning a Central Assumption Motivating Historicist Readings

temptation and sin," rather than as *the* historical Fall of the first two human beings, either alone or at the headwaters of an original human population.⁵³ A nonhistorical reading can still interpret the narrative as affirming that sin and evil are realities that emerge in human history (God does not create or initiate them), while admitting that the details remain mysterious.

Second, in keeping with historic Christian convictions about divine revelation and scripture, we should read Genesis 1-3 as inspired, revelatory, and authoritative narratives that disclose fundamental theological truths about God, human beings, God's intentions for creation (including humans), the problem and consequences of sin, and divine judgment and grace. Careful exegesis and theological reflection will help us to expound the details; but fundamentally, the text's theological concerns should be primary and central to interpretation. While commentators are widely divided over questions of historicity (and related critical matters such as dating, author(s), and sources), there is a remarkable degree of agreement on the *theological* teachings of Genesis 1-3.⁵⁴ Moreover, while the historicity of Adam is unlikely to make much of a difference to Christian life and practice, the theology of the narrative is deeply significant and authoritatively instructive.

Third, Genesis 1-3 teaches that the essence of sin is rebellion against God, the enthronement (via usurpation) of human autonomy, will, cunning, and desire above God's sovereignty, creative and sustaining purposes, wisdom, and love. The latter are meant to be central to human existence, grounding and properly aligning their worship and allegiance, their identity and purpose, and their moral and spiritual discernment; in short, God is the true Source (now hidden and inaccessible by human means alone) of all we are, all we have, all we do, and all we are destined to become. Theologically, the text affirms that sin and evil are an affront to God's character, will, and Lordship. The text does not solve the problem of the ultimate origins of evil, including malevolent inclinations, motivations, and influences, as the serpent's presence and role in the narrative indicates.

Fourth, we should read Genesis 3 as a *diagnosis* of the human sinful condition and state, initially directed at God's people (Israel) but applicable to all humans. Whether or not Genesis 3 intends to indicate an ontological corruption of human nature as a result of the original sin of one man (or couple) is highly contested among theologians, and an idea that many Old Testament scholars reject. What the narrative clearly and vividly depicts is the nature, workings, and consequences of temptation and sin. Thus, the story speaks profoundly into human life, and confronts readers (and listeners) with a fundamental existential-theological choice. It does not set out to explain the causal mechanisms of the origins and spread of sin in a modernist or historicist kind of way. This by no means weakens or softens its message; it is theologically sufficient for God to tell us *that* we are sinful without fully explaining the details of *how* we came to be sinful. *That* we are sinful is a basic revelatory fact, a basic Christian conviction founded upon divine revelation and known to us experientially by its effects. Its truthfulness does not rest on the need for a historical Adam/Fall. Characteristically, scripture itself does not blame Adam and Eve for the sin it exposes and condemns in Israel's later history; rather, it holds *sinner*s *presently committing sin* responsible and exhorts them to repent and seek the Lord.

Some commentators speculate that Genesis 3 is a retrospective narrative, projected back into Israel's primordial past in order to address its present experiences of sin and judgment (that is, during Deuteronomic history or exilic existence).⁵⁵ As such, the Genesis account "reveals the essential nature of sin so that we shall recognize it clearly when we encounter it in the historical accounts of human actions that are to follow in abundance in the Bible."⁵⁶ One fruitful suggestion that several biblical scholars have made is that Genesis 2-3 performs the function of ancient wisdom literature, inviting us to live in reverence for God and to walk in his ways.⁵⁷ Commentators have noted links with the book of Proverbs (for example, Prov. 3:18 depicts wisdom as a "tree of life") and the New Testament book of James.⁵⁸ Genesis presents us with a choice: choose

God and thus pursue wisdom, love, harmony, and blessing—in short, *life*; or, choose self and thus pursue foolishness, disordered desire, chaos and discord, and judgment/curse—in short, *death*. We see the infectious, distorting, destructive, and debilitating effects of the choice to sin depicted graphically in Genesis 4–11 and reappearing everywhere in scripture.

Fifth, it is important to point out that a nonhistorical reading of Adam/the Fall does not imply or require that we reject or deny any central, classical/orthodox, or even evangelical Christian theological convictions. The historicity issue is a secondary matter which need not be used in foundationalist fashion as a prolegomenon to ground the theological teachings of Genesis 1–3. Embracing a nonhistorical reading does not require a drift into theological liberalism or heterodoxy. As Oliver Crisp rightly notes, “There is no single, agreed-upon definition of original sin in the Christian tradition”; rather, “there are various versions of the doctrine that attend to a common set of theological themes, though they differ amongst themselves about the precise dogmatic shape of original sin.”⁵⁹

An influential theologian whom I would like to commend to my readers—one who was a strong critic of theological liberalism (that is, modernist theology influenced in its methods by Enlightenment assumptions and biases, in the tradition of Kant, Schleiermacher, Harnack, Troeltsch, and others) yet did not hold to a historical view of Adam/the Fall—is Dietrich Bonhoeffer. Reflecting on the use of mythological themes and metaphorical language in Genesis, in his book *Creation and Fall: A Theological Exposition of Genesis 1–3*, Bonhoeffer writes:

Who can speak of these things except in pictures? Pictures after all are not lies; rather they indicate things and enable the underlying meaning to shine through. To be sure, pictures do vary; the pictures of a child differ from those of an adult, and those of a person from the desert differ from those of a person from the city. One way or another, however, they remain true, to the extent that human speech and even speech about abstract ideas can remain true at all—that is, to the extent that God dwells in them.⁶⁰

Elsewhere, when discussing God’s fashioning the Adam (the human) out of clay, Bonhoeffer writes,

Surely no one can gain any knowledge about the origin of humankind from this! To be sure, as an account of what happened this story is at first sight of just as little consequence, and just as full of meaning, as many another myth of creation. And yet in being distinguished as the word of God it is quite simply *the source* of knowledge about the origin of humankind.⁶¹

Bonhoeffer explains, “That the biblical author, to the extent that the author’s word is a human word, was bound by the author’s own time, knowledge, and limits is as little disputed as the fact that through this word God, and God alone, tells us about God’s creation.”⁶² For Bonhoeffer, the theological import of Adam is that by addressing Adam, *God is addressing the reader/hearer of the text*. When the text describes Adam, it is describing us (whether Israel in the past or God’s people in the present); when it is addressing, judging, and holding forth grace to Adam, it is doing all of this to us.⁶³ Repeatedly in *Creation and Fall*, Bonhoeffer speaks of the Bible as an address to God’s people, and not simply one taking place in the past but an address that also speaks to readers and hearers today.⁶⁴

Bonhoeffer’s nonhistorical approach to Genesis 1–3 did not lead him into a drift toward theological liberalism; actually, his existential-theological reading of the text equipped him to challenge and criticize liberalism (indeed, Karl Barth—perhaps the most influential Protestant critic of theological liberalism in the twentieth century—drew inspiration from Bonhoeffer’s *Creation and Fall*, specifically Bonhoeffer’s relational-existential interpretation of the *imago Dei*). Additionally, Bonhoeffer’s theological reading of the text enabled him to see and utilize themes from Genesis 1–3, which are truly central to the text, to criticize Nazi ideology, German nationalism, anti-Semitism, and ecclesial corruption. Indeed, his decision to teach Christian theology via the book of Genesis (a *Jewish* text!) at the University of Berlin in the winter semester of 1932–1933 (*Creation and Fall* is the published form of these lectures) is itself a profoundly prophetic and subversive speech act: Bonhoeffer is not just saying things; he’s *doing things*

Article

Theodicy and the Historical Adam: Questioning a Central Assumption Motivating Historicist Readings

by saying things! Moreover, his approach to the Bible is not merely a minor detail, a feature only incidental to his theology. In fact, his Genesis lectures take place closely after his profoundly evangelical “discovery” of the Bible as God’s Word (Bonhoeffer also mentions his discovery of the Sermon on the Mount and prayer), marking his movement from academic speculation and abstraction toward a more concrete, direct, and literary approach.⁶⁵ His theological insights from this period draw on his earlier academic work (*Sanctorum Communio* and *Act and Being*) but now involve more direct engagement with the biblical text and attention to concrete application; and these insights and themes go on to influence his later works (for example, *Discipleship*, *Life Together*, *Ethics*, and *Letters and Papers from Prison*) and inspire his social activism and political resistance. In sum, while *Creation and Fall* is not a perfect book (its exegesis could be improved with insights from contemporary biblical scholarship), it is a powerful theological, pastoral, and ethical exposition of Genesis 1–3, which draws on themes central to the text and is evangelical in its theological assumptions, yet does not require Adam to be a literal, historical figure.

Conclusion

I began this article by demonstrating the significant and widespread impact that theodicy has in motivating interpreters to press for a historical reading of Adam/the Fall. I then set out to show why the historical Adam/Fall solution fails to address adequately the questions raised by theodicy. Considering our future eschatological glorified state, in which we will be made both completely good (our sanctification perfected) and fully free (both free *from* sin, even the capacity to sin, and free *for* loving God and others perfectly), raises the troubling question: Why did God not make us this way from the beginning and so avoid the sin, evil, suffering, and death that characterizes human history? This question reveals the weakness of the historical Adam/Fall solution as a fully effective theodicy. I then suggested that a theological/synchronic approach to narrating scripture’s theological plot, one that supports an “incarnation anyway” theology, enables an alternate theological reading of Genesis 1–3 that avoids

the problem and that opens space for more fruitful theological engagements with the text. I concluded by commending Dietrich Bonhoeffer’s theological exposition of Genesis 1–3 as an example of such productive theological hermeneutics. ▲

Notes

¹For example, see articles in *Perspectives on Science and Christian Faith* volumes 73, no. 3 (2021); 70, no. 1 (2018); and 67, no. 1 (2015).

²Michael Reeves and Hans Madueme, “Threads in a Seamless Garment: Original Sin in Systematic Theology,” in *Adam, the Fall, and Original Sin: Theological, Biblical, and Scientific Perspectives*, ed. Hans Madueme and Michael Reeves (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2014), 210.

³Reeves and Madueme, “Threads in a Seamless Garment,” 211 [emphasis added]. On the previous page, they also draw the following implications (fallaciously, in my view, i.e., the italicized parts indicate *non sequitur* conclusions): “If we remove a historical Adam and Fall from the theological picture, then sin becomes a side effect of evolution, a part of the natural ontology of created human beings” (p. 210; italics added); “without a fall, human sinfulness is no longer contingent but emerges from the very structure of the material world” (p. 210; italics added).

⁴Oliver D. Crisp points out that the ancient church did not take an official position on the historicity of the Fall; see his article, “On Original Sin,” *International Journal of Systematic Theology* 17, no. 3 (2015): 256, <https://doi.org/10.1111/ijst.12107>. And, as Stephen N. Williams writes in “Adam, the Fall, and Original Sin: A Review Essay,” *Themelios* 40, no. 2 (2015): 209–10, <https://www.thegospelcoalition.org/themelios/article/adam-the-fall-and-original-sin-a-review-essay/>:

It is one thing to argue the exegetical case for the authors’ claim about an ontological link, quite another to argue its theological necessity in this fashion. I confess that I am reminded of the argument that if you deny the historicity of Adam, then belief in the historicity of Jesus Christ is unsafe. As though belief in the historicity of Jesus depended on belief in the historicity of Adam!

⁵James K. A. Smith, “What Stands on the Fall? A Philosophical Exploration,” in *Evolution and the Fall*, ed. William T. Cavanaugh and James K. A. Smith (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2017), 49.

⁶*Ibid.*, 64 (footnote 18).

⁷Peter Enns, *The Evolution of Adam: What the Bible Does and Doesn’t Say about Human Origins* (Grand Rapids, MI: Brazos, 2012), 79–80.

⁸Crisp, “On Original Sin,” 252.

⁹Donald Macleod, “Original Sin in Reformed Theology,” in *Adam, the Fall, and Original Sin*, ed. Madueme and Reeves, 130.

¹⁰C. John Collins, “The Place of the ‘Fall’ in the Overall Vision of the Hebrew Bible,” *Trinity Journal* 40, no. 2 (2019): 165.

¹¹For other examples (where the connection exists, but not necessarily endorsed), see the following: T. D. J. Chappell, “Explaining the Inexplicable: Augustine on the Fall,” *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 62, no. 3 (Fall 1994): 869–84, <https://doi.org/10.1093/jaarel/LXII.3.869>; Crisp, “On Original Sin,” 252; William Lane Craig, *In Quest of*

- the Historical Adam: A Biblical and Scientific Exploration* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2021), 4–5; Daniel Haynes, “The Transgression of Adam and Christ the New Adam: St. Augustine and St. Maximus the Confessor on the Doctrine of Original Sin,” *St. Vladimir’s Theological Quarterly* 55, no. 3 (2011): 302; Robert Kolb, “The Lutheran Doctrine of Original Sin,” in *Adam, the Fall, and Original Sin*, ed. Madueme and Reeves, 110; Paul Ladouceur, “Evolution and Genesis 2–3: The Decline and Fall of Adam and Eve,” *St. Vladimir’s Theological Quarterly* 57, no. 1 (2013): 169; Juuso Loikkanen, “Backward Effects of the Fall: On the Plausibility of a Retroactive Theodicy,” *European Journal of Theology* 25, no. 1 (2016): 55–63; Jeffrey K. Mann, “Original Sin in Augustine: An Analysis of Ricoeur’s Essential Three Traits,” *Budhi* 2 (1998): 142; J. Richard Middleton, “Reading Genesis 3 Attentive to Human Evolution: Beyond Concordism and Non-Overlapping Magisteria,” in *Evolution and the Fall*, ed. Cavanaugh and Smith, 86; Henry L. Novello, “Lack of Personal, Social and Cosmic Integration: Original Sin from an Eschatological Perspective,” *Pacifica* 22, no. 2 (2009): 171, <https://doi.org/10.1177%2F1030570X0902200203>; Stanley E. Porter, “The Pauline Concept of Original Sin, in Light of Rabbinic Background,” *Tyndale Bulletin* 41, no. 1 (1990): 30, https://drmsb.com/TheNakedBible/TynBull_1990_41_1_01_Porter_OriginalSin.pdf; and Gordon Wenham, “Original Sin in Genesis 1–11,” *Churchman* 104, no. 4 (1990): 309–28, https://biblicalstudies.org.uk/pdf/churchman/104-04_309.pdf.
- ¹²In the Western Augustinian tradition, the original sin of Adam (and Eve) has a “real” (ontological) effect on all humanity; it is not merely a negative influence, symbol, or example to avoid. Augustinian realism “maintains that there is a real connection between Adam and his offspring such that they together form a metaphysical whole” (Oliver D. Crisp, “Retrieving Zwingli’s Doctrine of Original Sin,” *Journal of Reformed Theology* 10, no. 4 [2016]: 353, <https://doi.org/10.1163/15697312-01004014>). Moreover, for Augustine, original sin carries with it both moral corruption (ensuring that all human beings commit actual sin) and original guilt (the judgment of God that all humanity bears Adam’s guilt because all somehow participated in Adam’s sin). Augustine believed that the practice of infant baptism remits original guilt but does not heal the corruption caused by original sin. Thus, baptized individuals are not condemned for Adam’s sin, but apart from saving grace through Christ, they are condemned for the sins they themselves commit, which they do inevitably because of their sinful nature. It is also important to note the historical context of Augustine’s doctrine of original sin, especially the need to guard Christian harmatology (doctrine of sin) and soteriology (doctrine of salvation) from the Marcionite and Arian heresies. The (Eastern) Orthodox tradition also teaches a version of original sin, one that affirms that all human beings inherit the corruption of Adam (“inherited sin”) but not the guilt of Adam. Inherited sin is akin to a disease that predisposes human beings (unavoidably) to commit sins, which incur death and judgment. Interestingly, Crisp notes that Zwingli held to similar views, rejecting both federalism and Augustinian realism within Reformed theology in favor of the view that original sin involves inherited corruption from Adam but not the imputation of Adam’s guilt (Crisp, “Retrieving Zwingli’s Doctrine,” 352–60). See Oliver D. Crisp, “On Behalf of Augustinian Realism,” *Toronto Journal of Theology* 35, no. 2 (2019): 124–33, <https://muse.jhu.edu/article/751871>; Stephen J. Duffy, “Our Hearts of Darkness: Original Sin Revisited,” *Theological Studies* 49 (1988): 600–604, <https://doi.org/10.1177%2F004056398804900401>; Haynes, “Transgression of Adam,” 308–10, 314; Ladouceur, “Evolution and Genesis 2–3,” 135–76; and Mann, “Original Sin in Augustine,” 144–46.
- ¹³Crisp (“On Original Sin,” 257) cites three core tenets common to traditional doctrines of original sin: “First, that there was an original pair from whom we are all descended; second, that this pair committed the primal sin which adversely affects all their offspring; and third, that all human beings after the fall of the original pair are in need of salvation, without which they will perish.” He later adds, “To my mind it is the third of these claims that is dogmatically most fundamental. Human beings are sinners in need of salvation in Christ” (p. 265).
- ¹⁴In a previous article in *PSCF*, I outlined an eschatological framework for making sense of evolution theologically. See Patrick S. Franklin, “Understanding the Beginning in Light of the End: Eschatological Reflections on Making Theological Sense of Evolution,” *Perspectives on Science and Christian Faith* 66, no. 3 (2014): 154–70, <https://www.asa3.org/ASA/PSCF/2014/PSCF9-14Franklin.pdf>.
- ¹⁵For an exposition of this distinction, see Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Ethics*, vol. 6 *Dietrich Bonhoeffer Works*, ed. Clifford J. Green, trans. Reinhard Krauss, Charles C. West, and Douglas W. Stott (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress, 2005), 146–70. As a summary statement: “Christian life is the dawn of the ultimate in me, the life of Jesus Christ in me. But it is also always life in the penultimate, waiting for the ultimate” (p. 168).
- ¹⁶Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Act and Being: Transcendental Philosophy and Ontology in Systematic Theology*, vol. 2 *Dietrich Bonhoeffer Works*, ed. Wayne Whitson Floyd Jr., trans. H. Martin Rumscheidt (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress, 1996), 41, 46, 58, 80, 89, 137. For this theme in Athanasius, see Jonathan Morgan, “The Soul’s Forgetfulness of God in Athanasius’ Doctrine of the Fall,” *St. Vladimir’s Theological Quarterly* 60, no. 4 (2016): 477.
- ¹⁷Wolfhart Pannenberg, *Anthropology in Theological Perspective*, trans. Matthew J. O’Connell (Edinburgh, UK: T&T Clark, 1999), 43–79; cf. F. LeRon Shults, *Reforming Theological Anthropology: After the Philosophical Turn to Relationality* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2003), 90–91, 236–37.
- ¹⁸Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Creation and Fall: A Theological Exposition of Genesis 1–3*, vol. 3 *Dietrich Bonhoeffer Works*, ed. John W. de Gruchy, trans. Douglas Stephen Bax (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress, 1997), 62–67, 143–44; Pannenberg, *Anthropology in Theological Perspective*, 80–123.
- ¹⁹Bonhoeffer describes this brilliantly with the distinction he makes between being *sicut Deus* and being *imago Dei* (Bonhoeffer, *Creation and Fall*, 113).
- ²⁰Athanasius, *On the Incarnation of the Word* 5.1, in *NPNF2–04, Athanasius: Select Works and Letters*, ed. Philip Schaff (New York: Christian Literature, 1892), 38.
- ²¹E.g., Haynes, “Transgression of Adam,” 304.
- ²²Gary A. Anderson, “Biblical Origins and the Problem of the Fall,” *Pro Ecclesia* 10, no. 1 (2001): 26, <https://doi.org/10.1177%2F106385120101000102>.
- ²³Philip Hefner, “Biological Perspectives on Fall and Original Sin,” *Zygon* 28, no. 1 (March 1993): 94–95, <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1467-9744.1993.tb01020.x>.

Article

Theodicy and the Historical Adam: Questioning a Central Assumption Motivating Historicist Readings

For similar reflections on evolutionary influences on the human propensity toward sinning, see Celia Deane-Drummond, "The Birth of Morality and the Fall of Adam through an Evolutionary Inter-species Lens," *Theology Today* 72, no. 2 (2015): 182–93, <https://doi.org/10.1177%2F0040573615581544>.

²⁴Smith, "What Stands on the Fall?," 56.

²⁵Porter, "The Pauline Concept of Original Sin, in Light of Rabbinic Background," 8 (for the broader discussion, see pp. 3–8). Porter goes on to note: "Apparently, at times attribution is taken from God and given more directly to various human sources when this attribution is thought to be theologically out of character with God" (p. 8).

²⁶Macleod, "Original Sin in Reformed Theology," 135–36.

²⁷Haynes, "Transgression of Adam," 307. Haynes notes similarly that Maximus the Confessor "does not answer the 'how' question" in his reflections on the Fall in his *Ad Thalassium*, but "avers that it was due to the trickery of the devil and [human] ignorance, which is an irrational movement of a natural faculty toward its unnatural end" (p. 308).

²⁸Reeves and Madueme, "Threads in a Seamless Garment," 219.

²⁹See Patrick S. Franklin, *Being Human, Being Church: The Significance of Theological Anthropology for Ecclesiology* (Milton Keynes, UK: Paternoster, 2016), 178–86; see also Robert Sherman, *Covenant, Community, and the Spirit: A Trinitarian Theology of Church* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2015).

³⁰For a good introduction to this theme and its relevance for Christian life and theology, see James B. Torrance, *Worship, Community and the Triune God of Grace* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1996); for a practical outworking of the theme of participation for Christian life and ministry, see Henry T. Blackaby and Claude V. King, *Experiencing God: How to Live the Full Adventure of Knowing and Doing the Will of God* (Nashville, TN: Broadman & Holman, 1994). See also Patrick Franklin, "The God Who Sends Is the God Who Loves: Mission as Participating in the Ecstatic Love of the Triune God," in *The Interface of Science, Theology, and Religion: Essays in Honor of Alister E. McGrath*, ed. Dennis Ngien (Eugene, OR: Pickwick, 2019), 29–47.

³¹For further treatment of these themes in John, see Michael J. Gorman, *Abide and Go: Missional Theosis in the Gospel of John* (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock, 2018); and Andreas J. Köstenberger and Scott R. Swain, *Father, Son and Spirit: The Trinity and John's Gospel* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2008).

³²This union of believers with Christ and with each other mirrors the perichoretic union of Father, Son, and Spirit, but it does so analogically, not literally. Our union is not identical with the hypostatic union of Christ's two natures or with the oneness of the divine essence. As the patristic fathers clarify, the Son shares in the divine essence necessarily by nature, whereas we come to share in the divine life contingently through participation "in Christ" by the Spirit. Jesus is Son of God by nature; we become sons and daughters of God through adoption.

³³Michael Parsons, "'In Christ' in Paul," *Vox Evangelica* 18 (1988): 25, https://biblicalstudies.org.uk/pdf/vox/vol18/in-christ_parsons.pdf.

³⁴For a thorough exploration of these themes in Paul, see Michael J. Gorman's *Becoming the Gospel: Paul, Participa-*

tion, and Mission (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2015) and *Participating in Christ: Exploration in Paul's Theology and Spirituality* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2019); see also Parsons, "'In Christ' in Paul," 25–44.

³⁵Millard J. Erickson, *Christian Theology* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 1998): 297–98.

³⁶John H. Walton, "Reading Genesis 1 as Ancient Cosmology," in *Reading Genesis 1–2: An Evangelical Conversation*, ed. J. Daryl Charles (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 2013), 166.

³⁷Athanasius, *On the Incarnation of the Word*, 38.

³⁸For an overview of historical precedents for "incarnation anyway" theologies, see Georges Florovsky, "Cur Deus Homo? The Motive of the Incarnation," in chap. 6, "Dimensions of Redemption," in *Creation and Redemption*, vol. 3, *Collected Works of Georges Florovsky* (Belmont, MA: Nordland, 1976), 163–70. See also Edwin Christian van Driel, *Incarnation Anyway: Arguments for Supralapsarian Christology* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2008); Marilyn McCord Adams, *Christ and Horrors: The Coherence of Christology* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2006); and Brooke Foss Westcott, "The Gospel in Creation," in *The Epistles of St. John: The Greek Text with Notes and Essays* (London, UK: Macmillan, 1892), 290.

³⁹Oliver D. Crisp, "Incarnation without the Fall," *Journal of Reformed Theology* 10 (2016): 219–20, <https://doi.org/10.1163/15697312-01003016>.

⁴⁰The early church theologian Irenaeus spoke of the incarnation as the means by which God accustomed human beings to God and God to human beings. As Eric Osborn explains, "The first purpose of the economy was to accustom man to God and to accustom God to man." The incarnation marks a new and particularly significant phase in the process of accustoming, as "in Christ, man is able to see God, to contain God, to accustom himself to participate in God while God is accustomed to live in man" (Irenaeus, *Against Heresies* 2.30.3, in *The Apostolic Fathers with Justin Martyr and Irenaeus*, ed. Philip Schaff [Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2001]). See Eric Osborn, *Irenaeus of Lyons* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2005), 80–81.

⁴¹Crisp, "Incarnation without the Fall," 221. Bonhoeffer articulates a similar view of Christ (not Adam) being the prototype for humanity in *Creation and Fall*, 65, 113.

⁴²Crisp, "Incarnation without the Fall," 225.

⁴³In what follows, I rely on the leading commentary work of Gordon D. Fee, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians*, rev. ed., *The New International Commentary on the New Testament* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2014), as well as commentaries by Robert Scott Nash, *1 Corinthians*, *Smyth & Helwys Bible Commentary* (Macon, GA: Smyth & Helwys, 2009) and David E. Garland, *1 Corinthians*, *Baker Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2003).

⁴⁴Nash notes that "Unlike Philo, who saw the Adam of Genesis 1 as the archetype and ideal human being, Paul sees the first Adam as partaking of a nature that is incapable of 'inheriting the kingdom of God'" (Nash, *1 Corinthians*, 422). Similarly, in vv. 39–41, Paul uses the term "flesh" (*sarx*) "in a nonpejorative way to refer to the physicality of earthly bodies—their creatureliness, weakness, and transitoriness" whereas the "substance of heavenly being is 'glory'" (Garland, *1 Corinthians*, comment on 15:39–41).

⁴⁵Fee, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians*, 859, cf. 867.

⁴⁶Nash, *1 Corinthians*, 424.

⁴⁷Fee, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians*, 865.

⁴⁸Garland, *1 Corinthians*, comment on 15:42–44a. This is not to deny that there are also continuities between the earthly and resurrected spiritual bodies.

⁴⁹Fee, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians*, 869, 873, 875.

⁵⁰*Ibid.*, 874.

⁵¹David H. Kelsey, *Eccentric Existence: A Theological Anthropology*, 2 vols. (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 2009).

⁵²It is important to note that some interpreters believe that Paul's argument in Rom. 5:11ff requires the historicity of Adam. While space precludes a detailed discussion of this passage (as well as scope; this is ultimately within the domain of New Testament scholarship), a few comments in response are in order. First, Paul probably did believe that Adam was a historical person (the first human being that God created), but an evangelical theology of inspiration does not require us to believe everything that Paul believed, only what Paul intended to teach us. For example, as Denis O. Lamoureux points out, Paul's cosmology is outdated in light of modern science, so it not surprising to find that his understanding of biological origins is also obsolete. It is possible to identify and affirm Paul's theological teachings but see them as separable from (not necessarily or intrinsically attached to) his outdated cosmology and biology. See Lamoureux, *The Bible and Ancient Science: Principles of Interpretation* (Tullahoma, TN: McGahan, 2021), 174–75.

Second, Rom. 5:11ff is a difficult and much debated passage in biblical scholarship. A thorough and convincing exposition of Paul's scriptural reasoning must account for (a) Paul's broader aims in Romans and how Adam relates to the argument in Romans 5; (b) Paul's interpretation of the Old Testament more broadly, which is a huge—and contested—area of scholarly discussion; (c) the Old Testament's virtual silence about Adam causing others to sin (and hence Paul's very novel reading of Genesis 3 as compared to the canonical tradition); and (d) the lack of consensus generally in biblical scholarship about historicity in Paul's argument, including New Testament scholarship on Romans 5, Old Testament scholarship on Genesis 1–3, and biblical and hermeneutical scholarship on the relationship between the two.

Third, it seems to me that, in some ways, Paul is adapting the Genesis story to conform to his Christological purposes, rather than simply drawing out the necessary implications of the Genesis text for Christology. At the very least, the strict one-to-one typological correspondence between the two figures seems to be rooted in the uniqueness and particularity of the one Christ, thus moving from Christ to Adam, since Paul ignores the place of Eve in the Genesis story. In Genesis three, the first human being to sin is Eve, followed by Adam; so how can Paul say that sin and death entered into the world through "the one man" when this one man's sin was preceded by his wife's sin? It seems that Paul is reading Genesis theologically in light of Christ, with details about Christ controlling the specifics of the typology, rather than the other way around. As Dunn states, "Indeed, if anything, we should say that the effect of the comparison between the two epochal figures, Adam and Christ, is not so much to historicize the individual Adam as to bring out the more

than individual significance of the historic Christ." Earlier, Dunn writes,

The reference to Adam's failure is for Paul a way of characterizing the condition of humankind in the epoch of human history which has extended from the beginning of the human race till now ... it would not be true to say that Paul's theological point here depends on Adam being a 'historical' individual or on his disobedience being a historical event as such. Such an implication does not necessarily follow from the fact that a parallel is drawn with Christ's single act: an act in mythic history can be paralleled to an act in living history without the point of comparison being lost. So long as the story of Adam as the initiator of the sad tale of human failure was well known, which we may assume (the brevity of Paul's presentation presupposes such a knowledge), such a comparison was meaningful. (James D. G. Dunn, "The New Perspective on God's Righteous Purpose for Humankind" [5:12–21], in *Romans 1–8*, vol. 38A *Word Biblical Commentary* [Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Academic, 2018], no pages, http://library.mibckerala.org/lms_frame/eBook/Volume%2038A%20-%20DUNN%20Romans%20%E2%80%93938.pdf)

⁵³I allude to C. John Collins's proposal that Adam and Eve were the representative heads (King and Queen) of an original human population of perhaps 10,000 or so people. While this scenario is possible, I do not think it fits with the details of the biblical narrative. C. John Collins, *Did Adam and Eve Really Exist? Who They Were and Why It Matters* (Nottingham, UK: InterVarsity Press, 2011); cf. C. John Collins, "Adam and Eve as Historical People, and Why It Matters," *Perspectives on Science and Christian Faith* 62, no. 3 (2010): 159–60, <https://www.asa3.org/ASA/PSCF/2010/PSCF9-10Collins.pdf>.

⁵⁴One can see this, for example, in the multiple "views" book, *Reading Genesis 1–2: An Evangelical Conversation*, ed. J. Daryl Charles (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 2013).

⁵⁵Anderson, "Biblical Origins and the Problem of the Fall," 28–29.

⁵⁶Joseph Fitzpatrick, "Original Sin or Original Sinfulness?," *New Blackfriars* 90, no. 1030 (November 2009): 711. See also Phillip G. Camp, "David's Fall: Reading 2 Samuel 11–14 in Light of Genesis 2–4," *Restoration Quarterly* 53, no. 3 (2011): 149–58.

⁵⁷Middleton, "Reading Genesis 3," 79.

⁵⁸For a detailed comparison of Genesis 2–3 with wisdom and folly themes in Proverbs, see Enns, *Evolution of Adam*, 80, 87–91; on James and Genesis, see Joel B. Green, "Adam, What Have You Done? New Testament Voices on the Origins of Sin," in *Evolution and the Fall*, 110–14.

⁵⁹Crisp, "On Original Sin," 256.

⁶⁰Bonhoeffer, *Creation and Fall*, 81.

⁶¹*Ibid.*, 75–76 (emphasis original).

⁶²*Ibid.*, 49.

⁶³*Ibid.*, 89, 100.

⁶⁴*Ibid.*, 29, 30, 43, 82, 83, 89, 100.

⁶⁵See Eberhard Bethge, *Dietrich Bonhoeffer: A Biography*, ed. Victoria J. Barnett, trans. Eric Mosbacher, Peter and Betty Ross, Frank Clarke, and William Glen-Doepel (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress, 2000), 205–6.

ASA Members: Submit comments and questions on this article at www.asa3.org→RESOURCES→Forums→PSCF Discussion.