



William Horst

From One Person? Exegetical Alternatives to a Monogenetic Reading of Acts 17:26

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Biblical scholars and theologians who defend the classical view that Adam and Eve are the sole progenitors of humanity typically appeal to Acts 17:26 as a key proof text. This verse is part of Paul's speech in Athens, and is usually translated to say something like, "from one ancestor [God] made every human nation to dwell upon the entire face of the earth"; in this instance ancestor is normally understood to be Adam. This article surveys several alternative exegetical analyses of the passage that do not suggest that humanity descended from one single couple, and compares the considerations that weigh in favor of and against each plausible option. Ultimately, it is argued that the Christian tradition of the unity of truth suggests that faithful interpreters of Acts may opt to favor those plausible interpretations that align with the scientific consensus of polygenism over those that imply monogenism.

Keywords: Adam, polygenism, monogenism, evolution, Acts, Athens, Stoicism, Galileo, Bellarmine, unity of truth

In his speech in Athens, Paul states that "from one [God] made every nation of humans to dwell on the whole face of the earth" (Acts 17:26).¹ Modern English translations of the Bible typically render the phrase "from one" (Greek: *ex henos*) to indicate that the "one" refers to one human. For example, the New Revised Standard Version translates the phrase as "from one ancestor," the English Standard Version has "from one man," and the Common English Bible reads "from one person."² The majority of commentators on the passage likewise understand the phrase to refer to Adam, the first ancestor of humanity,³ and Christian authors who argue against an evolutionary understanding of human origins usually cite this passage as decisive evidence that the Bible teaches that Adam and Eve are the first parents of all humanity.⁴

Evolutionary science challenges the claim that Adam and Eve are the sole parents of all humanity (i.e., monogenism) in that genetic analysis points to a population

bottleneck in *Homo sapiens* of about 10,000 individuals, about 100,000–200,000 years ago.⁵ In other words, our genetic diversity suggests that we have descended from a population of ancestors that was not less than several thousand individuals at any point since biologically modern humans have walked the earth. The evidence suggests that no single pair of humans ever gave rise to the rest of humanity; this does not cohere well with the conventional interpretation of Paul's claim that God made all human nations "from one" (Acts 17:26). This presents an interesting critical problem for those who wish to take both the scientific evidence and the scriptures seriously.

Although the standard interpretation of Acts 17:26 does seem to contradict

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the claim that the smallest bottleneck in human population involved thousands of individuals (i.e., polygenism)⁶ rather than two, the meaning of “from one” in this verse is not as clear as the mainstream translations and widespread view of commentators would suggest. Ambiguities in the language of the passage in question give rise to several different, plausible interpretations of the phrase in which Paul identifies that from which God made all the nations of humans. In other words, it is not clear that the passage refers to Adam at all, and thus the passage does not necessarily present a problem vis-à-vis polygenism.

In this article, I will survey several possible interpretations of what the phrase “from one” refers to in Acts 17:26. I will present the best arguments in favor of and against each interpretation, and I will ultimately suggest that it is not definitively clear on exegetical grounds which of the possible meanings is best. I will then briefly discuss the Christian tradition of the unity of truth, in order to suggest an approach to adjudicating between the potential interpretations in the face of scientific evidence for polygenism. In short, I suggest that it is reasonable to favor those plausible exegetical options that cohere with the scientific consensus over those that do not.

Paul’s Athenian Address

The reference to God’s making every human nation “from one” (Acts 17:26) falls within an address Paul delivers while in the ancient Greek city of Athens. In order to assess potential interpretations of this phrase, it is necessary to consider the account of Paul in Athens more broadly (17:16–32). There are numerous interesting interpretive matters that I will not be able to cover, but several specific issues will be relevant to my discussion below.

In a number of ways, Paul’s visit to Athens is atypical of his ministry as recorded in the book of Acts. First, Paul does not appear to have planned to visit Athens. Rather, believers from the city of Beroea bring Paul to Athens to keep him safe after controversy erupts there in response to his ministry (see Acts 17:1–15). Paul waits in Athens for Timothy and Silas, his traveling companions, to join him, and while he is waiting there, he becomes distressed because the city is full of idols (17:15–16). It appears that Paul begins to minister in the synagogues and

the marketplace specifically in response to the distress that the idols cause him (17:17). In other words, Paul’s Athenian ministry is impromptu.

Paul’s visit to Athens is also unusual in that this is the only passage of Acts in which Paul is explicitly said to interact with philosophers. In particular, the text mentions philosophers from the Stoic and Epicurean schools (Acts 17:18), both of which originated in Athens several centuries earlier. Controversy about Paul’s ministry is usually sparked by objections among the Jewish community of a given city (Acts 13:44–45; 14:1–2; 17:5; 18:5–6, 12–13; 19:8–9; 21:27–28), or failing that, by Pauline actions that threaten to take a financial toll on certain influential people in a particular locale (Acts 16:19; 19:23–27); in Athens, however, the plot moves forward because of the philosophers’ reactions to Paul (Acts 17:18–19). Although the text does make passing mention of Paul engaging in discussions in the Jewish synagogue (Acts 17:17), Jewish concerns are not central to the narrative. Greek philosophy is front and center in the Athenian account in a way that is not found elsewhere in Acts.

The particularity of Paul’s ministry in Athens can also be seen in Paul’s speech to the Areopagus (Acts 17:22–31), which was the chief court of Athens. Most of the other speeches in Acts make heavy and explicit reference to the Jewish scriptures, typically in order to show that Jesus fulfills prophecies (Acts 2:14–36; 3:12–26; 4:8–12; 7:2–53; 13:16–41, 46–47; 15:13–21; cf. 26:22–23). By contrast, Paul’s address in Athens includes no explicit appeals to scripture, though arguably certain elements, such as God’s creation of the world (Acts 17:24), could be considered implicit allusions to elements of scripture. Paul does explicitly quote from the Athenians’ own poets instead: “as some of your own poets have also said, ‘For we also are [God’s] offspring’” (Acts 17:28).⁷ Paul’s choice of allusions in this speech reflects the non-Jewish, philosophical audience to whom he tailors his remarks. Whereas references to biblical prophecy would be compelling in a Jewish synagogue, they would be of little use in front of a council of Athenian intellectuals.

Paul is brought before the Areopagus because some of the Athenian philosophers understood him to be proclaiming “foreign divinities” (Acts 17:18). An educated ancient reader could not help but recall the

fifth century BCE Athenian philosopher Socrates, who was widely known to have been executed after standing trial before the Areopagus for introducing “new divinities.”⁸ So, although it may seem at first glance that the Areopagus is simply curious to know more about Paul’s new teaching,⁹ we can reasonably imagine that his “new teaching” about “foreign divinities” makes him suspect in the eyes of his audience (see esp. Acts 17:20).¹⁰

One of the major apparent aims of Paul’s address is to convince his audience that the God he proclaims is not actually foreign or new to Athens. A number of elements drive at this basic point. At the beginning of his speech, Paul mentions an altar “to an unknown god” which he found as he went through Athens, and states that he is about to proclaim to the Athenian council that which they worship without knowledge (Acts 17:23). The idea seems to be that the God Paul proclaims is not a foreign divinity that is new to Athens, but rather a God of whom the Athenians are already at some level aware, and whom they already worship implicitly. Likewise, Paul’s God is the creator of the whole world (Acts 17:24), and provides life, breath, and everything else to everyone (Acts 17:25). These claims would obviously include God’s creation of Athens, and providential sustenance of the people of Athens. Again, the God in question is not novel or foreign, but rather familiar and relevant. God is near to everyone (Acts 17:28), including the people of Athens, and apparently, they have already been feeling around for this God, as if blindfolded or searching in the dark (Acts 17:27). Paul’s allusion to the Athenian poets (see above) likewise establishes that the people of Athens already have some knowledge of the creator God, albeit an incomplete knowledge (Acts 17:30). All of these elements serve to establish that the God Paul proclaims was already at work among the Athenians before he arrived there, and although his proclamation has novel elements (see esp. Acts 17:31), it is in a certain kind of continuity with already-accepted Athenian thought about God.

Within the context of Paul’s refutation of the claims that his teaching is new and his God is foreign, the assertion that God made all human nations “from one” (Acts 17:26) serves to unify humanity under the providential care of the singular creator. Regardless of which interpretation one chooses for this phrase, the import of the claim is that the Athenians and

Paul share a common origin stemming from the same God.

Manuscript Ambiguity in Acts 17:26

The breadth of interpretive possibilities for the phrase “from one” is due in part to textual differences among ancient manuscripts of the passage. The text of the New Testament is based on thousands of ancient manuscripts—many of them fragmentary—the earliest of which date to the third century CE, or perhaps the end of the second century CE in a few cases. No two of these manuscripts match completely, since the process of transcribing a text by hand is prone to various kinds of error. *Textual criticism* is the discipline by which scholars compare differing manuscripts and attempt to reconstruct critically the earliest ascertainable version of a given passage.¹¹ Some manuscript differences can be resolved easily, such as when a scribe clearly made an obvious spelling mistake, or failed to copy an entire line of text. Other discrepancies are more difficult to resolve, and decisions are made with varying degrees of confidence.¹² In the case of Acts 17:26, the majority of ancient manuscripts read “from one blood” (Greek: *ex henos haimatos*), but the manuscripts generally considered to be the very most reliable read “from one” (*ex henos*).¹³

The committee responsible for producing the standard critical edition of the Greek text of the New Testament considered several potential arguments in favor of the “from one blood” variant of the text.¹⁴ First, because the Greek word here translated “blood” (i.e., *haimatos*) has a similar ending to the Greek word here translated “one” (i.e., *henos*), it is possible that the eye of a scribe may have skipped past the word for “blood” after writing the word for “one.” This kind of error is not uncommon in the transcription of biblical texts. Second, it is conceivable that someone deliberately deleted the word “blood” because Genesis describes God forming humanity from dust, not blood (Gen. 2:7). This sort of editing of the text did sometimes occur in the process of the dissemination of the Bible. Third, it is likewise possible that “blood” was removed from the text because “from one blood” may have sounded like an unnatural way to describe the descent of humanity from Adam. Any of these hypothetical scenarios is a possible explanation for how an earlier reading of “from one blood” might have given rise to some manuscripts that read

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“from one,” though it should be borne in mind that the second and third scenarios rely on the assumption that the scribes would have understood the phrase in question to refer to Adam, and I argue that this is less than clear.

Though words were occasionally left out of the text during the process of transcription, it was also quite common for extra words to be inserted into the text that were not original, and the majority of the committee ultimately found the attestation of “from one” in important early manuscripts compelling reason enough to conclude that “blood” was added to, rather than removed from, the text of Acts.¹⁵ Because most modern translations of the New Testament are based on the standard critical Greek text, they typically leave “blood” out of the English rendering of Acts 17:26.

Recently, Fred S. Cannon has argued that the “from one blood” textual variant should be taken seriously, based on significant early attestation of this reading in the manuscript tradition.¹⁶ For this reason, I will consider interpretive options that would follow from both the “from one” and the “from one blood” textual variants in this article.

Linguistic Ambiguity in Acts 17:26

In addition to the ambiguity introduced by differences between manuscripts, the meaning of “from one” is ambiguous in that the Greek word translated “one” (*henos*) could potentially be masculine or neuter in gender. Greek adjectives change spelling based on whether they are singular vs. plural, whether they are gendered masculine, feminine, or neuter, and how they function in relation to other words within the sentence (i.e., “case”). The Greek word translated “one” (*henos*) in Acts 17:26 is singular, and appears in the genitive case.¹⁷ The masculine singular genitive and neuter singular genitive forms of an ancient Greek adjective are spelled in exactly the same way. In most cases, context clarifies whether a given adjective should be understood as neuter or masculine, but occasionally, a genuine ambiguity occurs. If “blood” is considered to be part of the text of Acts 17:26 (see above), then “one” (*henos*) is clearly neuter, since the adjective modifies the neuter noun “blood” (*haimatos*). However, if “blood” is not considered to be part of the text, then nothing concrete remains to disambiguate whether “one” is

neuter or masculine, which expands the set of possible referents.

The majority of interpreters of Acts 17:26 understand “one” to mean “from one person” (i.e., Adam); this view would make the adjective masculine.¹⁸ By contrast, if the adjective is neuter, it would potentially express the idea “from one thing,” which some scholars take to mean something like “from one source.” Additionally, the text could be understood to express the following thought: “from one (nation) [God] made every nation of humans.” The word “nation” (Greek: *ethnos*) in this passage is a neuter noun, so if this is what the text expresses, the adjective “one” would be neuter, as well. In short, the Greek wording of Acts 17:26 potentially accommodates multiple interpretations of what it is from which all human nations originate. Other interpretations are certainly conceivable beyond the ones I have mentioned, but these seem to be the most plausible, and I will discuss reasons for and against each of these options.

Option 1: From One Human

A number of exegetical considerations weigh in favor of the majority interpretation, namely that “from one” means “from one human,” that is, Adam. A reference to “one human” establishes a tidy parallelism with “of humans” (Greek: *anthrōpōn*) later in the verse: “from one *human* [God] made every nation of *humans*.” Further, an appeal to the descent of all humanity from Adam would serve Paul’s rhetorical purposes in this passage, since the common lineage of all humanity does serve to unify the various human nations and potentially to challenge the xenophobia that can be found in the Athenians’ reaction to Paul’s “foreign divinities.” Paul was certainly familiar with the biblical account of Adam and Eve; this is apparent both because they were notable figures within the Judaism of Paul’s era, and because Paul appeals explicitly to Adam and/or Eve in a number of his letters.¹⁹ Further, in his letter to the Romans, Paul repeatedly refers to Adam as “one” (i.e., one person) using the same word found in Acts 17:26 (*hen[os]*; Acts 5:15, 16, 17, 18, 19; cf. 5:12). So, it would not be surprising to hear Paul refer to Adam as “one” in a speech. Given that virtually all critical scholars acknowledge that Luke and Acts were written by the same author,²⁰ it is relevant that Luke includes a genealogy of Jesus that continues back to Adam (Luke 3:23–38; cf. 1 Chron. 1:1), and

so an attentive reader of Luke/Acts could in some sense be primed to imagine the creation of humanity “from one person” as a reference to the descent of numerous generations of humans from Adam, despite the fact that Paul does not use Adam’s name in his speech.²¹

The notion that “from one” refers to Adam is further supported by several other elements in the surrounding verses that can potentially be understood to evoke the early chapters of Genesis. Just before the comment about God’s creation of all nations of humanity “from one” (Acts 17:26), Paul describes God’s creation of heaven and earth: “The God who made the world and all the things in it, who is Lord of heaven and earth, does not dwell in temples made by hand” (Acts 17:24). He likewise states that God “gives to everyone life and breath and all things” (Acts 17:25); the passage is potentially reminiscent of God’s breathing the breath of life into Adam, as described in Genesis 2:7. The wording of these comments more closely resembles a passage from Isaiah, which describes God as creator and giver of life: “Thus says the Lord, the God who made the heaven and established it, who made firm the earth and the things in it, and gives breath to the people who are on it, and spirit to those who walk it” (Isa. 42:5).²² Nonetheless, at a thematic level, biblically informed readers could easily find themselves thinking of the account of creation in Genesis when they hear Paul’s address to the Areopagus, since it describes God’s creation of heaven and earth (Gen. 2:4; cf. 1:1–2:3), and the bestowal of divine breath (Gen. 2:7). Further, just after his reference to God’s making of the nations “from one,” Paul says that God created the nations “to dwell upon the whole face of the earth” (Acts 17:26). The phrase, “upon the face of the earth” occurs regularly in the early chapters of Genesis (2:6; 6:7; 7:4, 23; 8:8, 9, 13), including a number of specific references to the spread of groups of humans over the face of the earth (Gen. 11:4, 8, 9). These textual connections, or “intertexts,” add to the likelihood that Paul intends a reference to Adam when he refers to God’s creation “from one,” since they suggest that Paul has creation, human origins, and the like, in mind at this point in his address.

So then, a substantial case can be made in favor of the Adamic reading of “from one” in Acts 17:26, and this helps to explain why so many interpreters understand the phrase as a reference to Adam. However,

this position is weakened by the fact that if “from one” is meant to refer to Adam, Paul’s non-Jewish Athenian audience would not reasonably have understood him to intend this allusion, since they would not be familiar with the Jewish scriptures, and thus would not share Paul’s assumption that Adam and Eve were the progenitors of humanity. A Jewish or Christian reader of Acts could potentially understand “from one” in reference to Adam, but given that Paul’s speech otherwise appears to be aimed at presenting his intellectual Athenian audience with an intelligible message (see above), it would be surprising if he is found to base his rhetoric on an appeal to scripture that his audience would not be able to recognize.

It is worth noting that a typical Greek understanding of human origins did not include the notion of a common ancestor that united all of humanity. Greek literary tradition does include genealogical accounts of various people-groups descending from earlier progenitors and migrating to various regions,²³ but such traditions did not paint a picture of the formation of all peoples from a single primordial nation, let alone a single common progenitor. Rather, the development of the human race includes the descent of some bloodlines from initial progenitors who were conceived directly from deities, other nations that were said to be “autochthonous” (Greek: *autochthōn*), meaning that they sprang directly from the soil of their particular region,²⁴ and other cases of extraordinary origins for particular groups of people. For that matter, different sources reflect multiple inconsistent traditions that the Greeks maintained without feeling the need to harmonize them into a consistent account. Some traditions identify Phoroneus as the first man,²⁵ but genealogical literature often begins with Deucalion—the son of the Titan god Prometheus—who survived a great flood together with his wife Pyrrha.²⁶ After the flood, at the behest of Zeus, Deucalion and Pyrrha throw stones over their heads which turn into humans; this unusual event gives rise to a particular people group.²⁷ Yet, Deucalion and Pyrrha also gave rise to progeny by more conventional procreation, and the relationship between this line and the people created from rocks is never explained.²⁸ Pseudo-Apollodorus’s account of Deucalion and Pyrrha’s progeny also includes additional people who were conceived by deities.²⁹ The point is, Greek genealogical tradition presents

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a hodgepodge of different people and groups originating from multiple sources, and could not readily be summarized in terms of all human nations originating from a single primordial nation or people. As John van Seters puts it, “The Greek tradition of origins ... seems to focus more on the origins of particular states, tribes, and peoples than on humankind in general.”³⁰

For the purposes of Paul’s address to the Athenians, it is particularly relevant that the founding mythology of Athens maintained that the Athenians were *autochthonous*. In other words, their forebears did not migrate to a certain region and there found a city. Rather, they literally sprang from the soil of Athens. This gave the Athenians a particularly strong claim to their land, grounds for civic pride, and, in some cases, a sense of superiority over ethnically mixed groups whose ancestral heterogeneity was understood to produce social inequity and a lack of loyalty to their city. The people of Athens understood themselves as pure descendants from a common set of ancestors who were particular to them.³¹ This is quite a different picture from the formation of all human nations “from one” (Acts 17:26), which Paul includes in his address to the Athenian council.

It is certainly possible that Paul could claim that all human nations descended from one ancestor, and that the Athenians could understand this concept, even though they would not have understood the “one” in question as Adam, in particular. However, this would presumably not have been rhetorically compelling to a people who did not hold to Genesis as an authoritative text, and did not think of human origins in terms of a single family tree. If Paul does intend to refer to God’s beginning human creation with a single progenitor, this claim would serve as a challenge to the Athenians’ traditional self-understanding.

Option 2: From One Nation

Although the Adamic interpretation of “from one” (Acts 17:26) is certainly the most popular, a relatively good case can be made for understanding the phrase to mean “from one nation.”³² First, this sense of “one” would establish parallelism with “nation” later in the verse: “from one *nation* [God] made every *nation* of humans.” Given that the occasion for Paul’s speech has to do with the perceived *foreign* nature of

his teaching in an Athenian context, and given the abundance of ethnic and cultural attributions in the passage in general,³³ a discussion of nations seems slightly more relevant than a discussion of a single human progenitor.³⁴

In the biblical tradition, God’s formation of all the nations of the earth from one nation would correspond to the Babel incident of Genesis 11:1–9. This passage describes unified humans resisting being scattered across the face of the earth (Gen. 11:4). Instead of dispersing across the earth, humans settle in the land of Shinar and work together to build a fortified city with a tall tower, in order to make a name for themselves and avoid the vulnerability of being spread across the earth. The Lord confuses the language of the people so that they cannot continue to undertake further endeavors of this nature, and thus, the people are scattered across the face of the earth despite their efforts to avoid this. Apparently, the spread of humans across the face of the earth was God’s intention from the beginning, which is consistent with God’s instruction earlier in Genesis for humans to “be fruitful and multiply, fill the earth and subdue it, and rule over the fish of the sea and over the flying creatures of the sky, and over every living thing that creeps over the earth” (Gen. 1:28). The language of the passage is ambiguous as to whether it describes a universal human unity and scattering or a local unity and scattering,³⁵ but the Babel story certainly could be understood as the origin of the diversity of human nations, especially by ancient readers who would not have had anthropological evidence to challenge such an account of human origins.

A number of specific parallels between Paul’s address to the Areopagus and the biblical account of Babel support the notion that Paul could have Babel in mind when he describes God making all human nations from “one” (Acts 17:26). Indeed, a number of scholars note the parallels between the passages, even if they understand Adam to be the “one.”³⁶ Although the language of “nation” per se does not occur in the passage, this notion is basically implied by the comment that “the people are one, and they have one language among them” (Gen. 11:6). Likewise, the verse just before the Babel passage describes the “nations” spreading over the earth from the descendants of Noah (Gen. 10:32), so the reader of Genesis is certainly primed to find the same

concept of nations in the unification and scattering of the people in the Babel account (Gen. 11:1–9). So, when Paul describes God making all human nations “from one,” it is quite plausible that he has in mind one *nation*, and that the nation in question is the unified people who gathered together in the land of Shinar before being scattered by divine intervention.

The plausibility of a Pauline reference to Babel is further supported by his description of human nations being made “to dwell on the whole face of the earth” (Acts 17:26). Although the language of “the face of the earth” occurs in a number of instances in the early chapters of Genesis (2:6; 6:7; 7:4, 23; 8:8, 9, 13), the instances that refer to *peoples* being spread across the face of the earth all occur within the Babel account (Gen. 11:4, 8, 9; cf. 10:32). Thus, Paul’s reference to nations dwelling on the face of the earth is less a parallel to the early chapters of Genesis in general, as some scholars suggest (see above), and more a parallel to the Babel incident, in particular.³⁷

The major difficulty with the proposal that “from one” refers to the single nation gathered at Babel, from whom God produced all human nations, is essentially the same as the key difficulty with the Adamic interpretation (see above). If Paul does intend to refer to the Babel account and the subsequent diversification of ethnic groups, this is not a reference that his audience would be able to pick up on. As with the Adamic interpretation, it is certainly possible that Paul’s hearers could have grasped the notion that all human nations descended from one common primordial nation, but this would not have been a matter of common ground between Paul and the Athenians. Rather, the point would be a challenge to their cherished self-understanding.

Option 3: From One (Source)

One point of contention within scholarly interpretation of Paul’s speech in Athens is whether the character of the speech is more biblical or more consistent with Greek philosophical tradition.³⁸ A biblical background is certainly more consistent with Paul’s speeches in Acts in general, but biblical allusions would not be intelligible to Paul’s Athenian audience. A philosophically oriented speech would be congenial to the Athenian audience, especially the Stoic and Epicurean philosophers mentioned in the text (Acts 17:18). Consistent with a philosophically

focused interpretation of the speech, certain scholars have suggested that the phrase “from one” (*ex henos*, Acts 17:26) should be understood as a grammatically neuter construction (“from one [thing]”), implying “from one (source),” and that the reference should be understood in terms of Stoic philosophical convictions about the unity of humanity and the origination of all humanity from the divine.³⁹ Thus, Paul does not explicitly affirm here that God made all humanity from Adam—one ancestor—but instead affirms that humanity is unified in that all human nations share a common source—namely, the creator God.

Although both Stoic and Epicurean philosophers are mentioned in the account of Paul’s ministry in Athens (Acts 17:18), his speech has much more overlap with Stoic thought than with Epicurean thought. Epicureans denied the idea of divine providence, and taught that the gods were not interested in the lives of humans. By contrast, the Stoics were basically pantheistic and emphasized the nearness and providence of the divine.⁴⁰ Paul’s address in Athens likewise emphasizes God’s nearness and involvement in human lives (esp. Acts 17:27–28), so a typical Stoic would find much more to agree with than a typical Epicurean.⁴¹ Paul’s speech certainly differs from Stoic thought on many points, especially his proclamation of the resurrection of Christ and the coming day of judgment (Acts 17:31), but he is clearly shown in this passage to be presenting his gospel in a manner that overlaps as much as it could with a Greek philosophical perspective, especially a Stoic perspective. For this reason, it should not surprise us to find that the phrase “from one” also has resonance with the Stoic tradition.

The Stoic notion of human unity due to a common source is rooted in Stoic cosmology. Although views differ significantly from author to author, Stoic cosmology generally understands the universe to be unified by an all-pervading spirit, which gives order and organization and ensures a deterministic chain of fate.⁴² The divine is everywhere providentially present. Thus, God or the gods can be said to be the source of everything in the universe, including all people. Some Stoic writings appeal to the divine source of humanity in order to encourage equality and regard for others. For example, Seneca the Younger, a first-century CE thinker shaped by Stoicism, appeals to the common source of humanity in order to encourage people to treat their slaves

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ethically: “Kindly remember that he whom you call your slave sprang from the same stock [literally ‘from the same seeds’].”⁴³ Stoics often regarded all of existence as a unified, interconnected body or society based on the pervasive presence of the divine spirit.⁴⁴ Widespread human awareness of the divine is also explained by the origination of humanity from God. Cicero says, “Man recognizes God because, in a way, he remembers and recognizes the source from which he sprang.”⁴⁵ If Paul does intend to convey that God created every human nation “from one (source)” (Acts 17:26), this comment would be quite at home within Stoic discourse about divinity.

A number of other points of contact can be found between typical ancient Stoic teaching and Paul’s speech to the Athenians, which further strengthen the plausibility that “from one” may well also reflect Stoic ideas. First, a number of authors associated with the Stoic tradition refer to God as the ancestor of humanity,⁴⁶ much as Paul claims by quoting Aratus (Acts 17:28; see above). Indeed, Aratus’s writings betray that he himself was informed by Stoic thought to a significant extent.⁴⁷ Of course, the idea that all humans are God’s offspring is consistent with God being the “one” source from which all humans have sprung (Acts 17:26).⁴⁸ Another important Stoic concept is the idea that humans of various groups share an innate awareness of God,⁴⁹ and this constitutes a second point of congeniality with Paul’s speech, especially his appeal to the altar to an unknown god (Acts 17:23). Third, much as Paul appeals to the common source of humanity in order to challenge the potential Athenian objection to that which is foreign (see above), Stoicism often includes a conviction about the unity and equality of humanity.⁵⁰ These additional parallels between Paul’s address and typical Stoic discourse about the relationship between divinity and humanity increase the likelihood that the phrase “from one” (Acts 17:26) ought to be understood in reference to the common divine source of humanity.⁵¹

Another important element of Paul’s Athenian address is his opposition to idols. Although he does appeal to the altar to an unknown god to help make his case (Acts 17:23), he repeatedly insists that idols, altars, and other elements of pagan devotion are unsuitable ways to honor the divine creator (see Acts 17:24–25, 29; cf. 17:16). This aspect of the speech is not distinctly Stoic, but similar anti-idol polemic

can certainly be found within Stoic tradition.⁵² In fact, Paul’s opposition to idols is something that Jewish, Stoic, and Epicurean audiences would be able to agree on fairly easily.⁵³

In sum, a solid historical-cultural case can be made in favor of reading “from one” in Acts 17:26 as a reference to God as the universal divine source of every human nation, rather than an evocation of the account of human origins found in Genesis. Although such an interpretation understands the phrase to be rooted in Hellenistic and especially Stoic philosophical tradition, this does not imply that Paul holds a thoroughly Stoic view, nor would it necessarily mean that Paul is implicitly denying that all humans descended from Adam. It would simply mean that Paul is describing his gospel in a manner that is as accessible as it can be to his audience while still challenging a number of their assumptions (Acts 17:32–33).

It is not absolutely necessary to choose between an Adamic and a Stoic interpretation of “from one” (Acts 17:26). Several scholars posit that the author of Acts intentionally includes an ambiguous phrase, so that the biblically informed reader (or hearer) understands that Adam is intended, whereas the Athenian audience would have been expected to understand the phrase in terms of the more familiar Stoic concepts just discussed.⁵⁴ In other words, the reader of Acts is to understand that Paul is employing words that would sound like popular philosophical concepts to his Athenian audience, while the biblically informed audience of Acts knows the true meaning behind his carefully selected words. This is certainly within the realm of possibility, but it seems to assume exceptionally attentive and insightful readers. If the author of Acts does intend such a clever double entendre, it is difficult to imagine that very many people would pick up on it, especially since most would have heard the text recited aloud, rather than reading it off a page themselves. At the very least, a significant possibility exists that Paul refers to God as the source of humanity *rather than* to Adam as a common progenitor of all humanity, even if this is not the only possible interpretation.⁵⁵

Option 4: From One Blood (Collective)

Considering the “blood” textual variant (see above), the creation of all human nations “from one blood”

could be interpreted collectively, as Cannon does.⁵⁶ Such language could certainly be taken to indicate an idea similar to the “from one nation” reading that I discuss above (i.e., option 2), namely, that all human nations emerged from one common group, in contrast to the common Greek understanding that certain communities of people (e.g., the people of Athens) had distinct, exclusive origins that rendered them superior to the people of other states (see above).⁵⁷ The advantages and disadvantages of this view would be roughly the same as the “from one nation” interpretation.

Option 5: From One Blood (Adam)

The reading “from one blood” does not necessarily imply a collective interpretation of human descent. It could just as readily be understood in reference to the singular bloodline of Adam and Eve, the common human progenitors.⁵⁸ However, it would render an allusion to Adam still more implicit than the “from one (person)” interpretation because one would have to understand that humanity’s common bloodline has its roots in the creation of Adam and Eve. In other words, to an uninitiated audience like the Areopagus, it would not be apparent that Paul was referring to an individual couple at the head of humanity, especially since Greek culture narrated the development of humanity in a much more piecemeal manner (see above). Still, if one thinks less in terms of Paul’s Athenian audience and more in terms of Luke’s biblically informed audience, one could reasonably imagine that the reader of Luke is intended to understand that Paul has the bloodline of Adam and Eve in mind, but refers to the primordial couple implicitly since the Athenians would not understand the reference anyway. So, this fifth option can be added to the list of plausible interpretations.

Normative Interpretation of Acts 17:26

Multiple understandings of Paul’s reference to God’s making the nations “from one” (Acts 17:26) are reasonable on exegetical grounds. However, for the purposes of normative Christian interpretation, the options are not equally congenial to evolutionary science, especially scientific evidence in favor of polygenism. Interpretations involving the descent of all humans from one common ancestor (i.e., options 1 and 5) do not square well with polygenism.⁵⁹

Interpretations involving the descent of all humans from one nation or people group (i.e., options 2 and 4) square relatively well with polygenism, insofar as a polygenetic understanding of human evolution would involve descent from a relatively small population of ancestors in the remote past, though in the case of the “from one nation” option (i.e., option 2), we would perhaps need to treat the term “nation” loosely, as an interbreeding population does not imply an organized society. Indeed, the human ancestral population likely lived in small, scattered groups among which individuals migrated from time to time.⁶⁰ There are other critical difficulties involved with a literal interpretation of the Babel narrative of Genesis,⁶¹ but Paul’s explicit claim that humans descended from a single interbreeding population rather than certain groups having independent origins (as in the *autochthonous* origin of the Athenians) would be consistent with contemporary scientific consensus. The interpretation that humans were made from one (divine) source (i.e., option 3) works quite well vis-à-vis a Christian faith informed by polygenism, though of course we should be careful not to interpret Paul in an overly Stoic way that ignores his uniqueness as a proclaimer of the gospel of Christ. This third interpretive option has the added benefit that it would constitute a compelling basis for the sort of universality for which Paul argues not only to his Athenian audience (or at least the Stoics present in it) and to the earliest readers of Acts, but also to modern Christian readers. Although Stoicism is no longer a popular philosophical school of thought, the notion that humans should be unified because they all have their origin in one God is certainly sensible to many modern people.

Acts 17:26 and the Unity of Truth

Given that Acts 17:26 presents scholars with legitimate textual and exegetical ambiguities that allow for multiple plausible interpretations, how might modern Christians adjudicate between these possibilities, especially since some possible interpretations are more or less problematic vis-à-vis genetic science? The Christian tradition does not present us with an obvious, definitive answer to how such issues ought to be resolved, but insofar as a relevant thread of tradition can be found, potential conflicts between science (or natural philosophy, as the predecessor to modern science) and the Bible have been addressed in the West using the theological conviction of the

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unity of truth. In other words, nature and scripture are held to be God's "two books," both of which reveal God's truth in unique ways, but which, properly understood, cannot contradict one another, since both come from the one supreme God. As Kenneth J. Howell has shown, the strategies that have been adopted for reconciling God's two books vary greatly across situations, but the varied strategies are rooted in the shared core conviction that the natural world and faith can and should be reconciled in the rare case where they are found to conflict.⁶² For example, in the case of the Copernican revolution, both Galileo Galilei and his key interlocutors agreed on the unity of truth, and agreed that if the heliocentric model were proven indubitably, then biblical interpretation would need to be updated to correspond to nature. They disagreed primarily on the extent to which the heliocentric model was demonstrable.⁶³

More specifically, Richard J. Blackwell shows that both Galileo and Cardinal Robert Bellarmine—who confronted Galileo on behalf of the Roman Catholic Church regarding heliocentrism—seem to have presumed that scientific propositions that appear to conflict with scripture could be placed into one of three meaningful categories:

Category I: propositions demonstrated to be true;

Category II: propositions not demonstrated to date but which could be demonstrated in the future;

Category III: propositions which can never be conclusively proven to be true.⁶⁴

Both Galileo and Bellarmine agreed that issues in category I necessitate a reinterpretation of scripture, or at least an acknowledgement of ignorance in how to interpret problematic passages correctly. If a claim about the natural world is indubitably true, biblical interpretation must bend to accommodate this truth. Both apparently also agreed that issues in category III should not prompt a reinterpretation of scripture or Christian faith. Rather, our understanding of nature should bend to accommodate the Bible. Galileo's discussion of issues in category II is not always clearly consistent, but he generally argues that the meaning of the Bible should not be fixed in the face of issues in category II. Further, he apparently regarded heliocentrism as an issue in category II (i.e., provable, but not yet definitively proven in his day), and history has of course vindicated this view. By contrast, it seems that Bellarmine may have placed heliocentrism in category III (i.e., not ever provable), and thus

insisted that the Bible should trump natural philosophy on the matter.⁶⁵

As a biblical scholar with no serious training in biology, I am not in a position to determine the degree of certainty with which we can now affirm polygenism in human evolution, though what I have heard and read gives the impression that such a model should be affirmed with high confidence. For that matter, written records pertaining to Galileo and Bellarmine do not go very far toward establishing specific criteria for determining how to categorize a particular scientific claim in terms of certainty. Moreover, it is not a given that Galileo, Bellarmine, or any other individual in the history of interpretation should get to decide how modern Christians ought to adjudicate between scripture and science, not least because, as Blackwell notes, biblical truth was generally regarded as superior to scientific truth in the cultural milieu of Galileo and Bellarmine, whereas scientific truth is typically regarded as superior to biblical truth in much of modern Western culture.⁶⁶ Furthermore, as I argued above, it would not be correct to say that polygenism *contradicts* Acts 17:26, since Paul's comment about the origin of human nations can reasonably be interpreted in multiple ways. To say the least, the question of how to interpret this passage in the face of genetic science is less than straightforward, and past discussions at the intersection of science and scripture do not perfectly correspond to it. At best, my suggestions along these lines are provisional and invite further constructive discourse.

Given all of the above, I submit that the following three elements should characterize a faithful and scientifically informed approach to Acts 17:26:

1. The subject should be confronted and discussed. Scholarship opposing evolution on biblical and theological grounds routinely cites Acts 17:26 as a proof text against polygenism (see citations above), but many scholarly works written in favor of evolutionary creationism ignore the verse entirely.⁶⁷ My discussion in this article should deprecate any scandal associated with this passage for evolutionary creationists, since the passage does not necessarily demand a monogenetic understanding of human origins.
2. The range of plausible interpretations should be acknowledged. In all likelihood, most readers of

Acts in English assume that the text must refer to human descent from Adam, given the consistency with which modern English translations say something like “from one ancestor.” To raise awareness about this interpretive issue is to give more people the chance to have insightful thoughts about it, and this is presumably advantageous for all.

3. To the extent that polygenism is affirmed with confidence, plausible interpretations consistent with polygenism should be favored with corresponding conviction over those that imply monogenism.⁶⁸ This is not to say that science should dictate all aspects of biblical interpretation. Such an approach makes scripture subordinate to nature. The case of Acts 17:26 is particular in that multiple reasonable interpretations can be found, some of which cohere with scientific consensus and others which are problematized by science. This hermeneutical approach may potentially apply to other current or future points of tension between science and biblical interpretation, but it does not necessarily apply to all such points of tension.

We might say that both science (as the interpretation of nature) and exegesis (as the interpretation of scripture) involve degrees of confidence. In Galileo’s day, heliocentrism had not yet been demonstrated definitively, though there were good observational reasons for natural philosophers to think it was true. In the twenty-first century, scarcely anyone would question that the earth revolves around the sun. Galileo’s discussion of biblical interpretation involved a certain tentativeness, since he expected heliocentrism would be proven in the future (relative to his day). His argument was not that biblical interpretation should be revised based on what he thought would be proven eventually, but rather that the church’s interpretation should not be fixed on geocentric assumptions while the issue was unresolved. Analogously, biblical interpretation could also be said to involve degrees of confidence. Some elements of scripture are clear and pervasively agreed upon, whereas certain passages are exegetically controversial and cause a great deal of ink to be spilled in the course of scholarly interlocution. Furthermore, we could reasonably say that neither science nor exegesis are ever finished. The possibility always exists that a new scientific discovery will require revision of an entrenched consensus, and likewise, on occasion, a particularly

striking exegetical argument causes a shift in biblical interpretation.⁶⁹

We could consider a general principle that a strongly evidenced scientific consensus should take a certain kind of hermeneutical priority over a biblical passage with multiple plausible interpretations (if one or more interpretations fit the scientific consensus and one or more others do not), whereas a strongly held consensus about biblical interpretation should be maintained in the face of less-than-definitive scientific controversies. In some circumstances, definitive interpretation may need to be deferred until greater exegetical or scientific clarity can be reached. Such a principle seems to me a fair application of the concept of the unity of truth.

In the case of Acts 17:26, I have argued that multiple exegetically plausible interpretations are available, which cohere with polygenism to varying extents. Insofar as polygenism is deemed to be strongly evidenced, it can reasonably prompt faithful Christian interpreters of Acts to prefer exegetical options that accommodate this scientific conviction. It is possible that a new, brilliant exegete could come along with an insight that will settle the interpretation of this biblical passage in such a way that polygenism (or some other scientific claim) cannot reasonably be accepted by faithful Christians, though admittedly this sort of consensus among biblical interpreters is rare.

Navigating the interpretation of God’s two books in the sort of way I here propose has obvious potential pitfalls. Some scientifically minded people will want to prioritize scientific claims over exegesis to an undue extent, especially in cases where their own scientific contribution sits uncomfortably alongside biblical interpretation. Likewise, exegetes may tend to prioritize their understanding of a given biblical passage over scientific claims to an inappropriate extent, especially if their own research has yielded an interpretation that shapes their view. To avoid these extremes will require humility, patience, and a willingness for thinkers of various disciplines to listen to one another and assess their own convictions critically and carefully. ◀

Notes

¹All translations of ancient texts are my own unless otherwise noted.

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²Additional examples in English include the New International Version, the New Living Translation, and the New English Translation, among others. This “personal” translation of this phrase is not limited to English (e.g., *Traduction œcuménique de la Bible*), though it does seem to be especially common among twentieth-century English versions. Some translations that tend toward more literal translation (often called “formal equivalence”) leave the phrase as “from one” (e.g., the New American Standard Bible), and some reflect the major manuscript variant, “from one blood” (e.g., the New King James Version), which I discuss below.

³For example, Bertil Gärtner, *The Areopagus Speech and Natural Revelation* (Uppsala, Sweden: Almqvist & Wiksells, 1955), 151–52; Hans Conzelmann, *Acts of the Apostles: A Commentary on the Acts of the Apostles* (Philadelphia, PA: Fortress, 1987), 142; F. F. Bruce, *The Acts of the Apostles: Greek Text with Introduction and Commentary*, 3rd ed. (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1990), 383; John B. Polhill, *Acts* (Nashville, TN: Broadman, 1992), 348; Luke Timothy Johnson, *The Acts of the Apostles* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical, 1992), 315; C. K. Barrett, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Acts of the Apostles*, 2 vols. (Edinburgh, UK: T&T Clark, 1994–1998), 2:842; Joseph A. Fitzmyer, *The Acts of the Apostles* (New York: Doubleday, 1998), 526; Ben Witherington III, *The Acts of the Apostles: A Socio-Rhetorical Commentary* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1998), 512; Darrell L. Bock, *Acts* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2007), 566; David Peterson, *The Acts of the Apostles* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2009), 496–97; Craig S. Keener, *Acts: An Exegetical Commentary*, 4 vols. (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2012–2015), 3:2647.

⁴For example, Dyson Hague, “The Doctrinal Value of the First Chapters of Genesis,” in *The Fundamentals: A Testimony to the Truth*, 4 vols. (Los Angeles: The Bible Institute of Los Angeles, 1917), 1:282–83; William D. Barrick, “A Historical Adam: Young-Earth Creation View,” in *Four Views on the Historical Adam*, ed. Matthew Barrett and Ardel B. Caneday (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2013), 219; Philip G. Ryken, “We Cannot Understand the World or Our Faith without a Real, Historical Adam,” in *Four Views on the Historical Adam*, ed. Barrett and Caneday, 276–77; Kenneth D. Keathley and Mark F. Rooker, *40 Questions about Creation and Evolution* (Grand Rapids, MI: Kregel Academic, 2014): 238–39; William Vandoodewaard, *The Quest for the Historical Adam: Genesis, Hermeneutics, and Human Origins* (Grand Rapids, MI: Reformation Heritage, 2015), 308; Richard B. Gaffin Jr., *No Adam, No Gospel: Adam and the History of Redemption* (Philadelphia, PA: Westminster Seminary Press, 2015), 11; and Guy Prentiss Waters, “Theistic Evolution Is Incompatible with the Teachings of the New Testament,” in *Theistic Evolution: A Scientific, Philosophical, and Theological Critique*, ed. J. P. Moreland et al. (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2017), 885.

⁵For accessible discussion of the scientific bases for this claim and the implications for Christian theology, see Dennis R. Venema, “Genesis and the Genome: Genomics Evidence for Human-Ape Common Ancestry and Ancestral Hominid Population Sizes,” *Perspectives on Science and Christian Faith* 62, no. 3 (2010): 166–78, <https://www.asa3.org/ASA/PSCF/2010/PSCF9-10Venema.pdf>; Dennis R. Venema and Scot McKnight, *Adam and the Genome: Reading Scripture after Genetic Science* (Grand Rapids, MI: Brazos, 2017), and recently Loren Haarsma,

When Did Sin Begin? Human Evolution and the Doctrine of Original Sin (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2021), 77–82. Venema explains that although genetic evidence does point to a single common female ancestor about 170,000 years ago (i.e., “Mitochondrial Eve”), from whom all modern humans inherit their mitochondrial DNA, and a single common male ancestor about 50,000 years ago (i.e., “Y-Chromosomal Adam”), from whom all modern male humans inherit their Y-chromosome sequences, these ancestors would each have been part of much larger populations who also contribute chromosomes to the population of modern humans (pp. 175–76).

⁶C. John Collins notes that “polygenism” or “polygenesis” occurs in academic literature with multiple senses, and can refer to the idea that humanity developed in parallel in multiple regions at once (“Adam and Eve as Historical People, and Why It Matters,” *Perspectives on Science and Christian Faith* 62, no. 3 [2010]: 160), <https://www.asa3.org/ASA/PSCF/2010/PSCF9-10Collins.pdf>. I intend by this term only that modern humans have descended from a population of ancestors larger than a single couple.

⁷Paul apparently quotes directly from Aratus’s *Phaenomena*, a popular third-century BCE work that was translated into multiple languages, and was widely known in the time of Paul. The opening of the text, from which Paul quotes (Greek: *tou gar kai genos eimen*), is addressed to Zeus. Aratus may have made this particular comment with a similar statement in mind from the Stoic Cleanthes’ famous *Hymn to Zeus* (“for from you we are offspring”; Greek: *ek sou gar genos esmen*), which could be why Paul attributes this comment to Athenian “poets” (plural). C. Kevin Rowe, *World Upside Down: Reading Acts in the Graeco-Roman Age* (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 2009), 37–38.

⁸See Xenophon, *Memorabilia* 1.1.1; Plato, *Apology* 24B; *Euthyphro* 3B; cf. Dio Chrysostom, *Orations* 43.9; Valerius Maximus, *Memorable Doings and Sayings* 1.1, ext. 7; and Josephus, *Against Apion* 2.263–64. This parallel between Paul and Socrates is typically identified in scholarly analyses of the passage. E.g., Rowe, *World Upside Down*, 32; and J. Andrew Cowan, “Paul and Socrates in Dialogue: Points of Contact between the Areopagus Speech and the Apology,” *New Testament Studies* 67, no. 1 (2021): 121–33, <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0028688520000223>.

⁹Rowe is almost certainly right that the author of Acts mentions that “all the Athenians and the visiting foreigners regularly had the opportunity for nothing other than to speak or to hear something (ever) newer” (Acts 17:21) in order to expose the hypocrisy of the Areopagus in charging Paul with introducing new/foreign teaching (Rowe, *World Upside Down*, 32–33; so also, Abraham J. Malherbe, *Paul and the Popular Philosophers* [Minneapolis, MN: Fortress, 1989], 152). Paul is accused of new teaching about foreign divinities, but the Athenians are obsessed with novelty, and inclusive of all manner of foreign visitors. So then, the point is not that the members of the Areopagus are curious about Paul’s new teaching, but rather that their suspicion of Paul is hypocritical.

¹⁰It is unclear whether Paul is formally on trial, and this is a perennial subject of scholarly debate. E.g., Rowe argues that Paul is on trial (*World Upside Down*, 29–33), whereas Cowan suggests a number of ways that the passage does not give this impression (“Paul and Socrates in Dialogue,” 125–28). Cowan’s argument is undermined slightly by Timothy D. Barnes’s point that Roman imperial-era trials

were often informal and at times confusing ("An Apostle on Trial," *Journal of Theological Studies* 20, no. 2 [1969]: 407–19), <https://www.jstor.org/stable/23960141>.

¹¹For a lucid and accessible introduction to textual criticism, see Bruce M. Metzger and Bart D. Ehrman, *The Text of the New Testament: Its Transmission, Corruption, and Restoration*, 4th ed. (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005).

¹²Bruce M. Metzger of the United Bible Societies discusses the rationale behind many of the most interesting text-critical decisions pertaining to the New Testament, and assigns each decision with a confidence rating in *A Textual Commentary on the Greek New Testament: A Companion Volume to the United Bible Societies' Greek New Testament*, 4th ed. (Stuttgart, Germany: Deutsche Bibelgesellschaft, 1994).

¹³One additional manuscript reads "from one mouth" (Greek: *ex henos stomatos*), but the evidence in favor of the other two variants is much stronger, and I am not aware of any scholar who argues in favor of this being the earliest known variant.

¹⁴Metzger, *A Textual Commentary on the Greek New Testament*, 404–5. The standard critical text of the New Testament is produced by Deutsche Bibelgesellschaft and serves as the basis for *Novum Testamentum Graece*, which is currently in its twenty-eighth edition (Barbara Aland et al., eds., *Novum Testamentum Graece*, 28th ed. [Stuttgart, Germany: Deutsche Bibelgesellschaft, 2012]), and *The Greek New Testament*, which is currently in its fifth edition (Barbara Aland et al., eds., *The Greek New Testament*, 5th ed. [Stuttgart, Germany: Deutsche Bibelgesellschaft, 2016]). Numerous modern translations of the New Testament in various languages are based on this reconstruction of the Greek text.

¹⁵Metzger assigns a "B" rating to the reconstruction "from one" (Greek: *ex henos*), whereas "A" would reflect the highest degree of confidence, evidently because there was not unanimity among the committee (*A Textual Commentary on the Greek New Testament*, 404–5).

¹⁶Fred 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://www.asa3.org/ASA/PSCF/2022/PSCF3-22Cannon.pdf>. I disagree with a number of aspects of Cannon's analysis, and note certain points of disagreement below, but insofar as it follows from his discussion that the "from one blood" textual variant should not be dismissed as readily as modern translations imply, he makes a compelling point.

¹⁷The particulars of the genitive case in ancient Greek need not concern us here. In short, "one" (*henos*) is genitive because it follows "from" (*ex*).

¹⁸Contra Cannon, "Acts 17:26," 21–31, it would be quite typical for a masculine adjective without a noun to be interpreted personally, as a substantival adjective. See Daniel B. Wallace, *Greek Grammar beyond the Basics: An Exegetical Syntax of the New Testament* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1996), 294–95.

¹⁹The Pauline letter collection mentions Adam and/or Eve explicitly in Rom. 5:12–21; 1 Cor. 15:21–22, 45–49; 2 Cor. 11:3; 1 Tim. 2:13–15. Jewish literature from the second temple literary period (roughly 200 BCE–200 CE) likewise makes frequent reference to Adam and/or Eve. Thomas H. Tobin, "The Jewish Context of Rom 5:12–14," *The Studia Philonica Annual* 13 (2001): 159–75. Although

Adam and Eve are two progenitors rather than "one," it is not unusual for Adam to be mentioned alone, both in Paul's letters and in other Jewish texts. Further, Genesis states that God created Eve from Adam's rib (2:21–23), so in a sense, Eve too was created from Adam, the "one."

²⁰Keener, *Acts: An Exegetical Commentary*, 1:402.

²¹The presence of Adam as the earliest progenitor listed in Luke's genealogy is itself an interesting consideration for discussions about human origins. I do not have sufficient space to give this passage the exegetical attention it deserves in this article, though such a treatment would certainly be profitable in the future.

²²Ernst Haenchen, *The Acts of the Apostles: A Commentary* (Oxford, UK: Basil Blackwell, 1971), 522; I. Howard Marshall, *The Acts of the Apostles* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1980), 287; and Bruce, *The Acts of the Apostles: Greek Text with Introduction and Commentary*, 382. The text here quoted is a translation of the Septuagint (Greek) version of Isaiah, which was familiar to many of the New Testament authors, and which resembles the wording in Acts more closely than the Hebrew version.

²³The most accessible example of Greek genealogical literature is Hesiod's *Catalogue of Women* (Hesiod, *The Shield. Catalogue of Women. Other Fragments* [Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2018], 40–291). For a comparison of such literature with the spread of humanity over the face of the earth in Genesis 9–10, see Guy Darshan, "The Biblical Account of the Post-Diluvian Generation (Gen. 9:20–10:32) in the Light of Greek Genealogical Literature," *Vetus Testamentum* 63 (2013): 515–35, <https://doi.org/10.1163/15685330-12341131>.

²⁴On the development of the meaning of *autochthōn*, see Vincent J. Rosivach, "Autochthony and the Athenians," *The Classical Quarterly* 37, no. 2 (1987): 294–306, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/638830>.

²⁵For example, Plato, *Timaeus* 22a.

²⁶For example, Hesiod, *Catalogue of Women*, fragment 3.

²⁷See Pindar, *Olympian Odes* 9.43–46; Virgil, *Georgics* 1.62–63; Ovid, *Metamorphoses* 1.318–415; and Pseudo-Apollodorus, *Library*, 1.7.2.

²⁸Pseudo-Apollodorus, *Library*, 1.7.2–3; cf. Plato, *Timaeus*, 22b.

²⁹For example, Pseudo-Apollodorus, *Library*, 1.7.3; cf. Hesiod, *Catalogue of Women*.

³⁰John van Seters, *Prologue to History: The Yahwist as Historian in Genesis* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 1992), 79.

³¹For detailed discussion of this tradition, see Rosivach, "Autochthony and the Athenians"; and Sara L. Forsdyke, "'Born from the Earth': The Political Uses of an Athenian Myth," *Journal of Ancient Near Eastern Religions* 12, no. 1 (2012): 119–41, <http://dx.doi.org/10.1163/156921212X629491>. Rosivach notes that the people of Athens held to their autochthony alongside seemingly contradictory traditions about immigrants coming from other places and being incorporated into the citizenry of Athens (Rosivach, "Autochthony and the Athenians," 296).

³²Exegetes of Acts seldom suggest the "from one nation" interpretation, but see R. Sheldon Mackenzie, "The Western Text of Acts: Some Lucanisms in Selected Sermons," *Journal of Biblical Literature* 104, no. 4 (1985): 647, <https://doi.org/10.2307/3260676>.

³³Tessa Rajak, "The Location of Cultures in Second Temple Palestine: The Evidence of Josephus," in *The Book of Acts in Its First Century Setting: Volume 4: The Book of Acts in Its Palestinian Setting*, ed. Richard Bauckham (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1995), 2.

³⁴John H. Walton notes that if the "one" in Acts 17:26 refers to Adam, it would be odd to refer to human "nations" in the verse at all, since Adam is the common progenitor of humanity, not the progenitor of particular nations ("A Historical Adam: Archetypal Creation View," in *Four Views on the Historical Adam*, ed. Barrett and Caneday, 105). Walton prefers to understand the "one" to be Noah (see also Walton, *The Lost World of Adam and Eve: Genesis 2-3 and the Human Origins Debate* [Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2015], 187), but the arguments in favor of Noah work just as well as arguments in favor of the reading I propose in this section, and the Noah-based interpretation has roughly the same problems as the Adam-based interpretation.

³⁵The ambiguity between universal and local interpretations is mainly due to the flexibility of the Hebrew word *erets*, which can refer to the whole of the earth or a particular region (Francis Brown, S. R. Driver, and Charles A. Briggs, *A Hebrew and English Lexicon of the Old Testament with an Appendix Containing the Biblical Aramaic* [Oxford, UK: Clarendon Press, 1906], 75-76). Thus, the Babel account could open with, "the whole earth had one language and united words" or "the whole region had one language and united words" (Gen. 11:1), and could close with "there the Lord confused the language of all the earth" or "there the Lord confused the language of all the region" (Gen. 11:9).

³⁶For example, James M. Scott, "Luke's Geographical Horizon," in *The Book of Acts in Its First Century Setting: Volume 2: The Book of Acts in Its Graeco-Roman Setting*, ed. David W. Gill and Conrad H. Gempf (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1994), 542-43; Witherington, *The Acts of the Apostles: A Socio-Rhetorical Commentary*, 527; and Keener, *Acts: An Exegetical Commentary*, 3:2645.

³⁷For example, Conzelmann, *Acts of the Apostles: A Commentary on the Acts of the Apostles*, 142; and Mackenzie, "The Western Text of Acts," 647.

³⁸For particularly detailed arguments in favor of the biblical background of the speech, see Gärtner, *The Areopagus Speech and Natural Revelation*; and Kenneth D. Litwak, "Israel's Prophets Meet Athens' Philosophers: Scriptural Echoes in Acts 17:22-31," *Biblica* 85, no. 2 (2004): 199-216, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/42614509>. For treatments emphasizing philosophical backgrounds, see esp. Max Pohlenz, "Paulus und die Stoa," *Zeitschrift für die neutestamentliche Wissenschaft und die Kunde der älteren Kirche* 42 (1949): 82-98, <https://doi.org/10.1515/zntw.1949.42.1.69>; Martin Dibelius, "Paul on the Areopagus," in *Studies in the Acts of the Apostles* (New York: Scribner's, 1956), 26-77; and David L. Balch, "The Areopagus Speech: An Appeal to the Stoic Historian Posidonius against Later Stoics and the Epicureans," in *Greeks, Romans, and Christians: Essays in Honor of Abraham J. Malherbe*, ed. David L. Balch, Everett Ferguson, and Wayne A. Meeks (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress, 1990), 52-79. On similarities and differences between Paul's speech and Greco-Roman philosophical thought, see Joshua W. Jipp, "Paul's Areopagus Speech of Acts 17:16-34 as Both Critique and Propaganda," *Journal of Biblical Literature* 131, no. 3 (2012): 567-88, <https://doi.org/10.2307/23488255>.

³⁹Especially Dibelius, "Paul on the Areopagus," 35-37; and Pohlenz, "Paulus und die Stoa," 88.

⁴⁰F. F. Bruce, *The Book of Acts*, rev. ed. (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1988), 331; Fitzmyer, *The Acts of the Apostles*, 609-10; and Henry Dyson, *Prolepsis and Ennoia in the Early Stoa* (Berlin, Germany: de Gruyter, 2009), 4.

⁴¹Likewise, Jerome H. Neyrey highlights differences between stereotypical Stoic and Epicurean perspectives on the judgment of God and shows that Paul's speech is much more consistent with the Stoic position ("Acts 17, Epicureans, and Theodicy: A Study in Stereotypes," in *Greeks, Romans, and Christians: Essays in Honor of Abraham J. Malherbe*, ed. Balch, Ferguson, and Meeks, 118-34). Indeed, he suggests that the people who rejected Paul should be understood to be Epicureans, whereas those who desired to hear Paul again should be identified with Stoics (Acts 17:32).

⁴²For an overview of Stoic cosmology, see Michael Lapidge, "Stoic Cosmology," in *The Stoics*, ed. John M. Rist (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1978), 161-85.

⁴³Seneca, *Moral Epistles* 47.10; and —, *Epistles, Volume I: Epistles 1-65*, trans. Richard M. Gummere, 3 vols. (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1917), 1:307. Cf. —, *Moral Epistles* 44.1-2.

⁴⁴Seneca, *Moral Epistles* 95.52; and Dio Chrysostom, *Orations*, 36.30. For additional citations and discussion, E. A. Judge, *The First Christians in the Roman World: Augustan and New Testament Essays* (Tübingen, Germany: Mohr Siebeck, 2008), 588-94. For detailed comparison of Acts 17 and Seneca, *Moral Epistles* 95 in particular, see Brian J. Tabb, "The Nature of True Worship: Reading Acts 17 with Seneca, *Epistle* 95," in *Paul and the Greco-Roman Philosophical Tradition*, ed. Joseph R. Dodson and Andrew W. Pitts (London, UK: Bloomsbury T&T Clark, 2017), 263-78.

⁴⁵Cicero, *Laws*, 1.24; and —, *On the Republic and On the Laws*, trans. Clinton W. Keyes (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1928), 325.

⁴⁶For example, Cleanthes, *Hymn to Zeus*; Cicero, *Laws* 1.24; and Dio Chrysostom, *Orations* 12.30, 42.

⁴⁷Lucien Legrand, "The Unknown God of Athens: Acts 17 and the Religion of the Gentiles," *Indian Journal of Theology* 30 (1981): 162.

⁴⁸Balch, "The Areopagus Speech," 77.

⁴⁹See Cicero, *Nature of the Gods* 2.12 and Dio Chrysostom, *Orations* 12.33; cf. Plutarch, *Against the Stoics on Common Notions* 31-34 and Sextus Empiricus, *Against the Mathematicians* 9.61.

⁵⁰Cicero, *Laws* 1.24; —, *Offices* 3.6.28; and Dio Chrysostom, *Orations* 7.138.

⁵¹Dibelius argues further that Paul's references to the divinely mandated seasons and geographical boundaries of humanity's habitation on the earth (Acts 17:26) likewise corresponds to Hellenistic philosophy in general, and Stoicism in particular ("Paul on the Areopagus," 97-101), but this interpretive point is less decisively clear. For contrasting arguments, see Pohlenz, "Paulus und die Stoa," 85-87; Walther Eltester, "Gott und die Natur in der Areopagrede," in *Neutestamentliche Studien für Rudolf Bultmann zu seinem 70. Geburtstag am 20. August 1954*, ed. Walther Eltester, rev. ed. (Berlin, Germany: Töpelmann, 1957), 202-27; and Arthur Darby Nock, *Essays on Religion and the Ancient World*, 2 vols. (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1972), 2:830.

⁵²Diogenes Laertius, *Lives of the Eminent Philosophers* 7.33; cf. Plutarch, *Morality* 1034B and Lactantius, *Divine Institutes*

2.2.14. See Jipp, "Paul's Areopagus Speech of Acts 17:16–34," 577–78; and Patrick Gray, "Implied Audiences in the Areopagus Narrative," *Tyndale Bulletin* 55, no. 2 (2004): 213–14.

⁵³On Epicurean opposition to idols, see C. K. Barrett, "Paul's Speech on the Areopagus," *New Testament Christianity for Africa and the World*, ed. Mark Glasswell and Edward Fasholé-Luke (London, UK: SPCK, 1974), 74–75.

⁵⁴Mark D. Given, "Not Either/or but Both/and in Paul's Areopagus Speech," *Biblical Interpretation* 3, no. 3 (1995): 356–72, <https://doi.org/10.1163/156851595x00186>; Daniel Marguerat, "Luc-Actes entre Jérusalem et Rome. Un procédé lucanien de double signification," *New Testament Studies* 45 (1999): 70–87; Hans-Josef Klauck, *Magic and Paganism in Early Christianity: The World of the Acts of the Apostles* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress, 2003), 85; Rowe, *World Upside Down*, 199; and Jipp, "Paul's Areopagus Speech of Acts 17:16–34," 581–82.

⁵⁵One could potentially argue along similar lines in favor of a double entendre involving the biblical conception of descent from one *nation* (i.e., the people of Babel) and the Stoic conception of origination from one divine *source*, though I am not aware of any scholar who takes such a position.

⁵⁶Cannon, "Acts 17:26," 34. Kenneth D. Keathley likewise appeals to the "from one blood" reading to establish that humans belong to a singular race, though it is not explicit whether he is aware of the textual variants for this verse ("Rescuing Adam: Three Approaches to Affirming a Historical Adam," *Southeastern Theological Review* 8, no. 1 [2017]: 58).

⁵⁷Along similar lines, Kenneth W. Kemp interprets Acts 17:26 (apparently whether or not "blood" is accepted as original to the text) to convey the idea of "from one stock," which challenges claims of Athenian autochthony ("Science, Theology, and Monogenesis," *American Catholic Philosophical Quarterly* 85, no. 2 [2011]: 218, <https://doi.org/10.5840/acpq201185213>).

⁵⁸This is how, e.g., Jipp understands the "from one blood" textual variant ("Paul's Areopagus Speech of Acts 17:16–34," 581–82), though he considers the variant without "blood" to be earlier. Likewise, Metzger's commentary on the "from one blood" variant assumes that this reading is intended to refer to Adam's bloodline (*A Textual Commentary on the Greek New Testament*, 404–5).

The biggest weakness of Cannon's treatment of Acts 17:26 is that he argues extensively in favor of the "from one blood" reading of the text, only to take for granted that this reading implies polygenism over monogenism ("Acts 17:26," 34), though a monogenetic interpretation is perfectly plausible.

⁵⁹Walton attempts to work around this difficulty by rightly pointing out that the focus of Paul's rhetoric in this passage is geopolitical, historical, and societal, rather than biological (*The Lost World of Adam and Eve*, 186–87). In other words, the passage is making a point about the origin of nations from the three sons of Noah, not about genetics. However, Walton does not address the issue that polygenism would also invalidate the point of the passage thusly interpreted. If unity across nations is based on common descent from Noah and Noah is not a common ancestor for all people, then the foundation for unity evaporates.

⁶⁰For example, Haarsma, *When Did Sin Begin? Human Evolution and the Doctrine of Original Sin*, 80–81.

⁶¹For example, Paul Seely, "Concordism and a Biblical Alternative: An Examination of Hugh Ross's Perspective," *Perspectives on Science and Christian Faith* 59, no. 1 (2007): 41–43, <https://www.asa3.org/ASA/PSCF/2007/PSCF3-07Seely.pdf>.

⁶²See Kenneth J. Howell, *God's Two Books: Copernican Cosmology and Biblical Interpretation in Early Modern Science* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 2002), esp. 210–11. As Howell notes, the dictum of the unity of truth is rooted in particular in the contribution of Saint Augustine of Hippo. For detailed discussion of Augustine's treatment of this subject, see also Ernan McMullin, "From Augustine to Galileo," *Modern Schoolman* 76, no. 2/3 (1999): 169–94, <https://doi.org/10.5840/schoolman1999762/324>; —, "Galileo's Theological Venture," *Zygon* 48, no. 1 (2013): 192–220, <https://dx.doi.org/10.1111/j.1467-9744.2012.01320.x>; and Paul Allen, "Augustine and the Systematic Theology of Origen," in *Augustine and Science*, ed. John Doody, Adam Goldstein, and Kim Paffenroth (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2013), 9–26.

⁶³See Howell, *God's Two Books*, 199; Richard J. Blackwell, *Galileo, Bellarmine, and the Bible: Including a Translation of Foscarini's Letter on the Motion of the Earth* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1991), 166–73. Numerous other excellent books on the Copernican revolution and its relevance for science and faith are also available.

⁶⁴Blackwell, *Galileo, Bellarmine, and the Bible*, 171.

⁶⁵*Ibid.*, 171–73.

⁶⁶*Ibid.*, 172.

⁶⁷For example, Acts 17:26 is never discussed in Daniel M. Harrell, *Nature's Witness: How Evolution Can Inspire Faith* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 2008); Denis O. Lamoureux, *Evolutionary Creation: A Christian Approach to Evolution* (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2008); Johnny V. Miller and John M. Soden, *In the Beginning ... We Misunderstood: Interpreting Genesis 1 in Its Original Context* (Grand Rapids, MI: Kregel, 2012); George L. Murphy, *Models of Atonement: Speaking about Salvation in a Scientific World* (Minneapolis, MN: Lutheran University Press, 2013); William T. Cavanaugh and James K. A. Smith, eds., *Evolution and the Fall* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2017); Venema and McKnight, *Adam and the Genome*; and Peter Enns, *The Evolution of Adam: What the Bible Does and Doesn't Say about Human Origins*, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids, MI: Brazos, 2021). Those who do mention Acts 17:26 seldom spend more than a few sentences on it (e.g., Haarsma, *When Did Sin Begin?*, 115), although Walton devotes a full two-page section (*The Lost World of Adam and Eve*, 186–87) and Cannon, recently, a full article ("Acts 17:26").

⁶⁸Most biblical scholars will balk at this proposal, since modern biblical scholarship typically follows a descriptive rather than normative paradigm. In other words, the biblical texts are analyzed in their own right by objective methods, regardless of the implications for theology and communities of faith. However, individuals and communities of faith generally look to scripture to establish norms for belief and practice, and in such a context, the scientific plausibility of an interpretation is a relevant consideration among many others.

⁶⁹A salient example is E. P. Sanders, *Paul and Palestinian Judaism: A Comparison of Patterns of Religion* (Philadelphia, PA: Fortress, 1977), which caused a massive shift in how Paul was understood to engage first-century Jewish interpretation of the Torah.