THEOLOGICAL SIGNIFICANCE OF A LITERAL, HISTORICAL ADAM

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In recent years, the historicity of a literal Adam has been called into question by several Bible scholars. In this paper, I will seek to show the historic viewpoint that the church has taken regarding this issue. I will also present the main arguments that oppose the church’s historic, consensual view. The information presented will be split up into the following persuasions: 1) Literal and Historical Adam, 2) Literal Non- Historical Adam, 3) Non-Literal Historical Adam, and the final category will be 4) Non-Literal and Non-Historical Adam. I will conclude the paper with my conclusion regarding the information gathered.

The Literal and Historical Adam Position

The historical, consensual view that the Church has held on the personhood of Adam, is that he was a literal, living individual who brought sin into the world when he defied the Law of God and ate fruit from the Tree of The Knowledge of Good and Evil. Since he was the first human being created by God, sin entered into the world through him and was passed on to all of his descendants (which consist of every living person from Adam up until the present moment).

In Romans 5:12-21 the Apostle Paul tells us that “sin entered the world through one man, and death through sin, and in this way death came to all men, because all sinned. . . . For if the many died by the trespass of the one man, how much more did God’s grace and gift that came by the grace of the One Man, Jesus Christ, overflow to the many!” Paul also claims in 1 Corinthians 15:21 that “since death came through a man, the resurrection of the dead comes also through a Man. For as in Adam all die, so in Christ all will be made alive.” This seems to strongly indicate that Paul believed in a literal, historical Adam. In the book, Four Views on The Historical Adam, C. John Collins submits that Paul’s comparison of Adam to Jesus is a narrative

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1 Lamoureux, Denis O. Was Adam a Real Person? (Christian Higher Education 10 2011), 79-96.  
2 William D. Barrick. Four Views on The Historical Adam;  
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3 Pete Enns. Were Adam and Eve historical figures; also Adam is Israel  
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4 Peter Enns. Were Adam and Eve historical figures?  
5 Denis Lamoureux. Was Adam a Real Person? Part 2  
Tobit 8:6 “Thou madest Adam, and gavest him Eve his wife for an helper and stay: of them came mankind: thou hast said, It is not good that man should be alone; let us make unto him an aid like unto himself.”  
7 NASB Bible Translation. 1995  
8 NASB Bible Translation. 1995  
9 Deyoung, Kevin. 10 Reasons to Believe in a Historical Adam. Christian Post.  
cause and effect. Essentially Adam sinned; (cause) and Jesus came to fix that problem, (effect). Adam would have most certainly been a real, literal person for this to occur the way it did. Later in 1 Corinthians, Paul states that there were two Adams. The first was physical, and the second was spiritual. To sum it up, Jesus as the spiritual second Adam came to fix what the physical first Adam had caused.

The Literal, Non-Historical Adam Position

This viewpoint essentially states that although Adam was a literal, living, breathing person, he was also a metaphor for the 10,000 people currently living at that time. If we look at Genesis 2:7, we see that God took some dust of the ground, and with it he formed man. The lost world of Genesis One: ancient cosmology and the origins debate, gives a possible solution postulated by a man by the name of John H. Walton. He states that we should view the dust as a way to define a class of human beings, not as an actual material. He summarizes it simply when he says, “It is indicative of human destiny and morality, and therefore is a functional comment, not a material one.” The clay was referring to the creation of a literal Adam, since he was merely a representation of humanity. Simply put, God reached down and created human beings with sin already in effect. Walton is of a mind to believe that rather than a literal single person sinning and bringing destruction to the world, God created man already with sin in their hearts. The story of Adam would be simply to zoom in on the life of one man among many that had no choice in the matter of defiance towards God as a result of being created with a sin nature already in place.

The Non-Literal, Historical Adam Position

The main idea of this argument is that Paul got it wrong. Genesis 2-4 is not to be read literally at all. Instead, it should be read as an allegory that symbolizes Adam and Eve as ancestors that existed about 150,000 years ago. Peter Enns, who was a main proponent in the human Genome Project as well as The BioLogos Foundation, was the main advocate for the

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11 Paul is referring to the literal Adam that is mentioned in Genesis 1-5 when he says the “first.” Jesus is referred to metaphorically as the second Adam or the “spiritual Adam.” “So also it is written, ‘The first MAN, Adam, BECAME A LIVING SOUL.’ The last Adam became a life-giving spirit. 46 However, the spiritual is not first, but the natural; then the spiritual. The first man is from the earth, earthy; the second man is from heaven.” (1Co 15:45-47 NASB)
13 "Then the LORD God formed man of dust from the ground, and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life; and man became a living being.” (Gen 2:7 NASB)
16 William Barrick et al. Four Views on The Historical Adam. 2013
Non-Literal, Historical Adam argument. He puts it simply in his own words when he states, “The Adam story is really an Israel story placed in primeval time. It is not a story of human origins but of Israel’s origins.” If we compare the story of the ancient nation of Israel with the story of Adam we get two timelines that are strikingly similar. For sake of clarity, I will number the events so that corresponding numbers can be compared to one another: 1) God brings the children of Israel across the Red Sea during the Exodus, and thus the nation of Israel is born. 2) God gives to the Israelites the country of Canaan which is lush and fertile. 3) God allows them to remain in the land as long as they uphold the Law of Moses and 4) the Israelites display constant disobedience and are eventually exiled. We will now look at Adam’s timeline: 1) after the creation of the world, God creates Adam. 2) God puts Adam in the fertile, lush Garden of Eden; 3) God allows Adam to remain in the Garden as long as he obeys God’s commandment; and 4) Adam disobeys and is exiled. The correlation between the two timelines are almost identical which would indicate as stated before, that the account of Adam that was given to us in Genesis 2-4 is simply an allegory that refers to the nation of Israel.

The Non-Literal, Non-Historical Position

The final viewpoint that will be presented in this paper is in essence, that the Genesis account of creation is a myth. Genesis 2-4 is actually not literal, historical events; rather it was God’s way of teaching the Israelites who He was. Denis Lamoureux makes a shocking statement about this argument in his article, Was Adam a Real Person? Part 2 when he claims, The de novo creation of Adam is example of the Holy Spirit accommodating, that is, descending, to the level of the ancient Hebrews in the biblical revelatory process. He takes their view of human origins, which is the best science-of-the-day, and employs it as a vessel to reveal that He is their Creator. And just like His use of ancient astronomy, when He separates the waters above from the waters below with the firmament in Genesis 1, His forming of Adam from the dust of ground never happened either. No doubt about it, this idea is shocking to most Christians. But the Message-Principle offers perspective on this situation. How God made humans is incidental to the message that He made us. Adam is simply an ancient vessel that delivers inerrant, life-changing, spiritual Truths. The central purpose of Genesis 2 is to reveal infallible Messages of Faith about the human spiritual condition.

To sum up his statement, God in His sovereignty allowed for the Ancient Hebrews to believe things about their past, even though these things were not true, so that they could better

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20 Adam was commanded by God to not eat from the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil. “The LORD God commanded the man, saying, ‘From any tree of the garden you may eat freely; but from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil you shall not eat, for in the day that you eat from it you will surely die.’” (Gen 2:16-17 NASB)
understand who He was. In other words, the entire creation account in Genesis was a made up myth to give the Israelites perspective.

My Refutation of the Literal, Non-Historical Position

The main problem with the literal, non-historical argument, is that if man was created with sin already in his heart, then there was no point to Jesus’ death, burial, resurrection, or even His birth. In 1 Corinthians 15:45, Paul states that, “The last Adam became a life-giving spirit.” The need for a life-giving spirit would seem to imply that there was a present lack of life to begin with. This would indicate that Jesus was bringing life as a solution to sin. If God never makes a mistake, and is immutable, then why did He need to send Jesus to fix a mankind intentionally created with sin already in their hearts? The reality is that Jesus was sent to fix what Adam had done, according to Paul’s statement in 1 Corinthians 15:22. A literal, historical Adam sinned against God, brought sin into the world, and Jesus was sent to be the life-giving sacrifice that would atone for the sin of Adam. Therefore, the historicity of a literal Adam is foundational to a biblical understanding of the origin of sin, the nature of death, and for the reality of salvation and sin.

My Refutation of the Non-Literal, Historical Position

The main issue that I see with the non-literal, historical approach is in the simple phrase, “Paul got it wrong.” That simple statement calls into question not only the inspiration of New Testament authors, but also the inerrancy of the Bible itself. If Paul is considered to be mistaken, then how can we trust the rest of the New Testament? If we can’t trust Paul, then how can we trust any other New Testament author? This is a slippery slope that leads to the conclusion that the entire Bible is not trustworthy.

24 “Sovereignty” is sarcasm on my part.
25 1 Corinthians 15:45 NASB
26 Life is the opposite of death, and death in this passage refers to specifically spiritual death, i.e. living in sin.
27 For as in Adam all die, so also in Christ all will be made alive. (1Co 15:22 NASB)
29 William Barrick et al. Four Views on The Historical Adam. 2013
30 William Barrick et al. Four Views on The Historical Adam. 2013
Testament Scripture (God cannot lie), but also the authority of Scripture as well as its inerrancy. If we were discussing our interpretations of Scripture, then you could say that I was wrong. However, the real item being discussed is what Paul had to say, not whether or not he interpreted history correctly. 2 Timothy 3:16 tells us that all Scripture is inspired by God. In whatever manner Paul did or did not interpret scripture, the simple fact remains that God inspired what he actually wrote down. Therefore, the logical conclusion is to say that if Paul was wrong, then whoever inspired Paul was wrong as well. Since that is not a conclusion many would be willing to take, the response is that Paul interpreted the inspiration incorrectly. At this point we are touching on the discussion of biblical inerrancy. If the Bible is without error, which all evidence seems to indicate, the Bible cannot have been mistaken as to what he wrote. What he wrote simply did not come from the mind of a fallible man.

The second issue that I have with this theory is how the similarities between the history of Adam and Israel are supposed to point to the story of Adam as being an allegory of Israel’s history. Two timelines are given, both groups are given virtually everything by God, they are given parameters, and when they break those parameters they are punished. If anything, this illustrates how history repeats itself. Adam was not an allegory; rather, he was a shining example to the nation of Israel as to what would happen if they disobeyed God’s commandments. Adam was actually an essential part of Israel’s history warning them to not make the same mistakes that their literal, historical ancestor Adam had made. In reality, it could be said that there is a relationship between the two stories – but it is a relationship of cause and effect, not of allegorical correlation.

My Refutation of the Non-Literal, Non-Historical Position

This last idea, that the creation account of Genesis 2-4 is a myth altogether, seems to be at the very least preposterous. In Simon Turpin’s article, The Importance of an Historical Adam, he states that “the doctrines of sin, Christology, and salvation are severely undermined if Adam is viewed as a myth. The historicity of Adam is of vital importance for a coherent understanding not only of the Scriptures but of the gospel.” If God allowed the Israelites to
believe untruth from an inspired source, all for the sole purpose of giving them a proper view of who He was, then I am forced to infer that God can be a liar, since the untruth that was given to Moses came from God. However, God is not a liar, and therefore I am forced to dismiss this argument in its entirety for the sole reason that it creates in one’s mind a view of God that is completely contrary to the reality of who He is as revealed in the totality of Scripture. Either all of Scripture is true, or none of it can be authoritatively said to be true.

My Conclusion Regarding the Position I Hold

In the words of Simon Turpin,

The debate over whether Adam was historical is ultimately a debate over whether we trust what the Scriptures clearly teach. If we cannot be certain of the beginning, then why would we be certain about what the Scriptures teach elsewhere? Understanding Adam as a historical figure is important for a coherent understanding of the biblical message of creation, fall and redemption.\textsuperscript{40}

This entire debate really boils down to the question of whether or not Scripture can be trusted to be literally true. Of course, one passage of Scripture cannot prove another portion of Scripture to be true; there must be external evidence that verifies it. The historical fact of the resurrection of Jesus Christ is the linchpin in this entire argument. His resurrection can be verified by multiple eyewitness accounts,\textsuperscript{41} testimony of the angels,\textsuperscript{42} and the behavior of the eye witnesses.\textsuperscript{43} These witnesses were beaten, ridiculed, and eventually put to death. The willingness of these Christians to be killed for their belief in the resurrection of Jesus Christ more than validates that belief. If I believe in the inspiration, inerrancy, and authority of scripture, and I must because of the historical fact of the resurrection of Jesus Christ, I am forced to believe that Adam was a literal, historical person, and was the first human created by God. I must wholeheartedly accept the literal, historical position.


\textsuperscript{41} To these He also presented Himself alive after His suffering, by many convincing proofs, appearing to them over a period of forty days and speaking of the things concerning the kingdom of God. (Act 1:3 NAU)

\textsuperscript{42} “And as the women were terrified and bowed their faces to the ground, the men said to them, ‘Why do you seek the living One among the dead?’ He is not here, but He has risen. Remember how He spoke to you while He was still in Galilee,” (Luk 24:5-6 NASB)

\textsuperscript{43} As they were speaking to the people, the priests and the captain of the temple guard and the Sadducees came up to them, being greatly disturbed because they were teaching the people and proclaiming in Jesus the resurrection from the dead. (Act 4:1-2 NASB)

And with great power the apostles were giving testimony to the resurrection of the Lord Jesus, and abundant grace was upon them all. (Act 4:33 NASB)
Bibliography

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