

Understanding Adam

BY PETER ENNS

There is much more to Exodus and creation in the Old Testament than cosmic battle. I am not trying to say that cosmic battle is some magic key to unlock the mysteries of the Bible. But it does open a new window to seeing the “ancient ways” in which the Israelites thought of creation.

It also helps us look at the Adam story from an angle that might be new to some readers here: Adam is the beginning of *Israel*, not *humanity*. I imagine this may require some explanation.

Israel’s history as a nation can be broken down as follows:

- Israel is “created” by God at the exodus through a cosmic battle (gods are defeated and the Red Sea is “divided”);
- The Israelites are given Canaan to inhabit, a lush land flowing with milk and honey;
- They remain in the land as long as they obey the Mosaic law;
- They persist in a pattern of disobedience and are exiled to Babylon.

Israel’s history parallels Adam’s drama in Genesis:

- Adam is created in Genesis 2 after the taming of chaos in Genesis 1;
- Adam is placed in a lush garden;
- Law (not to eat of the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil) is given as a stipulation for remaining in the garden;
- Adam and Eve disobey and are exiled.

There are two ways of looking at this parallel. You could say that the Adam story came first and then the Israelites just followed that pattern. But there is another way. Maybe Israel’s history happened first, and the Adam story was written to reflect that history. In other words, 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.*

Everyone has to decide for themselves which of these readings of Genesis has more “explanatory power.” I (and other biblical scholars) come down on the second option for a number of reasons, some having to do with Genesis itself while others concern other issues in the Bible. Let me give one reason from Genesis.

If we see Adam as a story of *Israelite* origins, it will help us make sense of at least one nagging question that begins in Genesis 4:13—one that readers of Genesis, past and present, have picked up on. After Cain kills Abel, he is afraid of a posse coming after him, which casually presumes the existence of other people. So God puts a mark on Cain and exiles him to Nod, a populated city to the east. There he takes a wife and they have a child, Enoch, and Cain proceeds to build a city, named after his son, in which others can live.

Some have solved this problem by saying that Adam and Eve had a lot more children that Genesis simply neglects to mention, and so Cain married his sister. I suppose if one must, one can take refuge in this

explanation. But this scenario seems a bit desperate—not to mention uncomfortable. Plus, this explanation is completely made up. Genesis neither says nor hints that the residents of Nod are Adam and Eve’s offspring. They are just “there.”

If the Adam story is about the first humans, the presence of other humans outside of Eden is out of place. We are quite justified in concluding that the Adam story is not about *absolute human* origins but the beginning of one smaller subset, one *particular people*.

The parallels between Israel and Adam that we see above tell us that the particular people in mind are Israel. Adam is “proto-Israel.”

Some might object that Genesis 1-11 deals with *universal* matters, not merely one people: the entire cosmos created in Genesis 1, the flood, the disbursement of the nations after the flood. Absolutely. No question there. But the point is this: after the creation of humanity in Genesis 1, Genesis 2 begins to tell the story of “proto-Israel.” In other words, Israel was not a latecomer, coming into existence *only* in the exodus. Israel was always there as God’s specially chosen people since the beginning.

Look at it this way. The word “adam” is ambiguous in Genesis. Every commentator notes that sometimes “adam” represents *humanity* (so I will use the lower case); other times it is the name “Adam” (upper case) representing one *man*. What does this back and forth mean? It means that Adam is a special subset of adam.

The character “Adam” is the focus of the story because he is the part of “adam” that God is really interested in. There is “adam” outside of Eden (in Nod), but inside of Eden, which is God’s focus, there is only “Adam”—the one with which he has a unique relationship.

The question in Genesis is whether “Adam” will be obedient to “the law” and stay in Eden, thus continuing this special relationship, or join the other “adam” outside in “exile.” This is the same question with Israel: after being “created” by God, will they obey and remain in the land, or disobey and be exiled?

Having said all this let me take a step or two back. I am not saying that this is ALL there is to the Adam story. There are all sorts of angles one can take to get at that extremely rich and deep piece of theology. But the “Adam is Israel” angle is at the very least a very good one—and in my opinion a much better angle than seeing Adam as the first human and all humans are descended from him. Genesis does not support that reading.

This “Israel-centered” reading of Adam is not a stretch. It is widely recognized, not only in modern scholarship, but by pre-modern interpreters. And you have to admit there is one distinct advantage of this reading that readers of BioLogos will recognize immediately: if the Adam story is not about absolute human origins, then the conflict between the Bible and evolution cannot be found there.

The conflict is found elsewhere in the Bible—namely in the New Testament and specifically in two of Paul’s letters.

Some might ask, “Why go through all this trouble? Why not just take scripture literally? The Bible says Adam was the first man. That’s the end of it.”

It’s not that simple, and if it were, people wouldn’t be talking about it so much. First of all, reading the Adam story symbolically rather than as a literal description of history is not a whim, and it is certainly not driven by a desire to undermine the Bible. Rather, as we have seen, the Bible *itself* invites a symbolic reading by using cosmic battle imagery and by drawing parallels between Adam and Israel (to name two factors).

There is also considerable *external evidence* that works against the “just read it literally” mentality.

The biblical depiction of human origins, if taken literally, presents Adam as the very first human being ever created. He was not the product of an evolutionary process, but a special creation of God a few thousand years before Jesus—roughly speaking, about 6000 years ago. Every single human being that has ever lived can trace his/her genetic history to that one person.

This is a problem because it is at odds with everything else we know about the past from the natural sciences and cultural remains.

There are *human cultural remains* dating well over 100,000 years ago. One recent example is 130,000-year-old stone tools found on Crete. (Their presence on an island presumes seafaring ability at that time.) Ritual/religious structures are known to have existed as far back as 40,000-70,000 years ago. Recently, a temple complex was found in Turkey dating to about 11,500 years ago—7,000 years before the Pyramids.

In addition to cultural artifacts, there is also the *scientific data* from the various natural sciences that support a very old earth (4.5 billion years old) and the evolutionary development of life on it—things most readers of this website hardly need me to point out. Most recently, the genetic evidence for common descent has, in the view of most everyone trained in the field, lent great support to the antiquity of humanity and sharing a common ancestry with primates.

There is a third line of evidence that is a problem for a literal reading of the Adam story. Archaeological evidence gathered over the last 150 years or so has helped us understand the *religions of the ancient Near East* during and long before the Old Testament period. As is well known, Genesis 1 and the Adam story bear unmistakable resemblances to the stories of other peoples—none of which we would ever think of taking as historical depictions of origins.

A strictly literal reading of the Adam story does not fit with what we know of the past. Some choose to ignore the data altogether. Others marginalize or interpret the data idiosyncratically to salvage some type of literal/historical reading. But, by and large, *everyone*—even including this latter group—has to do *some* creative thinking about how to handle the Adam story. A “just read it literally” mentality is not an available option. “What do I do with the Adam story?” is a real and pressing question for most people of faith.

In my experience, a lot of Christians—I might even guess most—have come to *some* peace with all of this. They may handle it in different ways, and some may not have arrived at a conclusion, but they at least recognize that something has to be done. They sense that a simple literal reading of the Adam story won’t work without creating a lot of cognitive dissonance, and so they are open to ideas.

But, sooner or later, another issue comes up that is hard to get around and for some simply ends the discussion entirely.

Christians have to account for more than *Genesis vis-à-vis* archaeology and science. They have to account for what *Paul says about Adam*. As I see it, this is as non-negotiable as accounting for the data mentioned above.

In Romans 5 and 1 Corinthians 15, Paul draws a parallel between Jesus and Adam: Adam disobeyed (eating of the fruit) and brought death to “all”; Jesus obeyed (in his crucifixion) and (in rising) brought life to “all.” Jesus came to undo what Adam did. He came to reverse the curse of Adam.

There is really little doubt that Paul understood Adam to be a real person, the first created human from whom all humans descended. And for many Christians, this settles the issue of whether there was a historical Adam. That is what Paul believed, and for his argument to have any meaning, *both Adam and*

Jesus have to be real people. If there was no Adam, there was no Fall. If there was no Fall, there was no need for a savior. If Adam is a fantasy, so is the Gospel.

For people who take the Bible seriously, Paul's understanding of Adam can be an insuperable obstacle to accepting what we know about the past from other sources. Some feel there is really no choice but to reject science and archaeology completely. I really don't think this is a viable option.

Others will accept to some extent the data we have, including evolution, but will insist that at some point along the line there was a first historical pair chosen by God to bear his image and from whom all true, image-bearing, humans are related. Placing an "Adam" somewhere on the evolutionary timeline is hypothetically possible, and there are knowledgeable people who find this a good way to reconcile Paul and science. (Although for others, this kind of "Adam" is too far from the kind of Adam Paul was thinking about, so it is not much help.)

However you slice it, what Paul says about Adam is a very important point of Christian theology. Clearly, what Paul says must be addressed.

But there is a factor in all of this that does not always get as much airtime as it should. It is regularly assumed that what Paul says about Adam is rather *obvious*, a *sure* starting point from which to engage this issue. "Well, I may not know what all the scientific and archaeological data are, but I can read English and I KNOW what Paul says. That is obvious, and I have no intention of messing around with that."

Yes, we must take Paul *seriously*. But what if what Paul is saying about Adam is not as straightforward as a simple reading suggests? Maybe the matter is more involved than "Paul says it; that settles it"?

Paul's Adam is not a simple matter. There are numerous factors that come into play in gaining a broader perspective on *what* Paul is saying and *why* he says it. In my next post, I want to list what some of these factors are. This is an issue that cannot be *resolved* in the span of a single paper. I am only interested in laying out on the table the issues that need to be kept in mind as we think about what Paul says about Adam and why he says it.

The tensions between science and faith, specifically evolution and Christianity, center on the issue of Paul's Adam. As such, I think this is where our theological energies need to be invested. This is the problem in a nutshell: Paul says something of vital and abiding theological importance that is anchored in an ancient view of human origins.

Raising these issues is not an attempt to make a simple matter more difficult than it needs to be. And digging deeper into what Paul said is not a clever way to ignore him. These are issues that come up inescapably, one way or another, when informed readers try to understand what Paul was communicating. There is nothing new being raised in these posts.

Rather than obscuring Paul, it is important to engage these issues if we are to take Paul with utmost *seriousness*. That means understanding him as he *deserves to be understood*—making the effort to hear *him* as clearly as we can rather than to hear *ourselves* through him. In order to hear Paul well, the issues listed below are among those that will need to be accounted for somehow.

I realize that dissecting Paul's view of Adam is a very difficult issue for many, and I do not do this lightly. But it is important to remind readers that BioLogos intends to be a place where important and sometimes emotionally laden issues can be aired and *discussed*. That is rare in our world—even in our Christian world—where marking out territory and going into battle are unfortunately commonly accurate metaphors for expressing disagreement. Sometimes patience and true understanding are left standing on

the periphery (“Better a patient person than a warrior, those with self–control than those who take a city,” Proverbs 16:32).

These are challenging issues—but they are not going away, and simplistic solutions rarely provide lasting comfort. What is needed is patience, respect, and knowledge. It is with this intention that I continue this discussion over Paul’s Adam and how it can, for people of faith, be in conversation with the natural sciences. The list that begins here is intended to lay out some of the necessary elements of that conversation.

I should go without saying that neither BioLogos nor I claim to have laid this difficult matter to rest in a series of a few posts. We’re in this together, folks. We welcome interaction with these issues below, and by all means feel free to add other factors that you deem relevant to this discussion.

1. Adam in the Old Testament

As important as Adam is to Paul, he is not a figure that gets a lot of airtime in the Old Testament. In fact, after Genesis 5, Adam makes his lone Old Testament appearance in 1 Chronicles 1:1, the first name in a genealogy (chapters 1-9) that spans from Adam to postexilic Israel. The reference to “adam” in Joshua 3:16 is a place name and in Hosea 6:7 it either refers to humanity in general (e.g., JPS translation “to a man”) or a place name (see TNIV and NIV footnotes; note also the second half of v. 7 where we read “they were unfaithful to me *there*”). It is unlikely and out of place for Hosea 6:7 to refer to the Adam of Genesis—and even if it did, this lone reference between Genesis 5 and 1 Chronicles 1 hardly amounts to a counter-argument.

So, how does one explain Paul’s high-profile view of Adam vis-à-vis his relative absence in the Old Testament? From where did Paul get his idea of the central importance of Adam for all humanity? What would drive Paul to bring front and center a figure who, of the 923 chapters that make up our Old Testament, is mentioned only in Genesis 2-5 and one postexilic text?

2. Adam Theology in the Old Testament

Adam may not be a major player explicitly in the Old Testament, but Adam theology is another matter. In addition to the Adam/Israel parallel from a previous post, some understand Noah to be an Adam figure as well—a new “first man” at a “new creation.” Noah as a second Adam seems pretty clear, and some also see figures like Abraham, Moses, and David, as “new Adams.” Each of these figures represents the “first” of some “new beginning” for God’s people.

I understand that seeing “Adam theology” all over the Old Testament may not be persuasive to everyone, which is fine since these are just avenues of exploration. Still, seeing Adam as a pattern for other Old Testament figures is hardly rare in the history of Jewish and Christian interpretation. The Old Testament is not seen as a loose connection of some stories or historical reflections. It is a “grand narrative” that tells *one* story of God and his people. (Some readers may be familiar with what is sometimes called a Biblical Theological approach to interpretation. Others call it Redemptive-Historical.)

Paul presents Jesus as a new Adam (Romans 5:17; 1 Corinthians 15:21-22); Adam is the “pattern” of the one to come (Romans 5:14). Is Paul carrying through this theme of “new beginnings for God’s people”? In other words, is Paul doing more than simply turning to Genesis 2-3 and reading it in isolation? Does Paul have a bigger theological grid in mind—a “grand narrative” of the Old Testament?

3. The Fall in the Old Testament

According to the traditional interpretation of Romans 5:12-21, Paul sees Adam’s disobedience in the Garden as the cause of death in the world and the reason all subsequent humans are corrupted by sin. Some add that the actual *guilt* of Adam’s transgression is immediately passed on to all subsequent humans. (Humans are not just *corrupted* by Adam’s transgression, but also bear the *guilt* of what Adam did).

Does that interpretation of Paul fit with how human beings are described in the Old Testament? To be sure, the world is a mess and God needs to set it right. But does the Old Testament teach or imply that every human being is dead in the sin that Adam committed? Are non-Israelites ever referred to, directly or indirectly, as having inherited the guilt of Adam’s transgression? Is the fall in the Garden seen as the problem of humanity that must be dealt with? Why is *adamic cause* of human misery never mentioned let alone driven home?

As for the Israelites, they are not presented as being dead in sin and thus incapable of pleasing God. The giving of the law, with its blessing for obedience and curses for disobedience, actually assumes the possibility of pleasing God. “Righteousness” is clearly an attainable status through obedience to the law.

So, what connection does Paul’s view of human depravity (“dead in sin”) have to the Old Testament? How does Paul’s view of sin relate to the notion of sin in the Old Testament? Is it “deeper” and more universal than what we find in the Old Testament? If so, why does Paul draw such a central conclusion about sin that is either muted or absent in the Old Testament?

This raises another sort of question: Is it even *necessary* for Paul and the Old Testament to have the same exact view of the nature of sin? Can Paul have a clearer view on the true depth of our alienation from God that is not yet present in the Old Testament in general or Genesis specifically? Does Paul’s use of the Adam story actually *depend* on him not reading it literally?

It is crucial to point out that *to raise these questions is not to answer them one way or another*. But, they *are* valid questions that have been raised and engaged by thoughtful readers, some for a very, very long time. They are not trendy or conjured up.

Thinking through them takes some patience, a fair amount of knowledge, and even more wisdom. At the end of the day, wrestling through these issues will yield a greater understanding of Paul and how his Gospel is summed up in the risen Messiah.

4. The Fall in the Garden

What exactly were the consequences of Adam and Eve’s disobedience in the Garden? I realize this question sounds like Bible 101, but it isn’t. It is a complicated issue, and many great minds have wrestled with it.

Adam and Eve eat the fruit, even though they were warned not to (Genesis 2:17). God imposes penalties—curses—on them with clearly intended ongoing consequences. From Adam and Eve on, humanity would experience death (return to dust); from Adam and Eve on, the ground would be cursed, women would have pain in childbirth, etc., etc. The penalties are announced and the first pair is then expelled from the Garden—the final blow.

So far all of this sounds familiar. But, with all the curses listed in 3:14-19, the following is *not* among them: “From now on, your children and all of humanity, by the very nature of their birth, will be born in a state of sin and guilt against which they will be powerless to help themselves.”

This omission may be surprising to some. A sense of being “born in sin” is typically associated as a central element of the Garden episode, especially reading Genesis 3 side-by-side with Paul (namely Romans 5:12-21). This has puzzled interpreters. So, the question is: If “born in sin” is what the Garden story is really about, why doesn’t Genesis just come out and say so?

Take the Cain and Abel story. Did Cain kill his brother because he was born in a state of sin? This is sometimes assumed to be the case, but is this what we actually read in Genesis?

Does Genesis indicate that it was *because* of Adam’s trespass that Cain killed Abel? Was Cain’s act a by-product of Adam’s transgression passed on to his offspring somehow? Or could it be that Cain’s sin follows in Adam’s footsteps some other way? After all, transgression did not need a fall—Adam and Eve had already sinned by disobeying God. Is Cain’s transgression, like that of his parents’, part of his humanity rather than fallenness?

Other than what we read in the list of curses in Genesis 3, the Garden story does not tell us what if anything “transferred” between Adam and his offspring. This does not call sin or the Gospel into question. But it does mean that responsible Christian interpreters will need to ask (1) what does the Fall narrative *in Genesis* actually say? (2) how does that connect with the Christian view of the Fall, especially as we see it in Paul’s writings?

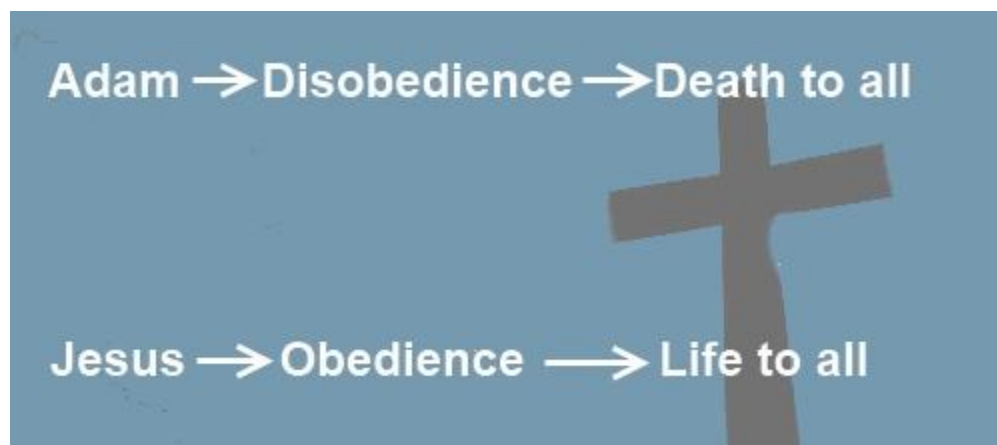
There are different ways of making the connection, but the point is simply that a connection has to be *made*. The connection is not obvious (as a scan of commentaries will show).

5. The Adam/Jesus Parallel in Romans 5 is both Clear and not so Clear

We move from Genesis to the other side of the equation: Paul. For many, the heart of the issue is the parallel Paul makes in Romans 5:12-21 between Jesus and Adam—the entire Gospel hangs on getting this parallel right, and what Paul says here settles the matter.

Yet, as with Genesis, there are numerous questions about what Paul is getting at here. Leafing through any commentaries on Romans will illustrate what some of them are. The general point Paul is making is clear enough, but some of the details are tricky.

What is clear in Romans 5:21-21 is that Adam’s disobedience resulted in death for “all,” and this comes right out of Genesis. Likewise, Jesus’ obedience (i.e., his crucifixion leading to his resurrection) brought life to “all.” (A similar point is made in 1 Corinthians 15, namely, vv. 20-22.)



This is breath-taking theology. In a few short verses, Paul is doing nothing less than bringing together the grand narrative of Scripture. The crucified and risen Messiah brings closure to the entire

biblical drama. The Christ is the *second*, obedient Adam (Romans 5), the firstfruits of the new humanity (1 Corinthians 15). In Christ, all of creation starts over.

We can't say enough about how important a point this is for Paul's theology. But, there are interpretive difficulties nonetheless that affect how the Adam/Jesus parallel plays out.

For example, Paul says that Adam's disobedience has universal implications: Adam brought death to "all." So what does it mean for Jesus to bring life to "all"? Paul is no universalist. Wouldn't it be better to say that Jesus brought life to "all *who believe*"?

Paul is not a sloppy thinker, but he is aware that the parallel clearly does not fit precisely. In fact, he is quick to say "many" in vv. 15 and 19 rather than "all." He seems to employ the parallel but then back off a bit, almost to say, "Well, not literally *all*. It doesn't quite work that way. I mean *many*."

The limits of the parallel do not diminish Paul's theology. The parallel serves his purpose, but is clearly not airtight. This signals that readers need to keep both eyes open when probing how exactly Paul understands the parallel.

Verse 12 also raises a question or two. What does Paul mean when he says that through Adam's sin, "death came to all, *because all sinned*." (Commentaries tend to camp out here for a bit, especially on the Greek phrase translated "because.") One might have expected Paul to say "because *he* [Adam] sinned" (death is Adam's fault). Is Paul suggesting that some responsibility is on our shoulders rather than Adam's? What exactly is Paul saying (or not saying) about Adam here?

Note, too, that Paul focuses on only one effect of Adam's disobedience: death and how "death reigned" from Adam on (Romans 5:14). There is no mention of the other effects of Adam's disobedience that are sometimes tied to this parallel, such as the corruption of our inner nature. That does not mean Paul does not believe that, only that he does not tie it to *Adam*. (Remember, folks, these posts are not about Paul's theology in general but Paul's Adam.)

Again, these questions about the Jesus/Adam parallel do not undermine Christianity. But there is a reason why this parallel has attracted so much attention throughout the history of the church, and why some of the very same questions continue to be raised.

To bring this all the way back to the beginning: Synthesizing evolution and Christianity is not a matter of starting with what Paul is "obviously" saying. Paul's Adam is challenging, and was so long before evolution ever entered the mix.

6. What is Romans Really About?

The last generation or two of New Testament scholarship has shed some light on how to read Paul. This is another complicated issue—if also controversial. But it is also an important one for understanding Paul, especially Romans.

N. T. Wright in particular has been a strong proponent of rethinking the message of Romans in light of the Jewish thought world behind the person of Jesus and into which Paul was speaking. In other words, how would people back then have understood what Paul was saying?

As the argument goes, Romans is often understood as showing the *personal* path to salvation, "how I can get right with God." But this is a peripheral (although legitimate) issue. According to Wright and others, there is a bigger issue that captures Romans from beginning to end: not personal salvation, but how Jews and Gentiles *together* can be *one* people, reconciled to God, united in the risen Messiah, not divided by longstanding ethnic issues.

This may seem a bit anti-climactic for contemporary Protestant readers of Romans. But the Jewish/Gentile issue was a *huge* problem in the early church. Many Jewish Christians felt that Gentiles had to become Jewish first (through law-keeping, especially circumcision) before being granted Christian fellowship.

Paul says, “No. Gentiles can enter our fellowship *as Gentiles*. Both groups are on equal footing.” This created tensions (see Acts), especially since the Old Testament requires circumcision for non-Israelites who want to join the fold (e.g., Exodus 12:48). So, Paul spends some time arguing his case (see Galatians).

So what does all this have to do with Paul’s Adam? Paul’s Jesus/Adam parallel does *not* stem from a “plain reading” of Genesis. It is selective and theologically driven.

Paul is not simply “reading Genesis” or his Old Testament. He *focuses* on one aspect of the Adam story—disobedience leads to death. Death is the problem that grabs Paul’s attention. This is only one of several issues that arise out of Genesis. And it is a theme that the Old Testament itself does not develop.

But Paul does. That is because the resurrection of Jesus is the impetus for what *aspect* of the Adam story he picks up and *how* he uses it. It is the *resurrection of Jesus* that drives Paul’s reading of the Adam story. For Paul, as for any other Jew, the resurrection of the Messiah came out of the blue. Why did God do *that*?

This is why. “Jew and Gentile, the real problem is much deeper than you ever thought. It affects both of you equally. Jesus is the solution that both of you need. To the Jews especially I want to say that keeping the law is not the solution to the world’s problems. It will not fix what is deeply wrong. Only Jesus can. The problem is so deep and universal, the Son of God had to die and rise from the dead to give us *all* a new beginning.”

Jesus, in his death and resurrection, does not simply cleanse us from sin. He conquers the effect of sin. He conquers death, for all who believe—Jew and Gentile alike.

Not everyone agrees with this reading of Romans, but it places Paul’s writings more securely within our growing understanding of the religious climate of Paul’s day. The issues N. T. Wright and others raise are important and influential.

7. Paul was an Ancient Man

Paul was an ancient man, not a modern one. Should we expect him, therefore, to share views of the world, of humanity, the cosmos, etc., common to his time? Or, does Paul’s inspired status mean that his view of physical reality transcends his time and place?

What we are really asking here is, “What does ‘inspiration’ mean?” That is a huge question, but let’s remain focused on the Adam issue. The question is this: Does Paul’s status as an inspired author of Scripture *mean* that his views of human origins and the world as a whole are scientifically accurate (since, as the argument goes, a text inspired by God could not give false information)? Does his inspired status *mean* Paul *cannot* share the view of the “ancient science” of his first-century world?

The issue of Paul’s Adam is analogous to Genesis 1. My sense is that few expect the author of Genesis to know about an expanding universe, a round earth, and a heliocentric solar system. The author described the world as he and others saw it, and what they saw represented their reality.

In the modern world, we, too, describe the world that we see. The difference, though, is that we “see” differently: not only with the naked eye and our imaginations, but also with telescopes and microscopes; not by reading the stars but by higher math and other methods.

So, does what we say concerning Genesis 1 transfer to Paul's worldview in general? Should we assume that Paul's way of seeing reflected his ancient sight? Again, few expect Paul to have knowledge of scientific theories of an expanding universe, old earth, or heliocentrism.

This brings us to the following question: *Does Paul's ancient view of the physical world extend to human origins* (one human pair living about 4000 years before his time)? Is Paul's view of the physical world an ancient one everywhere else *except* when it comes to human origins?

Paul shared ancient views about a lot of things. The question is whether his understanding of Adam and Eve as the progenitors of the human race is one of these ancient views.

8. Paul's Use of the Old Testament

Even casual readers of Paul's letters are rightly quizzical when watching how he uses the Old Testament. Paul often handles Old Testament passages in ways that are not tied to their original literal meaning. In fact, sometimes his use of the Old Testament looks subjective and even haphazard.

There are reasons for this. Paul's handling of the Old Testament reflects two very important historical factors. First, he was trained in *Jewish interpretive techniques*, which were characterized by creative and imaginative engagement with the Hebrew Bible since the early postexilic period. Second, Paul met the *resurrected Christ*, and now his creative and imaginative training was geared toward drawing out Christological connections to the Old Testament.

The result is that we see Paul (along with other Jewish interpreters of the period) employing the Old Testament in ways that go beyond what those passages were designed to do in the Old Testament.

This raises an important question. Could there be something creative going on in Paul's handling of the Adam story that goes beyond its literal meaning in Genesis (whatever that might be)? Since Paul is prone to reading the Old Testament in a creative and Christological manner *in general*, might he be doing the same thing with the Adam story?

This brings us to an unexpected question. Are we actually *misreading* Paul when we insist that he is reading the Adam story literally? Could Paul's use of the Adam story *in his own mind* be a creative theological engagement of that story for a purpose *other than what it was originally written for*?

What right do we really have to think that Paul was simply doing his version of grammatical-historical exegesis?

Paul's handling of the Adam story should be seen within the context of a larger phenomenon—his handling of the Old Testament in general. This issue is closely related to the following and final point.

9. How was Adam understood among Jewish interpreters in his time?

It is common among Christians to think of the period between the Old and New Testaments (the intertestamental period) as sort of a dead zone: not much happening. That is not even remotely true. It was during this time that the Judaism of Jesus' day was taking shape. An informed understanding of the New Testament requires some knowledge of this important historical period.

One thing that happened during the intertestamental period was a lot of biblical interpretation. By the time we get to the New Testament era, there had already been several hundred years of thoughtful readers engaging the many mysteries and conundrums of Scripture. You can see this in such well-known texts as the Dead Sea Scrolls, the Apocrypha, and other collections of writings from this general time period.

This is a huge field of research and publication in Biblical Studies.

All this is to say that Paul was not the first ancient Jewish man to engage his Bible. And he was certainly not the first person to wonder about the Garden story. Being a trained rabbi, it is hard to imagine that Paul was unaware of how Adam had been understood by others in this rich, interpretive world.

How did Jewish interpreters around the time of Paul understand Adam? In various ways. For example, the Wisdom of Solomon (Apocrypha, early 1st century A.D.) refers to Adam as one who was “delivered from his transgressions” (10:1), which is a curious take on the story (wasn’t he *punished*?). But some Jewish interpreters thought that Adam was vindicated somehow.

Further, Cain’s “unrighteousness” in 10:3 is not in any way connected to his father—Adam is not to blame. In fact, in 2:23-24, this ancient Jewish author blames the entrance of death on “the devil’s envy.” This last part suggests that he understood the serpent to be the devil, which is an *interpretation* of Genesis (since Genesis refers to the serpent as a crafty animal, not a supernatural being).

Ecclesiasticus (a.k.a. Ben Sira, Apocrypha, 2nd c. B.C.) talks about Adam (17:1ff.; 33:10) but there is no mention of a Fall or sinful nature inherited by his offspring. Adam is a fully positive figure. In the book of Jubilees (Pseudepigrapha, 2nd century B.C.), Adam is a priestly figure who actually offers sacrifices for his own transgression. This author leaves out Genesis 3:8-13 where Adam and Eve are found out, since it does not contribute to the point he wants to make.

These are three examples of imaginative engagement with the Adam story. A bit closer to Paul’s meaning, we have 2 Esdras 3:7 (Apocrypha, a Jewish work around the time of Christ). Here Adam’s transgression leads to “death for him and his descendents.”

This is very much what Paul says in Romans 5:12, and some have wondered whether Paul got his idea from 2 Esdras. Others argue that Paul came first and that some sections of 2 Esdras are later Christian additions to an originally Jewish work. It’s hard to know if there was any direct influence one way or another.

Interestingly, in 2 Esdras 3:20-22, Adam’s “evil heart” was something Adam seems to have been born with and that God “did not take away.” In other words, Adam was not born morally pure. God sowed in him an “evil seed” from the beginning (4:30). Adam transgressed because *God* didn’t do anything to prevent the seed from growing. This transgression led to the “permanent disease” for all his descendents. This writer is trying to answer the difficult question of why Adam fell in the first place. He concludes that it is part of the human condition.

In 2 Baruch (another Jewish work from the same time period), Adam is the “father of sin,” so to speak, but in the sense that everyone has the *responsibility* and *choice* whether to follow in his footsteps. Adam is not the cause of anyone else’s sin. Each of us “has been the Adam of his own soul” (48:42). This may or may not shed some light on Romans 5:12, where Paul says that “death came to all, *because all sinned.*” Perhaps the closest to Paul’s understanding of the Garden episode is found in the first century AD (probably) Jewish text *Life of Adam and Eve*. There, Adam chides Eve for bringing upon them a “great wound” and “transgression and sin in all our generations” (44:2).

The Garden episode was a pivotal text in ancient Judaism. It was also ambiguous on key points, and biblical interpreters wasted no time digging in and trying to make sense of it: who was Adam, what did he do, and how does that affect us? Paul’s Adam is one example of this rich interpretive activity. And his understanding may even owe something to what other Jewish interpreters of the time had already said.

I realize that some might quickly say, “I don’t care what these other interpreters said. I’m with Paul, and what he says matters.” I agree on at least one level. What Paul says matters. But that does not mean that Paul’s Adam is not a *creative handling of the story* to serve a larger theological purpose.

Paul's Adam should not be isolated from the rich interpretive activity of the centuries leading up to and including Paul's own time.

Understanding the Adam story in Genesis and Paul's use of the Adam story in Romans and 1 Corinthians is important and challenging. An informed discussion engages topics such as Old Testament views of creation and challenges in understanding Paul.

So, where are we with respect to Adam?

For Paul, Adam and Eve were the parents of the human race. Do all Christians have to accept Paul's interpretation of the Adam story?

1. What if we allow Paul (and other biblical writers) to settle for us the question of human origins? This is an option for many Christians today. In fact, groups like Answers in Genesis consider it the only truly Christian option. Those who maintain this position, however, must address the scientific and archaeological evidence that created the problems.

1a. Evidence can be *ignored*. We can argue that nothing take precedence over God's Word, and move on. This is possible but not satisfying for those familiar with either the scientific or archaeological data. Ignoring evidence will produce considerable cognitive dissonance.

1b. Evidence can be *challenged*. Mainstream scientific and archaeological evidence can be reinterpreted. We do not ignore or brush aside the evidence. We provide a persuasive *alternate account* of the evidence. By persuasive I mean an account that practicing scientists and scholars would consider good faith responses to the data. Idiosyncratic "theories"—actually hypotheses—such as the appearance of age, however, are *not* alternate scientific hypotheses but idiosyncratic assertions that are completely foreign to normal scientific explanation. They belong in 1a, not in 1b.

Accepting Paul's assumptions about human origins means the scientific and archaeological evidence must be ignored or mainstream theories must be replaced with better ones.

I speak as a biblical scholar, not a scientist. But *ignoring evidence* is not a reasonable option. And reconfiguring the evidence to support Paul's assumptions of a 6000 year-old earth and two humans as parents of the entire human race is, quite simply, impossible.

2. What if we affirm that Paul's view of human origins does not settle the matter for us today? Of course, this leaves us with a pressing question: how do we think about Adam today? This is where the conversation begins for those wishing to maintain a biblical faith in a modern world. And whatever way forward is chosen, we must be clear on one thing: we have *all* left "Paul's Adam." We are all "creating Adam," as it were, in an effort to reconcile Scripture and the modern understanding of human origins.

Thoughtful Christians today achieve this reconciliation in several ways. Some say Adam and Eve were not individuals but *representatives* of humanity as a whole. Alister McGrath calls these "stereotypes." John Walton uses the term "archetypes."

Others emphasize that Adam and Eve may not be our *biological* first parents, but rather our *spiritual* first parents. This is often reconciled with evolution by supposed that God endowed two hominids with his

image at some point in natural history. In other words, God “created” Adam and Eve several thousand years ago out of a larger population.

I will not comment here on the viability of these reconciliations. That question is far too large to be answered by any one person. It is a group effort, and BioLogos is bringing these issues into general conversation among Christians, working to preserve the integrity of both science and the Christian tradition.

Any version of #1 above is, at the end of the day, or even the beginning for that matter, unrealistic and *wrong*. But once you move to option #2, you have left Paul’s Adam and are now working with an Adam that is partially and even largely shaped by your own understanding and worldview. You are in an entirely different discussion. The question is: What solution to the problem best respects both theology and science?

That is the conversation encouraged by BioLogos. Indeed, it is a conversation that is both desperately needed and, in this modern age of science, inevitable.