

# How does the Fall fit into evolutionary history? Were Adam and Eve historical figures?



## Introduction

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The early chapters of [Genesis](#) lay the foundation for much of the Bible. Here we meet Adam and Eve, formed from the dust of the Earth, brought to life by the breath of God ([Genesis 2:7](#)), and placed in a beautiful garden with two mysterious trees, one that gives knowledge and the other life.

God tells Adam and Eve that they can eat from any tree in the garden except the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil. If they break this rule, God tells them that they will surely die ([Genesis 2:16-17](#)). But nonetheless, they disobey this command and are cursed and cast from the Garden of Eden. God places an angel with a flaming sword at the entrance to the garden so they can't get back in.

This is the story of how Adam and Eve's relationship with God was broken. This breach, often referred to as the Fall, marks not only the separation of God and humankind. The Biblical narrative, beginning particularly with the story of Abraham, recounts the story of what God does to resolve this problem. This story comes to its climax in the death and resurrection of the Son of

God, Jesus of Nazareth.

The familiar story of Adam and Eve is a staple of both Sunday school lessons and the stained glass motifs of Christianity's great cathedrals. But can this account fit into BioLogos? How does the Fall fit into an evolutionary history, where the Earth is billions of years old, and humans originated hundreds of thousands of years ago most likely in Africa? Is the story of Adam and Eve actual history, or is something else going on here? Christians over the centuries have held many positions on this, ranging from straightforward literalist interpretations of the texts to readings that emphasize the theological content.<sup>1</sup>

## The Literalist Reading

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Many Christians prior to the emergence of the historical science of geology interpreted the first chapters of Genesis as literal history. In the medieval period, for example, intrepid biblical literalists would head off on adventures to locate the Garden of Eden. Maps from this period even indicate where creative cartographers thought Eden was located and where Adam and Eve went upon being expelled.<sup>2</sup>

This literal reading implies that God specially created Adam and Eve from dust, and that all humans are descended from these original parents. They were created to have a perfect relationship with God, but their disobedience resulted in a curse for all humankind, including their descendants.

The literalist reading, despite its attractive simplicity, does not fit the evidence. First, there are two stories of creation, found in [Genesis 1:1-2:3](#) and [Genesis 2:4-2:25](#). These accounts have different chronological orders, a fact that didn't bother Christians who lived in the centuries before the discipline of history emerged. As odd as it may sound, people long ago talked about the past in radically different ways. Past events could be placed in an order reflecting their importance, for example, rather than their chronology. History is simply not done like this today, and we cannot imagine writing the history of the United States with the Civil War coming after World War II.

A literalist reading of Genesis runs into historical trouble immediately when we try to reconcile the chronological details of the two very different creation accounts in Genesis 1 and 2. Difficulties also arise when we work out the implications of the human race beginning with only two initial people. For example, where did the wife of Cain, Adam's son, come from? The only possibility from a literalist reading is that she was Cain's sister. Not only does this conflict with later Biblical commands against incest, but there is no reference in Genesis to Cain having a sister or any other humans who could populate another area (the land of Nod, east of Eden, [Gen 4:16](#)). Ironically, defending a literalist reading of this story requires one to explain away the text's literal meaning.

Equally problematic is that when Cain is banished from his homeland for killing his brother Abel, he fears being hunted down and killed. [Genesis 4:13-14](#) reads:

"Cain said to the Lord, 'My punishment is too great to bear! Behold, You have driven me this day from the face of the ground; and from Your face I will be hidden, and I will be a vagrant and a wanderer on the Earth, and whoever finds me will kill me!'" <sup>3</sup>

Again, it is highly implausible that the people Cain fears are also offspring of Adam and Eve. The people trying to kill Cain would have to be his extended family — siblings, nieces, nephews and so on — all united in trying to kill him. But the text taken literally does not allow it. Along the same lines, Genesis mentions the city that Cain built and named after his son ([Genesis 4:17](#)). Who would populate this city or help to build it? All of this points strongly toward a non-literal, symbolic reading of the creation stories.

The scientific evidence suggests a dramatically larger population at this point in history. Recently acquired genetic evidence also points to a population of several thousand people from whom all humans have descended, not just two. Finally, fossil and DNA records point strongly to a more unified creation reflected in the relatedness of humans and other animals. <sup>4</sup> The comparison of human and chimp chromosomes provides one of many compelling pieces of evidence for this unity. The chromosomes of the two species match up almost exactly, except for human chromosome 2, which appears to be a fusion of two chromosomes that were distinct in a primate ancestor of our species. This remarkable claim was confirmed when sequences that are normally found only at the ends of chromosomes were discovered in the middle of human chromosome 2, right where the fusion was thought to have taken place. Today, we carry in our bodies this evidence of our relatedness to other species. The evidence argues strongly against a literalist interpretation of the Genesis creation account of humans.

## The Everyman Reading

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The Everyman Reading of the creation story understands the Fall as an allegory representing every human's individual rejection of God. In this light, the Fall was not a historical event but an illustration of the common human condition that virtually everyone agrees is deeply flawed and sinful. In this view, Adam and Eve were not intended to be presented as historical figures. Their deeds simply represent the actions of all humans and remind us of this troubling part of our natures.

This interpretation is less popular among many Christians, for the historicity of Adam seems to be assumed by the apostle Paul.<sup>5</sup> In [Romans 5](#) (and somewhat in [1 Corinthians 15](#)), Paul draws an

analogy between Adam and Paul, both of whom are representative of humanity, but in different senses: Adam brings death to all, whereas Jesus brings life; Adam was disobedient, Jesus was obedient; Adam's disobedience affects all, whereas Jesus' obedience affects "all". Since Jesus is an historical figure, it is argued that Adam, too, must be an historical figure in the very same sense. You cannot have on part of the analogy be symbolic and the other historical. Plus, if Paul believed in an historical Adam as the first human, Christians should too. The difficulty with this understanding of Paul, however, is that it is difficult to reconcile with the scientific data, which has lead Christian thinkers to consider different ways of handling Paul's words.

## Historical Views

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Another view sees human-like creatures evolving as the scientific evidence indicates. But at a certain point in history, it is possible that God bestowed special spiritual gifts on those who had developed the necessary characteristics. This historical event would endow the recipients with the Image of God. We can say that *Homo divinus* was therefore created from *Homo sapiens*. With these spiritual gifts came the ability to know and experience evil — an opportunity that was grasped with tragic consequences that have carried through the history of *Homo divinus*.

This view can fit whether the humans in question constitute a group or a specific male-female pair. In the case of a group, we can imagine God interacts with all members of the group and essentially initiates the relationship that exists today. If the initiative is with a single human couple, then that relationship can spread to and through their offspring as that subset of the existing population comes to dominate.

In these two cases, humans exercised their free will and caused the Fall. The connection of the Fall with the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil suggests that *Homo divinus* exercised their moral consciousness by choosing to live independently, rather than by God's instruction. The Genesis narrative provides a vivid description of their consequent alienation from God.

These views require a non-literary reading of the Adam story, which follows from the details of the story itself (as we saw above), and from the genetic evidence, and from the significant amount of corroborating textual data that we have from the ancient Mesopotamian world. These views can also preserve the representational role of either a human pair or a larger initial population.

## Conclusion

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Are views such as those above acceptable for a Christian? Many thoughtful, faithful Christians throughout history have subscribed to nonliteralist views of the Genesis accounts of creation. For

example, the respected scholar and Christian writer C.S. Lewis held a similar view. In *The Problem of Pain*, Lewis notes the following:

“For long centuries, God perfected the animal from which was to become the vehicle of humanity and the image of Himself. He gave it hands whose thumb could be applied to each of the fingers, and jaws and teeth and throat capable of articulation, and a brain sufficiently complex to execute all of the material motions whereby rational thought is incarnated [ . . . ] Then, in the fullness of time, God caused to descend upon this organism, both on its psychology and physiology, a new kind of consciousness which could say “I” and “me,” which could look upon itself as an object, which knew God, which could make judgments of truth, beauty and goodness, and which was so far above time that it could perceive time flowing past [ . . . ] We do not know how many of these creatures God made, nor how long they continued in the Paradisal state. But sooner or later they fell. Someone or something whispered that they could become as gods [ . . . ] They wanted some corner in the universe of which they could say to God, “This is our business, not yours.” But there is no such corner. They wanted to be nouns, but they were, and eternally must be, mere adjectives. We have no idea in what particular act, or series of acts, the self-contradictory, impossible wish found expression. For all I can see, it might have concerned the literal eating of a fruit, but the question is of no consequence.”<sup>6</sup>

### **Consulted Experts:**

*The BioLogos Foundation is grateful for the assistance of [Pete Enns](#) in drafting this response.*

## Notes

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- Question image taken from: <http://www.flickr.com/photos/jlinczak/2056754343/>. Copyright details can be found here: <http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-sa/2.0/deed.en>.
1. The spectrum of possible views was inspired by those presented in Denis Alexander, *Creation or Evolution: Do We Have to Choose?* (Oxford, UK: Monarch Books, 2008).
  2. Jean Delumeau and Matthew O’Connell, *History of Paradise: The Garden of Eden in Myth and Tradition* (New York: Continuum Publishing Company, 1995).
  3. Genesis 4 (NASB).
  4. The genetic evidence is explained in: Francis Collins, “Deciphering God’s Instruction Book: The Lessons of the Human Genome,” in *The Language of God* (New York, NY: Free Press, 2006).

5. As an example, see Denis Alexander, *Creation or Evolution: Do We Have to Choose?* (Oxford, UK: Monarch Books, 2008). In chapter 12, Alexander gives reasonable arguments in favor of a historical model of the Fall.
6. C. S. Lewis, *The Problem of Pain* (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1996), 72-76. Quoted in Francis S. Collins, *Language of God* (New York, NY: Free Press, 2006), 208-209.

## Further Reading

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### Books

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- Alexander, Denis R. *Creation or Evolution: Do We Have to Choose?* Oxford, UK: Monarch Books, 2008.
  - Lamoureux, Denis O. *Evolutionary Creation: A Christian Approach to Evolution*. Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock Publisher, 2008.
  - Lucas, Ernest. *Can We Believe Genesis Today? The Bible and Questions of Science*. Leicester: InterVarsity Press, 2001.
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