Did Adam Really Exist?

Were Adam and Eve really the first pair of humans? Rick Wade responds to theistic evolution and OT scholar Peter Enns’ belief the human race did not begin with Adam.

Paul and Adam

In 2011, Christianity Today reported on the growing acceptance of theistic evolution in the evangelical community and one possible implication of it. If humans did evolve along with other species, was there a real historical first couple? Did Adam and Eve really exist?

In this article I’ll address a couple of theological problems this claim raises and a question of interpretation. I’ll look at the views of evangelical Old Testament scholar Peter Enns who denies a historical Adam; not, however, to single him out as a target, but rather because he raises the important issues in his writings.

Enns denies a historical Adam for two main reasons. One is that, as far as he is concerned, the matter of evolution is settled. There was no first human couple.{1} The other is his belief that Genesis 1 describes the origins of the world in the mythological framework of the ancient Near East, and thus isn’t historical, and that Genesis 2 describes the origins of Israel, not human origins.{2} So Genesis doesn’t intend to teach a historical Adam and Eve, and evolutionary science has proved that they couldn’t have existed.

Let’s begin with the question of how sin entered the world if there were no Adam.

In Romans chapter 5, the apostle Paul says sin, condemnation, and death came through the act of a man, Adam. This is contrasted with the act of another man, Jesus, which brought grace and righteousness.

However, if there were no historical Adam, where did sin come from? Enns says the Bible doesn’t tell us.{3} The Old Testament gives no indication, he says, “that Adam’s disobedience is the cause of universal sin, death, and condemnation, as Paul seems to argue.”{4} Paul was a man of his time who drew from a common understanding of human beginnings to explain the universality of sin. Enns acknowledges universal sin and the need for a Savior.{5} He just doesn’t know how this situation came about. The fact that Adam didn’t exist, Enns believes, does nothing to take away from Paul’s main point, namely, that salvation comes only through Christ for all people, both Jews and Gentiles. Is this true?

Paul and Adam: A Response

There are a few problems with this interpretation. First, there is a logical problem. Theologian Richard Gaffin points out that, in Rom. 5:12, 17, and 18, a connection is made between the “one man” through whom sin came and the “all” to whom it was spread. If sin really didn’t come in through the “one”—Adam—and spread to the “all”—you and me—how do we take seriously Paul’s further declaration that “one man’s act of righteousness leads to justification and life for all“?

Second, there is a piling on of error in Paul’s claim. One of Enns’ foundational beliefs is that God used human understanding to convey His truths in Scripture. God spoke through the myths of the ancient world when He inspired the writing of Genesis.{6} If Enns is correct, one would expect that
God was using the Genesis myth to reveal something true in Paul’s claim about Adam. In other words, the Old Testament story would be opened up so a truth would be revealed. However, Paul’s first point, that sin came through Adam to the race (Rom. 5:12), is in fact false, according to Enns. The following truth, about righteousness coming through Christ, is beside the point here. Paul’s assertion about Adam isn’t simply a *historical* one; it is a *doctrinal* one, too. The traditional teaching of the church regarding the source of sin, death, and condemnation is therefore false. Paul delivered a false teaching based upon a non-historical myth. He should have left Adam out of his discussion. It does nothing to buttress his claim about Christ.

Enns says that this matter of the origin of sin is “a vital issue to work through, . . . one of the more pressing and inevitable philosophical and theological issues before us.”{7} One has to wonder, though: if Paul didn’t have the answer, and he was taught by Christ directly, and if the rest of Scripture is silent about such an important matter, can we really think we can ferret out the solution ourselves?

**Paul’s Use of the Old Testament**

The use of the Old Testament in the New Testament is of great significance in this matter. How does Paul get the point he made out of Genesis if it isn’t true?

Peter Enns believes the problem is related to the way Paul interpreted and used the Old Testament. Paul lived in an era which is now called Second Temple Judaism. Writers in this era, Enns says, “were not motivated to reproduce the intention of the original human author” in the text under consideration.{8} Thus, we see Old Testament texts used in seemingly strange ways in the New Testament, strange if what we expect is a direct reproduction or a further development or deeper explanation of the Old Testament writer’s original intent. Texts could be taken completely out of context or words could be changed to make the text say something the New Testament writer wanted to say. In this way, Enns believes, Paul used the Old Testament creatively to explain the universality of sin and of the cross work of Christ.

Some scholars speak of “christocentric” interpretation of the Old Testament. Enns prefers the term “christotelic” which refers to the idea that Christ is the *completion* of the Old Testament or the *end* toward which the Old Testament story was headed. Regarding Adam, Enns writes, “Paul’s Adam is a vehicle by which he articulates the gospel message, but his Adam is still the product of a creative handling of the story.”{9} Paul presents Adam as a historical person, and then makes the further creative claim that Adam’s sin is the reason we all sin. Neither of these are true, but this does no harm to the most important part of the text where Paul claims that salvation for all people came through Christ.

None of this should be problematic for us, in Enns’ opinion, for he believes this view of the Bible is similar to our view of the Incarnation of Christ. In Jesus there are both humanity and divinity. Likewise, the Bible is a coming together of the divine and the human. God used the methods of Paul’s day to convey the gospel message.

**Paul’s Use of Old Testament: A Response**

How can we respond to this view of Paul’s use of the Adam story?

Enns believes “that the NT authors [subsumed] the OT under the authority of the crucified and risen Christ.”{10} However, Jesus never referred to the Old Testament in a way that showed the Old
Testament incorrect as it stood. Even His “but I say to you” in the Sermon on the Mount appears to be more a matter of teaching the depths of the laws than a correction of the Old Testament text. He upheld the authority of the Old Testament such as when he said, “Do not think that I have come to abolish the Law or the Prophets; I have not come to abolish them but to fulfill them” (Mt. 5:17).”{11}

Bruce Waltke is an evangelical Old Testament scholar who accepts theistic evolution but who disagrees with Enns on this matter. He wonders why Jesus rebuked the disciples on the road to Emmaus (Luke 24:25-27) for not understanding the plain language of Scripture if the plain historical sense isn’t sufficient.{12} He argues that Enns’ method of interpretation can’t be supported by Scripture.

Paul said the gospel he preached was “in accordance with the Scriptures” (1 Cor. 15:3-4) by which he meant the Old Testament.{13} Elsewhere he said that the Old Testament Scriptures are “profitable for teaching” in 2 Tim. 3:16-17.{14} New Testament scholar Richard Bauckham disagrees with the belief that Paul followed the interpretive methods of his day. The apostles weren’t guilty of reading into the Old Testament ideas held independently of it. He says, “They brought the Old Testament text into relationship with the history of Jesus in a process of mutual interpretation from which some of their profoundest theological insights sprang.”{15}

In fact, it was the apostles’ high esteem for the Old Testament that forced them to come to grips with the Trinitarian nature of God given the claims of Jesus.{16}

This doesn’t mean, however, that it’s always easy to understand how the apostles used the Old Testament. However, what the apostles taught was understood to be in continuity with what they had received before, not as a correction of it.

**The Matter of Inspiration**

It is inevitable that a discussion of the denial of the historical Adam will turn to the doctrine of the inspiration of Scripture. Old Testament scholar Peter Enns believes that Paul’s incorrect use of Adam “has no bearing whatsoever on the truth of the gospel.”{17} That’s true, but it has a lot to do with how we understand inspiration and its bearing on Paul’s writings.

The apostle Paul said that “all Scripture is inspired” or “breathed out” by God (2 Tim. 3:16). Peter explains further that “no prophecy of Scripture comes from someone’s own interpretation. . . . but men spoke from God as they were carried along by the Holy Spirit” (2 Pet. 1:20-21).

Paul, who claimed in 1 Thess. 2 that his teachings were the word of God (v. 13), intended to explain how sin and condemnation came into the world in Romans 5. Elsewhere, Peter spoke of Paul’s writings as Scripture (2 Pet. 3:15-16). If Paul’s explanation of this “vital issue,” in Enns’ words, was wrong, was it, then, of Paul’s own interpretation? Either it came from the Holy Spirit and was inspired Scripture, or it was merely Paul’s interpretation and was not. Which is it?

Old Testament scholar Bruce Waltke writes this: “A theory that entails notions that holy Scripture contains flat out contradictions, ludicrous harmonization, earlier revelations that are misleading and/or less than truthful, and doctrines that are represented as based on historical fact, but in fact are based on fabricated history, in my judgment, is inconsistent with the doctrine that God inspired every word of holy Scripture.”{18}
It might be objected here that I am confusing inspiration with interpretation. These are different things. However, if it is understood that all of Scripture comes from God who cannot lie, then we have to let that set limits on how we interpret Scripture. Interpretations that include false doctrines cannot be correct.

It seems to me that Enns has put himself into a difficult position. His conviction of the truth of human evolution isn’t his only reason for denying the historical Adam, but it puts the traditional understanding of Adam and his place in Paul’s theology out of bounds for him. It would be better to hold to what the church has taught for centuries rather than to the tentative conclusions of modern scientists.

Notes

2. Ibid., 52.
5. Enns, Evolution of Adam, 91. See also 124-25.
6. See for example Enns, Inspiration and Incarnation, 55-56.

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The Liberal Mind

*Kerby Anderson tries to understand the liberal mind from a biblical perspective. What are the assumptions the liberals make? How do those assumptions square with the Bible?*

As we begin this discussion, I want to make a clear distinction between the terms “liberal” and “leftist.” We often use the terms interchangeably but there is an important difference.

Dennis Prager wrote about this and even described those differences in a PragerU video.\(^1\) His argument is that traditional liberalism has far more in common with conservatism than it does with leftism. Here are some examples he uses to make his point.

Liberals and leftists have a different view of race. The traditional liberal position on race is that the color of one’s skin is insignificant. By contrast, leftists argue that the notion that race is insignificant is itself racist. Liberals were committed to racial integration and would have rejected the idea of separate black dormitories and separate black graduations on university campuses.

Nationalism is another difference. Dennis Prager says that liberals always deeply believed in the nation-state. Leftists, on the other hand, oppose nationalism and promote class solidarity.

Superman comics illustrate the point. When the writers of Superman were liberal, Superman was not only an American but also one who fought for “Truth, justice, and the American way.” The left-wing writers of Superman comics had Superman announce a few years ago that he was going to speak before the United Nations and inform them that he was renouncing his American citizenship.

Perhaps the best example is free speech. American liberals agree with the statement: “I disapprove of what you say, but I will defend your right to say it.” Leftists today are leading a nationwide suppression of free speech everywhere from the college campuses to the Big Tech companies.

Capitalism and the free enterprise system would be yet another example. Dennis Prager says, “Liberals have always been pro capitalism,” though they often wanted government “to play a bigger role” in the economy. Leftists oppose capitalism and are eagerly promoting socialism.

Liberals have had a love of Western civilization and taught it at most universities. They were promoters of the liberal arts and fine arts. In fact, one of the most revered liberals in American history was President Franklin Roosevelt who talked about the need to protect Western Civilization and even Christian civilization.

Today Western Civilization classes are rarely if ever taught in the university. That’s because leftists don’t believe Western Civilization is superior to any other civilization. Leftists label people who attempt to defend western values as racist and accuse them of promoting white supremacy. And attempts to promote religious liberty are dismissed as thinly disguised attacks on the LGBT community.
In conclusion, liberals and leftists are very different.

**Ethics and a Belief in Right and Wrong**

The philosophical foundation for most liberal perspectives is secularism. If you don’t believe in God and the Bible, then you certainly don’t believe in biblical absolutes or even moral absolutes. Dostoyevsky put it this way: “If God is dead, then everything is permitted.”

Even atheists admit that a view of God affects human behavior. Richard Dawkins recently expressed his fear that the removal of religion would be a bad idea for society because it would give people “license to do really bad things.”

He likens the idea of God to surveillance, or as he puts it, the “divine spy camera in the sky.” People generally tend to do the right thing when someone is watching them. They tend to do bad things when no one is watching. He goes on to add that the “Great Spy Camera theory” isn’t a good reason for him to believe in God.

It is also worth mentioning that more and more young people aren’t making decisions about right and wrong based on logic but instead based on feelings. I began to notice this decades ago. College students making a statement or challenging a conclusion used to say “I think” as they started a sentence. Then I started to see more and more of them say “I feel” at the start of a sentence. They wouldn’t use reason to discuss an issue. Instead, they would use emotion and talk about how they felt about a particular issue.

The liberal mind also has a very different foundation for discussing right and wrong. Dennis Prager recently admitted that he had been wrong. All of his life, he has said that the left’s moral compass is broken. But he has concluded that “in order to have a broken moral compass, you need to have a moral compass to begin with. But the left doesn’t have one.”

He doesn’t mean that conclusion as an attack. It is merely an observation that the left doesn’t really think in terms of good and evil. We assume that other people think that way because we think that way. But that is not how most of the people on the left perceive the world.

Karl Marx is a good example. He divided the world by economic class (the worker and the owner). One group was exploiting the other group. Good and evil aren’t really relevant when you are thinking in terms of class struggle. Friedrich Nietzsche, for example, operated “beyond good and evil.”

To the Marxists, “there is no such thing as a universal good or universal evil.” Those of us who perceive the world from a Judeo-Christian worldview see ethics as relevant to the moral standard, not the person or their social status.

A biblical view of ethics and morality begins with the reality that God exists and that He has revealed to us moral principles we are to apply to our lives and society. Those absolute moral principles are tied to God’s character and thus unchanging.

**A Naïve View of Human Nature**

In this article we are talking about the liberal mind, while often making a distinction between liberals and the left. When it comes to the proper view of human nature, both groups have a naïve and inaccurate view.
You can discover this for yourself by asking a simple question: Do you believe people are basically good? You will get an affirmative answer from most people in America because we live in a civilized society. We don’t have to deal with the level of corruption or terror that is a daily life in so many other countries in the world.

But if you press the question, you will begin to see how liberals have difficulty explaining the holocaust and Muslim terrorism. Because the liberal mind starts with the assumption that people are basically good. After all, that is what so many secular philosophers and psychologists have been saying for centuries. Two world wars and other wars during the 20th century should have caused most people to reject the idea that people are basically good.

The Bible teaches just the opposite. Romans 3:23 reminds us that “all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God.” Jeremiah 17:9 says, “The heart is deceitful above all things, and desperately sick; who can understand it?” This statement about the deceitfulness of our heart may seem extreme until we realize that Jesus also taught that “out of the heart come evil thoughts, murder, adultery, sexual immorality, theft, false witness, slander” (Matthew 15:19).

This naïve view of human nature should concern all of us. Young people, two generations after Auschwitz, believe people are basically good. One reason is biblical illiteracy. Another reason is historical illiteracy. A recent survey found two thirds of young people did not know six million died in the Holocaust and nearly half could not name one of the Nazi death camps.

This naïve view of human nature may also explain another phenomenon we have discussed before. One of the untruths described in the book, The Coddling of the American Mind, is the belief that the battle for truth is “us versus them.” If you think that people are basically good and you have to confront someone who disagrees with you, then they must be a bad person. They aren’t just wrong. They are evil.

Tribalism has been with us for centuries. That is nothing new about people joining and defending a tribe. But that has become more intense because of the rhetoric on university campuses and the comments spreading through social media. We don’t have to live this way, but the forces in society are making the divisions in society worse by the day.

A biblical perspective starts with the teaching that all are created in God’s image (Genesis 1:27) and thus have value and dignity. But all of us have a sin nature (Romans 5:12). We should interact with others who disagree with us with humility (Ephesians 4:2) and grace (Colossians 4:6).

**Big Government**

We will now look at why liberals and the left promote big government. The simple answer relates to our discussion above about human nature. If you believe that people are basically good, then it is easy to assume that political leaders and bureaucrats will want to do the best for the citizens.

Christians agree that government is necessary and that it is one of the institutions ordained by God (Romans 13:1-7). There is a role for government to set the rules of governing and to resolve internal disputes through a legal system. Government is not God. But for people who don’t believe in God, then the state often becomes God.

Friedrich Hayek wrote about this drive toward big government and the bureaucratic state in his classic book, The Road to Serfdom. He argued in his book that “the most important change which extensive government control produces is a psychological change, an alteration in the character of
The character of citizens is changed because they yield their will and decision-making to a more powerful government. They may have done so willingly in order to have a welfare state. Or they may have done so unwillingly because a dictator has taken control of the reins of power. Either way, Hayek argues, their character has been altered because the control over every detail of economic life is ultimately control of life itself.

Friedrich Hayek wrote *The Road to Serfdom* to warn us that sometimes the road can be paved with good intentions. Most government officials and bureaucrats write laws, rules, and regulations with every good intention. They desire to make the world a better place by preventing catastrophe and by encouraging positive actions from their citizens. But in their desire to control and direct every aspect of life, they take us down the road to serfdom.

He argued that people who enter into government and run powerful bureaucracies are often people who enjoy running not only the bureaucracy but also the lives of its citizens. In making uniform rules from a distance, they deprive the local communities of the freedom to apply their own knowledge and wisdom to their unique situations. A government seeking to be a benevolent god, usually morphs into a malevolent tyrant.

The liberal mind is all too willing to allow political leaders and bureaucrats to make decisions for the public. But that willingness is based on two flawed assumptions. First, human beings are not God and thus government leaders will certainly make flawed decisions that negatively affect the affairs of its citizens. Second, liberals do not believe we have a sin nature (Romans 3:23), and that includes government leaders. Even the best of them will not always be wise, compassionate, and altruistic. This is why the founders of this country established checks and balances in government to limit the impact of sinful behavior.

**Tolerance?**

If there is one attitude that you would think would be synonymous with the liberal mind, it would be tolerance. That may have been true in the past. Liberalism championed the idea of free thought and free speech. That is no longer the case.

Liberals have been developing a zero-tolerance culture. In some ways, that has been a positive change. We no longer tolerate racism. We no longer tolerate sexism. Certain statements, certain jokes, and certain attitudes have been deemed off-limits.

The problem is that the politically correct culture of the left moved the lines quickly to begin to attack just about any view or value contrary to the liberal mind. Stray at all from the accepted limits of leftist thinking and you will earn labels like racist, sexist, homophobic, xenophobic.

Quickly the zero-tolerance culture became the cancel culture. It is not enough to merely label an opponent with a smear, the left demands that an “enemy” lose their social standing and even their job and livelihood for deviating from what is acceptable thought. A mendacious social media mob will make sure that you pay a heavy penalty for contradicting the fundamental truths of the liberal mind.

One phenomenon that promotes this intolerance is the use of smears and negative labels. For example, patriotism and pride in your country is called xenophobia. Acknowledging the innate differences between males and females is labelled sexist. Promoting the idea that we are all of one
race (the human race) and that all lives matter is called racist. Questioning whether we should redefine traditional marriage is deemed homophobic. Arguing that very young children should not undergo sex assignment surgery is called transphobia. Pointing out that most terrorist attacks come from Muslim terrorists is labelled Islamophobic.

Should Christians be tolerant? The answer is yes, we should be tolerant, but that word has been redefined in society to argue that we should accept every person’s behavior. The Bible does not permit that. That is why I like to use the word