

Did Adam Really Exist?

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

1. Peter Enns, *The Evolution of Adam: What the Bible Does and Doesn't Say about Human Origins* (Grand Rapids: Brazos Press, 2012), ix, xiv, 122-23.
2. Ibid., 52.
3. Ibid., 124-26.
4. Peter Enns, *Inspiration and Incarnation: Evangelicals and the Problem of the Old Testament* (Grand Rapid: Baker, 2005), 82.
5. Enns, *Evolution of Adam*, 91. See also 124-25.
6. See for example Enns, *Inspiration and Incarnation*, 55-56.
7. Enns, *Evolution of Adam*, 126.
8. Enns, *Inspiration and Incarnation*, 131.
9. Enns, *The Evolution of Adam*, 102.
10. Peter Enns, "Fuller Meaning, Single Goal: A Christotelic Approach to the New Testament Use of the Old in Its First-Century Interpretive Environment," in *Three Views on the New Testament Use of the Old Testament*, ed. Stanley N. Gundry et al. (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2008) 208; quoted in Don Collett, "Trinitarian Hermeneutics and the Unity of Scripture," p. 10, n.26; accessed on the web site of Trinity School for Ministry, bit.ly/liBGLYT.
11. See Collett, "Trinitarian Hermeneutics and the Unity of Scripture," 10-11.
12. Bruce K. Waltke, "Revisiting Inspiration and Incarnation," *Westminster Theological Journal* 71 (2009), 90.
13. See Collett, "Trinitarian Hermeneutics and the Unity of Scripture," 11; referencing Christopher Seitz, "Creed, Scripture, and 'Historical Jesus': 'in accordance with the Scriptures,'" in *The Rule of Faith: Scripture, Canon, and Creed in a Critical Age*, ed. Ephraim Radner & George Sumner (Harrisburg, PA: Morehouse Publishing, 1998), 126-35.
14. Christopher Seitz, "Canon, Narrative, and the Old Testament's Literal Sense," *Tyndale Bulletin* 59.1 (2008), 31-32.
15. Richard Bauckham, *Jesus and the God of Israel* (Grand

Rapids: Eerdmans, 2008), 33.

16. See Collett, "Trinitarian Hermeneutics," 11-12. Cf. Bauckham, *Jesus and the God of Israel*, 54.

17. Enns, *The Evolution of Adam*, 102.

18. Waltke, "Revisiting Inspiration and Incarnation," 95.

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