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# Eroding the Historical Adam: A Response to *Adam and the Genome*

by [Simon Turpin](#) on June 1, 2017

## Abstract

The matter of Adam's historicity for many Christians today is often seen as unimportant or a side issue. Because of the impact of evolution on the theological world today, an increasing number of evangelical scholars are denying Adam's historicity. A recent example of this can be seen in the book *Adam and the Genome*. This article will evaluate all the biblical arguments put forth by theologian Scot McKnight for his rejection of a historical Adam.

## Introduction

One of the most important questions facing the church today is the historicity of Adam. In today's secular culture, it is common to view the biblical account of Adam as a story, myth, or parable. Today, however, there have been an increasing number of books written by professing evangelical scholars who are denying or doubting Adam's historicity—or at least some of the details about Adam in Genesis.<sup>1</sup> Recently, because of the supposed conflict between theology and science, another book, *Adam and the Genome*, has appeared, which abandons a historical Adam.

The book is split into two sections, with biology professor Dennis Venema tackling the scientific issues of the genome while New Testament theologian Scot McKnight deals with Adam from a biblical perspective. This review will seek to evaluate McKnight's main arguments. For a defense of Adam as a historical person please read "[In Defense of the Historical Adam](#)" and "[When Was Adam Created?](#)"<sup>2</sup>

McKnight's main thesis throughout his chapters is that there is no historical Adam and that this has *no* impact on the Bible's redemptive narrative.

## Science and the Bible

Although McKnight argues that his interpretation of Adam is based on Scripture, it is important to recognize that it is very much motivated by the current evolutionary paradigm:

So we are right back with our two facts: science’s view that human DNA goes back to more than two people and the Bible’s apparent teaching that it all goes back to two people, Adam and Eve. So we face the facts. The Bible really does make it look like Adam and Eve are humans from whom we descend. But scientists are going to tell us straightaway that Adam and Eve themselves had ancestors. . . . So we come to this point, and it is for me the most significant pastoral question pastors need to ask in tandem with scientists: *Are you willing to face the facts—the facts of the Bible and the facts of science?*<sup>3</sup>

However, it is not “science’s view” that human DNA goes back to more than two people. Rather, it is the view of certain scientists who believe in evolution. McKnight has also failed to distinguish between two significantly different types of science: historical science and observational science. Historical science seeks to reconstruct the unrepeatable, unobservable past by looking at the evidence of the past events that produced what we see in the present. And such historical reconstructions are very dependent on a scientist’s belief system or worldview. On the other hand, observational science uses repeatable, observable, testable experiments to find out how things in the present world operate so that we can find cures for disease or produce new technology or make other scientific advancements. Evolutionary scientists even recognize this distinction.<sup>4</sup> He also confuses “facts” with evolutionists’ *interpretation* of observable evidence, and he fails to see that those interpretations are based upon the *assumptions* of an anti-biblical, naturalistic worldview. So, it is McKnight who seems unwilling to face the facts.

As with most recent books that deal with the subject of evolution and Genesis, McKnight shows no interaction with any YEC responses to these issues and simply dismisses and caricatures as “fundamentalists” those who disagree with him on Adam. In fact, he goes so far as to say that “scientific creationists” are reacting out of “fear,” namely, a “fear that the Bible might be wrong and their entire faith might collapse.”<sup>5</sup> Therefore, McKnight believes what is needed is an “honesty about what the texts and empirical studies actually say.”<sup>6</sup> This could have been taken seriously only if McKnight had at least shown himself to be honest in how he deals and interacts with others who disagree.<sup>7</sup> Nevertheless, McKnight’s main concern, something Answers in Genesis has long pointed out, is that this debate is causing young people to leave the Church:

The number one reason young Christians leave the faith is the conflict between science and faith, and that conflict can be narrowed to the conflict between evolutionary theory and human origins as traditionally read in Genesis 1–2.<sup>8</sup>

This is because most of these young people recognize that evolution and the Bible are incompatible with one another. McKnight wants to argue that they have misunderstood the Bible’s context but that once they understand it correctly they will see that it allows for evolution.

## **Adam: Who Art Thou?**

Because of his acceptance of evolution, it should be of no surprise that McKnight brings up a lot of the classical objections to reading Genesis 1–11 as a concise report of actual events in time-space history. For example, Genesis 2 is seen as a second account of creation which cannot be harmonized with Genesis 1.<sup>9</sup> However, this is driven by his source critical view of the

Pentateuch and ignores the differences and nuances in these passages such as the use of the divine names.<sup>10</sup> He also brings up the popular argument that the “author of Genesis 1 . . . comes to the conclusion that the sky is a dome or a ‘vault’”<sup>11</sup> and the frequent question about where Cain got his wife.<sup>12</sup> These and others issues (such as Adam being created from dust, the garden of Eden, and a global flood)<sup>13</sup> are reasons why McKnight believes Genesis invites us to “fresh readings” since they should “make an honest reader wonder whether they are meant to be strictly historical.”<sup>14</sup> But why would the “honest” reader dismiss them as historical? The most honest reader there ever was (Jesus) never did. He took Genesis as straightforward history ([Matthew 19:4–6](#); [24:37–39](#); [Mark 10:6](#); [Luke 17:26–27](#)). The reason McKnight dismisses these texts as unhistorical is that, whether he realizes it or not, he has already limited history (at least pre-Abrahamic history) and science to a purely naturalistic perspective. In other words, everything must be explained by time and chance and the laws of nature working on matter. But this way of thinking about history and science has not always been the dominant perspective in science.<sup>15</sup> It is today, however, and because McKnight has been influenced by that naturalistic worldview, he dismisses supernatural elements within the text of Genesis 1–11. From a naturalistic perspective, history and science cannot speak to anything from outside of what you can observe; therefore, you cannot have revelation from God speak on the matter. When it comes to Genesis 1–11, McKnight has simply adopted the methods and conclusions of critical secular scholarship.

McKnight also makes the false distinction between the “literary Adam” and the “historical Adam”<sup>16</sup> and instead prefers to use terms such as “archetypal,” “genealogical,” and “literary” to describe Adam. He states:

“Archetypal Adam and Eve” refers to their representation of all humanity—Adam as Everyman and Eve as Everywoman. “Genealogical Adam” refers to Adam (and Eve) in genealogical lists, giving off (at least) the hint that the composer of the genealogy saw them as real persons. “Literary Adam (and Eve) refers to the Adam and Eve of Genesis taking on a life of their own because they are found in a text within Israel’s Scriptures.<sup>17</sup>

But why does the genealogy in Luke, for example, only give the hint of seeing Adam as a real person? Luke (3:23–38) presents Adam alongside numerous historical individuals (Noah, Abraham, Joseph, David) who are included in the genealogy of Christ. Luke is a credible historian who examined things carefully to give his readers certain knowledge ([Luke 1:3–4](#)), and he shows that Christ’s genealogy can be traced back to the first man and father of all humanity. If Adam is not a historical figure, then it undermines Luke’s point by using a mythical figure to make a theological point. Luke clearly believed Adam was historical (see also [Acts 17:26](#)).

Even though many theistic evolutionists look for an actual “Adam” who became head of the human race, chosen from a group of hominids, McKnight rightly points out, “One might suggest that, but it is rather obvious to all readers of Genesis 1–2 that *there are no other humans present from whom Adam and Eve could have been chosen.*”<sup>18</sup>

The primary reason, however, that McKnight believes Genesis should be read as something other than a historical description of events is that he believes it was impacted by the texts of the neighboring ANE (ancient Near Eastern) peoples (i.e. *Enuma Elish*, the *Gilgamesh Epic*, and

*Atrahasis*).<sup>19</sup> McKnight therefore argues that Adam (and Eve) should be viewed as part of the narrative used by Israel in discourse with the other nations in the ANE:

A contextual approach to reading Genesis 1–3 immediately establishes that the Adam and Eve of the Bible are *a literary Adam and Eve*. That is, Adam and Eve are part of a narrative designed to speak into a world that had similar and dissimilar narratives. Making use of this context does not mean Adam and Eve are “fictional,” and neither does it mean they are “historical.” To be as honest as we can with the text in its context, we need to begin with the undeniable: Adam and Eve are literary—are part of a narrative that is designed to reveal how God wants his people to understand who humans are and what humans are called to do in God’s creation.<sup>20</sup>

This contextual reading allows McKnight to see that there is no one interpretation of “Adam and Eve.” McKnight points out that from the second temple period to the time of the New Testament (530 BC–90 AD), the “Adam and Eve” of the biblical narrative have been interpreted in a variety of ways. That is why through history “the literary Adam was a wax Adam.”<sup>21</sup>

Another problem with McKnight’s view that Adam is not historical is that it is completely out of line with almost all approaches to Adam throughout history. Did first-century Jews think Adam was historical? Yes.<sup>22</sup> Did the New Testament authors think so? Yes. Did Jesus himself think the Adam was historical? Yes. Did the earliest Christians believe this? Yes.<sup>23</sup> Nevertheless, McKnight claims that it is not until the advent of modern genetics that we now know Adam was not historical. If McKnight’s view of Adam is the biblical one, then why did no one until him (or Karl Barth or Peter Enns)<sup>24</sup> believe this? Therefore, to claim that when you read the Bible in its context Adam is not historical is to be in complete disagreement with people in the ancient world and throughout the history of the Church who did not understand Genesis that way.

## Paul and Adam

When it comes to the New Testament, McKnight argues, “The Adam of Paul was not the historical Adam.”<sup>25</sup> In answering the question as to what kind of Adam is found in Romans 5, McKnight says,

The answer is clear: Paul’s Adam is the *literary* Adam of Genesis filtered through the Jewish tradition of interpreting Adam as the *archetypal*, *moral*, and *exemplary* Adam.<sup>26</sup>

McKnight believes Paul received a “literary Adam” that had already been filtered through a conversation that had been going on for a long time amongst Jewish interpreters. In his treatment of [Romans 5:12](#), McKnight denies that the doctrine of original sin is to be found there and, like many theistic evolutionists, blames Augustine for thinking that it is:

Paul neither affirms nor denies *transmission of sin, a sinful nature, and death* by way of procreation and birth and a life lived before God. What became central in later theories of salvation—that each human sinned “in” Adam and that each human is born condemned and in need of salvation—no matter how clear this is in logic, *cannot be found in* [Romans 5:12](#).<sup>27</sup>

For McKnight, “Paul is concerned not just with Adam unleashing cosmic death but with each of us as an Adam or Eve generating our own death.”<sup>28</sup> Therefore, “Paul cannot blame Adam; he blames each person for sinning like Adam.”<sup>29</sup>

Is McKnight right concerning [Romans 5:12](#)? Is our sin the result of Adam’s disobedience or because of our own individual sin? It should be recognized that the text indicates a primary and a secondary cause. The primary cause is Adam’s disobedience, when death entered the world; the secondary cause is the sin of individuals who through their own disobedience bring death upon themselves.<sup>30</sup> Throughout [Romans 5:12–21](#) Paul contrasts the sin of the one man (Adam) and the righteousness of the one man (Jesus).

The whole argument of [Romans 5:12–21](#) is based on the unity of all sinners in Adam and the unity of the redeemed in Christ. Throughout this passage, Paul speaks of the sin of one man (verses 15–19) and not individuals as the cause of the problem. It can be understood from Paul’s comments in [Romans 5:19](#) (“For as by one man’s disobedience many were made sinners”) that Adam’s disobedience (sin) made all of his descendants guilty by virtue of his first sin. Therefore, “Paul is insisting that people were really ‘made’ sinners through Adam’s act of disobedience.”<sup>31</sup> In context, the “many” of verse 19 are the “all men” of verse 12. It is because of Adam’s disobedience that we are considered sinners. This is not to deny human responsibility for sin, because we “are not guilty for Adam’s sin; we are guilty sinners in Adam.”<sup>32</sup> Moreover, Paul’s argument in [Romans 5:12–21](#) is fatally undermined if Adam means mankind in general, a metaphor for everybody. If it were not by one man that sin, condemnation, and judgment came upon all, then how can it be by one man, Jesus Christ, that salvation comes? The parallel is broken and the analogy does not work if Adam is a metaphor for mankind.

Although the term “original sin” may have been employed by Augustine to refer to our collective human guilt and corruption, this does not mean that the term was invented by him. There is an outline of the teaching of original sin in the Patristic theology of Irenaeus (AD 130–202), Basil (AD 329–379) and Ambrose (AD 340–397).<sup>33</sup> Moreover, the Jewish people of the second temple period (530 BC–70 AD) “shared the view that human sin [was] derived from Adam ([IV Ezra 3.7](#); Sifre [Deut. 3:23](#)).”<sup>34</sup> Possibly the clearest text from these Jewish writers that refers to original sin resulting from Adam is found in [2 Esdras 3:21–22](#), [26.35](#)

In the end, McKnight believes that Paul’s Adam is literary, not historical. But as fellow evolutionary creationist Denis Lamoureux has pointed out that to read Paul apart from a historical Adam “is a very counterintuitive way to read Scripture.”<sup>36</sup>

## Conclusion

Sadly, *Adam and the Genome* is further evidence of the direction in which many evangelicals are now turning when it comes to this issue of Adam. The historicity of Adam and his Fall in sin are not unimportant matters but are biblical facts with huge theological implications. The historicity of Adam is intertwined all the way through the Bible’s history and theology. If there is no Adam, then the whole of the biblical message falls apart, for he is essential to the biblical message of creation, fall, and redemption. The disagreement over Adam’s historicity and the process by

which God created him completely ignores the big picture of Adam and his importance in the narrative of Scripture.

## Footnotes

1. See Francis Collins, *The Language of God: A Scientist Presents Evidence for Belief* (Pocket Books: Great Britain, 2007) 126, 207; Tremper Longman III, “What Genesis 1–2 Teaches (and What It Doesn’t)” in *Reading Genesis 1–2: An Evangelical Conversation* (ed. J. Daryl Charles; Peabody Massachusetts: Hendrickson Publishers, 2013) 122.; Christopher Hays & Stephen Herring, “Adam and the fall” in *Evangelical Faith and the Challenge of Historical Criticism* (eds. Christopher M. Hays and Christopher B. Ansberry; Grand Rapids, Michigan: Baker Academic, 2013) 24-54; Denis O. Lamoureux, “Evolutionary Creation View,” in *Four Views on the Historical Adam* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2013), 37–65.
2. For a more in-depth discussion of the biblical, historical, and scientific evidence for the truth about Adam, see the 16-author work edited by Terry Mortenson, [\*Searching for Adam: Genesis the Truth about Man’s Origin\*](#) (Green Forest, AR: Master Books, 2016).
3. See Dennis R. Venema and Scott McKnight, *Adam and the Genome: Reading Scripture after Genetic Science* (Brazos Press: Grand Rapids, Michigan, 2017), 100. Throughout his chapters McKnight places significant weight upon the evidence from science to dismiss Adam as a historical person: see: 93–97, 132, 145.
4. See “Two Kinds of Science?,” Answers in Genesis, <https://answersingenesis.org/what-is-science/two-kinds-of-science/>.
5. Venema and McKnight, *Adam and the Genome*, 101.
6. Ibid.
7. As a scholar McKnight is obligated to at least interact with some of the many books and articles written by leading young-earth creationists (both Biblical scholars and scientists). If he had done so then he would have realized that his points are badly mistaken and have been answered long ago.
8. Venema and McKnight, *Adam and the Genome*, 104–105. See also 171–173.
9. Ibid, 102.
10. For example, it is often argued by theistic evolutionists that the differences between Genesis 1 and 2, such as the use of the divine names, mean that they are separate and contradictory accounts of creation. However, this overlooks the context and purpose of the chapters. In [Genesis 1:1–2:3](#) the divine name used is *'elohiym* which appears 35 times and focuses on the majesty and power of God. Whereas in [Genesis 2:4–3:24](#), God’s covenant keeping *Yahweh* is combined with *'elohiym*, which appears 20 times. Genesis 1 and 2 are not separate and contradictory accounts of creation. Rather [Genesis 2:4–25](#) focuses on events leading up to and including man in the garden of Eden. For a critique of the idea that Genesis 2 is a second account of creation, see Simon Turpin, “Genesis 2—Defending the Supernatural Creation of Adam,” Answer in Genesis, September 21, 2016, <https://answersingenesis.org/bible-characters/adam-and-eve/genesis-2-defending-supernatural-creation-adam/>.

11. Venema and McKnight, *Adam and the Genome*, 125. For a refutation of the idea that the sky in [Genesis 1:6–8](#) was a solid dome see Gary Vaterlaus “Underneath a Solid Sky,” Answers in Genesis March 9, 2009, <https://answersingenesis.org/contradictions-in-the-bible/underneath-a-solid-sky/>.
12. *Ibid.*, 96, 145.
13. McKnight believes these issues should keep us from reading Genesis 1–11 as history. See the above article “Defending the Supernatural Creation of Adam,” for a defence of Genesis 2 as an accurate account of history. Also, for a defence of the flood as a unique account of a historical global event see Dr. Andrew A. Snelling and Ken Ham “Was the Flood of Noah Global or Local in Extent?,” Answers in Genesis, April 17, 2013, <https://answersingenesis.org/the-flood/global/was-the-flood-of-noah-global-or-local-in-extent/>; and Steve Ham, “Is Genesis 1–11 a Derivation from Ancient Myths?,” March 29, 2011, <https://answersingenesis.org/creationism/creation-myths/is-genesis-1-11-a-derivation-from-ancient-myths/>.
14. *Ibid.*, 96.
15. For example, Peter Harrison has shown how the fall of Adam influenced modern science. See Peter Harrison, *The Fall of Man and the Foundations of Science* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007).
16. See Venema and McKnight, *Adam and the Genome*, 107–108.
17. *Ibid.*, 108.
18. *Ibid.*, 145.
19. *Ibid.*, 111–146.
20. *Ibid.*, 118.
21. *Ibid.*, 149.
22. Although McKnight has a chapter discussing various Jewish interpretations of Adam before and up till the first century, he concludes that “no author cared about giving Adam a historical reading” (Venema and McKnight, *Adam and the Genome*, 168). However, McKnight’s treatment of the Jewish sources is clearly bent to fit with his reading Adam as “archetypal,” “genealogical,” and “literary”—basically anything other than historical. For a brief discussion of the relevant Jewish sources that understood Adam as historical, see William VanDoodewaard, *The Quest For The Historical Adam: Genesis, Hermeneutics, and Human Origins* (Grand Rapids, MI: Reformation Heritage Books, 2015), 21–22.
23. For a defense of a historical Adam throughout Church history, see Dr. Tom Nettles’s chapter, “Adam’s Place in the History of the Church’s Theology,” in Terry Mortenson, ed., *Searching for Adam: Genesis & the Truth About Man’s Origin* (Green Forest, AR: Masters Books, 2016), 73–111.
24. Both Barth in the twentieth century, and Enns in the twenty first century, because of the influence of evolutionary thinking rejected Adam as historical. See Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics: The Doctrine of Reconciliation*, vol. 4, Part 1 (Edinburgh, Scotland: T&T Clark, 1956) 508–509; Peter Enns, *The Evolution of Adam: What the Bible Does and Doesn’t Say about Human Origins* (Grand Rapids, MI: Brazos Press, 2012), xvi.
25. Venema and McKnight, *Adam and the Genome*, 188.
26. *Ibid.*, 187.
27. *Ibid.*, 183–84.
28. *Ibid.*, 184

29. Ibid., 187.
30. This is also recognized by Colin G. Kruse, *Paul's Letter to The Romans: The Pillar New Testament Commentary* (W. B. Eerdmans: Grand Rapids, Michigan, 2012), 240–242.
31. Douglas Moo, *The Epistle to the Romans: NICNT* (W. B. Eerdmans: Grand Rapids, Michigan, 1996), 345.
32. Michael Horton, *The Christian Faith: A Systematic Theology for Pilgrims on the Way* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Zondervan, 2011), 426.
33. See Peter Sanlon, “Original Sin in Patristic Theology,” in Hans Madueme and Michael Reeves, eds., *Adam, The Fall, and Original Sin: Theological, Biblical, and Scientific Perspectives* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2014), 85–107.
34. Brevard Childs, *Biblical Theology of the Old and New Testaments* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1993), 579.
35. “For the first Adam, burdened with an evil heart, transgressed and was overcome, as were also all who were descended from him. Thus the disease became permanent; the law was in the hearts of the people along with the evil root; but what was good departed, and the evil remained . . . in everything doing just as Adam and all his descendants had done, for they also had the evil heart” ([2 Esdras 3:21–22](#), [26](#) NRSV).
36. Denis O. Lamoureux, “Evolutionary Creation View,” in Matthew Barrett and Ardel B. Caneday, eds., *Four Views on the Historical Adam* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2013), 63.