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# FIRST THINGS

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## THE HISTORICAL ADAM

by  
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**W**hat historical claims does the Bible make about Adam and Eve? And is belief in a historical Adam and Eve compatible with the scientific evidence? In order to avoid the pitfalls of reading contemporary science into the biblical texts, it is best to treat these questions separately. Only after having determined what the Bible actually says about the historical Adam shall we be in a position to judge whether those claims are compatible with what we know of human origins from contemporary science.

The stories of Adam and Eve are largely confined to the second and third chapters of Genesis. They are part of the pre-patriarchal narratives, often called the *primaeval* history, which make up Genesis 1–11. Old Testament scholars have long remarked on the resemblance of Genesis 1–11 to the religious literature of the ancient Near East. Grand themes such as the creation of the world, the origin of mankind, and the near destruction of humanity in the cataclysmic Flood are present in both the ancient myths and Genesis 1–11. By contrast, beginning in Genesis 12, the text’s focus narrows sharply to Israel. From here on, no such similarity exists between Genesis and the myths of the ancient Near East.

Should the *primaeval* narratives of Genesis 1–11 be understood, then, as a compilation of Israelite myths? In raising this question, we are using the definition of “myth” employed by folklorists and classicists: A myth is a traditional, sacred narrative explaining how the world and man came to be in their present form. A myth seeks to explain present realities by anchoring them in the prehistoric past and so to validate a culture’s contemporary institutions and values. In contrast to other forms of folklore, such as folktales and legends, myths are authoritative for the culture that embraces them. They are sacred narratives, and as such their main characters are not usually human beings alone but deities or quasi-divine heroes, whose

activities are set in an earlier age or another realm. Stories of the origin of the world and of mankind are just two of the most prominent examples of myth.

The lines between myth, folktale, and legend are apt to be blurry, but we can identify certain “family resemblances” that unite most myths:

1. Myths are narratives, whether oral or literary.
2. Myths are traditional stories handed down from generation to generation.
3. Myths are sacred for the society that embraces them.
4. Myths are objects of belief for members of the society that embraces them.
5. Myths are set in a *primaeval* age or another realm.
6. Myths are stories in which deities are important characters.
7. Myths seek to anchor present realities such as the world, mankind, natural phenomena, cultural practices, and the prevailing cult in a primordial time.
8. Myths exhibit fantastic elements and are not troubled by logical contradiction or incoherence.

Anchoring present realities in the primordial past is the heart of myth. The *primaeval* history of Genesis 1–11, including the stories of Adam and Eve, functions as Israel’s foundational myth, laying the basis of Israel’s worldview. The claim here is not that the narratives of Genesis 1–11 are derived from the myths of the ancient Near East. Hermann Gunkel (1862–1932) and the pan-Babylonian school that followed him made such an assertion, but few scholars defend the “dependence thesis” today. Rather, the claim is that the *primaeval* narratives belong to the genre of myth principally on the basis of their sharing common mythic themes and their effort to anchor present realities in the deep past.

For example, in Genesis 2 we have a story of the origin of humanity that supplements the brief notice of mankind’s creation in chapter 1. Although some have suggested that the story of Adam and Eve’s creation describes a different, later event, there is little in the text that would support this interpretation. On the contrary, there are three reasons for thinking that Genesis 2 is a description of the original creation of man. First, the purpose of the *primaeval* narratives of Genesis 1–11 is to portray God’s universal plan for and dealings with mankind. God was not preoccupied with just the offspring of one specially created human couple to the neglect of everyone else, a sort of pre-Israelite election, but with all mankind. Second, a comparison of the story of the creation of man in Genesis 2 with other ancient Near Eastern creation

stories, such as the *Atrahasis Epic*, shows that Genesis shares with those stories an interest in telling how mankind as such came to exist. Third, the account in Genesis 2, when read at face value, is about human origins. The author states explicitly that *there was no man* to do the work of agriculture, until God created man. Moreover, woman does not appear until her creation in Genesis 2:22. The name later given by the man to his wife, said to mean “the mother of all living” (Gen 3:20), affirms her (and the man’s) progenitorship of all mankind.

Further, attempts to ground natural phenomena in the primordial past abound in the account in Genesis 3 of the primordial couple’s disobedience to God as a result of their seduction by the serpent and of the punishments pronounced by God upon the serpent, the man, and the woman. Though the story does not explain the origin of evil as such—the deceitful serpent simply appears in the Garden, opposing God—it does offer a multifaceted explanation of human misery as a result of sin.

So even though attempts to show direct borrowing of Genesis 1–11 from ancient Near Eastern myths are fraught with conjecture and uncertainty, it cannot be denied that these chapters treat many of the same themes as do ancient Near Eastern myths, and that they seek to ground present realities in events of the primordial past. In terms of genre, Genesis 1–11 has key characteristics of myth.

That is not the whole of the story, however. Another feature of these chapters must be taken into account: their apparent interest in history. This interest is most clearly expressed in the genealogies that order the narratives chronologically. The narratives of Genesis are interspersed with genealogical notices that include the principal characters in lines of descent, thus turning the primaeval narratives into a primaeval history. We have in Genesis 1–11 not a cluster of unordered prehistoric stories, but a chronological account beginning at the moment of creation and carrying through to the call of Abraham.

Mere chronology, however, is not sufficient to indicate a historical interest. The *Enuma Elish* contains chronologically arranged stories but hardly has a historical interest. What makes Genesis 1–11 different is that the genealogies meld seamlessly into the historical period of the patriarchs, where the historical interest is obvious and not in dispute. Just as Abraham is presented as a historical person, so his ancestors are presented as historical persons. If the first eleven chapters of Genesis are in one sense myth, they are in another sense history.

That said, the artificial symmetry of ten antediluvian ancestors from Adam through Noah followed by ten postdiluvian ancestors from Shem through Abraham, together with the fantastic lifespans of the antediluvians, indicates that we are not dealing here with straightforward history. On the basis of comparative studies of Sumerian literature, the eminent Assyriologist Thorkild Jacobsen proposed that we recognize a unique genre of literature, which he dubbed “mytho-history.” People in the ancient Near East were already aware that the world was extremely old. According to the Babylonian priest Berossus, kings had reigned in Babylon for 432,000 years prior to the Flood. Yet the biblical genealogies famously total a scant 1,656 years from Adam until the Flood, with another 367 years from the Flood to the call of Abraham. Genesis presents a history of the world that is extremely short by ancient standards, bound tightly by father-son genealogies. We should not imagine that the genealogies contemplate the enormous leaps that would be necessary to bring them into harmony with what we know of the history of mankind; but neither should we imagine that they comprise purely fictitious characters. We can avoid these antitheses by understanding the brief history they chronicle as a mytho-history, not to be taken literally.

Ancient Near Eastern myths are often metaphorical rather than literal. Consider the story of Marduk’s creation of the world from Tiamat’s corpse in the *Enuma Elish*. No ancient Babylonian looking to the sky expected to see the desiccated flesh and bones of Tiamat overhead, nor did he expect to find the Tigris and Euphrates flowing out of Tiamat’s eye sockets. These images are figurative. Similarly, in the *Epic of Gilgamesh*, Gilgamesh and Enkidu’s slaying of the Bull of Heaven (the constellation Taurus) and distribution of its meat to the people of Uruk could not possibly be taken literally. Not only is it impossible for a stellar constellation to rampage through a Sumerian town, to be grabbed by the tail and stabbed, butchered, and eaten, but if all these things literally happened, then the Bull of Heaven should no longer be seen shining serenely in the night sky.

If Genesis 1–11 functions as mytho-history, then these chapters need not be read literally. The accounts of the origin and Fall of man are clearly metaphorical or figurative in nature, featuring as they do an anthropomorphic deity incompatible with the transcendent God of the creation account. The anthropomorphic nature of God, merely hinted at in chapter 2, becomes inescapable in chapter 3, where God is described as walking in the garden in the cool of the day and calling audibly to Adam in his hideout.

Other aspects of the narratives would be fantastic, even to the Pentateuchal author himself, if taken literally. The idea of an arboretum containing trees bearing fruit that, if eaten, would confer immortality or yield sudden knowledge of good and evil must have seemed fantastic to the author. We are not dealing, after all, with miraculous fruit, as if God would on the occasion of eating supernaturally bestow upon the eater immortality or knowledge of good and evil against his divine will.

**T**hen there is the infamous snake in the Garden. He makes for a great character in the story, conniving, sinister, opposed to God, perhaps a symbol of evil, but not plausibly a literal reptile, such as one might encounter in one's own garden, for the author knew that snakes neither talk nor are intelligent agents. Again, the snake's personality and speech cannot be attributed to the miraculous activity of God, lest God become the author of the Fall.

When God drives Adam and Eve from the Garden and posts cherubim and a flashing sword at its entrance to block their re-entry, this is doubtless not intended to be literal, since cherubim were regarded as creatures of fantasy and symbol in ancient Israel. It is not as though the author thought, what realism requires, that the cherubim remained at the entrance of the Garden for years on end until it was either overgrown with weeds or swept away by the Flood.

Since the Pentateuchal author has an interest in history, he intends for his narrative to be at some level historical, to concern people who actually lived and events that really occurred. But those persons and events have been clothed in the metaphorical and figurative language of myth.

If the stories are not meant to be read literally, what central truths do they convey? The following come almost immediately to mind:

1. God is one, a personal, transcendent Creator of all physical reality, perfectly good and worthy of worship.
2. God has designed the physical world and is the ultimate source of its structure and life forms.
3. Mankind is the pinnacle of the physical creation. Though finite, he is a personal agent like God and therefore uniquely capable of all Earth's creatures of knowing his creator.
4. Mankind is sexed, man and woman being of equal value, with marriage given to mankind for procreation and mutuality, the wife being a helper to her husband.

5. Work is good, a sacred assignment by God to mankind to steward the Earth and its creatures.
6. Human exploration and discovery of the workings of nature are a natural outgrowth of man's capacities, rather than divine bestowals without human initiative and effort.
7. Mankind is to set apart one day per week as sacred and for refreshment from work.
8. Man and woman alike have freely chosen to disobey God, suffering alienation from God and spiritual death as their just desert, condemned to a life of hardship and suffering during this mortal existence.
9. Human sin is cumulative and self-destructive, resulting in God's just judgement.
10. Despite human rebellion against God, God's original purpose to bless all mankind remains intact, as he graciously finds a way to work his will despite human defiance.

Such truths do not depend upon reading the *primaeval* narratives literalistically.

When we turn to the New Testament, we find the figure of Adam widely deployed, most importantly by Paul. Many scholars have attempted to distinguish between the *literary Adam* and the *historical Adam*. The literary Adam is a character in a story, specifically the stories of Genesis 2–3. The historical Adam is the person, if such there be, who actually existed—the actual individual whom the stories are allegedly about. By way of analogy, the Pompey of Plutarch's *Lives* is the literary Pompey, whereas the Roman general who actually lived was the historical Pompey. What we want to know is how closely the literary Pompey of the *Lives* resembles the historical Pompey. Similarly, we want to know how closely the literary Adam of Genesis 2–3 resembles the historical Adam, if such there be—or more precisely, whether New Testament authors assert that the literary Adam of Genesis 2–3 closely resembles the historical Adam.

This distinction implies a further distinction between *truth* and *truth-in-a-story*. A statement is true if what it states is the case. A statement is true-in-a-story if it is found in or implied by that story. So if I say, for example, that Gilgamesh slew the Bull of Heaven, my statement, though true-in-the-Epic of Gilgamesh, is false. Truth-in-a-story does not, however, preclude truth. In the Epic of Gilgamesh are, or are implied, statements, such as “Gilgamesh was an ancient Sumerian king,” which are both true-in-the-epic as well as true. The relevant question for us is whether New Testament passages referring to Adam are intended to assert truths or merely truths-in-the-stories-of-Genesis.

These distinctions are not drawn in order to weasel out of commitments on the part of New Testament authors to the truth of the Genesis stories and, hence, of the historical Adam. They are essential to our

treatment of many New Testament passages, which, if interpreted as asserting more than truth-in-a-story, would be plausibly false. Intriguingly, some of these passages involve the citation of pseudepigraphal and mythological texts to whose truth we should not wish to be committed.

**F**or example, in condemning the false teachers of his day, Jude contrasts them negatively to the archangel Michael in his dispute with the devil over Moses's body (Jude 9–10). According to Origen, the story is to be found in the apocryphal book *The Assumption of Moses*. Unfortunately, the extant version of this treatise, known only from an incomplete sixth-century manuscript, does not include the story. Richard Bauckham discerns two different versions of the story in Christian tradition. Noting that ancient lists of apocryphal books mention both a *Testament of Moses* and *The Assumption of Moses*, Bauckham hypothesizes that the earlier, Palestinian *Testament of Moses* was subsequently rewritten and entitled *The Assumption of Moses*. However we reconstruct the story and its evolution within the Christian tradition, what is clear is that Jude is citing extra-biblical legends about the burial of Moses. We thus apparently have here a reference to the literary Moses of *The Testament of Moses* or *The Assumption of Moses*, not to the literary Moses of the Pentateuch.

After providing further examples to illustrate the danger of false teachers, Jude proceeds to quote *1 Enoch* 1:9, a pseudepigraphal book from 400–200 b.c., as though the author were identical to the Enoch of the antediluvian primaeval history (Jude 7:14–15). This text is the *reductio ad absurdum* of facile arguments for Old Testament historicity on the basis of New Testament citation. The idea that an oral tradition emanating from the antediluvian Enoch had been preserved over thousands of years to reach the ears of the author of *1 Enoch* can hardly be called plausible.

One other example is Paul's allusion in *1 Corinthians* 10:4 to the rock that accompanied the ancient Israelites through their wilderness wanderings. Commentators commonly see a reference here to a Jewish legend based on the book of Numbers concerning a miraculous well, shaped like a rock, which continually supplied Israel with water in the desert. This legend, which flourished in later rabbinic Judaism, is documented as early as the first-century *Biblical Antiquities* of pseudo-Philo (10:7; 11:15). The tradition in some form doubtless goes back to the pre-Christian era. Paul cites this extra-canonical tradition in order to identify the rock in the story as Christ, who sustained Israel throughout its sojourn in the wilderness.

On the basis of such examples, we can see how naive it is to argue that merely because some New Testament author refers to a literary figure, whether found in the Old Testament or outside it, that figure is asserted to be a historical person. In every case, we must pay close attention to the context in order to determine whether the New Testament is asserting a figure's historicity or referring to the figure illustratively.

Turning to the many texts concerning Adam in the New Testament, we find that some of them do not necessarily go beyond illustrative reference to the literary Adam of Genesis. The statements of our Lord concerning Adam are plausibly illustrative. He begins by drawing attention to the literary Adam: "Have you not read . . .?" He then cites Genesis 1:27, "male and female he created them," and weds this statement with Genesis 2:24, "Therefore a man leaves his father and his mother and cleaves to his wife, and they become one flesh." This forms the basis for Jesus's teaching on divorce. Jesus is interpreting the story of Adam and Eve to discern its implications for marriage and divorce, not asserting its historicity. Similarly, many of Paul's references to Adam may be understood not to go beyond the literary Adam.

By contrast, in Romans 5:12–21, Paul's exposition of the effects of Adam's sin upon the world does imply the historicity of Adam and his fall into sin. For an action that is wholly internal to a fiction cannot have effects outside the fiction; only a historical action can have real-world effects. Paul's expressions "before the law was given" and "from Adam to Moses" show that he is referring to real epochs of human history, which were affected by Adam's act. It follows that Adam and his sin are asserted by Paul to be historical. What Paul asserts of the historical Adam does not, however, go beyond what we have already affirmed on the basis of our genre analysis of the *primaeval* history of Genesis 1–11—namely, that there was a progenitor of the entire human race through whose disobedience moral evil entered the world.

If the biblical Adam is, or was, a historical person who actually lived, then the obvious question arises: *When* did he live? Given the mythical nature of the *primaeval* history of Genesis 1–11, it is to modern science that we must turn in the attempt to answer this question.

First, however, we must figure out exactly what we are looking for. It would be rash to assume that organisms classified as *Homo* are *ipso facto* human beings. Rather, we need to specify certain conditions that are jointly sufficient for humanity. There is, in fact, a consensus among scientists as to what these conditions are. We are, after all, familiar with ourselves as human beings; we know what a human being is

like. On the basis of paradigmatic examples of humans, we can delineate certain features that, given sufficient anatomical similarity, are sufficient (if not necessary) for human personhood. Anthropologists Sally McBrearty and Alison Brooks list four characteristics of modern human behavior that are widely recognized and frequently repeated in the literature:

- abstract thinking (the ability to act with reference to abstract concepts not limited in time or space);
- planning depth (the ability to formulate strategies based on past experience and to act upon them in a group context);
- behavioral, economic, and technological innovativeness;
- symbolic behavior (the ability to represent objects, people, and abstract concepts with arbitrary symbols, vocal or visual, and to reify such symbols in cultural practice).

When do these behaviors appear in the prehistorical record? Though palaeoneurological evidence provides significant support for humanity's origin prior to the divergence of *Homo sapiens* and Neanderthals, the most important positive evidence for the historical presence of human beings is archaeological evidence for modern human behaviors. McBrearty and Brooks list more than twenty-five "archaeological signatures" of modern human behavior, such as new lithic technologies, hafting and composite tools, structured use of domestic space, and use of pigment. These archaeological signatures provide tangible traces of the four behaviors listed above. They show that the characteristics of modern human behavior were exhibited by the common ancestors of Neanderthals and modern humans. Three striking examples illustrate the point.

*The Schöningen spears.* One of the archaeological signatures of modern human behavior is said to be specialized hunting. The most impressive evidence of prehistoric hunting indicating modern cognitive capacity is eight wooden spears discovered during the mid-1990s at Schöningen, Germany. These artifacts are between 300,000 and 400,000 years old. Carefully crafted from shafts of spruce or pine, these six-to-seven-foot spears are designed for throwing. Each one tapers off toward the butt, so that most of the weight is forward. This design facilitates throwing with greater distance, accuracy, and penetration. In fact, reproductions of the Schöningen spears have been made and tested, and they turn out to be on a par with Olympic javelins! Hartmut Thieme, the chief excavator at Schöningen, contends that the manufacture of the spears, not to mention the cooperation involved in hunting wild herd animals, is sufficient to demonstrate abstract, conceptual thinking.

The spears were found alongside the remains of a herd of wild horses, the prey of the hunters. The hunters apparently pinned the herd of horses against the shore of a lake and may have driven them into the water, thus evincing a hunting strategy. Thieme believes that in order for such a venture to succeed, “extremely careful planning, coordination, and discussion among the hunters” must have taken place. Thieme believes that there must have existed among the hunters, even at this early time, “highly evolved, richly diverse, verbal communication.”

Unfortunately, no human remains were found in connection with the Schöningen spears, so we are left to guess at the identity of the hunters. But the antiquity of these artifacts and their similarity to finds at Clacton and Boxgrove, England, where human remains have been found, suggest that they are the design and manufacture of Heidelberg Man (*Homo heidelbergensis*), who is regarded as the last common ancestor of *Homo sapiens* and Neanderthals.

*Bruniquel Cave.* Many palaeoanthropologists consider the designation of different areas of a habitation site for different activities to indicate sophisticated cognitive functions. There are a number of unambiguous examples of structured use of domestic space in prehistoric contexts. The most striking comes from two strange, circular structures discovered deep inside Bruniquel Cave, France, and reported in 2016. The structures are found in a room at an astonishing depth of 336 meters, which places them in complete darkness. No humans had entered the cave since its natural closing in the Pleistocene and its re-opening in 1990, guaranteeing that the structures inside were undisturbed.

The two circular structures are composed of one to four stacked layers of aligned stalagmites. Short pieces were placed inside the superposed layers as supports, while others were placed vertically against the main structure, perhaps as stays to reinforce the constructions. Traces of fire are to be found on all six structures. Uranium-series dating of stalagmite regrowths on the structures, combined with the dating of stalagmite tips in the structures, give a reliable age of 176,500 years ago, making these edifices among the oldest known human constructions.

Neanderthals were likely the only humans living in Europe at that time. The attribution of the constructions to early Neanderthals is unprecedented in two ways, according to Jacques Jaubert, the lead archaeologist at the site. First, it reveals the use of deep cave space—entailing illumination—by a pre-modern human species. Second, it involves elaborate constructions, never before reported, made of

hundreds of partially calibrated, broken stalagmites, which appear to have been deliberately moved and placed in their current locations—and the presence of several intentionally heated zones.

Jaubert contends that the complexity of the structure, combined with its difficult access, is a sign of a collective project suggesting the existence of “an organized society that was already on the path to ‘modernity.’” It is not just the complexity of the structure, however, that is indicative of design. What distinguishes the Neanderthal constructions is their conventionality, evident from their rarity and placement, which is the essence of symbolic thinking. Reflecting on the discovery at Bruniquel Cave, palaeoanthropologist Chris Stringer remarks that it provides clear evidence that Neanderthals possessed “fully human capabilities.”

*Neanderthal Twine.* Just last year, a 6.2-millimeter fragment of three-ply fiber cord was recovered from the Neanderthal site of Abri du Maras in France. Found with implements dating to forty-to-fifty thousand years ago, the cord has three strings of fibers obtained from the inner bark of a gymnosperm (conifer tree), each twisted clockwise and then as a group twisted counterclockwise. The excavators, led by B. L. Hardy, emphasize that cordage manufacture involves a complex sequence of operations, including processing of the bark fibers and keeping track of multiple, sequential operations simultaneously. They state that the production of cordage requires an understanding of mathematical concepts and general numeracy in the creation of sets of elements and pairs of numbers to create a structure. They conclude that in view of the ongoing revelations of Neanderthal art and technology, “it is difficult to see how we can regard Neanderthals as anything other than the cognitive equals of modern humans.”

**G**iven the recent archaeological findings, Adam and Eve may plausibly be identified as belonging to the last common ancestor of *Homo sapiens* and Neanderthals, usually denominated *Homo heidelbergensis* or Heidelberg Man, living more than 750,000 years ago. Heidelberg Man was not some strange ape-man, but was recognizably human, with a cranial capacity of 1,260 cubic centimeters, well within the modern range. It is noteworthy that population genetics—a subfield of evolutionary biology dealing with genetic differences within and among populations—does not rule out the existence of two sole genetic progenitors of the human race living more than 500,000 years ago. The mythic history of Genesis is fully consistent with current scientific evidence concerning human origins.

As human beings, Neanderthals and other archaic humans are in God's image and therefore have intrinsic moral value and share in man's vocation. But what of Adam and Eve's contemporaries who were not their descendants? On an evolutionary scenario, Adam and Eve emerged from a wider population of hominins. Since Adam and Eve are the fount of all humanity, it follows necessarily that their contemporaries were not human and therefore not in the image of God, since to be human is to be in God's image (Gen. 1:26–27).

We may imagine an initial population of hominins—animals that were like human beings in many respects but lacked the capacity for rational thought. Out of this population, God selected two and furnished them with intellects by renovating their brains and endowing them with rational souls. One can envision a regulatory genetic mutation, which effected a change in the functioning of the brain, resulting in significantly greater cognitive capacity. Such a transformation could equip the individuals with the neurological structure to support a rational soul. Thus the radical transition effected in the founding pair that lifted them to the human level plausibly involved both biological and spiritual renovation. Some behavioral outworkings of this transformation would be immediate, whereas others would emerge slowly through environmental niche construction and gene-cultural coevolution.

Given the incompleteness of the data and the provisionality of all science, the quest for the historical Adam will doubtless never end. Yet given the archaeological evidence, our tentative conclusions are not particularly susceptible to sweeping changes. Adam plausibly lived sometime between around 1 million years ago to 750,000 years ago, a conclusion consistent with the evidence of population genetics. The most recent plausible date for human origins will probably be pushed back with further palaeontological and archaeological discoveries. We may also expect clarification of the place of *Homo heidelbergensis* in human evolutionary history. But for now, that name serves as a placeholder for the large-brained human species that was ancestral to *Homo sapiens* and the various sister species of the human family. We can live with uncertainty. For though we now see through a glass darkly, we shall one day see face to face.

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