

A Brief Theology of Human Origins

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September 14, 2020

Scripture presents us with a rich and clear theology of human origins. God, our Creator, describes our beginning, fall, and the hope of redemption in Christ to us in his Word, showing us our identity and purpose as his image-bearers. Understanding human origins according to God's revelation is essential for a healthy Christian life and a right understanding of the gospel—and as such is essential to our gospel witness to a pagan world.

Created by God

The first chapters of Genesis present a reality more vast than we can comprehend: the Triune God speaking all creation into existence, in all its grandeur, beauty, and complexity. Across the six days, by the power of his word, God brings into being, forms, and fills the earth and universe. As the divine revelation of creation origins, the opening of Genesis is

foundational to the whole counsel of God. Here, God begins to reveal to us who he is, what he has done and is doing, who we are, and the reality of the context in which we exist. Here is our origin, the beginning of sin, the fall and curse, and the beginning of the gospel.

Contemporary views on human origins

Despite the clarity of the text of Genesis 1 and 2, Protestants have debated the nature of human origins in the context of God's work of creation for the past two centuries. Some believe that humans were created through evolutionary biological processes, following a Darwinian model of gradual change and development through mechanisms including natural selection. In this school of thought humanity's origin lies in an ape-hominid-human chain. Scholars have described the process of transition from non-human to human in various ways. C.S. Lewis, Derek Kidner, Tim Keller, C. John Collins, Francis Collins, and others have taught that humanity may have come into existence when God imparted "soul" by a direct act, modifying a pair of hominids to humans who then bore God's image. This intervention created a distinct delineation between humans and hominids, the latter eventually becoming extinct. The change from hominid to human is ontological (a change in 'being') through the addition of a soul.

Others, like Denis Alexander, argue that possibly in the Neolithic period (10,000–15,000 years ago) following evolutionary development under God's ordinary providence, humanity received or sealed the image of God by coming into a special relationship with him. In this model, the change occurs through a Neolithic pair gaining "God-consciousness" or "spiritual life"—a relational, not ontological, change. In some variants of this view, God establishes a covenant relationship with humanity via a pair who receive this "God-consciousness" or "image bestowal." Forms of this model fall within what C. John Collins describes as legitimate Christian views.

Peter Enns, Daniel Harlow, Dennis Lamoureaux, and others posit a third category of approach to human origins. Here again, following a process of theistic evolution (ape-hominid-human) God reveals himself to a large group of early humans, possibly as distant as 150,000 years ago. Scripture's Adam and Eve are read as literary figures, symbolic of the group: they did not exist in any sense as two specific, historical individuals.

Contrasting with these three models of evolutionary origins is the traditional Christian understanding of Genesis on human origins: on the sixth day, God created the first man, Adam, from the dust of the ground, and the first woman, Eve, from Adam's rib (Genesis 1:26–31; Genesis 2:7, 18–25). God made them complete and mature in being, in his image, separate and distinct from the creation of the animals, without ancestry. God did this in a divine, supernatural, and intimate creative act, within a short period of time comprised of part of the sixth day, a day similar in duration to our days. Adam and Eve were God's final, culminating creations, crowning the completion of all of his other creative work. They are the first parents of all humanity. Both Genesis (cf. Genesis 1–2; 3:20; 5:1–4; 6:6–8; 9:6),

and the rest of Scripture testify to this reality (cf. Exodus 20:11; Deut. 4:32; 1 Chron. 1; Job 10:8, 40:15; Psalm 8:5–6, 89:38–48, 104:23–24, 119:73; Eccles. 3:19–20, 7:29, 12:1; Is. 42:5, 43:6–7; Jer. 27:4–5; Ezek. 28:12–13, 37:4–6; Malachi 2:9–10; Matt. 19:4–5; Mark 10:6–8; Luke 3:38; Acts 17:23–26; Rom. 5:12–15; 1 Cor. 11:9–12, 15:21–22, 37–39, 45–49; Col. 3:9–11; 1 Tim. 2:13; Jas. 3:9; Jude 14; Rev. 4:11, 10:6).

The Creator-creature distinction

In Genesis 1, the sixth day narrative (Genesis 1:24–31) provides us with key elements of understanding of our created origin. The sixth day, in its context in the chapter, reveals that our first parents were created in a context of God’s wider work of creation. While present with and in the midst of his creation, God is distinct and separate from it. All that exists in the created order owes its existence to God, who created *ex nihilo*, out of nothing. Genesis 1 declares that we are creatures and God is our Creator. Our creation and every aspect of our continued existence are entirely dependent on God. A weakness of theistic evolutionary models is their diminishment of the Creator-creature distinction by making all or part of human origin inherent to pre-existing human ancestry (along an ape-hominid-human evolutionary line). These theories necessitate some degree of human self-creation, in contrast to a traditional Christian understanding of Genesis 1 and a complete Creator-creature distinction in humanity’s origin.

Image-bearers of God

While the first chapters of Genesis teach us the profound distinction between God as Creator and humanity as his creatures, they also note a marvelous distinction between humanity and the animal creation. God said “Let us make man in our image, after our likeness. And let them have dominion...” (Genesis 1:26). God does not say this in relation to any other creatures. Humanity alone bears this marvelous distinction. The Westminster divines described the image of God in man as comprising of “knowledge, righteousness, and holiness, with dominion over the creatures” (WSC 10). God’s knowledge is original, independent, infinite, and complete. Ours, even prior to the fall, is derivative, dependent, finite, and partial. He made us as his image-bearers so that we could live in communicating fellowship with him, part of which involved serving as stewards over his creation. In our original state we were devoted to God, without any sin—bearing his image in righteousness and holiness. God called Adam and Eve to “be fruitful and multiply and fill the earth and subdue it and have dominion... over every living thing.” (Genesis 1:28) Our multi-faceted vocation as image-bearers of God is an integral reality of our created origin as humans.

Male and female

Another reality of our created origin as humans is that God created male and female (Genesis 1:27), Adam and Eve. Men and women are gloriously different, and at the same time marvelously similar, created in God’s image to complement and bless each other in

their God given calling to be fruitful, multiply, and exercise dominion in creation. Our sex is not only externally evident, but also fixed and intrinsic to our created being, regardless of the ways men or women may attempt to mask or change it by dress, cosmetics, hormonal, or surgical means. The pretense of gender fluidity claims that we can create or recreate ourselves sexually according to our own desires. However, the DNA of each of our cells reflects our divinely created maleness or femaleness, impacting the whole of our being. Even in the post-fall world, where some suffer from rare disorders of sexual development, the disordered chromosomal sex of either male or female can still be discerned, and in cases restored.

Marriage

God created Adam, a man, and subsequently created Eve, a woman, “as a helper fit for him” (Genesis 2:18). In creating Eve, and bringing her to Adam, God also created the first and normative marriage, of one man and one woman (cf. Matt. 19:4–5; Mark 10:6–8). As the prototypical man and woman made for each other, Adam and Eve were created to be able to unite sexually with the marvelous ability to multiply as a result (Genesis 2:24). Multiplication through sexual relationship in marriage is one aspect of God’s good creation calling of fruitfulness, multiplication and dominion.

While evolutionary models of human origins may construe homosexual, bisexual, and polyamorous sexual desires as innate to original humanity or to the ancestry of humanity, Genesis provides the original, God-created paradigm for marriage as a union of one male and one female, husband and wife. God describes this creation ordinance of marriage with its description of monogamous, heterosexual intimacy and desire as very good and sinless. A complementarian view of marriage, with distinct roles of husband and wife, also finds its foundation in the creation of Eve from, for, and with Adam. The Genesis revelation of human origins is foundational to the testimony of Scripture on marriage and good and healthy sexuality, protecting us from sinful and destructive abuses of our God-given sexuality (cf. Ex. 20:14; Lev. 18, 19:29; 20:10–21; Rom. 1:18–27; 1 Cor. 5, 6:9–20; Col. 3:5–6).

Unity of the Human Race

Where evolutionary models of human origins inherently require the possibility of some humans being more evolved and advanced than others, the traditional Christian understanding of human origins presents a foundational unity and equality of all humanity through our first parents, Adam and Eve (Gen. 4–5, 10). God made from one man every nation of mankind. (Acts 17:26) Although it is manifested in various ways, the ultimate reason for disunity, rivalry, bitterness, oppression and other evils perpetrated between nations, ethnicities, families, or individuals is spiritual: it is a result of sin. (Gen. 3–4; Col. 3:11–13)

Goodness, Sin and Suffering

Genesis 1 repeatedly emphasizes the nature of God’s original creation as “good” and “very good” (Gen. 1:4, 10, 12, 18, 25, 31). Biblical descriptions of both the pre-fall creation and the new creation to come, depict a world free of sin, suffering, violence, and death (cf. Isa. 11:6–9). They are paradigmatic of the original existence of the created order, including humanity in relation to God, one another, and the rest of the creation. Adam and Eve’s fall into sin and the ensuing curse are a point of drastic change: “sin came into the world through one man, and death through sin, and so death spread to all men because all sinned... by the one man’s disobedience the many were made sinners” (Rom. 5:12, 18). All humanity, apart from God’s grace, is now unrighteous, unholy, and suppresses the truth of God. We inhabit a world of continued sin, disorder, suffering, violence, and death. In contrast to evolutionary models, all of which require animal suffering and death (along the ape-hominid-human line) prior to the fall, Scripture makes it clear that both human and animal suffering are not inherent to God’s good creation, but connected to sin, the curse and judgement. Part of God’s call to his redeemed people is to work to alleviate and minimize both human and animal suffering through gospel proclamation and acts of mercy and justice (cf. Prov. 12:10; Isa. 11:6–9; Jonah 4:11; 1 Sam. 17; Luke 10:25–37). Creation groans for the coming restoration of all things (Rom. 8:20–25; Rev. 21:4).

The First and Second Adam

A key passage for a Christian theology of human origins is Colossians 1:15–17 which tells us, “[Christ is] the image of the invisible God, the firstborn of all creation... by him all things were created that are in heaven and that are on earth... all things were created through him and for him... he is before all things and in him all things hold together.” When we read the scene of Adam’s creation in light of Colossians, we realize that God the Son—the pre-incarnate Christ—was involved in creating the first man and woman. He intimately created the humanity that he took to himself in accomplishing redemption. He formed the man and breathed into him the breath of life; he formed the woman from the rib of the man. When Adam and Eve sinned, bringing themselves and all their posterity into a fallen state, the Creator promised to become the Redeemer, the coming Seed of the Woman (Genesis 3:15). He provided a covering for them by blood (Genesis 3:21). Immediately after the fall, God began to reveal his plan of redemption through Old Testament sacrifice, pointing forward to the incarnate sacrifice he would make in our flesh (Heb. 10:1–14). The whole Old Testament unfolds God’s covenant promise of salvation in Christ.

The fullness of the good news of Jesus Christ comes at his incarnation as the Redeemer. This is what the angels, who sang at creation (Job 38:7), now sing (Luke 2). It is what the apostles rejoiced in: “As in Adam all die, so also in Christ shall all be made alive” (1 Cor. 15:22). When we, Adam and Eve’s offspring, the human race, were dead in our sin, the Word, through whom all things were made, became flesh and dwelt among us, for our

salvation (John 1; Eph. 2:1–10). He took the just penalty of the sin of his people upon himself at the cross (Genesis 3:4; Acts 2:22–32; Rom. 3:9–26; Heb. 9:24–28).

Here is the Savior we need—the one who created us, who is like us in every way, except for sin (Heb. 2, 3:15). Just as God breathed life into Adam and made him a living being (Gen. 2:7), so in Christ he raises his new creation from spiritual death (Ezekiel 37:9–10, Eph. 2:1–10), and physical death (1 Cor. 15; Rev. 11:11).

Through faith in our Lord Jesus Christ, “the Author of life” (Acts 3:15), we are reconciled to God, and freely receive new, eternal life: “By a man came death, by a man has come also the resurrection from the dead... The first man Adam became a living being; the last Adam became a life-giving spirit... the first man was from the earth, a man of dust; the second man is from heaven. Just as we have borne the image of the man of dust, we shall also bear the image of the man of heaven... thanks be to God who gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ” (1 Cor. 15:21, 45, 47–48, 57). He is building one church “a great multitude that no one could number from every nation, from all tribes and peoples and languages.” (Rev. 7:9) Genesis reveals not only our beginning, but also the beginning of the gospel of the one Savior for all humanity.

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["Adam and Eve"](#) by Michael Reeves

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[*All Mankind Descending From Him?*](#) by Richard Gaffin

[*The God Of Creation: Truth And Gospel In Genesis 1*](#) by Richard Phillips

[*God, Adam and You*](#), ed. by Richard Phillips

Further Reading:

J.P. Versteeg, *Adam in the New Testament*. trans. Richard B. Gaffin Jr. Phillipsburg, NJ: P & R Publishing, 2012. 67pp.

Richard Phillips, ed., [*God, Adam and You: Biblical Creation Defended and Applied*](#). Phillipsburg, NJ: P & R Publishing, 2015. 224pp.

William VanDoodewaard, *The Quest for the Historical Adam: Genesis, Hermeneutics, and Human Origins*. Grand Rapids, MI: Reformation Heritage Books, 2015. 359pp.

J.P. Moreland, et al, eds. *Theistic Evolution: A Scientific, Theological, and Philosophical Critique*. Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2017. 1008pp.