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ARTICLES

The New Evangelical Protology and Its Impact On Eschatology

By Erick Mendieta

The ideological and theological divide that was generally assumed to exist between Evangelicals and theistic evolution is shrinking. A major issue moving these tectonic plates closer to each other in recent times is the impact of the conclusions that the Human Genome Project has created among significant Evangelical scholars. Others with views close to their perspective on origins have shifted their understanding of Genesis 1–11 and produced a new Evangelical protology that suggests or proposes alternative readings and hermeneutics to understand the creation account. This is evident in particular when it comes to their understanding of the “historical Adam” that tries to harmonize their understanding of Scripture and its theological message with the current scientific consensus on origins related to the common ancestry of humans.

This article briefly explores how the Human Genome Project has influenced this paradigm change and how it is manifesting itself through new proposals by prominent Evangelical scholars among others. It also summarizes some of the hermeneutical traits that characterize this new Evangelical protology and offers some reactions to understand what impact it has, particularly when it comes to our understanding of what Scripture teaches about human origins and eschatology.

Adam in the Origins Debate

Adam who? Whether we are aware or not, Adam’s role and identity in the Genesis account, his use in the New Testament, and his theological function in

major Christian doctrines have become the epicenter of the new discussion concerning human origins.

“The center of the evolution debate has shifted from asking whether we came from earlier animals to whether we could have come from one man and one woman.”¹ This is how Richard N. Ostling rightly summarizes a new trend since 2011 within the evolution-creation debate that has produced significant changes to the way some prominent Evangelical scholars read and understand the function of the first chapters of Genesis and consider the traditional historical identity of Adam.

The Human Genome Project is listed by members on both sides of the debate, and also within the Evangelical community, as playing a major role for this new shift in understanding.² According to Peter Enns, this research has “shown beyond any reasonable scientific doubt that humans and primates share common ancestry.”³ Likewise, Randall Isaac, executive director of the American Scientific Affiliation, commenting on the scientific challenges presented to the Adam account in Genesis, states, “There was a lot of wiggle room in the past. The human genome sequencing took that wiggle room away.”⁴

Among the lead researchers of the Human Genome Project is the atheist-turned-Evangelical Christian Francis S. Collins, who holds to both creationist and Darwinian perspectives and considers that God as Creator oversaw the process of natural selection, therefore becoming a strong promoter of “theistic evolution” through the BioLogos Foundation as well as the BioLogos blog.⁵

Collins argues that the scientific results of the Human Genome Project indicate that today’s humans

emerged anatomically from primate ancestors somewhere around 100,000 to 150,000 years ago, from a basic population of ten thousand individuals instead of two individuals named Adam and Eve.⁶

On the other hand, Walter Kaiser observes that affirming the historic Christian confession of Adam and Eve has been much easier to do before Collins's work and conversion.⁷ Kaiser also considers that this research presented a "huge paradigm shift for theologians and biblical exegetes to address, especially in light of the confessional creeds of the Christian Church."⁸ As a result of the Human Genome Project and its theological implications, Kaiser observes that all of a sudden a number of new challenges to the biblical record emerged that have a profound impact on biblical concepts and doctrines, such as anthropology, creation, and soteriology.⁹

A perplexing evidence of these new challenges can be illustrated by William Lane Craig's new book on Adam: *In Quest of the Historical Adam: A Biblical and Scientific Exploration*. How important is the historical Adam for the theological construction of Christian doctrine and faith? According to Craig, "it is tempting to view the question of the historical Adam as a peripheral concern, hardly at the heart of Christian theology. It has never been addressed by an ecumenical council, and the church's insouciance cannot be written off wholly as result of the doctrine's being universally accepted."¹⁰ This doctrine, argues Craig, "does not have the centrality that doctrines concerning justification, and sanctification do, not to speak of such doctrines as the Trinity, incarnation and atonement."¹¹

Nonetheless, Craig acknowledges that for many traditional theologians the historicity of Adam is crucial for our understanding of hamartiology or doctrine of sin.¹² However, Craig does not think "that the denial of the historical Adam undermines in turn the doctrine of atonement."¹³ He states, "The attempt to make the doctrine of original sin a necessary condition of the doctrine of the atonement is, however, an overreach."¹⁴ Craig goes even further and concludes that while "the historicity of Adam is entailed by and therefore a necessary condition of the doctrine of original sin,"¹⁵ "it is dubious that the doctrine of original sin is essential to the Christian faith."¹⁶ Therefore, "denial of the doctrine of original sin does not undermine the doctrine of the atonement."¹⁷ Thus, "while the doctrine of original sin depends crucially on the fact of a historical Adam, Christianity need not embrace the traditional doctrine of original sin but may content itself with affirming the universal wrongdoing of human beings and their inability to save themselves."¹⁸ For Craig sustains that "the attempt to explain the universality of human sin by postulating a corruption or wounding of human nature

inherited from Adam is a theological add-on to which the Christian theologian need not be committed."¹⁹

Subsequently, the challenge of the historical Adam for Craig, as is also the case with other prominent Evangelical scholars, is not necessarily its historicity or its theological importance for the Christian doctrine of salvation per se, but the "reverberatory effect on the doctrine of Scripture with regard to Scripture's truthfulness and reliability."²⁰ Because "if the Scriptures clearly teach that there was a historical Adam at the headwaters of the human race, then the falsity of that doctrine would have a reverberatory effect on the doctrine of Scripture with regard to Scripture's truthfulness and reliability. The Scriptures would then be convicted of teaching falsehoods."²¹ Similarly problematic, according to Craig, is if Jesus Himself believed in the historicity of Adam and Eve (Matt 19:4-6). Is He then guilty of teaching doctrinal error? How does His omniscience relate to this issue?²²

Craig maintains that even in the worst-case scenario of a proposal that denies the possibility of Adam's existence, such a proposal is not hopeless for the Christian doctrinal system.²³ However, as Craig admits, this "would involve us in pretty extensive theological revisions of the doctrines of Scripture and incarnation."²⁴ Therefore, he suggests that "we need to consider how Scripture's teaching that there was a historical Adam is or might be compatible with the scientific evidence."²⁵ However, Craig argues that the existing attempts of young earth creationist "Christian science," or revisionist, to understand the historical Adam in light of the current scientific evidence and consensus are not satisfactory and offer unacceptable perspectives to harmonize both.²⁶ Thus, Craig along with other prominent Evangelical scholars, proposes the "need to consider the option that Gen 1-11 need not be taken literally."²⁷ This, according to Craig, would allow us to understand this section of Genesis in light of the benefits of modern scholarship with respect of genre analysis and interpretation of ancient texts, which neither church fathers nor reformers enjoyed but we should not ignore.²⁸

John Walton's Adam

Old Testament Evangelical scholars of standing such as Tremper Longman III, Bruce Waltke, and John Walton have suggested their openness and the need for a reevaluation of the traditional understanding of the historical identity of Adam.²⁹ Among them, John Walton has written extensively on reading the early chapter of Genesis in their ancient Near Eastern context.³⁰ Walton's main concern in his discussions of Genesis is to show that there is no real contradiction or tension between science and the Bible because as Christians "we affirm the importance of both special

revelation (in the Bible and in Jesus) and general revelation (in the world that God has created and that science help us understand).³¹ However, Walton considers that “a perception of conflict between the two is not uncommon.”³²

Yet Walton attempts to resolve this tension, particularly in his book on *The Lost World of Adam and Eve*, by showing that there are “faithful readings of Scripture” that may differ from traditional readings of the past, but which find support in the text and are compatible with its ancient Near Eastern context as well as with some of the more recent scientific discoveries, including the Human Genome Project.

According to Walton, the Human Genome Project is perhaps the most recent advance in science that provides a basis for investigating what we can learn about human origins. Walton also considers that the perceived threat posed by the current consensus about human origins is overblown.

Walton’s main theses are:

1. There is no material creation in Genesis 1–2; creation has to do with establishing functions alone.
2. Adam and Eve are archetypes, not prototypes—meaning they are historical persons but not the biological progenitors of the human race.

Material Origins in the Ancient Near East and the Bible

Among Walton’s main proposals is the argument that the ancient Near East people were not interested in material origins, but in the proper arrangement of the material within an orderly cosmos. As a result of this, Walton also considers in light of this background that the ancient Israelites would not have expected a story on material origins either. However, Richard E. Averbeck strongly disagrees with Walton and considers that both the ancient Near East and the Bible are concerned with material origins.³³ Averbeck also argues that Walton “goes beyond the limits of the text and speaks in contradiction to explicit statements in it.”³⁴

Nonetheless, Walton’s comparison and contrast between the ancient Near East and the Bible’s creation accounts received a mixed response among those who consider it a good introduction and understanding of the ancient Near East’s material relationship with the Bible.³⁵ Others argue that, while it is useful, some of Walton’s conclusions and observations concerning the influence of ancient Near Eastern materials on the Bible accounts of origins are not warranted by the biblical text—especially those dealing with material creation.³⁶

Gordon Wenham rightly states one of the major drawbacks of Walton’s analysis of the ancient Near East and the Bible. He says, “Walton is so concerned to convince his readers that Genesis is an ancient creation myth that he overemphasizes its similarity to Egyptian and Mesopotamian texts, so that Genesis’

originality is downplayed.”³⁷ Likewise, Trevor Craigen asks whether

no revelation was given to the Israelites to change what they were already understanding of the cosmos. Were the words of Moses merely echoing contemporary Israelite understanding? Or, did these words instruct the Israelites on what they were to believe in contradistinction to other nations’ “origins” literature?³⁸

Adam as Archetype, Not Prototype

Walton’s discussion of the historical Adam has also received a mixed response from scholars, with some of them considering his exegetical work on the topic illuminating,³⁹ “a convincing apologetic for Christian and scientist to engage in greater dialogue regarding origins,”⁴⁰ and others who argue that while Walton provides a creative and essentially cohesive interpretation of Genesis 1–3, it is a less-than-convincing case and presents only a “possible” interpretation but not a probable or better one.⁴¹

However, it is important to acknowledge that Walton recognizes that while ancient Israel shares broad ideological commonalities with ancient Near Eastern cosmologies, they interact and develop in distinctive ways in Genesis 1.⁴² For example, according to Walton, “when cosmologies include the creation of humanity as a component, archetypal interests dominate.”⁴³ Yet, the archetypal presentation in Genesis has a different shape entirely. Genesis relates people to God only through His image, thereby receiving a ruling role in the cosmos and views them as serving deity by caring for the sacred space.⁴⁴

Interestingly, Walton observes, “Another distinctive is that Genesis develops the archetype in part through a monogenesis perspective rather than a familiar polygenesis approach observable in ancient Near Eastern texts.”⁴⁵ Walton defines monogenesis and polygenesis as follows:

Monogenesis refers to the idea that all of humanity emerged from a single human pair—ostensibly the general viewpoint in the Hebrew bible (cf. 1 Chronicles 1–9); polygenesis, reflected in the rest of the ancient Near East, is the view that humans were created *en mass*—a logical procedure, since the gods desired slave labor.⁴⁶

However, Walton gives no further consideration to this distinctive feature of the Genesis account.

Walton’s main arguments for his perspective on Adam in *The Lost World of Adam and Eve* begins by a discussion of the occurrences of *’ādām* in Genesis

1–5.⁴⁷ Walton also argues that because of the language used in the creation or forming accounts of Adam and Eve, “forming from dust” and “building from rib,” they should be understood archetypally⁴⁸ rather than as an explanation of how these two unique individuals were uniquely formed.⁴⁹ Furthermore, Walton argues that the ancient Near Eastern accounts on the forming of humans are archetypal as well and could be the reason why this idea is not unfamiliar to the Israelites and perhaps the source of it.⁵⁰ Additionally, Walton contends that the New Testament is more interested in Adam and Eve as archetypes than as biological progenitors.⁵¹ Finally, Walton recognizes that in the New Testament Adam and Eve are presented in different ways: archetypal, illustrative, and historical.⁵² Therefore, according to Walton, to contend that some treatment of Adam is archetypal in Genesis is not to suggest that he is not historical.⁵³ However, it is important to notice that this does not mean that by asserting the historicity of Adam Walton is considering that Adam is the first human, but the first *significant* one.

According to Walton, only the textual element of the genealogies and the theological element of sin and redemption argue strongly for a historical Adam and Eve.⁵⁴ However, Walton observes that for them to play these historical roles does not necessarily require them to be the first human beings or the universal ancestors of all human beings (biologically/genetically).⁵⁵ Walton considers that the question of the historical Adam has more to do with sin’s origins than with material human origins. These distinctions have not been separated in the past, claims Walton, perhaps because there has been no impetus to do so. But, he concludes that in light of the Human Genome Project it has become more important to ask whether these two distinctions always track together.⁵⁶ Therefore, Walton’s suggestion is to accept the historical Adam without deciding on material human origins. According to him, this has the advantage of separating scientific elements (material human origins) from exegetical/theological elements with the result of reducing the conflict between the claims of science and those of Scripture without compromise.⁵⁷

Alternative Evangelical Proposals for Adam

Walton’s proposal represents a paradigm-shifting perspective that moves further from the conservative Evangelical interpretations of Genesis and Adam in particular. Andrew Steinmann considers Walton’s work as evidence of one trend that has become evident among a faction of Evangelical scholars in recent times to effect an accommodation between the Bible and worldviews of non-Evangelicals.⁵⁸ Steinmann argues that particularly on the topic of creation, these scholars “offer interpretations of Scriptures that allow a more congenial alignment of Genesis and other parts of the Bible with current

scientific consensus.”⁵⁹ Steinmann observes also that “these scholars want to move Evangelical views of the meaning of Scripture toward an interpretation of Genesis and other biblical passages that is comfortable with current evolutionary theory while simultaneously seeking to maintain a high view of Scriptural authority.”⁶⁰

Terry Roberson presents a good example of this trend with his comments about the 2013 debate book by Zondervan *Four Views on the Historical Adam*.⁶¹ He notices,

All six contributors are professing evangelicals who claim to believe in inerrancy. Denis Lamoureux believes Adam is a myth and Gregory Boyd is open to that possibility. John Walton, C. John Collins and Philip Ryken hold to a historical Adam, but have different views about how many of the details of Genesis 1–3 are literally true. William Barrick argues for the literal truth and is the only young-earth creationist among the six.⁶²

Additionally, two more authors who are engaged with the Evangelical discussion of origins and of the historical Adam are worth mentioning: Peter Enns and Scot McKnight. Enns considers that the literary evidence from the ancient Near East supports the notion that the creation stories were not written as historical accounts.⁶³ Enns also argues that the Adam story suggests it is not about universal human origins but Israel’s origin, and if we understand Adam as proto-Israel some tensions between the Genesis creation account and evolution are minimized.⁶⁴ After all, according to Enns, “for ancient Israelites, as well as any other ANE peoples, origin stories are focused on telling their own story, not everyone else’s. These stories are about self-definition.”⁶⁵ Therefore, concludes Enns, “it is questionable whether the Adam story is even relevant to the modern question of *human* origins.”⁶⁶

However, Enns acknowledges that the greatest scriptural challenge to the conversation between Christianity and evolution comes from the prominent role that Adam plays in two of Paul’s letters, especially in Romans 5:12–21 and 1 Corinthians 15:20–58.⁶⁷ In these passages, admits Enns, “Paul seems to regard Adam as the first human being and ancestor of everyone who ever lived”⁶⁸ and who is theologically necessary to exist in human history to be personally responsible for alienating humanity from God.⁶⁹ Yet, Enns considers that Paul’s motivation for his unique rendering of Adam is to explain how Christ’s crucifixion and resurrection put all humanity on the same footing and subject to the same universal dilemma of sin and death which requires the same Savior.⁷⁰ But in doing so, argues Enns, Paul assigns to Adam a largely unique role from other uses in ancient

Jewish interpretations of him and it moves well beyond what Genesis and the Old Testament have to say.⁷¹ Therefore, Enns considers that what Paul assumed about Adam has to be understood in Paul's historical context. Paul was a first-century Jew, and his approach to biblical interpretation reflects the assumptions and conventions held by other Jewish interpreters at that time.⁷² According to Enns, in Paul's use of the Old Testament one point is virtually uncontested: "Paul does not feel bound by the original meaning of the Old Testament passage he is citing, especially as he seeks to make a vital theological point about the gospel."⁷³ If we understand this, argues Enns, "we will see that, whatever Paul says of Adam, that does not settle what Adam means in Genesis itself, and most certainly not the question of human origins as debated in the modern world."⁷⁴

Scot McKnight, who confesses to a *prima scriptura* approach to truth, considers that Scripture has a context and that part of reading Scripture is to discern the dialogue at work in the Bible between revelation and its culture.⁷⁵ Therefore, according to McKnight, the reader is challenged "to let the Bible be the Bible in its interactive relationship with the ancient Near East."⁷⁶ Interestingly, McKnight does not assume that the author of Genesis 1–3 knew the ancient Near Eastern creation stories or read them, or was consciously interacting with them, but McKnight considers that "these texts express the kinds of ideas 'in the air' when Genesis 1 and 2 were drafted."⁷⁷

According to McKnight, a contextual approach to reading Genesis 1–3 "immediately establishes that the Adam and Eve of the Bible are a *literary Adam and Eve*."⁷⁸ But what does McKnight mean by using this terminology? He states, "Adam and Eve are part of a narrative designed to speak into a world that had similar and dissimilar narratives."⁷⁹ However, McKnight clarifies that making use of this approach, by comparing them with other ancient Near Eastern stories, does not mean Adam and Eve are "fictional" and neither are they "historical."⁸⁰ Consequently, McKnight offers this perspective about Adam and Eve: "to be as honest as we can be 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 they are called to do in God's creation."⁸¹

McKnight argues that when someone considers Adam and Eve "historical," they imply these seven characteristics: (1) Two *actual* persons named Adam and Eve existed suddenly as a result of God's creation. (2) Those two persons have a *biological* relationship to all human beings that are alive today. (3) Their DNA is our DNA. (4) Those two sinned, died, and brought death into the world. (5) Those two *passed on their sin natures* to all human beings. (6) Without their sinning and passing of that nature to all humans

beings, *not all humans beings would be in need of salvation*. (7) Therefore, if one denies the *historical* Adam, one denies the gospel of salvation.⁸²

McKnight proposes to his readers that instead of fighting a concordist approach to the historical Adam, they should discover the literary, image-of-God Adam and Eve who shed light on humans and human history, but not in a historical, biological, or genetic sense as modern sciences and history demands; rather, they come from the world of the ancient Near East and early Judaism.⁸³ However, McKnight observes that an honest reading of the Bible also leads to what he calls "the genealogical Adam" who is rooted in the literary portrait of Adam and Eve over against their ancient Near Eastern contexts. Additionally, argues McKnight, "*all Jewish genealogies*—when they do appear (and they are not frequent)—that take us back to the origins will take us back to Adam and Eve."⁸⁴ Adam as the first man and Eve as the first woman. So, says McKnight, "*the literary Adam of Genesis became the genealogical Adam in the biblical story*."⁸⁵ Yet, again he warns us "not to confuse the genealogical Adam with the historical Adam because the literary-genealogical Adam is a man with a wax body who can be molded and formed into a variety of Adams."⁸⁶

The next feature added to Adam through the Jewish traditions, according to McKnight, is related to the role that Adam plays as the "*paradigm or prototype or archetype* of the human choice between obedience and disobedience."⁸⁷ This, according to McKnight, is a suggested synthesis of the Adam of the Jewish traditions. Adam, adds McKnight, "is depicted very much as the *moral* Adam."⁸⁸ As a result, in some of these interpretive traditions, "Adam is not just the first human being (the *literary-genealogical* Adam) but also the first sinner, whose sin had an impact on those who followed him."⁸⁹

Finally, McKnight observes that he supports the idea together with Joseph Fitzmyer that "Paul treats Adam as a historical human being, humanity's first parent, and contrasts him with the historical Jesus Christ. But in Genesis itself '*Adām*' is a symbolic figure, denoting humanity. . . . So Paul has historicized the symbolic Adam of Genesis."⁹⁰ Thus, McKnight's advice for interpreters is that "if we are to read the Bible in its context and let the Bible be *prima scriptura*, and to do so with our eyes on students of science, we will need the readers to give far more attention than we have in the past to the various sorts of Adams and Eves the Jewish world knew."⁹¹ Accordingly for McKnight, the sort of Adam that Paul knew is not the *historical* Adam and Eve known today, but the literary, genealogical, moral, exemplary, and archetypal Adam and Eve.⁹² However, McKnight has to acknowledge that "among scholars of Paul, some argue that Paul believed in two real, actual human beings, while others are not sure what Paul believed."⁹³

For example, D. A. Carson considers not only that Paul believed in a historical Adam, but that the historicity of Adam is relevant to his own argument.⁹⁴ Carson observes that in the four passages of Paul where Adam is explicitly mentioned, and in others where he lurks behind several major themes, it is possible to perceive “Paul’s insistence on the historicity of Adam, on his individuality and representative status, on the nature and consequences of the fall, on the links between these things and the person and work of Christ, and on their typological place with respect to the new creation.”⁹⁵ Carson adds that “if this all be allowed to tumble into disarray, the foundations of Christian theology (not just *Pauline* Theology) are threatened. The church is left only with disparate but scarcely related truths, diversely interpreted; or with systems of theology which are Christian in name only, but not deeply and essentially biblical.”⁹⁶

Similarly, Caneday declares that “if Adam was not the first human and progenitor of all humanity, as Genesis and the apostle Paul affirm, then the Gospel of Jesus Christ inescapably falls suspect—because the Gospel of Luke unambiguously traces the genealogy of Jesus back through Joseph, who was thought to be his father, all the way back through Enos, to Seth, then to Adam, and finally to God (Luke 3:18).”⁹⁷ Additionally, Caneday considers that “what Luke’s Gospel forthrightly asserts, Paul accepts as unequivocally factual. On the basis of the genealogical continuum between Adam and Christ, he proceeds to draw out the divinely invested theological significance concerning this relationship with regard to essential Christian beliefs bound up in the gospel.”⁹⁸ Thus, Caneday argues, “The apostle affirms Adam’s historicity and Adam’s symbolic and typological function. He does not separate Adam’s historicity and Adam’s symbolic and typological function as though to insist upon his representative role nullifies his factual existence or vice versa.”⁹⁹ It is evident from these quotations that not everyone in the Evangelical scholarly community denies Adam’s historicity whether in Genesis or in the New Testament, including Paul. Yet there exist significant disagreements with the new proposals that are advanced within the Evangelical scholarly community.

Apart from these important contributors to the Adam debate, there is the recent *Dictionary of Christianity and Science* from Zondervan, which claims that virtually all of its contributors are Evangelical Christians. This reference work is presented as a contemporary investigation of the interaction between the Christian faith and science. Two entries in the dictionary deal with Adam and Eve. The first is titled “Adam and Eve (First-Couple View)” by Todd S. Beal, which affirms that “the evidence throughout the Scripture is that Adam and Eve are historical persons created uniquely by God as the universal

ancestors of mankind.”¹⁰⁰ It also argues “the data from the Human Genome Project does not contradict that: the starting pool of 10,000 humans is an inference from the data— an inference made using the evolutionary assumptions of common ancestry, gradual change over long periods of time, and natural selection.”¹⁰¹

However, the second article, titled “Adam and Eve (Representative-Couple View),” by Tremper Longman III expresses his view of Adam and Eve in an ambiguous way, allowing different possibilities. There are two ways of thinking about them, says Longman: “Perhaps they are a representative couple in the original population (or even a representative couple tens of thousands of years after the original population), or perhaps Adam and Eve simply stand for original humanity.”¹⁰² Thus Genesis 3 teaches us, argues Longman, that original humanity (perhaps the first representative couple; perhaps the entirety of original humanity) then rebelled against God.¹⁰³ Longman argues that this couple represented “what all humans would do (and actually do do) in their place but also so affected the social system that it is ever after impossible not to sin.”¹⁰⁴ Longman concludes his comments suggesting a revision of our understanding of the relationship between Christian theology, soteriology in particular, and the historical Adam on one hand, and on the other hand a renewed appreciation for the role that science has to help us understand the truth claims of the Bible better.¹⁰⁵

The divide among Evangelical scholars on the issue of the historical Adam is evident and polarizing. Andrew Steinmann argues that the inner struggle in Evangelical circles concerning the historical Adam today should be a cautionary tale for Lutherans.¹⁰⁶ It should also be a warning to Seventh-day Adventists, who may naively assume that all Evangelicals are “on our side” when the topic of God’s creation of the world is brought to the fore.¹⁰⁷

Reactions and Responses to the New Evangelical Perspective on Adam

From this brief survey of the recent Evangelical proposals to understand the historical Adam, it is possible to observe certain common hermeneutical traits among this new Evangelical perspective on Adam. These new Evangelicals:

1. Accept the possibility of a stronger influence of ancient Near Eastern creation stories on the biblical account of creation, emphasizing the similarities but ignoring or dismissing their distinctive differences, particularly monotheism and monogenesis. Also, as in the case of Walton, they ignore or contradict the textual evidence from the ancient Near East and the Bible on material origins in order to pursue their argument for functional origins.

2. Propose a “genre calibration” for the Genesis account, which implies not considering it as a historical narrative, but as a “symbolic” or “metaphorical” text, or perhaps just a narrative with important theological concepts that is neither “fictional” nor “historical.” Or they identify and understand it as an “ancient cosmology” or “ancient biology,” which is right in its own terms and context, but not in our present understanding of science. However, particularly Genesis 2 with its “toledot”¹⁰⁸ feature and the historical markers that the chapter uses are indicators that “we have entered in true time human history in time and space.”¹⁰⁹

3. Reinterpret, revise, or reject the New Testament’s use of the historical Adam, particularly Paul that allows its soteriological framework to remain without the need for an actual historical Adam but allows alternative ones: literary, genealogical, and/or archetypal.

4. Reframe the understanding of theological concepts such as inerrancy, *prima Scriptura*, and *sola Scriptura* that would admit a new understanding of the nature and function of Genesis in order to facilitate the conversation between Scripture and science.

5. Affirm a stronger reliability for scientific discoveries, such as the Human Genome Project, than for the Scriptures, taking a harmonizing position favoring science above the Bible. The benefit of the doubt is for science, not the Scriptures.

6. Present ministerial, missiological, and ecclesiological concerns for the need of revising Christianity’s position on the historical Adam that will allow Christians to engage better within the scientific communities, improve their evangelistic opportunities, and remain in the church.

Protology and Its Implications

William VanDoodewaard observes that through the first eighteen centuries of Christian church history, exegetes and theologians had a nearly monolithic commitment to a literal understanding of human origins.¹¹⁰ According to VanDoodewaard, “nearly the entirety of Christendom held to an Adam and Eve who were the first human pair, without ancestry or contemporaries at their point of origin.”¹¹¹ Moreover, VanDoodewaard states that almost every Christian theologian “understood Adam and Eve as literally created in the manner described in Genesis 2:7 and Genesis 2:21–22.”¹¹² Even Walton agrees with this historical portrayal when he states, “Even very early interpreters undoubtedly considered Adam and Eve to be the progenitors of the entire human race.”¹¹³

Furthermore, as observed by R. Albert Mohler Jr., president of the Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, in his preface for VanDoodewaard’s book, the theological challenge for this generation of Evangelicals is the question of beginnings. He states, “In terms of the gospel of Jesus Christ, the most

urgent question related to beginnings has to do with the existence of Adam and Eve as the first parents to all humanity and to the reality of the fall as the explanation for human sinfulness and all that comes with sin.”¹¹⁴ Yet, others resent that the “question of cosmic and human origins has become completely muddled with the *soteriological* question as to whether an ‘original Adam’ is necessary for the biblical doctrine of salvation.”¹¹⁵ However, it is difficult not to work with this assumption if one reads the New Testament, especially Paul. This is also supported by many church fathers.

Protology and Eschatology

Even more, VanDoodewaard observes that issues related to protology, such as the quest for the historical Adam and how it is pursued, impact a wide range of doctrinal topics, which includes eschatology.¹¹⁶

Michael Hasel, for example, observes that “the evolutionary hypothesis leaves us with major questions that not only affects origins, but also impacts our view of the fulfillment of biblical promises of future events.”¹¹⁷

The relationship between the first and last chapters of the Bible is evident. Alexander Desmond observes regarding the new Jerusalem that for John, “this exceptional city is the goal toward which everything in creation is moving. It is the fulfillment of what God initiated in Genesis 1.”¹¹⁸

Therefore, it is not an inappropriate idea to think that changes in the understanding of the traditional Evangelical protology could have effects on their understanding of the eschatology presented in the last chapters of Revelation. However, what seems to be the logical outcome of denying the supernatural events of creation, and thus those related to the same concepts in the new creation as presented in the last chapters of Revelation, is absent in the analysis of those questioning the historicity of Genesis but affirming their faith in the reality of heaven.

For example, McKnight, whose position on the historical Adam has previously been discussed, argues in his 2015 book *The Heaven Promise* that “the first nonnegotiable feature of the Heaven Promise has to do with God. In Heaven, God will be God.”¹¹⁹ Among the indicators of this new reality, McKnight argues that “*God will be the sustenance for all.*”¹²⁰ As proof for this, McKnight mentions “the water of life and the tree of life that sustains the life of kingdom people are ‘flowing from the throne of God and of the Lamb.’”¹²¹ Here, McKnight offers no scientific challenge nor presents any interpretational proposal to understand these declarations as nonliteral or nonhistorical.

However, scholars like Carson, who recognize the relationship between protology and eschatology, aptly point out that one is dependent on the other. Carson strongly suggests that “the more Gen. 1–3 is

relegated to the vague category of ‘myth’, the more difficult it becomes to preserve the robust teaching of the Apostle himself.”¹²² This problem on origins, according to Carson, affects the other end too—Pauline eschatology. Carson notices that there are scholars who are “prepared to adopt the *realized* part of Pauline eschatology, but neither the beginning nor the end of Paul’s construction of salvation history.”¹²³ These theologians barely sustain the middle of the salvation-historical line. For now, Evangelicals only struggle with the beginning of the salvation-historical line but not with its end, although they are particularly related to each other.

Conclusion

The hermeneutical and theological dilemmas created by these new proposals are ground shaking when it comes to the assumed stance on origins and soteriology sustained by an increasing number of Evangelicals. Slowly but surely this paradigm shift among and within Evangelicals is affecting their understanding of Scripture, and of its authority and primacy in matters of doctrine.

It seems that the new Evangelical protology has not yet reached its logical and consistent outcome on

the soteriological and eschatological ramifications that would be imposed by denying the historicity of creation and the historical Adam. However, its new, creative, and alternative hermeneutical proposals provide evidence of a new trend in theological attitudes among Evangelicals who seek to harmonize Genesis with the current scientific consensus on human origins. Such a trend could have an enormous impact not only in Evangelical hermeneutics and soteriology, but on the historical understanding of the Christian eschatology as presented in the last chapters of Revelation. As such, these newer approaches are incompatible with a high view of Scripture and are at stark odds with the Seventh-day Adventist understanding of biblical eschatology.

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¹ Richard N. Ostling, “The Search for the Historical Adam: The Center of the Evolution Debate Has Shifted From Whether We Came From Earlier Animals to Whether We Could Have Come From One Man and One Woman,” *Christianity Today* 55, no. 6 (2011).

² Peter Enns, *The Evolution of Adam: What the Bible Does and Doesn’t Say About Human Origins* (Grand Rapids, MI: Brazos Press, 2012), ix. According to Enns, evolutionary theory has been around for generations, but in recent years two factors are bringing the issue back into the public eye. The first is the relentless, articulate, and popular attacks on Christianity by the new atheists. Jerry Coyne, Richard Dawkins, Daniel Dennett, and others have aggressively promoted evolution and argued that evolution has destroyed the possibility of religious faith—especially a faith like Christianity, whose sacred writings contain the story of Adam, the first man created out of dust several thousand years ago. The second factor has been well-publicized advances in our understanding of evolution, particularly genetics. The Human Genome Project, completed in 2003, has shown beyond any reasonable scientific doubt that humans and primates share common ancestry. See also Walter C. Kaiser Jr., “A Literal and Historical Adam and Eve? Reflections on the Work of Peter Enns,” *Criswell Theological Review* 10, no. 2 (2013): 75–76; and Dennis R. Venema and Scot McKnight, *Adam and the Genome: Reading Scripture After Genetic Science* (Grand Rapids, MI: Brazos Press, 2017). McKnight raises the following questions involving the Human Genome Project. What happens when evolutionary theory and the Human Genome Project encounter the Bible’s creation narratives? What happens, then, when we are told that the best of science today teaches that the DNA characteristic of modern humans could not have come from less than approximately ten thousand hominids? What happens when we are told there were pre-Adamite humans? What about those two humans in Genesis 1–3? And what about the eight that survived Noah’s flood? Whom are we to believe, some ask: the Bible or science? McKnight observes that “if the Human Genome Project has any weight in our worldview, to insist that our DNA comes from two humans, Adam and Eve, is intentionally to run contrary to what science now teaches with considerable evidence.” See also Todd Wood, “A Simple Truth Seeker” in Tim Stafford, ed., *The Adam Quest: Eleven Scientists Who Held on to a Strong Faith While Wrestling With the Mystery of Human Origins*

(Nashville, TN: Nelson Books, 2013), 44–45. In the presentation of Todd Wood, a creationist, the following comments are presented: “The launch of BioLogos, a Christian organization begun by the Human Genome Project’s Francis Collins, has changed the terms of the debate among Christians.” According to Fazale Rana and Hugh Ross, *Who Was Adam? A Creation Model Approach to the Origin of Man* (Colorado Springs, CO: NavPress, 2005), 59, new insight into human origins and genetic diversity comes from the Human Genome Project.

³ Enns, ix.

⁴ Ostling, 24.

⁵ Kaiser, 76.

⁶ Francis S. Collins, *The Language of God: A Scientist Presents Evidence for Belief* (New York: Free Press, 2006).

⁷ Kaiser, 75.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 76.

⁹ *Ibid.*

¹⁰ William Lane Craig, *In Quest of the Historical Adam: A Biblical and Scientific Exploration* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2021), 3.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 4.

¹² *Ibid.* Craig offers a brief summary of how traditional theologians address the issue of the historical Adam for the doctrine of sin: “For if Adam was not a historical person, clearly there was no historical fall into sin in the traditional sense. In particular, the doctrine of original sin must go by the board if there was no historical Adam and hence no fall. For in the absence of a historical Adam, there is, or was, no sin of Adam that can be imputed to every human being. It should be obvious that we cannot be held guilty and hence deserving of punishment for an infraction that never occurred. By the same token we cannot be heirs of a corrupted human nature as a result of Adam’s sin if no such sin ever occurred. Thus, in the absence of a historical Adam the traditional doctrine of original sin cannot be maintained.” See also Raoul Dederen, ed., *Handbook of Seventh-day Adventist Theology*, Commentary Reference Series 12 (Hagerstown, MD: Review and Herald, 2001), 241–242: “Throughout history some theologians have defined the Fall narrative of Genesis 3 as allegory, dismissing it as myth without historical basis. Some refer to it as a suprahistorical event, incomprehensible for those of us who live in history. But for a correct understanding of the essence, nature,

and destiny of sin, its historicity cannot be dismissed or undermined. Its beginning, its impact on the drama of human history, its defeat on the cross, and its final eradication at the final judgment are portrayed in Scriptures as historic mileposts, reaching from rebellion to restoration. To deny historicity to any of these events is to deny the authority and the authenticity of the Scriptures as the Word of the living God and to deny the sovereign Lord of history Himself.” Bruce A. Demarest, *The Cross and Salvation: The Doctrine of Salvation*, Foundations of Evangelical Theology (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Books, 1997), 73–74, asks and answers an important question: “Why do humans, the highest of God’s creation and unique image-bearers, require grace for salvation and Christian living? Because sin’s terrible tragedy affects all persons through Adam and Eve.” He adds, “Scripture teaches that Adam’s sin affected not only himself but all of his offspring.” In the language of classical theology, argues Demarest, “the human race prior to the fall was *posse non peccare et mori* (‘able not to sin and die’); but after the fall each sinful member is *non posse non peccare et mori* (‘not able not to sin and die’). The entire human race is afflicted with objective guilt, alienation from God, and depraved natures that refuse to know, love, and serve the Creator. Universal sinfulness through Adam has seriously maimed human capacities to actualize the good.” See also Bruce A. Demarest, “Fall of the Human Race,” in *Evangelical Dictionary of Theology*, ed. Walter A. Elwell (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2001), 434–436. Michael F. Bird, *Evangelical Theology: A Biblical and Systematic Introduction* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2013), 668–669, observes that “curiously, this initial revolt against God finds no further mention in the Old Testament, yet its implications continue to dominate the actions of history’s earliest humans (Gen 1–11) and Israel’s own dealings with God from the conquest of Canaan to the postexilic period. Later Christian interpreters of Genesis, from Paul to Augustine, make specific and extended usage of this episode of the ‘fall’ of Adam in their construction of a doctrine of sin.” However, he states that “while ‘original sin’ is never explicitly stated or defined by the Scriptures, its reality is strongly implied, since there is assumed to be an organic unity between Adam’s sin and human sinfulness.”

¹³ Craig, 4. See also Dyson Hague, “The Doctrinal Value of the First Chapters of Genesis,” in *The Fundamentals*, vol. 1, ed. R. A. Torrey and A. C. Dixon (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 2003), 285. See, for example, Hague stating: “With regard to our redemption, the third chapter of Genesis is the basis of all Soteriology. If there was no fall, there was no condemnation, no separation and no need of reconciliation. If there was no need of reconciliation, there was no need of redemption; and if there was no need of redemption, the Incarnation was a superfluity, and the crucifixion folly. (Gal. 3:21.) So closely does the apostle link the fall of Adam and the death of Christ, that without Adam’s fall the science of theology is evacuated of its most salient feature, the atonement.”

¹⁴ Craig, 5.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 5–6. Craig offers these arguments as indicative of the non-essential value of the doctrine of original sin to the Christian faith: “The doctrine enjoys slim scriptural support, to put it mildly; not to be found in the account of Gen 3 of the curses following the fall, the doctrine depends entirely on one biblical passage, Rom 5:12–21, and that passage is vague and open to multiple interpretations. Paul does not teach clearly that either (1) Adam’s sin is imputed to every one of his descendants or (2) Adam’s sin resulted in a corruption of human nature or a privation of original righteousness that is transmitted to all of his descendants.”

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 5.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 6.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*

²⁰ *Ibid.*

²¹ *Ibid.*

²² *Ibid.*, 7.

²³ *Ibid.*, 12.

²⁴ *Ibid.*

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 12–13.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 13–14.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 14.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 16–18. Craig agrees and quotes Old Testament scholar Brevard Childs in the following statements: “To compare the church fathers,

or the Reformers for that matter, with modern scholarship in terms of philology, textual and literary criticism, or of historical knowledge and exegetical precision should convince any reasonable person of the undeniable achievements of historical critical scholarship in respect to the Old Testament.”

²⁹ Ostling, 26.

³⁰ John H. Walton, *Genesis: From Biblical Text . . . to Contemporary Life*, The NIVApplication Commentary (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2001). See also Walton, *The Lost World of Genesis One: Ancient Cosmology and the Origins Debate* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2009); Walton, *Genesis 1 as Ancient Cosmology* (Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 2011); Walton, “Human Origins and the Bible,” *Zygon* 47, no. 4 (2012); Matthew Barrett and Ardek B. Caneday, eds., *Four Views on the Historical Adam*, ed. Stanley N. Gundry, Counterpoints: Bible and Theology (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2013); Walton, *The Lost World of Adam and Eve: Genesis 2–3 and the Human Origins Debate* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2015); and Walton, “The Lost World of Adam and Eve: Old Testament Scholar John Walton Affirms a Historical Adam—But Says There Are Far More Important Dimensions to Genesis,” *Christianity Today* 59, no. 2 (2015).

³¹ Walton, *The Lost World of Adam and Eve*, 13.

³² *Ibid.*

³³ Richard E. Averbeck, “The Lost World of Adam and Eve: A Review Essay,” *Themelios* 40, no. 2 (2015).

³⁴ *Ibid.*, 227.

³⁵ Sean M. Cordry, “The Lost World of Genesis One: Ancient Cosmology and the Origins Debate,” *Perspectives on Science and Christian Faith* 62, no. 3 (2010); Hans-Christof Kraus, “The Lost World of Genesis One: Ancient Cosmology and the Origins Debate,” *Journal for the Study of the Old Testament* 35, no. 5 (2011); Michael S. Heiser, “The Lost World of Genesis One: Ancient Cosmology and the Origins Debate,” *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 53, no. 1 (2010); Barry A. Jones, “The Lost World of Genesis One: Ancient Cosmology and the Origins Debate,” *Review & Expositor* 107, no. 2 (2010); Ernest Lucas, “The Lost World of Genesis One: Ancient Cosmology and the Origins Debate,” *Science and Christian Belief* 23, no. 1 (2011).

³⁶ Scott A. Ashmon, “The Lost World of Genesis One: Ancient Cosmology and the Origins Debate,” *Concordia Theological Quarterly* 77, nos. 1–2 (2013): 187. Ashmon considers that Walton’s view of Genesis 1 goes too far by denying that the ancient Near East is not concerned with material origins and argues that the ancient Near East cosmogony was concerned with material and functional (and nominal) origins. See also Douglas J. Becker, “The Lost World of Genesis One: Ancient Cosmology and the Origins Debate,” *Themelios* 34, no. 3 (2009): 358–359. Becker observes that one possible weakness in Walton’s argument is his insistence on reading Genesis 1 in *purely* functional terms. Becker considers that maybe Genesis is concerned with both material existence and function, perhaps with emphasis on the latter. See also Richard S. Hess, “The Lost World of Genesis One: Ancient Cosmology and the Origins Debate,” *Bulletin for Biblical Research* 20, no. 3 (2010): 435. Hess considers that Walton’s argument for functionality in Genesis 1 needs further support to establish his case. Hess also wonders if the functional element is truly central in this text. See also Brian L. Webster, “The Lost World of Genesis One: Ancient Cosmology and the Origins Debate,” *Bibliotheca Sacra* 168, no. 671 (2011): 357. Webster makes two important observations regarding Walton’s function orientation. First, Walton sometimes overstates this idea to the point that it sounds like he means that Genesis 1 would have been understood as being about the abstract functions without being about material origins at all. Second, Webster argues that, ancient Near East creation texts may start with unformed substance that gets modified, but they still have a pattern in which specific things were not there at first, and then were. Webster concludes that the fact that these ancient texts describe the change of unformed matter into new things does not mean that on the surface they are primarily about abstract functions rather than material origins.

³⁷ Gordon J. Wenham, “The Lost World of Genesis One: Ancient Cosmology and the Origins Debate,” *Science and Christian Belief* 25, no. 1 (2013): 73.

³⁸ Trevor Craigen, “The Lost World of Genesis One: Ancient Cosmology and the Origins Debate,” *The Master’s Seminary Journal* 21, no. 2 (2010): 261.

³⁹ Daniel De Vries, “The Lost World of Adam and Eve: Genesis 2–3 and the Human Origins Debate,” *Calvin Theological Journal* 51, no. 1 (2016): 143–145.

⁴⁰ Andrea L. Robinson, “The Lost World of Adam and Eve: Genesis 2–3 and the Human Origins Debate,” *Science and Christian Belief* 28, no. 1 (2016): 50.

⁴¹ Deane Galbraith, “The Lost World of Adam and Eve: Genesis 2–3 and the Human Origins Debate,” *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 58, no. 1 (2015): 168–169. Galbraith observes that Walton himself states that his concern is to offer a way to make Genesis 1–3 acceptable for those who hold to modern scientific theories about material origins of the universe and humanity. Galbraith also argues that the cumulative effect of so many inventive interpretations by Walton places a large shadow over his functional emphasis. See also Robert P. Gordon, “The Lost World of Adam and Eve: Genesis 2–3 and the Human Origins Debate,” *Journal for the Study of the Old Testament* 40, no. 5 (2016): 71.

⁴² Walton, *Genesis 1 as Ancient Cosmology*, 194.

⁴³ *Ibid.*

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, 194–195.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, 195.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*

⁴⁷ Walton, *Genesis 2–3 and the Human Origins Debate*, 58–61.

⁴⁸ Walton offers an explanation of how archetype is used to refer to Adam: “The core proposal of this book is that the forming accounts of Adam and Eve should be understood archetypally rather than as accounts of how those two individuals were uniquely formed. When I use the word archetype, I am not referring to the way that literature uses archetypes. I am referring to the simple concept that an archetype embodies all others in the group. An archetype in the Bible can well be an individual and usually is. I am quite prepared to affirm the idea that Adam is an individual—a real person in a real past. Nevertheless, we have seen in the usage of the term *’ādām* that the use of the definite article tends toward an understanding of Adam as a representative of some sort, and an archetype is one form of representation.”

⁴⁹ Walton, *Genesis 2–3 and the Human Origins Debate*, 70–81.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, 82–91.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, 92–95.

⁵² *Ibid.*, 96–101. Walton says, “When we identify Adam and Eve as historical figures, we mean that they are real people involved in real events in a real past. They are not inherently mythological or legendary, though their roles may contribute to them being treated that way in some of the reception history. Likewise they are not fictional. At the same time, there may be some elements in their profile that are not intended to convey historical elements.” On the literary use of Adam in the New Testament, Walton considers that Adam is also used as a literary figure to express a literary or theological truth that does not necessarily implies a historical truth. Walton argues his case with the example on the use of Melchizedek and Enoch in the New Testament.

⁵³ *Ibid.*, 96.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, 103.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*

⁵⁸ Andrew Steinmann, “Lost World of Genesis One: John H. Walton, American Evangelicals and Creation,” *Lutheran Education Journal* (2012). See also William D. Barrick, “Old Testament Evidence for a Literal, Historical Adam and Eve,” in *Searching for Adam: Genesis and the Truth about Humans Origins*, ed. Terry Mortenson (Master Books, 2016), 18. Barrick presents the following historical development of the origins of the universe debate. He considers that the debate over the origins of the universe, the earth, and humankind has subtly shifted in recent years. From the 1920s until the 1960s, the origins debate between biblicists and non-biblicists focused on evolution vs. creation. From the 1960s until 2000, the origins debate focused on Noah’s Flood, the length of the creation days, and the age of the creation. From 2000 until the present, the debate rages on whether the biblical Adam is the historical and genetic parent of all human beings.

⁵⁹ Steinmann, 2.

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*

⁶¹ Barrett and Caneday.

⁶² Terry Mortenson, “Introduction,” in Mortenson, *Searching for*

Adam, 7. Young-earth creationists maintain that the whole earth, not just life on the planet, was created during the six days of creation week.

⁶³ Enns, 57–58. Enns states, “To observe the similarities between the creation and flood stories and the literature of the ancient Near East, and to insist that all of those other writings are clearly ahistorical while Genesis is somehow presenting history—this is not a strong position of faith, but rather a weak one, where Scripture must conform to one’s expectations. Genesis cries out to be read as something other than a historical description of events.”

⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, 66.

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, 69.

⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, emphasis original.

⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, 79.

⁶⁸ *Ibid.*

⁶⁹ *Ibid.*, 80.

⁷⁰ *Ibid.*, 81.

⁷¹ *Ibid.*

⁷² *Ibid.*, 95. Enns argues that “Paul engaged his Scripture against the backdrop of hermeneutical conventions of his day, not ours, and we must understand Paul in that context. In other words, in the same way that we must calibrate the genre of Genesis by looking at the surrounding culture, we must understand Paul’s interpretation of the Old Testament within his ancient world.”

⁷³ *Ibid.*, 103.

⁷⁴ *Ibid.*, 117. Enns suggests an alternative reading to understand Paul’s view and use of Genesis and Adam in particular. Enns considers that certain elements are to be considered in our analysis of Paul’s Adam: “The ambiguous nature of the Adam story in Genesis, Adam’s functional absence in the Old Testament, the creative energy invested into the Adam story by other ancient interpreters, and Paul’s creative use of the Old Testament in general—we will approach Paul’s use of the Adam story with the expectation of finding there not a plain reading of Genesis but a transformation of Genesis.”

⁷⁵ Venema and McKnight, 106.

⁷⁶ *Ibid.*, 112, emphasis original. According to McKnight, “that is the most respectful, the most honest, and the most *prima scriptura* approach.”

⁷⁷ *Ibid.*, 113, emphasis original.

⁷⁸ *Ibid.*, 118, emphasis original.

⁷⁹ *Ibid.*

⁸⁰ *Ibid.*

⁸¹ *Ibid.*

⁸² *Ibid.*, 107–108, emphasis original.

⁸³ *Ibid.*, 144–146.

⁸⁴ *Ibid.*, 146, emphasis original.

⁸⁵ *Ibid.*

⁸⁶ *Ibid.*

⁸⁷ *Ibid.*, 169, emphasis original.

⁸⁸ *Ibid.*, emphasis original.

⁸⁹ *Ibid.*, emphasis original. McKnight observes that, for example, “in the Qumran community we discover an Adam who, though formed in the image of God (4Q504 frag. 8, line 4), is the archetype who ‘broke faith’ (CD 10.8). Thus Israel, ‘like Adam, broke the covenant’ (4Q167 frag. 7 9.1). Those who are faithful, however, will inherit the ‘glory of Adam’ (1QS 4.23). Hence, the emphasis in the Dead Sea Scrolls on the two spirits derives from the interpretive history of Adam choosing disobedience and therefore becoming a prototype of the human faced with obedience or disobedience (1QS 3–4).”

⁹⁰ *Ibid.*, 190.

⁹¹ *Ibid.*, 191, emphasis original.

⁹² *Ibid.*, emphasis original.

⁹³ *Ibid.*, 190.

⁹⁴ See D. A. Carson, “Adam in the Epistles of Paul,” in *In the Beginning . . . : A Symposium on the Bible and Creation*, ed. N. M. de S. Cameron (Glasgow: Biblical Creation Society, 1980), 28–43.

⁹⁵ *Ibid.*, 41.

⁹⁶ *Ibid.*

⁹⁷ A. B. Caneday, “The Language of God and Adam’s Genesis and Historicity in Paul’s Gospel,” *Southern Baptist Journal of Theology* 15, no. 1 (2011): 27.

⁹⁸ *Ibid.*

⁹⁹ *Ibid.*

¹⁰⁰ Todd S. Beall, “Adam and Eve (First-Couple View),” in *Dictionary of Christianity and Science*, ed. Paul Copan et al. (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2017), 75.

¹⁰¹ *Ibid.*, 75–76.

¹⁰² Tremper Longman III, “Adam and Eve (Representative-Couple View),” in Copan et al., 92–93.

¹⁰³ *Ibid.*, 93.

¹⁰⁴ *Ibid.*

¹⁰⁵ *Ibid.*, 95.

¹⁰⁶ Andrew Steinmann is a Lutheran theologian from the Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod. The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod has publicly declared its belief that God created the world as narrated in Genesis.

¹⁰⁷ Steinmann, 2.

¹⁰⁸ Averbeck, 237–238. See also Richard M. Davidson, “The Biblical Account of Origins,” *Journal of the Adventist Theological Society* 14, no. 1 (2003): 13. Davidson observes that it is widely recognized that the whole book of Genesis is structured by the word generations (*tōlēdōt*) in connection with each section of the book (13x). This is a word used in the setting of genealogies concerned with the accurate account of time and history. It means literally “begettings” or “bringings-forth” (from the verb *yālad* “to bring forth, beget”) and implies that Genesis is the “history of beginnings.” Davidson concludes that “the use of *tōlēdōt* in Gen 2:4 shows that the author intends the account of creation to be considered just as literal as the rest of the Genesis narratives.” Mathews K. A., *Genesis 1–11:26*, The New American Commentary, vol. 1A (Nashville, TN: Broadman & Holman Publishers, 1996), 41. Mathews notices that “the recurring formulaic *tōlēdōt* device shows that the composition was arranged to join the historical moorings of Israel with the beginnings of the cosmos.”

¹⁰⁹ Averbeck, 238.

¹¹⁰ William VanDoodewaard, *The Quest for the Historical Adam: Genesis, Hermeneutics, and Human Origins* (Grand Rapids, MI: Reformation Heritage Books, 2015), loc. 7119.

¹¹¹ *Ibid.*

¹¹² *Ibid.*

¹¹³ Walton, *Genesis 2–3 and the Human Origins Debate*, 181. Walton quotes second-century B.C. Tobit 8:6, “Those two were parents of

all humans.” The Old Testament writers likewise understood Genesis 1–2 that way, as can be seen in Psalms 33 and 104.

¹¹⁴ VanDoodewaard, loc. 148. See also Steinmann, Steinmann, “The Lost World of Genesis One: John H. Walton, American Evangelicals and Creation” 2, who argues that the accommodation of Genesis with evolutionary theory will have unintended consequences for Christian doctrine, especially the gospel. This, according to Steinmann, is a question that is often ignored or minimized.

¹¹⁵ August H. Konkel, “The Lost World of Adam and Eve: Genesis 2–3 and the Human Origins Debate,” *Perspectives on Science and Christian Faith* 68, no. 1 (2016): 68, emphasis original.

¹¹⁶ VanDoodewaard, loc. 7633–7644.

¹¹⁷ Michael G. Hasel, ““In The Beginning. . .” The Relationship Between Protology and Eschatology,” in *The Cosmic Battle for the Planet Earth: Essays in Honor of Norman R. Gulley*, ed. Ron Du Preez and Jiří Moskala (Berrien Springs, MI: Andrews University, 2003), 21. Hasel observes, “For if Christ is coming again to create a new heaven and a new earth, what will be the time duration? Will it be instantaneous or will it take millions of years?”

¹¹⁸ T. Desmond Alexander, “From Paradise to the Promised Land: An Introduction to the Pentateuch,” (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2012), 132.

¹¹⁹ Scot McKnight, *The Heaven Promise: Engaging the Bible’s Truth About Life to Come* (Colorado Springs, CO: WaterBrook Press, 2015), 59.

¹²⁰ *Ibid.*, 64.

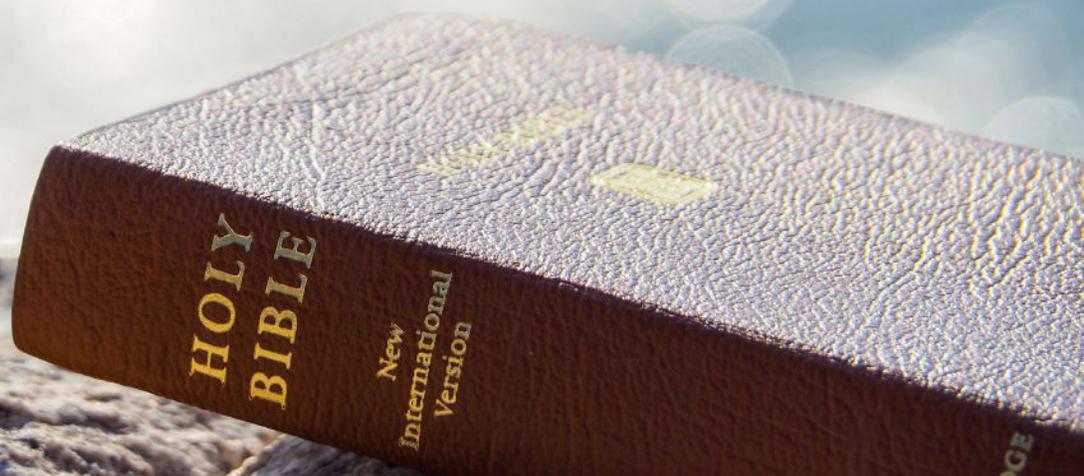
¹²¹ *Ibid.*

¹²² Carson, 40.

¹²³ *Ibid.*, emphasis original. Cf. Morna Dorothy Hooker, *Pauline Pieces* (London: Epworth Press, 1979), 50: “Adam and Christ may represent two contrasting humanities, two modes of life, but the two figures who represent them are an ill balanced pair—the one mythical, the other historical. And here I come to my problem—which is that the whole scheme of redemption, as Paul understands it, is set against an eschatological backcloth, which made sense to him but no longer makes sense to me.”

**All Scripture is breathed out by God and profitable for teaching,
for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness,
that the man of God may be competent, equipped for every good work.**

2 Timothy 3:16–17



Lessons from Matthew 21

By Clinton Wahlen

The end of Jesus' ministry is fast approaching. The time has come for Jesus' triumphal entry into Jerusalem. Thus, He does something He has consistently refused to do up to this point: publicly present Himself as the Messiah in fulfillment of prophecy. He also for the first time accepts the recognition of Himself as the Messiah by the crowds (Matt 21:1–11). The significance of this event is obvious and further underscored by its presence in all four Gospel accounts (Mark 11:1–10; Luke 18:28–40; John 12:12–19). In His messianic role He claims authority over the temple, cleansing it of marketeering, and is confronted by the religious leaders—first by the chief priests and scribes and, later, by the chief priests and elders (Matt 21:12–27). The chapter concludes with Jesus telling two parables, both of which constitute a serious warning for the Jewish leaders.

Interpretation of Matthew 21

1. Verses 1–11, the Triumphal Entry

- As Jesus draws “near” to Jerusalem, the further fulfillment of the time prophecies of Daniel 9:26–27 do also. Up to this point, Matthew has only used the word (Gk. *engizō*) for the drawing near of the kingdom of heaven (Matt 3:2; 4:17; 10:7), but will now use it also of God's judgment upon Israel (Matt 21:34) and Jesus' impending death (Matt 26:45).
- Jesus instructs His disciples to obtain a “donkey” for His use to ride into Jerusalem in fulfillment of Zechariah 9:9. Unlike Mark and Luke, Matthew (following closely the Hebrew text) mentions both a female donkey and her colt (Matt 21:5), suggesting the latter is still young and in need of its mother.
- Matthew's quotation of the prophecy (absent from the parallel passages of Mark and Luke) emphasizes the meekness of the Messiah (cf. Matt 11:29) in contrast to the popular expectations of a militaristic messiah who would lead Israel to victory over Roman oppression (see, e.g., *Psalms of Solomon* 17:21–25; 4Q285 4 1–8; 2 *Baruch* 40).
- The description of two animals in connection with the triumphal entry seems to reflect an eyewitness account because the colt was one “on which no one has ever sat”

(Mark 11:2, ESV)¹ and not ready to be separated from its mother, especially in view of the large crowd with its loud acclamations (Matt 21:8–9).

- To grasp the significance of this event, it is helpful to visualize it from the standpoint of those who observed it from the gates of the temple. A “very great multitude” stretching along the narrow road from the Mount of Olives to Jerusalem and advancing on the temple would be unprecedented, and could have seemed quite threatening to the religious authorities.
- The hosannas come from Psalm 118:25–26 and among the psalms of praise traditionally associated with the Jewish festivals, especially the Passover. This particular psalm is “a royal song of thanksgiving for military victory”² that apparently describes a royal procession into the temple.³ The messianic expectancy of the crowds has reached its peak.
- The procession's initial confrontation with the disturbed inhabitants of Jerusalem (Matt 21:10; cf. 2:3) and the religious leaders is only implied in Matthew's abbreviated account of the entry itself (cf. Luke 19:39; John 12:19; and the more detailed description in DA 580–581). As is evident from Mark 11:11, by the time Jesus slips away from the crowds (and the confrontation) and enters the temple it is already late, so He departs to Bethany for the night.

2. Verses 12–17, Jesus Cleanses the Temple

- Matthew passes immediately on to the next major event: Jesus' cleansing of the temple, in which He drove out the buyers as well as the sellers (so also Mark 11:15).⁴ The Greek word used by all three Synoptics (*ekballō*) refers to a forced removal (see, e.g., Matt 7:4–5; 8:12; 9:25; 21:39), including the expelling of demons (Matt 7:22; 8:16, 31, etc.).
- Moneychangers were needed in addition to the vendors of doves and animals for sacrifice because common coins with images of the Roman emperor could not be used in the temple and had to be exchanged for Tyrian shekels, which had a higher silver content but also had the image of the god of Tyre, Baal-Melqart.

- This business of buying and selling might have been a rather recent example of the creeping Hellenization that disturbed many devout Jews. Its incursion into the temple complex itself could have been justified based on Herod's substantial enlargement of the Temple Mount and its probable location near the southern entrance of the plaza, well away from the temple proper. Even if the priests and rulers did not consider this area holy, to Jesus—as well as the pilgrims to the temple who had purified themselves for entry and mounted the steps to the plaza—it was holy ground.
- The place hallowed by God's presence (cf. Matt 23:21) was designed to be “a house of prayer,” not business, and Jesus insisted it be treated as such (cf. Matt 23:16–22). More ominously, He also quoted the prophecy of Jeremiah 7:11, which portends Babylon's destruction of the first temple. Thus He warns that failure to live up to God's plan for Israel and the temple, exemplified by the corrupt dealings of these marketeers, would result in a similar desolation (Matt 24:2, 15; cf. Dan 9:26).
- Only Matthew notes that the blind and the lame came to Jesus in the temple. This situation presented a challenge: those who were suffering from such maladies were assumed to be ritually unclean, because they were thought incapable of observing the laws of purity adequately. Jesus finessed this challenge by healing them, fulfilling prophecies related to the Lord's return to Mount Zion (Isa 29:18; 35:5–6).
- Praises to Jesus as the Son of David rile the chief priests and scribes because it ascribes to Him messianic authority, apparently ignoring all “the wonderful things” (Gk. *thaumasia*) He was doing (Matt 21:15). The Greek word used for the miracles appears only here in the New Testament but is found several times in the Septuagint for the wonders God performed in connection with the exodus (Exod 3:20 LXX; Deut 34:12; Ps 77 [78]:11–12). Therefore, these healings seem also to signify the more profound deliverance brought by Jesus, which the exodus typified.
- Responding to the leaders' indignation, Jesus quotes Psalm 8:2, which Jewish traditions linked with the song of deliverance at the exodus (Exod 15) and the praising of God by children at the Red Sea.⁵

3. Verses 18–27, Jesus Curses the Fig Tree and His Authority Is Questioned

- Jesus' cursing of the fig tree after a fruitless search for figs seems quite uncharacteristic of Him, especially in light of it being too early to expect ripe figs (Mark 11:13). But early figs, renowned for their sweetness, might be found at this time of the year.⁶ As with many of Jesus' miracles, this act underscored a deeper lesson. Since “a tree is known by its fruit” (Matt 12:33), Israel's leaders can anticipate certain judgment should their resistance to Jesus and their persistent failure to produce the fruits of righteousness continue (cf. Matt 3:10; 7:19).
- For the disciples, the miracle contains a lesson on faith. Jesus wants them to realize the amazing possibilities open to the one who has faith and does not doubt. Genuine faith excludes wavering and doubt (Jas 1:6–8), because the latter erodes and, eventually, destroys faith through the slow but steady process of a thousand pinpricks. Jesus amplifies the point with the assurance that “all things, whatever you ask in prayer, if you believe you will receive” (Matt 21:22, author's translation).
- Closely related to this story about faith and fruit bearing is the Jewish leaders' questioning of Jesus on the issue of authority immediately after His return to the temple. He's met with a double-barreled question. Opposition is escalating because Jesus' work is now centered in the temple, a highly volatile venue. The chief priests and elders hope their question leads Jesus either to affirm or deny His having a superior authority. By affirming His authority, a legal case would be established against Him that the Romans could sustain, while a denial would undercut His influence with the people and maintain their authority.
- But the issue of authority is complicated because it is inseparable from the lives of people and their livelihood and permeates all cultures and social groups—from the family to the wider community, institutions, and the public square. Jesus recognizes the entire matter revolves around one key issue—one's relation to the message and baptism of John.
- Jesus avoids asking about John himself, which could have political ramifications, thus excluding political issues that could thwart His message. Referring to his baptism

highlights the message of repentance brought by John (and Jesus) which the religious authorities have consistently resisted (cf. Matt 3:7; 12:33–34, 39).

- If they reply “from heaven” it would be an admission that John is a true prophet and his message is to be believed and received. Their refusal to answer the question is a silent witness to their unbelief of the heaven-sent message of Jesus and John. Their further unwillingness to say it is “of men”—that is, of mere human origin—is explained by their fear of men. Like Herod (Matt 14:5), they are afraid of losing their position of authority. Thus they prove themselves to be precisely what Jesus calls them throughout Matthew’s Gospel: hypocrites/actors.

4. Verses 28–32, The Parable of the Two Sons

- Knowing they are plotting His destruction, Jesus sets before them two parables, both designed to reveal their hypocrisy, the parable of the Two Sons (Matt 21:28–32) and of the Wicked Vinedressers (Matt 21:33–46). The first is found only in Matthew and the second is significantly longer than in Mark and Luke. Both parables relate to work in a vineyard, which symbolizes Israel (cf. Isa 5:7).
- In the interpretation of parables, it is helpful to remind ourselves of the two levels of meaning discussed in a previous article: the meaning of the story itself and the spiritual meaning the story would have for the audience who first heard the parable.⁷ Also, as with the two longer parables of Matthew 13, these two parables have allegorical elements that must be recognized in order to adequately understand and interpret them.⁸
- The two sons, who are addressed by the father with an affectionate form in Greek (*teknon*, “child”), have completely opposite reactions to the father’s request to work in the vineyard. The first replies like a spoiled brat, “I don’t want to” (Matt 21:29, author’s translation), but later regrets his response and goes to work. Unlike the first son, the second son immediately agrees to go and work but, in fact, does not. He also shows his father great respect, addressing him as “sir.” This Greek word (*kurie*) can also be translated “lord,” which suggests the father in the parable symbolizes God.
- In answer to the question as to which son did the father’s will, the chief priests and elders can only answer, “the first.” Jesus then applies this to “tax collectors and harlots”—social outcasts who showed no

religious interest as citizens of Israel but believed John the Baptist’s message (cf. Luke 3:12–13). In other words, they did not remain rebellious tax collectors and harlots but through John’s baptism of repentance regained status within Israel. Ironically, Israel’s religious leaders, were acting like the second son, showing God enormous respect and claiming to do His will but persisting in their unbelief of John’s message, and, by implication, the message of Jesus to whose ministry John pointed (Matt 3:11–12).

5. Verses 33–46, the Parable of the Wicked Vinedressers

- Vineyards were an important industry throughout the Roman world, including in Israel, and some of Jesus’ hearers may have worked in them or even owned one. A vineyard was a long-term investment, requiring several years before it would begin bearing fruit and producing income. Nevertheless, workers would need to be paid during this time and, when grapes could finally be harvested, an agreed percentage would be given to the owner with the vinedressers’ wages paid from the remainder. The servants were sent to receive some of the fruit as payment for leasing the vineyard (cf. Matt 21:33).
- Surprisingly, the vinedressers of the parable act as if they own the vineyard, rather than merely leasing it, and do everything possible to selfishly keep the vineyard, its fruit, and its profit to themselves. They mistreat the servants who are sent to receive the fruit as payment for the lease.
- Finally, the owner decides to send his son, anticipating the vinedressers will respect him, because, unlike the servants, the son would have authority over the vineyard. But, rather than coming to their senses, admitting their guilt, and submitting to the son’s authority, the vinedressers see an opportunity to claim the vineyard for themselves and, in order to take possession, they kill the landowner’s son.
- This parable has many similarities with the parable of the Workers in the Vineyard (Matt 20:1–16): the vineyard represents Israel and the landowner represents God.⁹ In view of the historical and literary contexts of this parable, the religious leaders, who are to care for the vineyard-Israel, are represented by the vinedressers.¹⁰
- People listening to the parable would readily identify the other elements as follows: the servants sent by the landowner (God)

represent the prophets, who were often persecuted by Israel's leaders; the son represents Jesus; the far country to which the landowner went is a reference to heaven where God dwells. These identifications suggest the timeframe of the parable spans most of the nation's history up to the time of Jesus, during which time many prophets were beaten (Jer 20:1–2; 37:15; 1 Kgs 22:24), killed (1 Kgs 18:4, 13; Jer 26:20–23), and even stoned (2 Chr 24:21–22).¹¹ Finally, God's Son, whom the leaders want to destroy (Matt 21:46) is sent.

- Jesus leaves it to the audience to pronounce judgment—that is, the chief priests and elders (Matt 21:23)—asking them what the owner will do to these vinedressers. Their reply in verse 41 indicates three results: (1) judgment—the owner will miserably destroy those wicked men; (2) transfer—he will lease his vineyard to other vinedressers; and (3) rationale—the new tenants will render to the owner the fruits in their seasons.
- In verse 42, Jesus quotes Psalm 118, which the Jews recognized as messianic (cf. its application to Jesus by the crowds and the children in Matt 21:9, 15). By making this connection, Jesus implies a wordplay in Hebrew that correlates the rejected “son” (*bēn*) of the parable with the rejected stone (*eben*) of the psalm. The builders of Solomon's temple had rejected a very large stone and set it aside because they could not find a place for it, but it turned out to be the most important stone of all: the cornerstone of the temple's foundation.¹² The rejected stone points to Jesus with His imminent rejection and crucifixion. Its final placement as “the head of the corner” points to His vindication at the resurrection and His role as the cornerstone of the new “temple,” the church (Eph 2:19–22; 1 Pet 2:4–10).
- In verse 43, the meaning of the vineyard is broadened—no longer symbolic merely of national Israel, but of the kingdom of God, which is centered around the new community (Gk. *ekklēsia*) that Jesus is establishing (Matt 18:17). Taking the vineyard away and giving it to others refers not to regime change in Israel, but to the transfer of responsibility for the kingdom of God to a different “nation” or people, who would produce its “fruits”—the good works of righteousness and mercy (Matt 12:33; cf. 23:23). This new people would be defined by their relation to Jesus through accepting His gospel of the kingdom.

- The contrasting conditions either of falling on the stone and being broken or having it fall on oneself and being ground to powder allude to two passages of Scripture: (1) Isaiah 8:13–15, which describes God Himself either as a sanctuary (i.e., a refuge made of stone) for those who fear Him or as “a stone of stumbling and a rock of offense” for those who do not; and (2) the stone of Daniel 2 that breaks Nebuchadnezzar's image in pieces and grinds it to powder (Dan 2:34–35). By this latter allusion Jesus also hints at national Israel's future demise.
- These two different actions of the stone point to a two-stage process in the progress of the kingdom of God. The first stage, people choosing to fall on the stone and being broken, is in process now and describes how the preaching of the gospel brings people to faith in Jesus and membership in the kingdom of God. The second stage, the stone falling on them and crushing them to powder, will occur at the second advent and describes how those who have rejected Jesus will be destroyed along with the kingdoms of this world (Matt 24:27–28).

Application of the Chapter

Some valuable lessons from Matthew 21 include:

1. Just as Jesus waited for the right time to fulfill the purpose of His life, setting the closing events in motion by His triumphal entry, so we should wait for the right time and way of accomplishing God's purposes in our life. “To everything *there is* a season, A time for every purpose under heaven” (Eccl 3:1).
2. Also like Jesus, we should avoid controversy and conflict whenever possible without compromising principle, but speak up and not remain silent when biblical truth is threatened.
3. The action of Jesus to purify the temple illustrates the importance of having a quiet time and place for prayer and communion with God, separate from the business of the day. It also illustrates His ability to purify our hearts from worldly principles and replace them with the heavenly principles embodied in His teaching and example.
4. Jesus' promise that our petitions offered in faith will be granted must be understood in relation to other biblical principles regarding prayer: that we ask in Jesus' name and according to His will (John 13:13–14; 1 John 5:14–15), and “keep His commandments and do those things that are pleasing in His sight” (1 John 3:22).
5. Like the first son of the parable, regardless of what our former ways may have been, God's grace enables us to open our hearts to repentance and the

transformation of heart and life through faith and acceptance of the gospel.

6. Jesus wept at their rejection of the only message that could save them and their city (Luke 19:41; cf. Matt 23:37). Here He presents two parables to the Jewish leaders as final warnings, because He cares about them and desperately wants to save Israel from ruin. They are also warnings to us not to ignore, resist, or reject the appeals God makes to us personally through the Scriptures and through His Spirit.

Clinton Wahlen
Associate Director
Biblical Research Institute



¹ All biblical quotations are from the NKJV, unless otherwise indicated.

² Leslie C. Allen, *Psalms 101–150*, rev. ed., Word Biblical Commentary 21 (Nashville, TN: Thomas Nelson, 2002), 165.

³ Derek Kidner, *Psalms 73–150: An Introduction and Commentary*, Tyndale Old Testament Commentaries 16 (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1975), 447.

⁴ According to John 2:13–22, Jesus also cleansed the temple at the beginning of His ministry.

⁵ W. D. Davies and Dale C. Allison, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Gospel According to Saint Matthew*, International Critical Commentary, 3 vols. (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1988–1997), 3:142.

⁶ Michael J. Wilkins, *Zondervan Illustrated Bible Backgrounds Commentary: New Testament*, 4 vols. (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2002), 1:130.

⁷ Clinton Wahlen, “Lessons From Matthew 13,” *Reflections* 72 (October 2020): 7.

⁸ Note this key principle of interpretation in Craig L. Blomberg, *Interpreting the Parables*, 2nd ed. (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2012), 80: “Commonly, the primary details that disclose an allegorical level of meaning are the narratives’ principal characters, and the meanings ascribed to them must be ones which the stories’ original audiences could have been expected to grasp in their historical settings.”

⁹ See Clinton Wahlen, “Lessons From Matthew 20,” *Reflections* 79 (July–September 2022): 13.

¹⁰ This interpretation understands the parable as an allegory, which is in harmony with the way Jesus Himself interprets some of the longer parables (e.g., Matt 13:18–23, 37–43). See n. 6 above; cf. Wahlen, “Lessons From Matthew 13,” 8.

¹¹ D. A. Carson, *Matthew, Expositor’s Bible Commentary* 9 (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2010), 510.

¹² See Ellen G. White, *The Desire of Ages* (Mountain View, CA: Pacific Press, 1898), 597–598.

NEWS

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First Sentence Ever Written in Canaanite Discovered by Adventist Archeologists

By Michael G. Hasel



Fig. 1. Aerial view of Tel Lachish (Credit: Emil Aladjem).

The alphabet was invented around 1800 BC and was used by the Canaanites and later by most other languages in the world. Until recently, no meaningful Canaanite inscriptions had been discovered, save only two or three words here and there. Now an amazing discovery presents an entire sentence in alphabetic Canaanite, dating to about 1700 BC. It is engraved on a small ivory comb and includes a wish against lice.

“The find cannot be overestimated. The invention of the alphabet was the most important contribution to communication in the last four millennia. Before this time, complicated systems of writing in Egypt and Mesopotamia limited literacy. Today most of the world constructs sentences using the alphabet found on this comb 3,700 years ago. Here we have the first verbal sentence using the alphabet ever found,” writes Michael G. Hasel, professor of archaeology at Southern Adventist University, and co-director of the Lachish excavations with Yosef Garfinkel and Martin G. Klingbeil.

The ivory comb is small, measuring roughly 3.5 by 2.5 cm. The comb has teeth on both sides. Although their bases are still visible, the comb teeth themselves were broken in antiquity. The central part of the comb is somewhat eroded, possibly by the pressure of fingers holding the comb during haircare or removal of lice from the head or beard. The side of the comb with six thick teeth was used to untangle knots in the hair,

while the other side, with 14 fine teeth, was used to remove lice and their eggs, much like the modern-day two-sided lice combs sold in stores.

“When we found the comb on the first day of excavation in 2016 the inscription was not seen due to the encrustation of dirt,” says Katherine Hesler, a graduate of Southern Adventist University, in whose area the find was made. Ancient combs were made from wood, bone, or ivory. Ivory was a very expensive material and likely an imported luxury object. As there were no elephants in Canaan during that time period, the comb likely came from nearby Egypt—factors indicating that even people of high social status suffered from lice.

Partners from the Hebrew University of Jerusalem analyzed the comb itself for the presence of lice under a microscope and photographs were taken of both sides. Remains of head lice, 0.5–0.6 mm in size, were found on the second tooth. The climatic conditions of Lachish, however, did not allow preservation of whole head lice, but only those of the outer chitin membrane of the nymph stage head louse.

The discovery of writing on the comb was only made in 2022 as Dr. Madeleine Mumcuoglu was photographing the object under certain light. The inscription was deciphered by semitic epigraphist Dr. Daniel Vainstub at Ben Gurion University. The findings by the joint expedition between the Hebrew University and Southern Adventist University were published in the *Jerusalem Journal of Archaeology*.



Fig. 2. The ivory comb
(Credit: Dafna Gazit, Israel Antiquities Authority).

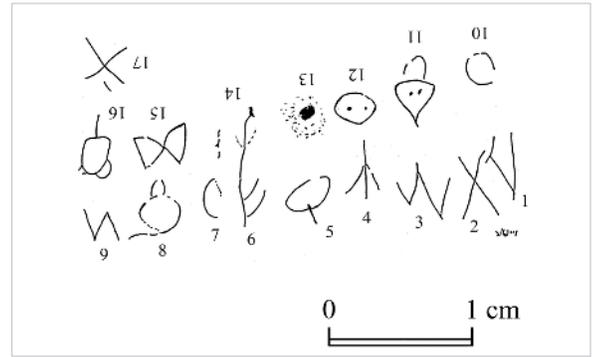


Fig. 3. Rendering of the comb
(Credit: Daniel Vainstub).

There are seventeen Canaanite letters on the comb. They are archaic in form—from the first stage of the invention of the alphabet script. They form seven words in Canaanite, reading: “May this tusk root out the lice of the hair and the beard.”

Despite its small size, the inscription on the comb from Lachish has very special features, some of which are unique and fill in gaps and lacunas in our knowledge of many aspects of the culture of Canaan in the Bronze Age:

First, we have for the first time an entire verbal sentence written in the dialect spoken by the Canaanite inhabitants of Lachish, enabling us to compare this language in all its aspects with the other sources for it.

Second, the inscription on the comb sheds light on some hitherto poorly attested aspects of everyday life of the time, haircare and dealing with lice.

Third, this is the first discovery in the region of an inscription referring to the purpose of the object on which it was written, as opposed to dedicatory or ownership inscriptions on objects.

Finally, the engraver’s skill in successfully executing such tiny letters (1–3 mm wide) is a fact that from now on should be taken into account in any attempt to summarize and draw conclusions on literacy in Canaan in the Bronze Age.

The Canaanite alphabet is the same used in the written Hebrew of the first books of the Bible. The

comb inscription dates the alphabet before the biblical writers existed and confirms that the alphabetic script was in everyday use in cities that were later occupied by the Israelites.

Lachish was a major Canaanite city state in the second millennium BC and the second most important city in the biblical kingdom of Judah. On January 30, 2023, Southern Adventist University will feature a major museum exhibition entitled “Peace and War: The Assyrian Conquest of Lachish,” which will highlight important discoveries from the 2013–2017 excavations they sponsored at Lachish.

This is a slightly edited version of a News Release – Southern Adventist University.

CITATION: Daniel Vainstub, Madeleine Mumcuoglu, Michael G. Hasel, Katherine M. Hesler, Miriam Lavi, Rivka Rabinovich, Yuval Goren, and Yosef Garfinkel, “A Canaanite’s Wish to Eradicate Lice on an Inscribed Ivory Comb From Lachish,” *Jerusalem Journal of Archaeology* 2 (2022): 76–119, <https://doi.org/10.52486/01.00002.4>.

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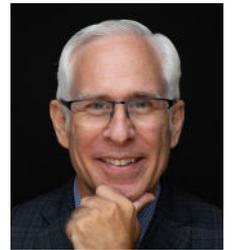


Fig. 4. Michael Hasel and Katherine Hesler in area where comb was found (Credit: Zachary Kast, Fourth Expedition to Lachish).



Fig. 5. Area AA and Southern archaeologists where comb was found (Credit: Zachary Kast, Fourth Expedition to Lachish).

Happy Holidays

**“BEHOLD, A VIRGIN SHALL BE WITH CHILD,
AND SHALL BRING FORTH A SON,
AND THEY SHALL CALL HIS NAME EMMANUEL,
WHICH BEING INTERPRETED IS, GOD WITH US.”**

- Matthew 1:23



Index to *Reflections*

The first issue of *Reflections* was published in January 2003. Since then, we've published many articles.

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