

# The SBJT Forum

*Editor's Note:* Readers should be aware of the forum's format. Bruce A. Ware, Ted Cabal, John N. Oswalt and Terry Mortenson have been asked specific questions to which they have provided written responses. These writers are not responding to one another. Their answers are presented in an order that hopefully makes the forum read as much like a unified presentation as possible.

**SBJT: DOES THE LITERAL historicity of Adam as the first human being, created by God from the dust of the ground, matter theologically? That is, could one deny the historicity of Adam as the first created human being but still hold to all the necessary tenets of evangelical theology?**

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**Bruce Ware:** The answers to these questions center on (1) whether the Bible presents Adam as the first literal and historical human being, (2) whether there is a biblical connection between the historical Adam in his creation and fall, and certain doctrines normally associated with the historical Adam, and (3) if so, what these doctrines might be and what the nature of this connection might be. I'll suggest two lines of response intended to cover these three issues.

First, the historicity of Adam as

the first literal human being is everywhere taught and assumed in the Bible. The language and kinds of descriptors of Adam in Genesis 5:3-5—the number of years he lived after Seth, that he had other children, and the total number of years he lived—are identical to the language and kinds of descriptors used of other historical persons in Genesis and elsewhere (cf., the rest of Gen 5; Gen 11:10-26; Gen 25:7-11; 1 Chron 1-9). The Chronicler opens his lengthy genealogy of Israel with “Adam” who begins the whole of the human race. Job contrasts his own openness before God with Adam who covered his transgressions (Job 31:33). Hosea compares Israel's disobedience to Adam who transgressed God's covenant (Hos 6:7). Luke grounds the genealogy of Jesus in the first man, Adam, the son of God (Luke 3:38). Jesus understood Adam and Eve as literal human persons, created by God and then joined together in the first marriage of a man and woman (Matt 19:4-6; Mark 10:6-9). Paul's references to Adam as the first human being in Romans 5:12-18; 1 Corinthians 11:7-9; 15:21-22; and 2 Timothy 2:13-14 are

unmistakably of this historical person who was created prior to the woman who came from him (1 Cor 11:8; 1 Tim 2:13), created in the image of God (1 Cor 11:7), and sinned bringing sin and death to all of his descendants after him (Rom 5:12-18; 1 Cor 15:21-22). Finally, Jude 14 refers to the historical person, Enoch, in the seventh generation from Adam, who would also be understood as historical. A fair reading of these texts supports the conclusion that the Bible itself repeatedly and without exception treats Adam as a literal historical person, the first human created by God.

Second, does the fact of Adam's historicity matter theologically? Indeed, it does, for the simple reason that the theology that is connected to Adam is theology that is rooted in history and impossible to account for apart from that history. That is, there clearly is a biblical connection between the historical Adam and theology associated with him, and the connection is such that this theology depends upon that history and would be non-existent without that history. Or to put it differently, this history gives birth to theology. As you cannot have a child without a mother, you cannot have this theology without the history that brings it into existence.

Consider, for example, some key areas of theology associated with Adam's true and literal historicity. First, the creation of man in the image of God involves the creation of a literal first human being in God's image who becomes the fountainhead, as it were, of all other human beings who are likewise in the image of God. Genesis 5:3 makes the fascinating observation that Adam, at 130 years of age, "had a son in his own likeness, in his own image; and he named him Seth." The language here is unmistakably that of Genesis 1:26. While the order of "image" and "likeness" is reversed, it appears that what is said earlier of man being created in the image and likeness of God (Gen 1:26) is said here as Seth is brought forth in the likeness and image of Adam (Gen 5:3). The parallel nature of this language leads one to conclude that Seth is born in the image of God (which

surely he is, cf. Gen 9:6) only as he is born in the likeness and image of Adam. Apart from the literal historical, indeed biological, connection between Adam and Seth, the image of God status of Seth could not occur. As it is with Seth, so also is it for us. Not only does our biological human identity trace back to the historical Adam; our very status as being image of God human beings traces back to the first man, the historical first human, Adam.

Second, the fall of man into sin is likewise a central theological tenet rooted precisely in what happened in history. Paul summarizes the argument here succinctly: "For since by a man came death, by a man also came the resurrection of the dead. For as in Adam all die, so also in Christ all will be made alive" (1 Cor 15:21-22). Consider four observations: (1) Adam brought death into the world (15:21a). (2) All humans who follow from Adam are subject to death (15:22a). (3) The overturning of Adam's sin and death occurs in the historical reality of the triumph of Christ via his resurrection from the dead (15:21b). And (4) All humans who are united to Christ will be made alive (15:22b). The historical reality of the resurrection of Christ, by which those in Christ are raised to live forevermore, is parallel here to the historical reality of the sin of Adam, which brought sin and death to all in Adam. The historical cord here cannot be cut without eliminating the corresponding theology. Nothing short of original sin in Adam and eternal life in Christ are tied inextricably and necessarily to history.

Third, our theology of gender and sexuality is tied inextricably to the creation of the first human pair and the nature of the marital union designed by God for them. When Jesus refers back to Genesis 2, and when Paul alludes to aspects of Genesis 2 and 3, they both understood Adam and Eve as real historical persons who exemplified the lifelong one-flesh union of male and female that God designed and brought into existence. By their historical fall, Adam and Eve broke from the design of God and brought about sinful distortions of both gender relations and human sexuality. Our theol-

ogy of gender and sexuality does not float in mid-air unattached to history. Rather, God's created design first was instantiated in the original first man and woman, and both Jesus and Paul point back to this design really brought into existence by God and really lived out in the Garden. Likewise the perversions of God's good design are rooted in the historical rebellion against God and his ways that took place in history, recorded for us in Genesis 3. Here, as elsewhere, theology and history are intertwined such that the historicity of Adam is essential to this theology. This theology, then, depends upon that history and would be non-existent without that history.

**SBJT: "What are some of the significant apologetic and philosophical issues regarding the historicity of Adam?"**

**Ted Cabal:** It is interesting that just as apologists have rightly concerned themselves with debates concerning the historical Jesus, so also must they be alert to the critical issues regarding the historical Adam. And the worldview implications that follow from the creation and fall of this first man lie at the heart of some of the urgent apologetic and philosophical matters facing Christians today. I'd like to address three.

First, many hold that the historical Adam is only a myth. But actually one of the greatest myths of our time is that contemporary science has debunked even the possibility of the historical Adam. Anti-supernaturalistic assumptions may discount the possibility, but paleoanthropology (fossil evidence) and molecular anthropology (comparison of human DNA or protein sequences) pose no serious threat to belief in the literal, direct creation of the first man. It is interesting that though creationists themselves have sometimes heatedly debated the age of the earth's creation, they enjoy general agreement regarding the recent creation of Adam. Adam's

biblical genealogies ("gap" questions aside) span only thousands of years. And "secular" human history is recorded over thousands of years rather than millions. Even naturalistic biological anthropology speaks of the "modern" (behavioral, anatomical) human appearing on the scene thousands, not millions of years ago.

Second, many Americans who believe in God's recent and direct creation of Adam do not believe the related essential doctrines. Consistent polling in recent years reveals that one of the biblical doctrines most widely held by Americans—about two-thirds—is the divine, direct and recent creation of the first human. For example, in a 2007 Gallup poll, 39% believed it definitely true and 27% probably true that God created human beings pretty much in their present form at one time within the last 10,000 years. Yet a Barna 2009 "worldview" poll revealed that only 34% believe moral truth is absolute, only 28% believe it impossible for someone to earn their way into Heaven, and only 40% believe Jesus Christ lived a sinless life while He was on earth. As Dr. Ware rightly noted, the historicity of Adam is foundational for central biblical doctrines. Yet tragically the polls tell us that millions of Americans believe in the historical Adam while rejecting the following universal gospel implications: the sinfulness of the first man and his progeny necessitates a sinless last Adam if they are to be saved. The battle for minds is comprehensive, and Christian teaching must stress not only the creation of the historical Adam but also its doctrinal significance.

Third, rejection of the implications of the historical Adam lies at the heart of some of our most important cultural clashes. Biblical Christianity competes with two primary worldviews in the United States, evolutionary naturalism and post-modern religion. A brief look at the anthropological doctrines of the two philosophies shows just some of the problems of rejecting the implications of the historical Adam.

As indicated by doctrinal polls, true evolutionary naturalists comprise less than 20% of the

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American population. But the influence of this worldview is enormous in the educational and political arenas. The evangelists for this view, such as the New Atheists, bombard us with the message that humans are nothing special, only the products of a meaningless, purposeless process. If believed, the effect on personal and social ethics is disastrous. When humans are only accidental animals, then beginning and end of life issues can be handled in a manner similar to the handling of other animals. And one of the pressing apologetic issues for Christians today has to do with whether our minds are more than our brains. So, in comparison to the biblical worldview, evolutionary naturalists hold too low of an anthropology. The biblical worldview teaches that we are not just dust, but are spiritual creatures uniquely formed in the image of God. The upshot of all this makes for a huge difference in the shared cultural arena.

Compared to evolutionary naturalists, the number of Americans believing in the doctrines of postmodern religion is much higher by virtue of Americans being a religious, if syncretistic people. Postmodern doctrines appear tolerant, but are actually quite dogmatic in rejecting Jesus as the exclusive way to salvation. And this rejection of Christian salvation is directly related to its anthropology. Unlike evolutionary naturalism, postmodern religion tends to hold that humans are not only more than special, they are essentially God/gods themselves. Holding a view too high of anthropology, postmodern folks typically hold a corollary view too low of Jesus Christ. The historical Adam, however, implies that though we are special creatures, we are still just creatures—and sinful ones in need of a unique Savior, too. These vital implications of Adam are just those which Americans are more inclined to reject than Adam himself.

In the end, worldviews that either reject the creation of Adam or its implications will necessarily collide with that of biblical Christians. And this explains why these diverse worldviews tend to agree there is no essential human nature created by God. Instead, humans are free to create them-

selves in whatever image they choose—and free to save themselves in whatever manner they choose.

**SBJT: What is the relationship of the creation account in Genesis to the origin myths in the ancient Near East?**

**John Oswalt:** For some time, critical Old Testament scholars have argued that the creation accounts in Genesis are myths of the same type as those found in neighboring cultures in the ancient Near East. They have been forced to do so because of the evolutionary model which they have adopted to explain the origins of the Old Testament. If Israel's faith evolved from the same cultural milieu as did the religions of the surrounding peoples, then it must have had the same starting point. In order to make their case, critical scholars have minimized significant differences in content, worldview, and language and have maximized superficial similarities.

Historically, those who have believed that it is divine revelation and inspiration that explain the origin and development of the Hebrew faith have denied that the religion and its book evolved from the pagan religion around Israel. To maintain their case, these scholars often argued that Genesis 1-11 had to be taken as literal statements of fact. But more recently, evangelical scholars have begun to see that there is a genre difference between Genesis chapters 1-11 and the rest of the book—and that a different interpretive model might be required for the earlier chapters than the latter ones. Unfortunately, a number of those who have become convinced of this fact now seem to feel forced to go to the opposite end of the spectrum and align themselves with critical scholars as though that were the only option. But in so doing they have overlooked the definitive differences between the two sets of texts. However one

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explains these differences, they argue forcefully that the Genesis creation accounts have not been derived in any meaningful way from the ancient Near Eastern origin myths.<sup>1</sup>

We may organize the argument on three levels: (1) Are the Genesis accounts mythical? (2) Are the Genesis accounts derived from myths? (3) Are there mythical elements in the Genesis accounts? My answer to all three questions is no. Whatever the Genesis creation accounts are, they are not myth—that is so because of the radical differences in what constitutes “myth” and what constitutes the Bible. Myth is a literary or oral form which retells some phase of primordial events with the intent of reproducing those same effects in contemporary life. It is characterized by the understanding that the cosmos is God, and God is the cosmos. Thus whatever happens in one sphere of the cosmos—human, nature, or deity—will be reproduced in the others. This may be called the principle of continuity. There is nothing of this nature in the Bible. The Bible is predicated on transcendence. God is *not* the cosmos, nor can he be manipulated through any aspect of the cosmos. Thus what occurs in primordial time and space is *not* repeatable in actual time and space. In short, myths cannot work in the biblical world. One only needs to read the Egyptian, or Mesopotamian, or Canaanite origin myths alongside the biblical creation accounts to recognize that with the Bible we are in a completely different literary and theological world.

But are the Genesis accounts derived from the myths? Have the inspired writers taken the myths as their starting point and then allowed their revealed worldview to “reinvent” the myths, so to speak? I do not see any evidence in support of such a position. As I have just said, the *raison d’être* (reasons for existence) of the two literatures are so far apart that attempting to derive the biblical from the mythical would be a bootless task. The myths from all three of the dominant cultures presume the eternal existence of matter, and that spirit arises from it. The Bible begins with the exis-

tence of God who does not arise from matter. The Canaanite and Mesopotamian myths see a great battle between the gods and recalcitrant animate matter (in life, chaos is always threatening to overwhelm that order upon which human life depends, and the myths pretend to provide a way of controlling that). There is absolutely nothing of struggle in the biblical accounts. There is no threat to God and no resistance to his creative will. The overall atmosphere of Genesis 1 and 2 is total serenity.

But it has been said that the order of Genesis 1 reflects that of the Mesopotamian myth. That myth is eleven tablets long, and almost the entirety is given over to the struggle of the gods against the chaos monster. What little is said of the forming of this cosmos is brief and fragmentary. To reconstruct out of that “an order of creation” similar to the Bible’s requires “insight,” sleight of hand, and faith in equal measures.

But do we not find at least “traces” of the myths in Genesis? Here it will be pointed out that it might be more natural to read the Hebrew of Genesis 1:1 as “When God began to create the heaven and earth, they were without form and void.” It will also be remarked that the Hebrew word *tehom* translated “deep” is a cognate of the Akkadian *tiamat* which is the name of the primary chaos monster in the Mesopotamian origin myth. Or attention will be called to the fact that one of the ways Marduk subdued Tiamat was by hurling the seven winds down her throat, and that the apparent way in which form and order were brought to the heaven and earth in the Bible was through a “mighty wind” (*ruah ‘elohim*) soaring over the waters. In other literary studies if evidence of this sort were adduced to show some sort of dependence, the argument would be laughed off the stage.

Even if the proposed reading of Genesis 1:1 were accepted (and there is plenty of evidence not to read Genesis 1:1 this way) it still does not demonstrate that the Hebrews believed chaotic matter pre-existed God. For example, in regard to *tehom*, one of the earliest things budding Hebrew exegetes are taught is not to allow cognates to over-

rule usage. *Tehom* is never used personally in the Bible, nor is it in anyway chaotic or opposed to God. In those later places in the Bible where there are allusions to the chaos monster (although not in a creation context) *tehom* is not used. In addition, as for the supposed connection between Marduk's seven winds and the Holy Spirit, "strained" is hardly adequate. A few other similar "mythical elements" have been proposed, and they are all equally illusory.

In closing, let me say that the conclusion that the biblical creation accounts are not myth, are not derived from myth, and do not contain mythical elements, does not then foreclose discussion about what genre they *are*. It only establishes what they are not. My own conclusion is that they refer to historic fact in poetic and allusive ways. But that is another discussion.

**SBJT: What is the goal of Christian apologetics with respect to origins? Not only that, but if Adam was created on the sixth day only a few thousand years ago, how do we explain that there are no human fossil records with the dinosaurs, which supposedly lived millions of years ago?**

**Terry Mortenson:** As to the first question, it seems to me that for many leading Christian apologists the goal is simply to give solid reasons for believing in the existence of God. This implies that the only enemy to fight is atheism. But while atheism is certainly a serious foe of Christianity, that is not the only enemy from the perspective of biblical apologetics. The important apologetic text of 1 Peter 3:15 tells us that we each need to "sanctify Christ as Lord in our hearts" and be ready always to give a defense (an apologetic) "for the hope that is in us."

That means that our apologetics must lead to Christ and must defend the truth of the Bible, which is the source of information about Christ, our Lord and Savior. And that means that we must defend biblical truth at whatever points its veracity and authority are being attacked.

Jesus taught that the whole of Scripture, beginning with Moses (i.e. Genesis), bears witness to him and his work of redemption (Luke 24:27, 44). The whole Bible is his Word. And Genesis provides us with the foundation of the gospel—it explains why Jesus had to become a man to be our redeemer. It reveals that an initially "very good" creation was ruined by God's curse because of Adam's sin, a curse that affected the whole creation (Gen 3:14-19; 5:29; Rom 5:12; 8:18-25). We cannot reject the literal history of Genesis 1-11 without undermining the gospel. If those chapters are mythical or symbolic, then Jesus died for a mythological or symbolic problem and is offering sinners a mythological and symbolic hope.

Genesis 1-11, along with the Gospels, is undoubtedly the most attacked portion of the Bible over the last 200 years. And it has been under attack not only by Bible-hating skeptics, but also by many sincere and godly Christian leaders and scholars who have mistakenly accepted evolution and/or millions of years as proven scientific fact. So, Christian apologists must defend the literal historical truth of Genesis if they wish to be faithful to the biblical task of apologetics. It is not enough to defend the existence of God or the resurrection of Jesus or even the historicity of a literal Adam. We must defend all the truth of God's Word.

As to the second question, in the early nineteenth century, the apparent lack of human fossils in most of the sedimentary rock layers—except those layers near the top of the "geological column"—was a major reason why most Christians quickly rejected the roughly 6000-years-old age of the creation that had been accepted as clear biblical teaching by most Christian for the previous eighteen centuries. Old earth proponents at that time insisted that the rock layers containing extinct creatures had to have been formed long before God created man.

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In those early decades of the nineteenth century a number of Christian authors, who collectively became known as the “scriptural geologists” and who were young-earth creationists, contended that there was indeed evidence of human fossils with extinct creatures in lower rock layers, but that the evidence had been either ignored or misinterpreted by those who were advocating millions of years in earth history. But old-earth geologists ignored or dismissed (as being uninformed) this evidence and the scriptural geologists’s many other geological and biblical arguments. By 1850 most of the church had rejected the historically orthodox young-earth view.<sup>2</sup>

Once the church had compromised with millions of years, it had very little defense when Darwin’s theory of evolution was published in 1859. Darwin’s friend, Charles Lyell, was the champion of uniformitarian geology and the most influential man in persuading the church to completely reject the global flood and biblical time-scale. But in 1863 he revisited some of the evidence presented in the early nineteenth century for the contemporary existence of man and extinct creatures.<sup>3</sup> While the scriptural geologists had used this evidence decades earlier to argue *against* the great antiquity of the earth, Lyell now used the same evidence to “prove” the great antiquity of man (well beyond the biblical chronology).

In addition, several scriptural geologists emphasized that the argument for the non-existence of man—or indeed any other creatures—in earlier times, based on the absence of fossil evidence, was geologically and philosophically unsound. Today there is much geological evidence that this argument still is invalid. Therefore the fact that we don’t find humans with dinosaurs or trilobites in the rock record doesn’t mean that humans didn’t live at the same time as those creatures. The absence of evidence is not evidence of absence.<sup>4</sup>

Soon after Darwin’s *The Descent of Man* (1871) many in the church were not only accepting evolution as the explanation for the origin of plants and

animals but many also began to reject the supernatural creation of Adam from dust and Eve from his rib. By the 1880’s the then editor of a Christian journal estimated that “perhaps a quarter, perhaps a half of the educated ministers in our leading evangelical denominations” believed “that the story of the creation and fall of man, told in Genesis, is no more the record of actual occurrences than is the parable of the Prodigal Son.”<sup>5</sup>

So here is the progression of compromise over the past 200 years. First, the church accepted that the earth is millions of years old, but insisted that plants and animals were supernaturally created (not evolved), and that Adam was created supernaturally by God about 6000 years ago. Then came the view that the earth is old and animals and plants evolved over millions of years, but that Adam was created by God about 6000 years ago. Later, many Christians insisted that Adam was supernaturally created but long before 6000 years ago. Others said that Adam’s body evolved from some lower animal, which changed into a human by the infusion of the divine image. Now we have professing Christians who believe that Adam never existed as an individual but rather mankind evolved spiritually and physically from some ape-like creatures over the course of thousands of years.

The church’s compromise with millions of years opened the door to further compromise of biblical truth over the next two centuries, including the current growing denial of a literal Adam and a literal fall. Once the slippery slide started on the age of the earth, there was no stopping the theological compromise, except with those who returned to the supreme authority of Scripture and believed God rather than the majority of scientists. The claim of millions of years is the foundation to this current battle about Adam. We can’t just contend for a literal Adam, critically important as that is. We must also contend for a young earth because the same Word of God that teaches a literal Adam and literal fall also teaches that the whole creation is only thousands of years old.

## ENDNOTES

<sup>1</sup>The observant reader will have noted that I do not call the myths “creation accounts.” That is intentional. The myths know nothing of “creation,” i.e. the bringing into existence of something that had not existed before. They only know of the reorganization of the primordial matter that had always existed.

<sup>2</sup>For a discussion of these nineteenth-century developments, see Terry Mortenson, *The Great Turning Point: the Church’s Catastrophic Mistake on Geology—Before Darwin* (Green Forest, AR: Master Books, 2004).

<sup>3</sup>Charles Lyell, *The Antiquity of Man* (London, 1863), 68.

<sup>4</sup>See Terry Mortenson, “The Historical Development of the Geological Time-scale,” [cited 9 April 2011]. Online: <http://www.answersingenesis.org/articles/aid/v2/n1/old-earth-time-scale>.

<sup>5</sup>Ronald Numbers, *The Creationists* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1992), 3.