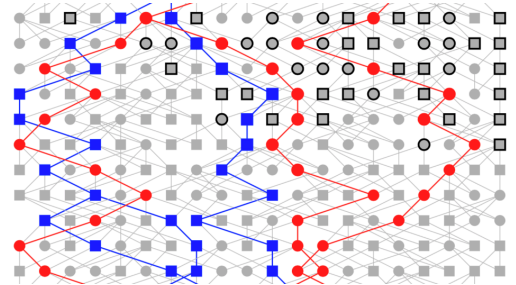




A Genealogical Rapprochement on Adam?

S. Joshua Swamidass

<https://doi.org/10.54739/9mu3>



Call me a *confessing scientist*: a scientist in the Church and a Christian in science, giving a truthful account of what I have seen. My personal position in this debate is beside the point, and not my advocacy here. Instead, as a peaceful scientist, I advocate on behalf of the *empty chair*, those historically excluded from the conversation. For this reason, I am no longer working with BioLogos. I no longer call myself an *evolutionary creationist* or a *theistic evolutionist*. As most scientists do, I still affirm evolutionary science, however my goal is to serve with an honest account of what I have seen in science. I seek to place *others* theological concerns and questions over my personal agenda.

A Surprising Claim

I advocate for the *empty chair*. To this end and for this purpose, I made a fairly radical claim at a public lecture at Urbana Seminary, then at a scientific seminar at the ASA conference, then in an online symposium for The Creation Project. This claim is consistent with the genetic evidence in which it appears (1) our ancestors arise as a population, not a single couple, and that (2) we share ancestry with the great apes.

Entirely consistent with the genetic evidence, it is possible Adam was created out of dust, and Eve out of his rib, less than 10,000 years ago in a divinely created garden where God might dwell with them, the first beings with opportunity to be in a relationship with Him. Perhaps their fall brought accountability for sin to all their descendants. Leaving the Garden, their offspring blended with their neighbors¹ in the surrounding towns. In this way, they became genealogical ancestors of all those in recorded history. Adam and Eve, here, are the single-couple progenitors² of all mankind. Even if this scenario is false or unnecessary, nothing in evolutionary science unsettles this story. So, evolution presses in a very limited way on

About a month after this was published in late 2017, BioLogos responded to this article and my defense of Keller, agreeing that the science here is correct. It would be seventeen months later that President Haarsma silently edited her confrontation of Keller to remove the error. In 2020, BioLogos acknowledged some, but not all, of the scientific errors they made. They also explained why they continue to disagree, on theological grounds, with the findings explained in this article. (This note was updated in April 2020)

our understanding of Adam and Eve, only suggesting (alongside Scripture) that their lineage was not pure.

Though I personally do not endorse any specific account, not even this one, the point is that the scientific evidence does not unsettle this *literal, traditional, and concordist*³ account of Genesis. From a scientific point of view, most of the details in this account are not important; the dates can shift, and so can the theology. As long as there is mixing with those “outside the garden,” this account is consistent with all the findings of evolutionary science. There are no hermeneutical or theological claims embedded in this claim. Rather, scientifically speaking, this account fits without contradiction into the evolutionary account of our origins.

This is a finding with far more significance than this specific account. As the former president of BioLogos, Darrel Falk, immediately recognized, “science is silent on the question of Adam and Eve being ancestors of us all. It is even silent on the issue of whether Adam and Eve were created *de novo*...**One can't pin the question of Adam and Eve on science anymore.**” BioLogos as an organization, also, publicly endorsed the science behind these claims.

This is a disruptive finding. Our collective failure to recognize this fact was nothing short of a large and consequential error, a scientific error. The surprise and uncertainty and objections that arise, they all expose scientific errors in our understanding of how evolutionary science interacts with theology. Despite what we have heard, science is [*silent*] about whether they were *de novo* created, much as it is silent on the Resurrection.

I am pleased to announce that an article justifying the science behind this claim was accepted for publication, without major revision, after review by six anonymous reviewers (included three scientists). It will appear in the March 1, 2018 issue of PSCF, in time for the 2018 Dabar Conference which will focus on a historical Adam. This article is long and technical in order to systematically deal with a steady stream of scientific objections offered by others over the last six months. The good news is that the scientific debate about my claim is essentially over. After review by over twenty scientists, no sustained objection has been brought forward. This is not surprising, because my claim rests on a large body of established scientific work, a body of work that has been overlooked till now.

1. Their neighbors would have been created by an evolutionary process.
2. Keep in mind that sole-progenitorship does not preclude intermixing with other lines.

3. Here, by “concordist” I do not mean eisegesis, which is always incorrect. Instead, I am using the positive definition, where concordist means embracing correspondence between an interpretation and the natural world.

A Genealogical Adam and Eve

The technical paper covers a lot of ground, heads off several technical objections, and avoids addressing the theological implications entirely. Here, I provide a high level overview for those who want to a new way forward in the origins debate.

Starting Point

We start with the two key findings of genetic science: (1) it appears that our ancestors arise as population, not a single couple, and (2) we share ancestry with the great apes. To these two findings, we add two undisputed facts:

1. **Genealogical Ancestry is not Genetic Ancestry.** Though scientific discourse focuses on genetic ancestry, genealogical ancestry is germane to the theological claims about Adam. For this reason, it has been an error to answer genealogical questions about Adam with scientific claims about genetic ancestry. Most importantly, we find that, if they existed, Adam and Eve were very likely (under plausible assumptions) ancestors of all of us. Under some theological definitions of “human,”⁴ they would also be the first and only humans when they arise, who are also the ancestors of every human in all history.
2. **The Term “Human” is Ambiguous in the Distant Past.** This is true in both theology and science; moreover, “human” is used differently in both theology and science. For this reason, references to “human,” “mankind,” and “humanity” in theology and science, when applied to the distant past, are hotly debated, unsettled, ambiguous, and ultimately misleading. When in dialogue with theology, ambiguity and theological weight of the term “human” creates avoidable confusion about what science does and does not say. Most importantly, in light of recent universal ancestry, there is nearly total freedom in mapping between theological “humans,” as we understand them today, and the findings of science.

Recognizing ambiguity in “human” raises premature concerns about naming others as “sub-humans.” Here, John Walton’s model, based on a *textual analysis*⁵ of Genesis 1 – 3, is helpful. Without reliance on extra-Scriptural sources, he argues that Genesis 1 and Genesis 2 are sequential. God first makes “mankind” in His Image, and then later identifies, or perhaps specially creates, a single man Adam and a woman Eve, who together become important because of his Fall. Walton calls Adam and Eve the first “true” humans, who are both God Imaged and Fallen. In contrast, those “outside the garden” are God Imaged, but not yet Fallen. They are not sub-human, to be clear, but they are also different than humans as we understand them today; C.S. Lewis might say they were better than us. A related two-creation interpretation of Genesis, also, is found in The Book of Enoch (from before 200 BC) and elsewhere, so this solution may carry both traditional and textual support. The two-creation model of mankind is just one theological approach; many more are possible. Nonetheless,

-
4. For example, if we define theological humans as “Adam, Eve, and their descendants,” then by definition they are the sole-couple progenitors of all humans, by definition.
 5. In contrast with much of his argument, the case for reading Genesis 1 and 2 sequentially does not depend in any way on Ancient Near Eastern (ANE) literature. For this reason, this part of his argument should be understood on its own terms, independent of one’s hermeneutical stance on ANE.

I personally refrain from endorsing any specific solution at this time, and offer this primarily to abet premature concerns.

Moreover, because of the necessary entailments of the science, proposals within this framework cannot be construed as *polygenesis*, a false theory of origins sometimes marshalled in support of racism. Instead, this framework continues to affirm monophylogeny, which is the way modern science came to reject polygenesis as a falsified theory. All humans alive today are the same kind, and all would share ancestry with Adam and Eve if they existed. Adam and Eve, if they existed, were not important for bringing advanced biological abilities to those “outside the garden,” but for a unique theological role they played.

Eight Theses on Adam and Eve

From this starting point, a careful review of the established science brings us to important conclusions. These conclusions are based on a mainstream science account of origins, which includes evolution. This is not a creative reinterpretation of the facts, or a challenge to evolution. Instead this is a correction to a scientific error in our understanding of how evolutionary science interacts with theology.

1. **Genetic science still stands.** It still appears that most our ancestors arise as a population, not a single couple, and we share ancestry with the great apes. This is not an argument against evolutionary science in any way. Evolution is a valid description of the history of those “outside the garden.” They appear to have evolved from a common ancestor with the great apes.
2. Under a single plausible assumption, it is very likely that if they existed (e.g. as in Walton, Kidner, Keller, Alexander, or Stott’s proposals), then **Adam and Eve are ancestors of us all**, because genealogical ancestry becomes universal in just a few thousand years. This is true whether or not genealogical ancestry is theologically important, and wherever it is that they lived. This is true even if they were in our recent history, just 6,000 years ago in the Middle East.
3. All that evolutionary science tells us, alongside the many hints of Scripture, is that **there were biologically compatible beings “outside the garden” with whom Adam’s line eventually mixed**. Beings outside the garden are a well known possibility considered by both modern and ancient readers, because of several passages that seem to suggest it. Consequently, all major camps in the creation debate (including *Reasons to Believe* and *Answers in Genesis*) allow for intermixing between Adam’s lines and others, and no historical creed or confession denies this option.
4. If they existed, **Adam and Eve probably did not transmit DNA to all their descendants, nor did they transmit any identifiable DNA to any of their descendants**. Genetic information is transmitted only unreliably. This means that Adam and Eve’s DNA is not how the Fall or original sin, if they exist, is transmitted to all of us. It also means that, if Adam and Eve existed, they were essentially the same biology as those outside the garden.
5. Therefore, **there is no evidence against (or for) the de novo creation of Adam and Eve**, because any evidence of a single de novo creation event would have been erased. Most our ancestors are genetic ghosts, and there is no way to identify Adamic

genetic material even if it was passed to us. [The Deceitful God objection \(against Apparent Age\)](#) does not apply because the story we read from genomes is not false; it is the real history of those “outside the garden.”

6. **Scripture and theology, at most, make claims about genealogical ancestry, but not genetic ancestry.** They cannot be directly making any genetic (as in pertaining to DNA) claims because we are ignorant of DNA till less than 100 years ago. The confusion between genetic and genealogical ancestry may have caused widespread eisegesis as we confused our modern discourse on genetic ancestry (e.g. Y-Chromosomal Adam) with the theological discourse prior to knowledge of DNA. Of course, there will be debate about if genealogical claims appear Scripture, but we should agree that Scripture is silent about DNA, much as it is silent about quantum mechanics and General Relativity.
7. For this reason, with the right mapping between theological “humans” and science, **there is no contradiction between evolutionary science and most claims of theology**, the historical confessions, and *[some]* “traditional” accounts of Adam and Eve. This finding of non-contradiction extends to terms like *sole-progenitor*, *first parents*, “*all the living*,” “*de novo*” creation, *without parents*, etc. Keep in mind that sole-progenitor has several meanings, and does not forbid intermixing with other lines (see, for example, [AiG’s many views on Nephilim](#)).
8. **If intermixing with other lines is permitted, a model can be usually constructed to match the genetic evidence.** With well chosen definitions of theological “humans” in the distant past, there need not be contradiction.

A *Genealogical Adam* will not solve the puzzle of Adam and Eve for everyone, but it will for many. For example, Tim Keller is a *minimal literalist*, who affirms the *de novo* creation of Adam and Eve, ancestors of us all. [He has been told, falsely, that this contradicts with science.](#) It does not. There is no evidence against the *de novo* creation of Adam.

Even for those that cannot affirm evolution, this is an important opportunity for claiming common ground. Science does not speak of when God does and does not act, so we should not think that it has ruled out miracles. Those that argue otherwise are on shaky ground.

Reframing the Adam Debate

For a very long time, the received wisdom has understood “traditional” understandings of Adam and Eve to be in direct conflict with evolutionary science. We faced an *either-or* choice, between two mutually exclusive options. Now, however, we can see that there is a *both-and* option available, which keeps the story almost entirely intact. Although the genetic story seems in total conflict with “traditional” account, the genealogical story is consistent with the genetics and evolutionary story, but looks almost identical to the “traditional” account. Visually dimming those outside Adam’s line makes the evolutionary story look exactly like the “traditional” Genesis account, with Adam and Eve as sole-progenitors⁶ of us all.

6. Once again, recall that sole-progenitors does not preclude mixing. Its definition here is that people are conferred with a specific theological status solely by way of a connection to this single-couple alone. In this sense, they are our sole-

Those seeking to calm anxieties and reduce conflict will forefront this description of evolutionary science, a genealogical Adam. Those seeking to perpetuate a conflict will ignore this description. This is true for all voices in the conversation, regardless of our personal understanding of Adam. Many of us face a choice between a personal theological agenda and truthfulness in presenting science to the public.

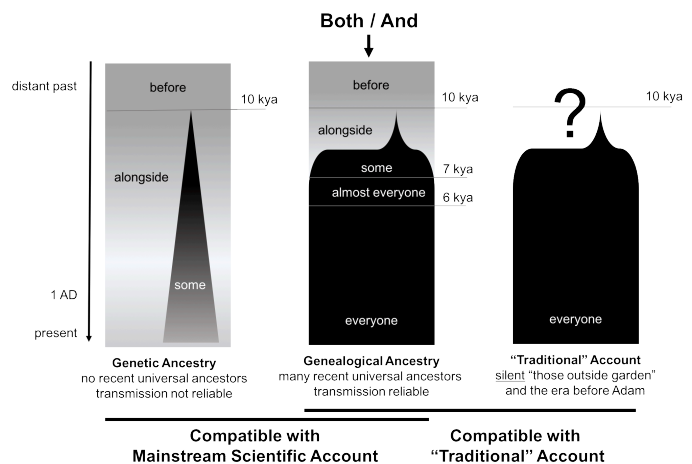
One exemplary biologist, who does not affirm a historical Adam, wrote to me his assessment recently. Of note, this is the **former president of BioLogos**, Darrel Falk, and he gets it exactly right:

You...demonstrated that science is silent on the question of Adam and Eve being ancestors of us all. It is even silent on the issue of whether Adam and Eve were created *de novo* in much the same way as the natural sciences are silent on whether there could have been a resurrection. I believe your contribution to the discussion has been immeasurable. I am not a concordist, so as a lay person I think all of this is not likely an accurate reading of Scripture—but that’s not the point—One can’t pin the question of Adam and Eve on science anymore. And I think that’s been your primary if not only point the whole way along.

Darrel Falk, founding president of BioLogos

An Invitation to Theology

Science is silent, therefore, on Adam and Eve, ancestors of us all. They might even be *de novo* created from the dust, and from a rib, and lived less than 10,000 years ago. Science tells us nothing about them. Instead, we must turn to theology and hermeneutics. Here, the conversation is set for some very important and engaging *[dialogue]* between science and theology.



A genealogical Adam is the both-and option. The three figures show different views of ancestry to an Adam and Eve placed 10,000 years ago in the past. The left figure shows the limitations of genetic ancestry, which does not allow for the “traditional” account of Adam and Eve. The right figure shows the “traditional” account, which is silent about beings outside the garden. The middle figure shows a genealogical Adam in evolution, which is consistent with both mainstream science and the “traditional” account. Until now, it was thought that our understanding of Adam and Eve required major revisions to fit within the evolutionary account.

progenitors, sole source of any theological status (like original sin) conferred by being in their line.

Those who find theological significance in a genealogical connection to Adam are invited into important questions. How should we think of beings “outside the garden,” even if they remain in our distant past? A genealogical Adam affirms *monophylogeny* in the present day (thereby rejecting polygenesis), but how theologically coherent is a history with other beings alongside Adam? It is also surprising that genealogical ancestors are not usually genetic ancestors. In what way, then, could genealogical relationships, nonetheless, be theologically meaningful for doctrines like original sin?

A genealogical Adam brings us back to theology with a whole set of questions, especially about ancestral sin and those “outside the garden.” Those “outside the garden” are a particularly interesting mystery, considered by many over the last 2,000 years. Clearly a part of some traditional accounts of Genesis, “those outside the garden” is exactly where the theological questions are most interesting. The conversation will touch on a wide range of neglected treasures, including the *midrash* of the *Book of Enoch*, from before 200 BC, and *Religion and Rocketry* by C.S. Lewis.

I have been working out some answers of my own, but I am no theologian. This year’s Dabar conference is focused on a historical Adam, and I am honored to be sharing about a genealogical Adam there. It will take a few years for the theological dust to settle. Hang on, the ride is going to be fun.

References

<https://peacefulscience.org/articles/defense-tim-keller/>
<http://biologos.org/blogs/deborah-haarsma-the-presidents-notebook-on-geniality-and-genealogy>
https://discourse.peacefulscience.org/t/_/4798
<https://biologos.org/articles/truth-seeking-in-science>
<https://biologos.org/articles/series/book-review-the-genealogical-adam-and-eve/genealogy-genetics-and-the-power-of-words>
<https://peacefulscience.org/articles/confessing-scientist/>
<https://peacefulscience.org/articles/reviewing-adam-and-the-genome/>
<http://www.asa3.org/ASAradio/ASA2017Swamidass2.mp3>
<http://henrycenter.tiu.edu/2017/06/a-genealogical-adam-and-eve-in-evolution>

Looking Forward

Going forward, look for more theological work on this in conjunction with theological partners. For interested organizations, groups and scholars, I am available to clarify the science, and support partnerships to move us forward. This will be a dialogue between science and theology. The science is subtle and exciting, and theologians can take a starring role.

This is an exciting moment. Everyone is welcome to join the conversation and begin developing *A Genealogical Adam* further, whatever we think of evolution or theology. Of note, several scholars who personally do not affirm a historical Adam recognize the significance of this work for the Church. Special recognition goes to Greg Cootsona, who directs the STEAM project which has funded this effort even though he personally does not affirm a historical Adam. Moreover, several scholars sympathetic to *A Genealogical Adam* remain within BioLogos, even as I leave.

This is not about promoting any narrow theological agenda. This is not an endorsement of *literalism*, *concordism* or *traditionalism* either. Instead, we seek to explain science in a way that reduces anxiety and tension for everyone, allowing for more options than we previously knew were possible. Let us together welcome the full diversity of the Church with an accurate account of science.

<https://asa3.org/ASA/PSCF/2018/PSCF3-18Swamidass.pdf>
<http://henrycenter.tiu.edu/dabar-conference>
<http://scientificintegrity.blogspot.com/2010/04/religion-and-rocketry-by-cs-lewis.html>
<https://www.biblicalarchaeology.org/daily/biblical-topics/hebrew-bible/lilith-in-the-bible-and-mythology>
https://rationalwiki.org/wiki/Omphalos_hypothesis#Deceitful_god
<https://answersingenesis.org/bible-characters/who-were-the-nephilim>
<http://potiphar.jongarvey.co.uk/2017/09/08/the-creation-of-adam>
<https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Midrash>
https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Book_of_Enoch