




When Did Sin Begin?

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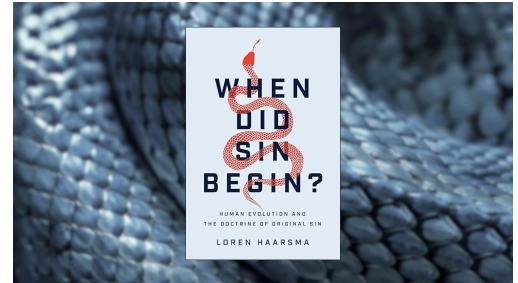
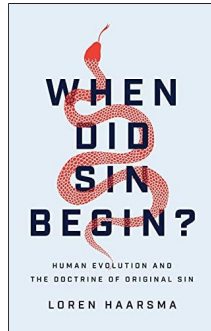
Haarsma, associate professor of physics at Calvin University, argues “there are several possible ways to harmonize the doctrine of original sin and the science of human evolution, taking seriously both what Scripture teaches and what we learn from science” (p. 14).

Haarsma presents four possible scenarios: Adam and Eve were particular historical individuals who federally represented all humanity (scenario 1); they were particular historical individuals whose sin spread culturally or genealogically to all humans (scenario 2); in a compressed history, Adam and Eve represent many actual individuals who received special revelation from God (scenario 3); or they are symbolic figures who represent humanity as it evolved to become ethically aware and thus morally responsible to God (scenario 4). These scenarios are not exhaustive, and each has several possible variations.

Haarsma contends “[a]ll four are easily compatible with the scientific data,” “[a]ll four can easily affirm...divine action” (p. 107), and that original sin and human evolution are easily compatible.

The first four chapters are devoted to preliminary and parallel issues: the task of relating Scripture and science, possible ways of understanding divine action in evolution (and more specifically, human evolution), the problem of natural evil—predation, suffering, and death before humans arrived, and evidence for human evolution. The remaining chapters examine the four scenarios in the light of a variety of theological issues, such as when sin began, the nature of sin, and how sin is propagated.

In the end, Haarsma reduces the four scenarios to two: Adam and Eve are recent historical individuals from whom we all descend (scenarios 1 and 2; approach 1), or they are symbolic, literary figures who were not actual historical individuals (scenarios 3 and 4; approach 2). In summary, Haarsma asserts the two main approaches



each face a distinct set of serious—and essentially unresolvable—“difficult questions” (ch. 11).

Nonetheless, Haarsma argues, all four scenarios are in general agreement about three points: 1) The inspiration and authority of Scripture. 2) Science may inform theology, but it cannot dictate to theology. History shows that, at times, science “alerts us to theological difficulties” that were not apparent before. And 3) the redemptive paradigm remains the same. God is good and holy; sin is culpable rebellion against God; and the work of Jesus Christ is “central to God’s atonement for the world” (256-57). Thus, the believer can embrace whichever of the four scenarios best aligns with his or her theological perspective or tradition.

A Mixed Scientific Argument

Scientifically, the book’s high-level summary of evolution is mostly accurate, though it lacks critical caveats. Notably, the book incorporates—without identifying or crediting—substantial corrections to the BioLogos organization’s position.¹ Haarsma rightly explains the distinction between genetic and genealogical ancestry, acknowledging that Adam and Eve could be recent universal ancestors of everyone, and they could even be *de novo* created without parents.

However, the discussion of population genetics (ch. 4) contains many substantial errors and omits critical references.² Haarsma reports, inaccurately, that a single-couple origin—without interbreeding, and more ancient than 500,000 years ago—has *not* been shown consistent with *effective population size* estimates from linkage disequilibrium and incomplete lineage sorting. In support, Haarsma cites several defunct and inaccurate sources, including one since deleted (ch 4, fn. 8), omitting a large body of scholarship that corrects these mistakes.³ Oddly, Haarsma does not discuss or reference the lineage time estimates that do legitimately place some constraints on these scenarios. Inexplicably and without any justification, Haarsma goes on to warn that, even if ultimately shown consistent with the evidence, these scenarios would still be “unlikely.”

Loren Haarsma. When Did Sin Begin? Human Evolution and the Doctrine of Original Sin. Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2021. ix + 261 pp. Paperback. ISBN 978-1-5409-6368-0. \$27.99.

1. For an example, see S. Joshua Swamidass. A U-Turn on Adam and Eve. Peaceful Science. <https://doi.org/10.54739/83rj>
2. S. Joshua Swamidass. The Misunderstood Science of Genetic Bottlenecks. The 2022 Annual Meeting of the American Scientific Affiliation. <https://doi.org/10.54739/1w7j>
3. For a more complete explanation, see The Misunderstood Science of Genetic Bottlenecks. <https://doi.org/10.54739/1w7j>

Haarsma also claims, incorrectly, that high estimates of *effective population size* demonstrate that *Homo sapiens* did not begin as a single couple. But these estimates do not, in fact, demonstrate our ancestral population size was always large. Moreover, it is widely accepted that *Homo sapiens* interbreed with other hominins. So even if our ancestral population was always large, *Homo sapiens* could still have begun as a single original couple alongside a larger population of our other ancestors.⁴ On the basis of such inaccuracies, several important *ancient* Adam and Eve scenarios are unfairly excluded. Consequently, and undermining his overall argument, Haarsma neglects the concerns of a large group of Christians, including William Lane Craig, *Reasons to Believe*, and many Catholics.

A Particular Doctrine of Accommodation

Exegetically, Haarsma's argument for the second approach—in which Adam and Eve are *not* considered historical individuals—depends on a disputed understanding of the doctrine of accommodation.

Theologians from the Church Fathers to the present day have used the doctrine of accommodation to defend Scripture's authority. The Bible is authoritative over everything it teaches or affirms. There is wide agreement these teachings are often presented in an accommodated fashion, using customs, life situations, and conceptual categories of that day to communicate to the immediate audience. The book briefly and accurately discusses Calvin's use of accommodation.

Haarsma's argument, however, hinges on a distinct and controversial notion of divine accommodation, one employing an approach used by later scholars of the 17th-19th centuries. He asserts "[The] truth about Christ's redeeming work *does not depend* on what we decide about the historicity of Adam" (p. 143). ~ ~ ~ Using Adam as a literary character is not an example of accommodation. To say that it is, is to make a category mistake.

It also does not get to the issue at hand. Does Paul merely use Adam to make a theological point? Or does he teach that Adam's actions caused the present human condition? Pauline scholars across the spectrum agree that it is the latter. If Paul was wrong in *affirming* Adam's existence (beyond merely *believing* it or simply *using* Adam as archetype) then this error does indeed impact the authority of Scripture.

The idea that the principle of accommodation can be expanded, in this way, to include affirmations of error is a modern notion that most evangelical scholars reject. The Lausanne Covenant, a foundational document in evangelicalism, holds that Scripture is "without error in all that it affirms." Disagreement with this precise phrase, indeed, is why many evolutionary creationists do not affirm the Lausanne Covenant. For these reasons and others like it, evangelicals who wish to uphold Scripture's authority will, usually, not accept the non-historical Adam scenarios.

4. This scenario is extensively discussed in <https://doi.org/10.54739/1w7j>.

Difficult Questions All Around?

The book's summary analysis that historical Adam and no-Adam scenarios each face a distinct list of "difficult [theological] questions" (ch. 11) substantially undermines the book's thesis that there are "many ways of harmonizing evolution and the doctrine of sin," because, in Haarsma's presentation, both approaches 1 and 2 appear to face intractable theological problems. In his telling, and defeating his own thesis, these difficult questions are not "easily" to answer, so there are not easy ways to reconcile Christian theology with evolutionary science.

In our assessment, the questions for no-Adam scenarios (approach 1; scenarios 1 and 2) are truly *difficult*. Denying a historical Adam, it would seem, will require major reinterpretations of key passages of Scripture (questions #1 and 4), denying the original goodness of creation (#5), and attributing sin and evil to God (#6). These large revisionary departures from historical Christian faith are the precise reasons why many so Christians are uncomfortable with evolutionary creationism.

In contrast, the purportedly "difficult" questions facing a recent genealogical Adam and Eve (approach 2; scenarios 3 and 4) are much less difficult. Some, such as whether Adam and Eve could have chosen differently or why God allowed the Fall's effects to spread, have been contemplated many times in the history of theology.⁵ For others (e.g. question #3), Haarsma fails to engage with resolutions that have been discussed extensively in the theological literature, including within his more discrete references.

A more sensible theological analysis would recognize this substantial difference in difficulty. The book's conclusion, then, would be that evolution itself does not create any difficult theological problems as long as we still affirm a historical Adam.

Conclusion

Ultimately, we agree with the high-level premise: There are "many ways" to reconcile evolution with the doctrine of sin., but range of reconciliations acceptable to most evangelicals is very different than the range which Haarsma presents.

We agree that No-Adam scenarios do indeed face "difficult" questions and may not be theologically sound reconciliations. In contrast, scenarios with a recent genealogical Adam and Eve do not face unanswered or intractably difficult questions. This book, moreover, unfairly dismisses scenarios with an ancient Adam based on inaccurate science. Critically, and without convincing justification, the book argument places scenarios that do *not* affirm a historical Adam on an equal theological footing with those that do.

5. This question was the topic of much scholarship by Church fathers, and subsequently, yielding several theologically robust responses. See, for example, the *felix culpa* tradition.

References

<https://peacefulscience.org/books/when-sin-begin/>

<https://doi.org/10.54739/83rj>

<https://peacefulscience.org/series/asa-workshop-2022/>

<https://doi.org/10.54739/1w7j>