Historical Adam and the Ancient Near East

Part 2 of 2: Do We Need to Believe in a Historical Adam?
with Darrell L. Bock and Richard Averbeck
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Darrell Bock: All right. Now, let's come to another feature of Genesis 1 that gets discussed. I have two things more, things I want to cover in Genesis 1, and that is being made in the image of God. And then how should we think about the reference to Adam in Chapter 1? Are we thinking of Adam and Eve yet or are we thinking about humanity? So those two points. Image of God and Adam.

Richard Averbeck: Well, the fact of the matter is that in Chapter 1, I don't think we're thinking about Adam and Eve yet. I think what's going on is God says, "Let us make man." I think it means humankind, humanity. And part of the reason for that is it goes on and it uses the plural. It talks about "and let them rule over the heavens and the earth." So, right from the start, it's treating Adam as a collective, as the whole of humanity. This is the place of humanity in the world.

Darrell Bock: Just like we're creating fish and we're creating birds, et cetera, right.

Richard Averbeck: Yeah, you don't have the first fish and you know. If you follow that, it's the idea that this is something that keeps on renewing itself too because of propagation and so on. So he's made this world to actually work so that it renews itself, if you will, and that's part of the whole system of how God has set it up, with the seasons and all of this from day four on and so on.

Darrell Bock: So we're seeing the ordering of groups.

Richard Averbeck: Yes.

Darrell Bock: Sun, moon, et cetera. Birds, reptiles. Yeah, I'm sitting here thinking, "Before Adam, was there Nemo?" I mean was he the first fish. So we're dealing with corporate groupings here and the general structure of humanity. Again, thinking through the picture we had earlier. This is the director giving us the big panoramic view to start off with, and then we zero in and take a look at particulars. So that's what's going on with Adam you think. What about image of God?
Richard Averbeck: Well, the image of God – the terminology for image of God is very consistently used for a physical expression. It's like a word for a physical expression. In fact, we have one statue from the ancient, around 1000 BC that we found, in which it's in two languages, Aramaic and Acadian. And in Aramaic – this is a language very much like Hebrew. In fact, part of the Bible is written in Hebrew, parts of Daniel and Ezra is written in Aramaic. And on this particular statue there's an inscription that tells us about what the statue is for. And it refers to the statue as the image, the same word that's used in Hebrew, and the likeness, the same word that's used in Hebrew twice for each of them, alternately, in reference to this statue of this king that's to represent him here before this god in this particular temple. The point is that we are like God's statue in the world. We're here. He created us as physical beings to function in this physical world, managing it, physically, and giving us all the capacities to do that in a way that's really pleasing to him. We're supposed to be his representation.

Darrell Bock: Now would the word vice regent or regents on behalf of God, would that be an image that would work here? Or does that say too much or too little?

Richard Averbeck: Yes, I think it would be an image that works. As long as you understand that it's the whole of humanity that is this statue, as well as each individual person has this status. And so it's an expansive kind of concept, because in order for us to manage this world, we need to be fruitful and multiply, as it says in verse 28. And so it brings in man and woman as part of this humanity in order to have us propagate to fill the earth. And then, it goes on again in verse 28 and says, "and rule over the animals" and so on in the earth. So what happens is, it comes right back to that purpose that we have to manage this world as God's physical beings who represent him here as his statue. We're not dead rock of course. But it's a way of talking about us that helps us to know who we are to be representing.
Darrell Bock: Now, I said I had two questions, and that was on the image of God and Adam, and I’ve lied, because I now thought of a third question that I want to deal with in Genesis 1. And that is – let's talk about the male and female part of this. Within the image of God, we have this differentiation, which represents both diversity and wholeness at the same time. So let's talk about how male and female and how gender operate into the concept of the image of God because I think that's an important feature of Genesis 1 as well.

Richard Averbeck: Well, in Genesis 1, together we function in the image and likeness of God. It's very functional, how we live in this world. It's about what we do, and therefore, all that's behind what we do in the terms of the way God has made us. It's interesting that it's saying that we are meant to handle the world together as man and woman. We're not in this thing alone. We're functioning together as units of man and woman together to manage our world, and to live in it in ways that are really pleasing to God.

Darrell Bock: Yeah, that is interesting because in our culture we've got this emphasis on the individual and this emphasis that's on the individual means that we tend to operate in our own silos, if you will. But the stress that we see in the Old Testament and the stress that we see even coming out of Genesis 1 is the importance of working together and of being able to complement one another in what we do in life.

Is that fair? That whereas – I often say it this way, whereas the west tends to be a very individualized culture, the culture of the Bible is a very corporate culture and emphasizes the corporate nature of our lives and thinking through a more corporate lens about how I connect to other people and not just thinking of myself as kind of this independent, individual satellite operating on my own off here to the side. Fair?

Richard Averbeck: Yeah. God created us as relational beings, and he's relational with us. And we need to be relational with one another. And the core of that relational bond is the man and woman bond in the world. And that comes out very explicitly in chapter 2, as it develops this further down at the level. But the point is that this is the way it is right from the beginning. It's man and woman, but it's then also all of humanity together that is supposed to function in this way in God's created world.
**Darrell Bock:** So it would be fair to say that what we often call the Great Commandment, which is to love God with all your heart, mind and soul, and love your neighbor as yourself, really does have its roots in the way this creation story is told at the beginning, and being sensitive to the fact that people who are created are all created in the image of God and, thus, have a certain status and value that's precious because they’ve been created to reflect God. And so we ought to treat them with a certain care as a result of thinking through the creation.

**Richard Averbeck:** Yeah. That's one of the things that stands out to me about it is the dignity with which God has created. Now, of course, post-fall, we don't always live in dignified ways. But he has created us with dignity and that's still there. And we're meant to function in that way, and that means we need to treat people in that way who are around us.

We need to treat people as those created in is image and likeness. So we don't really mistreat people. It's connected very much. It's interesting. When Jesus gives those two great commandments, he was asked to give just one commandment. He refuses to give one. He gives two because they have to go together.

**Darrell Bock:** Yeah. Now, we think of the end of Genesis 1, and we're really making several points. We've got the creation by the one Creator God. There aren't many gods out there. We don't have a battle in the creation for who is on top of it from the start. It's his world that's being created. He has created us in the image of God to represent him in the world. That's very important. So these four ideas are very important, particularly in a culture that wants to – if I can say it – naturalize the creation.

I'm talking about our own world that wants to naturalize the creation, suggests there is no theological content in the world, that everything can be explained chemically or interrelationally or sociologically, but certainly not theologically. All these things run, crash headlong into Genesis 1 and the history that is there that is contained also in the grand story that we talked about. Fair?

**Richard Averbeck:** Yes, it is. It is interesting, as God introduces the plurality of humanity there in the creation account with the image and likeness, he actually begins by saying, "Let us make man in our image and likeness." And this is maybe something I should remark on here. What seems to be happening – and there's quite a number of passages in the Old Testament that refer to this heavenly council, God decreeing things in the heavenly council.
And you can look at 1 Kings 22, the Micaiah incident. You can look at Job chapters 1 and 2, with the angels coming in to counsel with God. You can look at it in Isaiah 6, with Isaiah going into the throne room of God with these beings. The fact of the matter is there's quite a number of places where this is talked about.

It seems that what is happening in Genesis 1 is because he's talking about the plurality of humanity, he's talking about the plurality of the heavenly council, and he's saying, "I'm a relational God too."

Now, I think that includes the Trinity as part of what it's talking about, but it's a broad concept. Our God is a relational God. We cannot be like God without being relational. It's the very nature of who God is.

And so there's this background to this whole discussion about why we have that plural there. But I think it's plural because he wants us to understand that even to relate to God, we need to have this character about us in terms of relating to people, because relating to people is connected to relating to the God who created all of us as his image and likeness.

**Darrell Bock:**

Now, this theme – I have to comment on this. This theme runs smack into Islam because the picture of the Islamic god is of a very sovereign god, a very powerful god. But the relational part of who god is is not emphasized in Islam as it is in Judaism and in Christianity. So this is a very important – another important distinctive of the Genesis story and the theology that it's given us.

Okay, let's turn our attention to Genesis 2. And it's here, I think, that the question comes really to the fore of the historical Adam, which we've said is our topic, although we've laid a lot of background for it. Why should we think of Adam not as a figure or a metaphor, but as an actual figure in the history of not just the creation but of the world?

**Richard Averbeck:**

Well, in the shift that takes place between Genesis 1, verse 30 – Chapter 2, verse 4 – there is this transition formula that I've mentioned before. “These are the generations of,” often translated “these are the accounts of.” Well, what it's talking about is, okay, what developed here and out of this whole cosmos. But one of the things that happens when we make that shift – and there's a lot of background to this further on in Genesis as well, in terms of how this expression, these are the generations of, is used.
But as you go on, what you begin to see in Genesis 2 that you simply do not see in Genesis 1, is what we could call historical markers. And these historical markers tell us that now this is taking the perspective of the world and the history and the situation of ancient Israel in that Ancient Near Eastern world. For example, it talks about the four rivers of the Garden. And in verse 14 – the first couple rivers are difficult to identify.

But when we come to verse 14, we have two rivers. We have the Tigris and we have the Euphrates. We're talking about the rivers that run through Iraq today, and we often refer to that in history as Mesopotamia, between the two rivers. The point here is that it talks about the Tigris as east of a shore, Syria. But then it talks about – it just mentions the Euphrates and doesn't give any description. All of the other rivers have a description about where they are.

But the Euphrates, there's no description because everybody knew where the Euphrates was. It was there, and it was part of a framework within which the garden was planted in Eden. So the point is that we start getting these kind of historical markers in chapter 2 that tell us, "Oh, we're down into real geography here. We're down into the real world where we actually live," and the ancient Israelites would’ve actually known that.

**Darrell Bock:** So that's one clue. Other clues that come from within Genesis is this movement of the generations and the genealogies that run through the book that connect the first part of Genesis to the parts that follow. Is that another feature that we're looking at?

**Richard Averbeck:** Yeah. That particular formula, the Hebrew word for generations is “toledoth.” It comes from “yalad,” which means to be born. And the natural place to find this is in tribal kind of genealogical history. And we know that the patriarchs come and actually live in that particular way, tribal groups. Abraham comes out of Mesopotamia from a tribal context and so on, and he moves out from his kin and from his family and he comes into Canaan.
Well, what we have is through the book starting – not only in the early part, but thinking first of the patriarchal concept, starting with Abraham at the end of Genesis 11 and into 12, they have this generation formula. These are the generations of Terah; these are the generations of Abraham; these are the generations of Isaac; these are the generations of Jacob, and so on through it, kind of carrying along the account in what would be the natural way to do history in that context, which is just family history, genealogy. And so the accounts of the patriarchs are hung on a genealogical framework because that's how you would do history in that kind of world, in that kind of tribal world where you don't have a city government or things like that that are running it.

Well, what happens is in Genesis this toledoth formula that finds its natural place in the patriarchal accounts with this tribal sociology, what happens is that keeps getting pushed back into the earlier parts of Genesis, way back to Genesis 2, verse 4. And then in chapter 5, verse 1, this is the book of the generations of Adam. And then in chapter 6, verse 9, these are the generations of Noah. And you go on through and you find it also at chapter 10, verse 1. These are the generations of Shem, Ham, and Japheth and so on. And we finally get to Abraham then in Genesis 12.

The point is that the concept of history and the way history would be thought of was such to the ancient Israelites who were organized according to tribal groups. You know, Judah, Benjamin, Ephraim and so on. And they would have understood this as saying, "Oh, so now, we can think of that earlier history as the kind of history that's associated with the patriarchs and with us in our generation." And this term gets used even at the end of Ruth, the generations that come out of the genealogy of Ruth with Boaz, leading to David.

So the point is that moving in this terminology for these are the generations of way back into these accounts is giving it a sense that we're supposed to think of this as historical in some really significant way.

**Darrell Bock:** And so when we see this pick up in the New Testament with Luke in the genealogy that we have there, that genealogy extends all the way back to Adam. Or when we get to the discussion of Romans 5, we talk about Adam in comparison to Christ, and we're comparing two kinds of real humanity, if I can say it that way.
When we come to 1 Corinthians 15 and we have the story of the resurrection of Jesus and how he makes alive that which has been dead and we compare it to the situation with Adam. These comparisons are important, not just as theological statements and theological metaphors, but they really are depicting two ways in which humanity can relate to God. And one is through a real death and the other is through a real life.

Richard Averbeck: Yeah.

Darrell Bock: And so it's picking up on that structure of the generations and of the passing of the baton, if you will, that we see in Genesis and works off of that. So it's very sensitive to the inherent literary theme that Genesis possesses.

Richard Averbeck: Yeah, actually this shows up in so many different ways in the Bible. If you look at 1 Chronicles, the first nine chapters are genealogies because it starts with Adam and it goes on up. It connects again, Adam forward into history. And the idea is that, you know, this is a real history here. And the idea is that just, again, gives us this kind of – okay, we anchor it back there. We don't start history way up here. It anchors back there.

Darrell Bock: And, of course, we also have Acts 17, Mars Hill, where Paul gets up and says, "From one man, humanity emerged." And then, again, we get the building up of this Adamic line on the one hand and then what Christ brings – although Paul doesn't get to finish his speech – when he mentions resurrection. But you can see he's building this two humanities picture as well that we also see in Romans 5.

Richard Averbeck: Yeah.

Darrell Bock: So we've got lots of places in Genesis 2 that point to this reality. You know even Jesus deals with this when he talks – he gets the question on marriage, and he takes the question of marriage back to Adam and Eve and discusses their relationship as the prototype for marriage. So all these connections at multiple levels, saying that the roots of our history go back to this one figure, point to this historical rootage of this figure, and Genesis 2 is really the starting point for that story.
Richard Averbeck: Yeah, and the story from Genesis 2 continues through chapter 3 and through chapter 4. The unit actually extends from chapter 2, verse 4 all the way to chapter 4, verse 26. We don't get the next toledoth, the next generation's indicator, until chapter 5, verse 1. And so we see, like in chapter 4, various regional things pointed out. We also see the arising of civilization, different kinds of occupations and so on. So it's tying it in to how man actually lives in Chapter 4 after the fall.

Darrell Bock: Now, is there anything else in Genesis 2 that we should mention before we turn our attention to Genesis 3?

Richard Averbeck: I think one of the things is to re-emphasize again the importance of man and woman and the unit. Because when God says, "It's not good," that's the first not good and it's connected with he's not done yet. He's made the man out of the dust of the ground in chapter 2, verse 7. But it's not good for the man to be alone.

Aloneness is an excruciating sort of thing. We're designed to have a bond with first, a man and a woman bond, but then bonds with one another, connections. And this is an important part of what is really emphasized, of course, in Chapter 2.

Darrell Bock: And it is an important point and that is – and it is a oneness of differentiation and the ability to multiply at the same time because if he had created other males and that had been it, the creation would have had a very short history.

Richard Averbeck: Yeah.

Darrell Bock: So the idea of male and female designed to complement one another and to bring to fruition the call of God to be fruitful and multiply that we get from chapter 1, is seen in the way male and female are created in chapter 2. We'll come back to that theme. Not in this podcast but in other podcasts as we turn our attention to issues related to sexuality and our identity as humans, and how we relate to one another. But that is a very, very important foundational point for all of that discussion.

Richard Averbeck: Yeah. Yes, we're intended to do life together as a functional unit that is one flesh. We're intended to do it together.
Darrell Bock: Okay. Now, let's talk about Genesis 3 and the issues here. And, of course, this is the issue of the fall that creates the predicament that walks out in terms of the plot of the Bible, in terms of the entirety of the salvation story. We've already talked a little bit about where did evil come from. How can the serpent be there, be evil, be occupied by a voice, which tells you that something unusual is going on. Let's talk a little bit about that particular image, the idea of a serpent who speaks and who doesn't crawl yet.

Richard Averbeck: The very nature of the account is it raises all sorts of very interesting questions for people. But it doesn't answer all of them directly. One of the things – and it's an intriguing narrative. I think it's supposed to draw us in. Part of it is just to make us wonder. But one of the things that the account does is it kind of develops what I might call a narrative theology of fallenness. It's like an archetypal account, not in a Jungian sort of sense, but in the sense that we keep on replaying the dynamics of the fall.

So it's not just what happened. It's what continues to happen. It's what we continue to do in our corruption. And so it's important to see the dynamics of how that actually works, and the different things, deception and doubt and illegitimate desire and so on, to shame, to fear, to scrambling, to hiding, all the different things that go on there.

One of the other things that stands out, I think people often ask is, "How could the man and woman fall if they weren't already sinful? How could they do that?" And I think the only answer that the text really gives is that it comes from the outside. It comes from this serpent, this one who is going to corrupt the image of God as an attack upon God himself. And so the narrative actually tells us, gives an answer to how could this have happened in the first place.

Darrell Bock: And the serpent is a talking figure. There's another etiology here, if I can say it that way, because at the beginning he doesn't crawl. At the end of the story, after the curse, he's now committed to slithering on the ground. It's an important account because the core of the challenge from the serpent is that God has spoken something that you don't need to believe. “Has God really said, ‘You will surely die?’” And the whole point is to doubt the way in which God has set up the creation and what he says about it.
Richard Averbeck: One of the things that really stands out to me, again, there's a whole set of dynamics here. One of those is, really, the serpent seems to be wanting them to doubt two things. One is the goodness of God in the first place. "Is it really good that God is not letting you eat from this tree?" You know, that kind of thing.

Darrell Bock: This is your right, your entitlement.

Richard Averbeck: Yeah, right. In other words, "Is God really good?" and then he wants them to doubt the repercussion of rebellion against God. "It really isn't that serious, is it, these kinds of things? In fact, if you do this you'll be even better" and so forth. This is the kind of thing that's going on. But if you think about it, how much of our own corruption and our own sinful actions come out of not really believing what God has already given us is good. These kinds of things are just endemic to the nature of our fallen condition.

Darrell Bock: Yeah. And so this account is not only historical in its exchange, but it's epic in its significance, because what it does is it puts in one story the story that we all live in one way or another, in that we – when we take on our independence or when we have a sense of entitlement that separates us from God or when we secularize our world and try and de-theologize it – if I can coin a term – all these actions are nothing but mirrors of what took place in Genesis 3, and nothing but mirrors of what theologians call the Fall, and leading to tragic consequences, deep consequences, even far beyond the damage of merely having made a very bad choice.

Richard Averbeck: Yeah, it really puts us in a bad place. It tells us how we got into the mess we're in. And one of the things that I've thought about is how the serpent was able to get to the first Adam. But like in Matthew 4, the temptation of Jesus, he wasn't able to get the second one. And it's – I think it's a mirror of this whole thing. This whole connection is important even on levels where the name, Adam, isn't even used.

Darrell Bock: Yes. And you've brought us to a place that I kind of want to wrap around as we close, and that is the contrast between Adam and Christ, which, of course, the New Testament makes so very much of. That there are these two kinds of humanity. There's the humanity that goes its own way, that separates from God and is separated from God, and that suffers the consequences.
And then there's this redeemed humanity by the grace of God that comes not because of something man does for himself, but comes because of what God does on behalf of man to reach out and pull him out of this mess, if I can say it that way. And in doing so, we get a second Adam whose extension of grace because of the extension of sin that it covers is greater than the damage that Adam can do.

Because the damage that Adam did can be reversed. And it can be reversed by participating in the very grace of God that comes back to these core ideas of, we're made for fellowship, we're made to engage with God, we're made to honor God, we're made to serve God, and our lives should be oriented in that way.

And Jesus points us in that direction, not only by forgiving our sin, which is very, very important – he removes the stain and the guilt and the separation – but he also gives us that which enables us to live and that was required for real life. And that is to be reconnected in this relational way to the very God who created us in his image.

Richard Averbeck: And the thing that – as you were talking, I was thinking is, we got ourselves into this mess, but we can't get ourselves out. We're really dependent on God's grace. And that's something that people really need to understand is that it is purely by grace. It's a gift from God, what he has done. And we can't earn it and we're not designed to.

We're designed to simply trust him with what he has told us is true and to respond to it and trust in Christ alone, with no merit of our own. And one of the things that stands out in my experience in the world, is somehow we want to think that we can manage it. But we can't manage this. We're totally dependent upon what God has done for us in Christ.

Darrell Bock: Yes. And the way you participate in it is not by doing something that you earn. The way you participate in it is simply by receiving the gift of God's grace that he offers. I often used to illustrate this in talking about what the Gospel is about. You know a Christmas gift doesn't do you any good if you pull it out from underneath the tree and open it up. You've got to receive the gift that someone gives. Otherwise, it just sits under the tree.
The Table Podcast  Historical Adam and the Ancient Near East

And that's what we're talking about with God's grace. God's grace and God's presence, in terms of what he offers through Jesus, doesn't do us any good unless we embrace it. And we see it in this light of the contrast of who Jesus is, and who he is in light of who Adam was. And who Jesus is, and we see it in light of who we are if we're disconnected from God. We're in the very place that Adam found himself, and we're in the very need that Adam had that's all met by what Jesus Christ does.

Richard Averbeck: Yeah. And we show that we're in Adam by the way we live, day by day. And what God wants us to show is that we're in Christ.

Darrell Bock: And well, you don't need much proof of that. We're pretty dysfunctional. All you have to do is turn on the television at 10:00 PM at night, or look at the way a lot of people relate to one another within their families or within their homes, and the destruction and dysfunction that we often cause, and we know we have deep needs. And, really, in one sense the Gospel is about being honest with who we are apart from God, and appreciating that the only way we can be the way we're designed to be is if we connect to the one who created us to be that way.

Richard Averbeck: Yeah. I think of Colossians 3 where it talks about being renewed to the image of the Creator, the whole work of God. That's what it's about is making us who we are designed to be in the first place.

Darrell Bock: And that's why this discussion on historical Adam is not just an abstract discussion of history or myth or literature. It really is about the story of humanity. And because it's about the story of humanity, thinking about who Adam was and who he is in each of us, is a very, very important part of forming an identity that is properly related to the God who created us.

Well, Dick, I want to thank you for being a part of this discussion on historical Adam, and I want to thank those of you who have listened to the podcast for joining us and taking the time to reflect on these early chapters of Genesis that are so important. Thank you very much.

Richard Averbeck: Thank you, Darrell.
Darrell Bock: And we thank you for being part of The Table podcast, and we look forward to seeing you again, where we again have the opportunity to discuss the connections between God and culture.