Debating the Historical Adam Passages

Part 2 of 2: Historical Adam in the New Testament
with Darrell Bock, Mark Bailey, Elliott Johnson, Robert Chisholm, Nathan Holsteen
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Darrell Bock: Well, you know, the interesting thing is, is that when you work with eschatological texts in the New Testament, you see this theme of the messianic woes and the battle of what it takes to inject the presence of the kingdom into the reality of the world. I’m working right now in Matthew 11 where John the Baptist is preaching, and it said, “No one greater has been born of woman but the one who is least in the kingdom is greater than he,” and then it goes on to say, you know, until John the prophets prophesied and it talks about the kingdom of God is now being preached, but it’s suffering violence and violent men seek to take it by. And the background of this is the groaning of the creation for redemption. And the roots of that story certainly are found in what is happening in the early chapters of Genesis.

Okay, let’s come to the New Testament now and the passages that certainly are a part of the discussion and that are most famous. We’ve already mentioned two briefly but they’re worth putting on the table. Jesus, when asked about marriage, goes back to the example of Adam and Eve for marriage and talks about that as the beginning.

Robert Chisholm: And interesting, when he quotes it, he says “and the two of them will become one flesh,” which is not in the traditional Hebrew text, but he says “the two of them” because he is emphasizing the man and the woman, and I mean that’s a very literal understanding of what’s happening.
Darrell Bock: Yeah. So someone might ask, well, did Jesus ever allude to these kinds of texts, did he ever say anything about them? Well, of course, the Mark 10 and Matthew 19 texts do that. Perhaps the most famous text, and I think we’ll start here, is the text in Romans 5, and again, just to get it in front of everybody I’ll read it and then we can comment in turn. And Mark, I think I’ll have you lead off.

“So then, just as sin entered the world through one man and death through sin, so death spread to all people because all sinned – for before the law was given sin was in the world but there was no accounting for sin when there is no law. Yet death reigned from Adam until Moses, even over those who did not sin in the same way that Adam (who is a type of the coming one) transgressed. But the gracious gift is not like the transgression. For if the many died through the transgression of the one man, how much more did the grace of God and the gift of grace of the one man, Jesus Christ, multiply to the many! And the gift is not like the one who sinned. For judgment resulting from the one transgression, led to condemnation, but the gracious gift from the many failures led to justification. For if by the justification of the one man, death reigned through the one, how much more those who received the abundance of grace and the gift of righteousness reign in life through the one, Jesus Christ.

Consequently, just as condemnation for all people came through one transgression, so too through one righteous act came righteousness leading to life for all people. For just as through the disobedience of the one man many were made sinners, so also through the obedience of one man many will be made righteous. Now the law came so that the transgression may increase, but where sin increased, grace multiplied all the more, so that just as sin reigned in death, so also grace will reign through righteousness to eternal life through Jesus Christ our Lord.”

Clearly we have a typology being built here, a contrast between Adam on the one hand and Jesus on the other. We have consistent comparison of the one man to the one man, the one act to the one act. Mark.
Mark Bailey: Well, I think that probably even the critics of our position or those that would not take a literal Adam would point to this passage as their toughest passage with which to deal. It argues for the origin of sin, it argues for the original death, it argues for the resultant fallen sinful nature on those who have been born from Adam. I think it’s fascinating that you get the issues of sin, death, imputation, even the reference to a type.

In the study of typology, types were not mythological, they were a person, event or institution that had a historical reality that pointed to a New Testament fulfillment or – and it’s easier looking backwards from the reality back to the shadow to understand those. But even the term type, Adam is a person who went through an event as a result, a theology that developed that comes back to the argument of etiology.

But I noticed in 15, 16, 17, 18 and 19, you’ve got the transgression of one, one who sinned, by one who sinned death reigned, through one transgression condemnation to all, through one man’s disobedience, many were made sinners. You just keep getting that repeated phrase, repeated phrase. It was through that person that we have the explanation for all that has gone wrong and for the very reason for which Christ came to do his work.

So the theological foundation of all of our salvation, the issue of judgment, the issue of imputation and identification with Christ, all of that is rooted in the relationship of a historical Adam and therefore, a historical Christ.

Elliott Johnson: Yeah, I would only add that as the story of Adam is told, there’s a whole set of expectations that are tied to what God has created, and those expectations are dashed in Genesis 3 when Adam falls. So that sense of expectation is now satisfied in the last Adam. I was preaching in a church in Scotland and used the term the second Adam and an old lady came up to me and she was waiving her finger and she said, “He’s not the second Adam, there’s not going to be a third and a fourth Adam, he’s the last Adam.”

Darrell Bock: And of course what we have here is what we would call a reverse typology, in which the type and the anti-type are in contrast to one another in terms of how they function, so that one brings sin and death, the other brings grace and salvation. And this is why Paul uses the “much more” language to talk about what Jesus has brought versus what it is that Adam is responsible for. Nathan, you look like you’re smiling at me again, you ready to dive in?
The Table Podcast Debating the Historical Adam Passages

Nathan Holsteen: I am, indeed. This is exactly where we find a complete difference between the triviality of the Copernican issue, the sun revolving around the earth, and in this case, we’re talking about something absolutely critical to the faith of Christianity. This is a passage that ties together the necessity for a historical Adam with our understanding of salvation in Christ. It ties together themes of condemnation because of Adam, and justification in Christ.

So yeah, this is obviously one of the most significant battleground passages precisely because of how it ties these absolutely essential themes together.

Darrell Bock: And I think it’s important – you know, it took us three quarters of an hour to get here but I think it’s important to say that everything that we talked about leading up to the discussion of Romans 5 is telling us, this is how this text is being read.

Nathan Holsteen: Yes.

Darrell Bock: There isn’t a whole lot of work going on here to justify why these associations are being made. It’s because these ideas, theologically were being affirmed, coming out of Judaism and into Christianity, and so Paul as a good old rabbi who has come to the lord, makes this point and drives it home.


Robert Chisholm: Darrell, could I ask you a hermeneutical question because I know you’ve done a lot of work in New Testament use of the Old and you have actually contributed to volumes – multi-author volumes where you’ve taken a certain position.

Darrell Bock: I’m not supposed to be answering, but go ahead.

Robert Chisholm: Yeah, but I think you have something to add here. Does it seem to you that those who want to argue against an historical Adam are almost going to be pushed to the point where they’re going to have to say Paul was wrong. Paul really did not understand these texts correctly? And it seems like that is a shaky place to be.
Darrell Bock: Yeah, I think the way the argument is going to be made is Paul is accommodating himself to a common understanding that people had at the time. We know better now, for a variety of reasons, and that’s going to be the way you’re going to try and relativize what Paul is doing here. I think the problem – the problem that I have with that is, is that there are forms of bibliology that say that the Bible is accurate with regards to matters of faith and practice but not on matters of history, but the trouble is, you can’t decouple that here, okay. This is a matter of faith and practice, it happens to be a matter of faith and practice like so much of Christianity that is tied to certain things that are said to have happened.

And so just like the resurrection is rooted in history and so we don’t make that into a metaphor, so here, Adam is an issue that is being presented on the table as being a matter of history and we shouldn’t think about making that a metaphor either. And so I think that’s what you’re seeing here. The issue of accommodation is an attempt, if I can say it this way, many times when it’s argued, not always but many times when it’s argued, is an attempt to save the Bible for modern man, and I prefer to let the Bible save modern man.

Robert Chisholm: Now, in their view of accommodation would they – sorry, I didn’t mean to take over – did Paul understand that he was doing this, or he wouldn’t understand that?
Darrell Bock: No, accommodation is a modern term placed on Paul to talk about how we can still make sense of the Bible for modern man rather than being an explanation for what Paul himself is consciously doing. And so again, it’s an important point and I think it says powerfully how this text is being dealt with.

And I guess the way I want to say this goes something like this: that however you conceive of the way origins is portrayed in the Bible (and we have done nothing in this podcast to discuss when we think creation took place or anything like that, that’s not our purpose here), there is a moment when God places his image in that which he has created and makes that thing a human being. That’s what we’re talking about, and the Bible says that moment is Adam and that moment is Eve.

And so if you ask me, my own personal view about where the bottom line is on this discussion, that’s kind of the bottom line. And I think if you pull that out of the picture, if you say, well, Adam’s just a picture of the fact that all humans fail or that we all sin or whatever, we’ve lost this connection to the image of God being placed in a human being. At some point, God makes a conscious act to create humanity and that’s being expressed in the picture of Adam and Eve. Nathan, you have anything you want to add?

Nathan Holsteen: Yeah, Dr. Chisholm, I resonate with your question, your question about do those who question the historicity of Adam actually suggest that Paul misunderstood something, and I do happen to have a book written by a prominent evangelical who has come to question the historicity of Adam, where he says, “As I see it,” and this is a quote, “As I see it, the scientific evidence we have for human origins and the literary evidence we have for the nature of ancient stories of origins are so overwhelmingly persuasive that belief in a first human such as Paul understood him is not a viable option.” So I do think this is the pathway that some are beating in order to extricate themselves from the difficulty of a first human being.
Darrell Bock: And the beauty of that quote, if I can say it that way, is, is that he’s very, very clear what’s motivating the decision. The decision is being motivated by two factors, one is science and the other is a particular literary reading of the early chapters of Genesis. Now, we are, in the context of this podcast and the context of the one that we have done with Dick Averbeck, are discussing the literary elements of that. We have raised questions about whether that, in fact, is as persuasive and decisive as that quotation suggests and we are promising at some point to bring in a discussion at the science level to talk about that aspect of the equation.

Because again, a full discussion of this issue really can’t take place without those factors also being laid on the table and discussed. Having said that, it’s very important to know what the text itself is actually doing and saying and that’s what we’re trying to do here.

Robert Chisholm: But I think your argument is an important one that is used by those who deny the historical Adam and I’m looking forward to what Dick has to say because I know he’ll have something very significant to offer. And so I’d like to encourage everyone to make sure that they check that interview out as well, because I’m just champing at the bit. I would love to contest that second aspect of that quotation. When you start to compare the biblical origin stories with ancient or eastern materials, the comparisons that have been made are based on a very faulty use of an outdated form critical method, but I won’t go there.

Darrell Bock: Ryan, our producer is going to kill me, but we’ve already made this interview so I can tell you –I can tell you that we discuss this in some detail and we go through and compare some of what’s going on in the ancient literature with what you see in the New Testament and the different emphases and the different kind of imagery that’s used, and the associations that are made at one level are pretty superficial compared to the substantive things that are going on.

So all of that to say that although people have reasons and bring forward reasons for expressing themselves differently on this matter, we think there is another way to put the package together and think about it and that’s why we’ve taken the time to do this.
Mark Bailey: Let me pick up on one of Bob’s questions, which was what does Paul think, and you know, in light of what he’s arguing here in Romans 5, it’s ironic as well that in Acts 17, when he is at Athens, in the midst of a very cosmopolitan setting, in the midst of a very public forum setting, in the midst of a very philosophically contested environment, with the stoics as well as the epicureans, when he argues his theology from beginning to end, he starts with from one man came all of the inhabitants of the world and God has determined not only their placement but their habitation and their limitations. And he argues all the way to final judgment.

So if there was a time in my thinking, if there was a time to dodge the origins issue, it would have been at Mars Hill, at the Areopagus, that would have been the time to say “generalized humanity,” et cetera, et cetera. But he goes on record, “from one man came everyone else.” And so what he holds in Romans he, you know, preaches in Acts, what he preaches in Acts he is going to repeat in 1 Corinthians 15, because it doesn’t just relate to justification, his argument of the comparison of Adam and Christ will also relate to resurrection and all eternity.

Darrell Bock: Man, that was such a great transition I think we’ll go to 1 Corinthians 15 because that’s actually where I was going next. 1 Corinthians 15.

Mark Bailey: You’re welcome.

Darrell Bock: Anytime, the check is in the mail. 1 Corinthians 15:21-22, “For since death came through a man, the resurrection of the dead also came through a man.” Here is this one man contrast again, like we saw in Romans, except now we’re dealing with resurrection and death and life. “For just as in Adam all die, so also in Christ all will be made alive.” I think we don’t need to beat a dead horse, I think this is parallel in the kind of typology that we see; it is a contrastive kind of parallel and we see the contrast between death and resurrection, death and life, very much like what we saw in Romans 5 except Romans 5, of course, was the entry of sin and the entry of justification. Of course, justification leads into resurrection.

So this is all one cloth, this is all one thing that we’re talking about, ultimately, in terms of the foundational role that Adam is playing in these texts.
Elliott Johnson: I even see Paul going a bit further in that, in verse 45. “The first man, Adam, became a living being, God breathing into him the breath of life, the last Adam became a life-giving spirit.” Speaking of John 7 where he is going to pour out the spirit, Acts 1, where the promise of the Father he will receive when he has sins and the spirit is then poured out, and his life becomes our life and it’s just as essential as Adam’s was to our natural living, Christ is to our Christian life.

Darrell Bock: Yes, and that’s of course part of what makes this particular aspect of the theology so Christian, is that Jesus provides something that supplies what Adam, the very predicament that Adam put us into. Nathan, you’re shaking your head.

Mark Bailey: We’ve lost him.

Darrell Bock: We’ve lost his sound, so –.

Mark Bailey: Well, let me come back to that text while we’re trying to resurrect Nathan.

Nathan Holsteen: I think I’m back.

Darrell Bock: Got him back.

Mark Bailey: Now you’re back.

Darrell Bock: Go ahead.

Nathan Holsteen: I’m agreeing with you but I’ll save my comments for later, how about that?

Darrell Bock: Okay, that sounds good.
Mark Bailey: Yeah, I find it fascinating that in verse 45, as Elliott introduced us to, or in 44, you have the natural body compared to the spiritual body. There is a natural body, there is a spiritual body. “The first man, Adam,” he says it that way, “the first man, Adam, became a living soul.” So he gives us first, he gives us origin, he gives us timing, and he then goes into this contrast, I’ve called this the comparison of the atoms, A-T-O-M-S, as well as the comparison of the Adams, as you walk your way through there.

And the first one is from the earth, so the first man, Adam, is linked to the earth and he therefore is earthly; the second man is from Heaven. Let me read it in verse 48, “As is the earthly, so are those who are earthly and as is the heavenly, so are those who are heavenly, just as we have borne the image of the earthly, we will also bear the image of the heavenly.

So we were born in the image of Adam but also in the image of God, but in a new sense, being a new creation, we will one day be like Christ and bear his image as a heavenly image. And so you get order, you get historicity, you get primacy, you get origins all the way through here. So there is really an argument from anthropology, biblical anthropology, he goes to biblical Christology and he finishes, obviously, with eschatology, as to where all of this is going to go.

Darrell Bock: And there’s just a pinch of soteriology in there too.

Mark Bailey: It’s all made possible by soteriology.

Darrell Bock: Put a pinch between your cheek and gum.

Mark Bailey: It’s the soteriology and the Christology, that’s what I meant, that’s right.
Very good. We have two passages, we’re running out of time, I want to touch on briefly just to kind of wrap our survey up and be sure that we’ve touched on at least most of the texts that are relevant here. We have 1 Timothy 2:13-14 and Jude 14, I’m going to read them, juxtapose them to one another and then we’ll discuss these and then summarize.

1 Timothy 2:13, “For Adam was formed first and then Eve. And Adam was not deceived, but the woman, because she was fully deceived, fell into transgression.” Now, here actually is a new element in the emphasis and that is going back to the story of Genesis 3 and highlighting the fact that the woman first disobeyed God and then Adam, although in the end, Adam was held responsible for the transgression.

And then Jude 14, “Now Enoch, the seventh in descent beginning with Adam, even prophesied of them, saying, “Look! The Lord is coming with thousands and thousands of his holy ones,” and then it moves on to the prophesy of Enoch. So again, an allusion to the genealogical structure that we talked about, that exists in Genesis, talking about how many generations we’re talking about between Adam and Enoch.

So these kind of round out the New Testament texts that are relevant to this discussion. Any comments on either 1 Timothy or Jude?

I think the 1 Timothy 2:13-14 link with the 1 Corinthians 11, where you have the order of leadership mentioned, God, Christ, man, woman. And so those both would show the practical arguments in the ecclesiology and the function of the church are rooted in a historical reference, and the etiology going back to – again, the etiology going back to the creation account for why leadership is said to be what it is. So those two go together, I think.

And again, we haven’t discussed every passage that’s relevant here in detail, but 1 Corinthians 11 is a nice example of one where we’ve got an allusion to the creation of man and woman and the discussions that assume a background to Genesis without actually mentioning –

The names, right.
Darrell Bock: The names, exactly. And if we did that we would be here a while.

We’ve gone through our texts. Elliott, you had something you wanted to say?

Elliott Johnson: No, I was – you had a summary you were going to add.

Darrell Bock: Yeah, I was going to say, are we ready for your summary?

Nathan Holsteen: Oh, are you speaking to me?

Darrell Bock: Yes, Nathan.

Elliott Johnson: Yes, Nathan, I’m sorry.

Nathan Holsteen: Yeah, I do. The thing that makes this such a critical issue in my way of thinking is the connection that we’ve already seen biblically between the need for a historical Adam and our need for salvation. Caught in between those is a doctrine of sin and the thing that perplexes me is how can someone deny the historicity of Adam and rescue a doctrine of sin that would adequately explain what we’ve read in scripture. And so far I can’t find a way to do that. So far, it seems to me denying the historicity of Adam is absolutely fatal to a biblical doctrine of sin.

I always end up giving credit to man that he does not deserve if Adam was not a historical person. I always make too much of man’s ability to save himself if I dispense with a historical Adam. And this is the idea that haunts me as I consider the future of evangelicalism: if we buy this idea that Adam never really personally existed, I am very afraid for the doctrine of sin and as a consequence, the doctrine of salvation in the evangelical world.

It seems to me this is a foundational issue and I kind of would like to leave this with one of the ideas that I stole from John Calvin, not that he’s right on everything he says, but in The Institute’s book two, chapter one, he says, “It’s not strange to think that the one man who perverted the whole order of nature in Heaven and on Earth deteriorated his race also by his revolt.” And this is where I have to plant my flag. What Adam did in rebelling against God affected me, it changed the kind of humanity that I have. I’m a sinful, rebellious creature because of what Adam did and I can’t say that if there never was a historical Adam.
Darrell Bock: In other words, the point that you’re making here is that if we do away with Adam and his effect on not just the human race but on the entirety of the creation, because this is something that hits across the creation, it’s a comprehensive doctrine –

Nathan Holsteen: Yes, yes.

Darrell Bock: Then what we do is we leave ourselves only responsible for the existence of sin and we hold out perhaps the possibility that I can do well as well as not sin, I can do well enough as well as not sin. And the point that you’re trying to make is that scripture doesn’t let you go there.

Nathan Holsteen: That’s exactly my point and that’s exactly the thing that scares me the most about this entire discussion.

Darrell Bock: Is that if we understand that Adam has, in one way or another, passed on to all of us a lack of responsiveness to God that leaves us short, then we need to understand that that’s a part of the rationale for why it is Jesus has to come and has to change us from within, not just declare us righteous but actually change who we are and restore the image of God in who we are to a potential for fullness that it currently lacks.

Nathan Holsteen: Exactly right, yes.

Darrell Bock: Okay. Well, I think we have come to the end of our time. I don’t know if any of the rest of you have anything you want to add to that. That’s a nice summary of kind of where this pulls us together.

Mark Bailey: Just to list, it affects your view of creation, the fall, the generations, salvation with its imputation and justification, marriage, family, the church leadership, the nature of the resurrection, final judgment and even in the allusions in Revelation, the reality of Heaven. Other than that this doesn’t have any relevance.

Darrell Bock: Yeah, it just touches the entirety of the creation, creation groans for the redemption that Jesus Christ brings and that need exists because of what happened under Adam.

Mark Bailey: Can I link back one final thing for our listeners?

Darrell Bock: Sure.
Mark Bailey: And those who are watching. Nathan mentioned Romans 8, there’s a fascinating passage in Romans 8 that why did God subject creation to futility? It was with hope. It’s a great statement, in hope that they would ultimately find their salvation in Christ. The very reason that God put creation in this position, because of the fall, was so that their only hope, as we’ve just mentioned, would be found in Jesus Christ and a new creation.

Darrell Bock: And it does so in a way that authentically reflects what it means to be made in the image of God, which is that we all make choices for which we are responsible in relationship to God. And so it puts the onus, if you will, right where it ought to be and that is in our need to be responsive to the God who created us. I think the issue here, in part, is if we lose a doctrine of Adam in the picture, we lose our sense of our accountability to a creator for the relationship that we have to him, and I think there are a lot of things going on in our culture today that try and neutralize the presence of God in such a way that we don’t think about him as a creator if we think about him at all, and we don’t think about the accountability that we have to him as a creator.

What the Adam element does is it makes us – it reminds us we are accountable, and we are accountable in a way that we cannot fix for ourselves. We are accountable in a way in which God has to come in and fix it by his goodness and his grace, that’s the hope. And I think that that is an important part of this story as well.

Well, I thank you all for gathering around the Table, where we discuss issues of God and culture. Today our subject has been the historical Adam and my hope is that for you, the listeners, this has been a fruitful journey through scripture and the passages that discuss who Adam is, and as a result, also, who we are and who Jesus Christ is.