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REVIEW

The Evolution of Adam: What the Bible Does and Doesn't Say about Human Origins

by Peter Enns

Grand Rapids (MI): Brazos, 2012. 192 pages

reviewed by James F McGrath

The Evolution of Adam explores the way the understanding and depiction of the figure of Adam develops over the history of Jewish and Christian interpretation. Using texts which mention Adam as an example, Peter Enns provides an introduction to the history and methods of the scholarly study of the Bible. Enns sees four options available for those seeking to relate science and Scripture: (1) accept evolution and reject Christianity, (2) accept Paul's view of Adam as binding and reject evolution, (3) reconcile the two by positing a first human pair in the evolutionary process, or (4) rethink Genesis and Paul (p xvii–xviii). Enns considers the fourth option preferable, and the book is written not only to make the case for that option, but also to explore how to go about it in detail.

The book is divided into two main parts, the first focusing on the creation stories in Genesis, the second focusing on Adam in Paul's theology. Part one begins with the evidence and approaches that emerged in the nineteenth century, which forced Christians to reconsider their assumptions about Genesis. On the one hand, new textual discoveries revealed accounts of creation from Israel's neighbors, stories which were older than the Bible and which clearly had some relationship to the Bible's contents. On the other hand, careful analysis of the contents of Genesis resulted in the realization that it was not the product of a single author (Moses), but incorporated multiple sources, and could not have been put in its final form until much later, since it makes reference to kings in Israel, to the Canaanites as no longer being in the land, and so on. Challenges to traditional ideas about the nature and character of Genesis thus result from study of the Bible and from discovery of ancient texts, quite apart from any considerations raised by the natural sciences.

In surveying the history of Pentateuchal criticism, Enns notes a similarity between how ideas and theories develop in Biblical studies and in the natural sciences. In the cases of both Julius Wellhausen and Charles Darwin, many of the details of their proposals have been challenged or overturned, and yet both are regarded as having set the course for the future of their fields in important ways, having a lasting impact down to the present.

Enns stresses the need to practice "genre discernment," since many assume from the outset that they know what sort of literature Genesis is and what it is appropriate to expect from it. This first part of the book also discusses the Eden story as modeled on the story of Israel, and the cosmological significance of the Tabernacle, among other details.

In part two, Enns turns his attention to Adam as Paul understood him, emphasizing that this is not simply Adam as depicted in Genesis. Paul was willing not merely to reinterpret passages, but even to reword them in order to make his point. Paul was clearly not a Bibli-cist. The implication, of course, is that those who set themselves up to be the defenders of Paul's view of Adam are, in the very process, approaching Scripture in a radically different way than Paul himself did.

One reason why Paul's view of Adam is distinctive is that he views Adam in relation to Jesus. Indeed, it is Paul's view of Adam that is shaped by Jesus, rather than vice versa. Enns acknowledges that Paul presumed Adam to be a historical individual. But he considers it important to separate the observable situation in which humankind finds itself (namely one of domination by sin, alienation from God, and subjection to death), and Paul's presumed cause of that state of affairs (p 123–125). One can view Jesus as God's solution to humanity's plight much as Paul did, even while taking a different view of the cause of that plight. That does require rethinking of Christian theology, but not necessarily the jettisoning of its core tenets, much less of the whole package in its entirety.

Enns makes many other important points in this part of the book. Among them is his emphasis that “failure to provide at once an adequate counterproposal to a historical Adam for ‘why’ does not mean that the scientific and archaeological data that raised the problem in the first place can be set aside” (p 126). The question of whether the sun orbits the earth or vice versa was settled by the scientific data and the simplicity of the latter explanation in accounting for the relevant evidence, and fortunately did not have to await a point at which all Christians felt that they had adequately adapted to the new cosmological view. The question of whether evolution occurred is to be settled scientifically, and accepting the conclusion of science must not be made dependent on whether Christians have yet come up with a satisfactory way of adapting their theologies to this new understanding.

In the conclusion to the book, Enns offers nine theses. One is that literalism is not an option—and indeed, is dangerous. Another is that an incarnational view of Scripture is appropriate. For Christians to claim that one has to deny the humanity and cultural trappings of the Bible in order to encounter God is to deny the very nature of the incarnation, which claims that God is made known in and through a human life. Enns also emphasizes the need for serious theological reflection on the subject of evolution. Evolution requires a very different view of a number of matters, from aggression and sexuality to death. Nevertheless, Enns views it as a genuine and viable option to rethink Christian theology in a way that keeps core elements intact.

These, perhaps, are the key points to take away from this important book, which packs an impressive amount of persuasive detail into a relatively small space. On the one hand, mainstream science including evolution is not going away, and so one can only ignore or deny evolution by isolating oneself and engaging in deception of oneself and others. On the other hand, there are viable and attractive options in between preserving faith by rejecting science or rejecting faith because of science. It is possible (and for those committed to both the Christian faith and honest engagement with other spheres of human knowledge, necessary) to rethink elements of Christian theology in relation to the current state of scientific knowledge. In doing so, Christians are not being unfaithful to God and the Gospel, but are doing precisely what has always been done, even within the pages of the

Bible itself, namely allowing their faith to find expression in a way that is relevant to and incarnate within their particular historical context.

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