Critique of The Evolution of Adam (Enns)

Jordan P Ballard
CRITIQUE OF THE EVOLUTION OF ADAM:
WHAT THE BIBLE DOES AND DOESN’T SAY ABOUT HUMAN ORIGINS

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The Evolution of Adam is a recent contribution (2012) to the long list of books in the creation-evolution or science-religion debate. The author, Dr. Peter Enns, is the former Old Testament professor at Westminster Theological Seminary, Philadelphia, who was dismissed from Westminster on account of the views espoused in his 2006 book, Inspiration and Incarnation, in which he argues for the full humanity of Scripture and implies that the Bible has historical and scientific errors as well as contradictions. As controversial as Inspiration and Incarnation was in evangelicalism, The Evolution of Adam is just as controversial in that Enns argues that modern evolutionary science has eliminated the possibility of reading the early chapters of Genesis in a straightforward, historical manner. Of course, this is not a new idea. Liberal commentators have long taught that Genesis 1-11 is mythical, not historical. But for evangelicals, non-historical
or mythical views of Genesis 1-11, and especially the historicity of Adam and Eve, have not been widely accepted because evangelicals believe that the historical Fall of Adam and Eve which brought sin into the world is directly tied to the Gospel message. ⁵ After all, does not Paul use the historical Adam in his explanation of the Gospel in Romans 5 and 1 Corinthians 15? Enns’ task, therefore, is to quiet the fears of evangelicals by demonstrating that when Genesis 1-3 and Paul’s use of the Old Testament are rightly understood, nothing about the Gospel message is affected if Adam and Eve never really existed.

In the first section of The Evolution of Adam,⁶ Enns argues that the Genesis account of creation is really an ancient story of Israel’s self-definition. He begins by providing an overview of the history of biblical criticism of the Old Testament from Spinoza (1632-77) to Wellhausen (1844-1918) to show the way scholarship has advanced in modern times.⁷ During the nineteenth century, Genesis was compared to some of the newly discovered creation myths and flood legends from the other ancient Near Eastern peoples, and many critical scholars viewed Genesis as just one more myth from the pre-modern world. Enns acknowledges that most of the views of Wellhausen and others have since been nuanced or rejected, but he maintains that the trajectory set by the biblical criticism of the nineteenth century should still inform our interpretation of Genesis today.

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⁶ Enns, The Evolution of Adam, 3-76.

⁷ Ibid., 3-8.
In chapter two, Enns argues for the critical view that Genesis was written late in Israel’s history (post-exilic) and that we should therefore understand that Genesis was written with a theological purpose, not simply as an historical account. He deconstructs the traditional view that Moses wrote most of the Pentateuch by using the well-known internal arguments against Mosaic authorship (e.g., Moses is spoken of in the third person; Moses could not record his own death, etc.) and by adopting a modified version of Wellhausen’s documentary hypothesis of the Pentateuch which suggests that Genesis is a compilation of written and oral tradition complied by an editor or editors sometime near the end of the postexilic period. With these presuppositions in place, Genesis must have been written for the specific purpose of self-definition for the nation of Israel. As Enns states, “The crisis of the exile prompted Israel to put down in writing once and for all an official declaration: ‘This is who we are, and this is the God we worship.’”

Christians must interpret the creation stories in light of this larger theological framework if they are to rightly understand the Bible.

The third point Enns makes is that Christians must read Genesis 1-11 in light of its ancient Near Eastern context and influences. In particular, Enns has in mind the creation and flood myths from Israel’s neighbors—namely, Enuma Elish, the Gilgamesh Epic, and the Atrahasis Epic. He believes that the similarities between Genesis 1-11 and these ancient myths suggest that Israel was influenced by these pagan traditions. The differences that scholars have noted between Genesis 1-11 and the ancient Near Eastern

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8 Ibid., 9-34.
9 Ibid., 32.
10 Enns believes that there are two creation stories presented in Genesis 1-2 (ibid., 151n4).
11 Ibid., 35-59.
myths can be explained as Israel’s attempt to incorporate its own theological beliefs into its creation story as a polemic against pagan religions. Therefore, modern readers must approach Genesis 1-11 with appropriate expectations, recognizing that Genesis contains myths containing theological truths. In answer to the obvious objection that in this view, Genesis teaches errors or falsehoods, Enns argues that “[i]t is not beneath God to condescend to culturally conditioned human modes of communication.”

The fourth and final plank in Enns’ explanation of the true meaning of Genesis is that the story of Adam is a recapitulation of Israel’s national history. Just as Adam was created from the dust of the ground, so Israel was created during the exodus from Egypt. Just as Adam was commanded not to eat from the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil, so Israel was given commands through Moses. The Garden of Eden is paralleled to the Land of Canaan, and Adam’s disobedience and expulsion from the garden is like Israel’s disobedience and exile from the Promised Land. Enns also sees similarities between the seven days of creation, the seven creative commands of the tabernacle, and the sevens present in the construction and dedication of the temple. Turning to the New Testament, Enns believes that in Christ the ancient stories of creation and redemption are transformed so that Jesus is the new and improved Adam.

The second half of *The Evolution of Adam* addresses the theological question of how Christians are to understand the New Testament teachings of Paul if Adam never

12 Ibid., 58.

13 Ibid., 61-76.

14 It is interesting that on this point, Enns believes that the account of the exodus from Egypt is largely unhistorical (see ibid., 156n1). The parallel is difficult to make if the exodus and conquest never happened.

15 Ibid., 70-73.
existed. In particular, Paul seems to state in Romans 5:12-21 that death came into the world through the sin of Adam and that this death was passed on to all men (i.e., the doctrine of original sin). But Enns argues that this is not the proper way to read Paul because the doctrine of original sin is not taught in Genesis 1-11 or elsewhere in the Old Testament. In fact, Adam is relatively unimportant to Christian theology since he is only mentioned once outside of Genesis in the Old Testament (1 Chron 1:1).\textsuperscript{16} Instead, Enns prefers reading the story of Adam as a wisdom story about choosing good over evil in line with his view that Adam represents proto-Israel.\textsuperscript{17}

When Christians read the New Testament, they must understand that Paul was a man of his times in that he was greatly influenced by rabbinic Judaism and the hermeneutical practices of Second Temple Jews. In other words, Paul’s pre-scientific worldview was matched by his pre-modern exegesis of Old Testament texts, and it is improper to impose on him the modern standards of hermeneutics.\textsuperscript{18} Enns cites a few examples to support his contention that Paul often took creative license when using the Old Testament for his own theological purposes.\textsuperscript{19} If this is true in some instances, then it is likely true of Paul in Romans 5 and 1 Corinthians 15 when he refers to Adam.\textsuperscript{20} What

\textsuperscript{16} His arguments that Hosea 6:7 refers to a place (“at Adam”) instead of a name (“like Adam”) is debatable, and he downplays the importance of the genealogies in Genesis 5:1 (םֹאֵב יִבְנֵי) and in 1 Chronicles 1:1.

\textsuperscript{17} Ibid., 88-92.

\textsuperscript{18} Ibid., 93-117.


\textsuperscript{20} Ibid., 103-117.
then is the meaning of Paul’s argument in Romans 5:12-21? Enns states, “Paul’s Adam as first human, who introduced universal sin and death, supports his contention that Jew and gentile [sic] are on the same footing and in need of the same Savior.” The fact that Adam is non-historical makes no difference to Paul’s argument, according to Enns.

Enns concludes the book with nine theses which he believes follow for those who accept Scripture as God’s Word and evolution as the correct account of human origins.

1. Literalism is not an option.
2. Scientific and biblical models of human origins are, strictly speaking, incompatible because they speak a different “language.” They cannot be reconciled, and there is no “Adam” to be found in an evolutionary scheme.
3. The Adam story in Genesis reflects its ancient Near Eastern setting and should be read that way.
4. There are two creation stories in Genesis; the Adam story is probably the older and was subsumed under Genesis 1 after the exile in order to tell Israel’s story.
5. The Israel-centered focus of the Adam story can also be seen in its similarity to Proverbs: the story of Adam is about failure to fear God and attain wise maturity.
6. God’s solution through the resurrection of Christ reveals the deep, foundational plight of the human condition, and Paul expresses that fact in the biblical idiom available to him.
7. A proper view of inspiration will embrace the fact that God speaks by means of the cultural idiom of the authors—whether it be the author of Genesis in describing origins or how Paul would later come to understand Genesis. Both reflect the setting and limitations of the cultural moment.
8. The root of the conflict for many Christians is not scientific or even theological, but group identity and fear of losing what it offers.
9. A true rapprochement between evolution and Christianity requires a synthesis, not simply adding evolution to existing theological formulations.

In evaluating The Evolution of Adam, the first point to make is that the logic Enns employs for his first two conclusions is valid. If evolution is true, then there is no reason

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21 Ibid., 134.

to think that the Genesis account of creation is historical or that God made an original pair named “Adam” and “Eve.” Christians can speculate about whether God specially created the first humans (progressive creationism) or whether He formed Adam and Eve from a pair of hominids (theistic evolution), but these are just ad hoc solutions to the problem, not scientific or biblical solutions. Indeed, if one accepts the evolutionary account of the world and of human origins, then certain biblical passages and teachings must be reexamined. Perhaps Christians have misunderstood and misinterpreted the Scriptures. The questions Enns raises in the book about whether Christianity really needs an historical Adam will certainly fuel discussions for evangelicals in the years ahead.23

While Enns’ logic is consistent in one area, his argumentation in most of the book is generally weak. 1) He assumes that evolution is a true, scientific account of human origins, but he provides no interaction with creationist literature or with the intelligent design proponents who are skeptical of evolution.24 Thus, he builds his case on a huge, unproven assumption. If evolution is false, then his argument falls like a house of cards. 2) Enns rushes through many of his arguments for his critical view of the date and authorship of the Pentateuch and simply appeals to “scholars” and “the scholarly consensus” to back up his assertions.25 This commits the logical fallacy of *consensus*

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23 In fact, there is forthcoming book on the question of the historicity of Adam: Ardel B. Caneday and Matthew Barrett, eds., *Four Views on the Historical Adam* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2013).


25 See the following pages for Enns’ appeals to scholars and the scholarly consensus: xviii, 13, 17, 23, 24, 26, 29, 31, 32, 38, 53, 56, 70, 71, 116, 159. Enns is inconsistent in his acceptance of the consensus views, though. He asserts that the resurrection of Christ is something which is accepted by faith (126), but this surely goes against the “scientific consensus” that dead men do not come back to life.
Enns does not identify this “consensus”, though one imagines that his scholarly consensus is comprised of critical, non-evangelical scholars who share his presuppositions about the Bible. Were Enns to survey evangelical scholars about the date and authorship of the Pentateuch, he would find that his arguments go against the consensus. Indeed, all of the Enns objections to Mosaic authorship have been addressed by evangelicals before, but his post-exilic date for the Pentateuch is vital for his thesis that the Pentateuch was created to provide Israel with a sense of identity. Again, if his assumptions about the Pentateuch are mistaken, then his thesis about Adam representing proto-Israel is likely mistaken.

3) Many of Enns’ biblical arguments are exegetically thin. For example, his case that Adam is a recapitulation of Israel is only supported by a handful of superficial similarities. These are not enough to sustain his case or to answer other obvious questions such as, “If Adam is Israel, then whom does Eve represent?” The same can be said of the parallels between Genesis 1-11 and ancient Near Eastern creation and flood myths. The apparent similarities are overshadowed by the stark differences between Genesis and the pagan myths. Enns also downplays the passages which mention Adam outside of Genesis 1 and 5 (1 Chron 1:1; Luke 3:38; 1 Tim 2:13-14; Jude 14) because he is only focusing on Paul’s use of Adam in Romans 5 and 1 Corinthians 15. However, these

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29 See note 4.
passages certainly appear to take the Genesis account as historical (especially the genealogies). Enns needs to deal with these passages and others if he is going to maintain that Genesis 1-11 as a whole is non-historical. Enns’ argument that the doctrine of original sin is absent from the Old Testament overlooks the consequences of sin (death) upon all of mankind after the Fall. Finally, Enns’ interpretation of Paul’s argument in Romans 5 is novel and strained. This interpretation is not obvious to anyone but Enns.

4) The theological price that one has to pay to adopt Enns view is too high for evangelicals. Unless one accepts Enns’ view of Scripture presented in Inspiration and Incarnation, then one will not likely buy Enns’ reinterpretation of Romans 5. For examples, most evangelicals will not be willing to accept Enns’ view that Jesus’ affirmation of Mosaic authorship of the Pentateuch (John 5:46-47) “reflects the tradition that he himself inherited as a first-century Jew and that his hearers assumed to be the case.” Evangelicals believe that Jesus would not teach something false.

5) Enns leaves many important questions unanswered. For example, if Adam and Eve never existed as the first human pair, then what does it mean to be made in the “image of God”? Enns states that the image of God refers to humanity’s role of ruling


God’s creation but not to any notions of humans having a soul or spirit. If this is true, then when and how did the immaterial component (soul/spirit) of man evolve? In addition, if Adam and Eve never existed, then why do we have sin in the world? Christians have traditionally believed that Adam and Eve brought sin and death (at least human death) into the world at the Fall depicted in Genesis 3, and this seems to be the plain reading of Romans 5:12-21. However, Enns states that we do not know the origin of sin. All we can know is that each person is a sinner. Does this mean that humanity evolved as sinners in God’s good providence? If so, how does this affect theodicy? A third question which is of great importance today is the question of marriage. If Adam and Eve never existed, what does that mean for the biblical view of marriage? Should Christians be open to same-sex marriage now that they understand that Genesis 2 is mythical? Enns’ logic for reinterpreting the creation Scriptures in light of evolution would certainly apply to Scriptures on marriage and sexuality. Enns does not concern himself with these questions in the book, so one is reluctant to adopt his mythical view of Genesis 1-11 in light of these theological consequences.

32 Ibid., xv.

33 Ibid., 124-25.
Annotated Bibliography


Anderson provides a lengthy overview of *The Evolution of Adam* and critiques Enns on three main points. First, he cites many evangelicals who are critical of Enns’ view of inspiration and inerrancy from his earlier work, *Inspiration and Incarnation*, which is reflected in *The Evolution of Adam*. Second, he points out Enns’ uncritical acceptance of the evolutionary account of human origins. Third, Anderson critiques Enns’ specific handling of biblical passages throughout *The Evolution of Adam*.


Todd Beall provides an overview and critique of the four ways in which scholars interpret Genesis 1-11: mythical, largely figurative, partly figurative, and literal. Beall critiques evangelical scholars who believe that Genesis 1-11 is an adaptation of Babylonian, Canaanite, and/or Egyptian myths by showing that the differences between Genesis 1-11 and these ancient Near Eastern myths are far greater than any superficial similarities that may exist. Instead of Israel borrowing from her neighbors, it is likely that the neighbors retained some of the truths from Noah’s Flood and then corrupted them over time with pagan beliefs. Although many evangelicals believe that Genesis 1 is a polemic against the ancient Near Eastern gods, Beall points out that there is nothing in Genesis 1 to suggest this (cf. Exod 12:12; Num 33:4).


The four contributors to this forthcoming book include Denis O. Lamoureux, John H.
Walton, C. John Collins, and William Barrick. Chapter one is entitled, “No Historical Adam, Evolutionary Creation View” (Lamoureux). Chapter two is entitled, “A Historical Adam, Archetypal Creation View” (Walton). Chapter three is entitled, “A Historical Adam, Old-Earth Creation View” (Collins). Chapter four is entitled, “A Historical Adam, Young-Earth Creation View” (Barrick). The book has two concluding chapters with pastoral reflections from Greg Boyd and Philip Ryken.


This short book is coauthored by a physicist (Carlson) and an Old Testament scholar (Longman). Like Enns, the authors accept the theory of evolution as a fact of science and proceed to answer questions about how Christians should understand Genesis in light of modern science. They compare Genesis 1-11 to other ancient Near Easter creation and flood myths, and they conclude that Genesis 1-2 constitute a worldview statement on the part of ancient Israel that is non-scientific. Thus, Christians do not need to fight the battle between science and religion because Genesis is not in conflict with (evolutionary) science.


After summarizing the arguments from the book, Collins critiques Enns on a number of points. 1) Enns does not engage in the counter-arguments from traditionalists about the date and authorship of the Pentateuch. 2) Enns appeals to a scholarly consensus without defining who belongs to the consensus. 3) Enns often displays a simplistic reading of Scripture, and his argument that Adam is proto-Israel is backwards; Israel is God’s “new Adam” in the world. 4) Enns’ dismissal of the many scholars who accept evolution and an historical reading of Genesis 1-11 is unwarranted. 5) Enns underplays the other mentions of Adam and Eve in the New Testament.


In this book, Enns uses the hypostatic union of Christ as an analogy to argue for the full humanity of Scripture. Just as Jesus was fully human and fully divine, so Christians must also recognize the human elements of Scripture along with the divine elements. Enns states that the Bible must be interpreted in its cultural milieu along since it reflects similar teachings and beliefs about the world as other
ancient Near Eastern writings. Additionally, the Old Testament has a wide
diversity of theological teachings. Finally, the way in which the New Testament
authors cite the Old Testament reflects the Jewish thought and practices of the
times.

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“Interaction with Bruce Waltke,” Westminster Theological Journal 71 no. 1
(Spring 2009): 97-114.

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Telling God’s Story: A Parents’ Guide to Teaching the Bible. Charles City, VA:

This book is designed to be a practical tool to help parents teach their children the Bible.
Enns includes three chapters on methodology with instructions on how to
approach the Bible as a story, not as a set of rules or as a manual for life. The
second half of the book includes an overview of the Bible in five main acts:
Creation and Fall; Redemption: Abraham and Moses; David and the Problem of
Kingship; The Return from Babylon; Jesus: Scene One and Scene Two. The book
reflects Enns’ personal views of the Bible which are found in his earlier work,
Inspiration and Incarnation, and in his more recent work, The Evolution of Adam.

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The Evolution of Adam: What the Bible Does and Doesn’t Say About Human

Enns, Peter, and Jared Byas. Genesis for Normal People: A Guide to the Most
Controversial, Misunderstood, and Abused Book of the Bible. Englewood, CO:

This book is written for the lay-Christian studying the book of Genesis. The authors use
Enns’ framework for interpreting Genesis which he develops in The Evolution of
Adam: Genesis was written in the post-exilic era when Israel needed to define its
national identity; Genesis 1 is largely a polemic against the other ancient Near
Eastern gods; Adam represents proto-Israel; Genesis 1-11 is non-historical. The
difference is that Enns continues what he began in The Evolution of Adam and
goes through each of the major sections of the patriarchal stories in Genesis with
his interpretive grid.

Frame, John M. “Review of Peter Enns, Inspiration and Incarnation.” Accessed

Geisler, Norman L., and Ronald M. Brooks. Come Let Us Reason: An Introduction to

Geisler, Norman L. and William C. Roach. Defending Inerrancy: Affirming the Accuracy

Ham, president of Answers in Genesis, critiques Enns’ low view of Scripture, his rejection of a literal reading of Genesis 1-11 in light of the New Testament references to Genesis 1-11 as literal history, his acceptance of the theory of evolution, and his practice of cherry-picking when it comes to what is historical and what is non-historical. Ham agrees with Enns’ assertions that evolution and millions of years cannot be mixed with the Bible, but he counters Enns’ biblical arguments by pointing readers to the many articles on the AiG website which addresses Enns’ objections to a literal reading of Genesis 1-11.


Ron Minton surveys the epistles of the New Testament and comes to conclusion that the apostles believed in a recent creation. He supports this conclusion by examining a handful of passages (Acts 3:21; 14:15-17; 17:24-31; Rom 1:18-25; 5:12-14, 19; 8:19-23; Col 1:15-20; Heb 9:25-26; Rev 21:1-5; 22:1-3). He also looks at Hebrews 4:1-10 and 2 Peter 3:3-8 since these are often used by scholars to promote an old-earth interpretation of Genesis. In summary, there is nothing in Acts or in the epistles to support an old earth interpretation. If anything, these verses support a recent creation.


Mortenson discusses Jesus’ view of the age of the earth and believes that anything which Jesus affirms should be affirmed by Christians. He addresses three verses in particular which show that Jesus believed in a young earth: Mark 10:6, Mark 13:19-20, and Luke 11:50-51. Mortenson gives a careful exegesis of each passage and deals with objections offered by those favoring an old-earth interpretation of creation. Mortenson makes a good case that Jesus was a young-earth creationist from these verses.

____. “The Inspiration and Interpretation of God’s Word, with Special Reference to Peter Enns. Part II: The Interpretation of Representative Passages,” Westminster Theological Journal 71 no. 2 (Fall 2009): 247-79.
