

§ 10. Doctrine of Man

Lecture 13

The Question of the Historicity of Adam and Eve

Welcome to Defenders. Happy Palm Sunday! I have to confess, I can get pretty used to teaching Defenders this way – from the safety of my home office. This is pretty comfortable. Of course the big disadvantage is we don't have the benefit of class discussion. But I encourage you to leave your comments and questions on our Reasonable Faith Facebook page.

Before we talk about man as sinner there is one more facet of man as created in God's image that we cannot avoid. Indeed, it is a matter of great controversy today among Christians, and has been the focus of my study for the last two years. That is the question of the historical Adam and Eve, which for convenience's sake I'll refer to simply as the question of the historical Adam. We've already dealt with this question extensively under the Doctrine of Creation, so I'll be able to simply summarize a great deal here. If I had it to do over again, I would move much of the material dealing with the creation of man from the Doctrine of Creation to this locus. As a result of my studies, this section of the Defenders course is significantly revised from the lessons I gave in Defenders series 2.

The first question we need to deal with is whether the Bible commits us to a historical Adam. Traditionally, the church has understood Adam and Eve to be historical people from whom the entire human population is descended. By contrast the modern view of Adam is that the stories of Adam and Eve and their Fall into sin are purely mythological or symbolic; a story told in figurative language to describe the universal plight of mankind. Adam is Everyman, not someone who lived and died in the prehistoric past. We are all image bearers of God, and in the course of our lives, we all fall into sin. Adam's sin is a symbol of man's fallenness and corruption before God.

Today we want to come to some evaluation of these competing views.

Now, on the one hand, there is a good deal of truth in the modern view. Adam and Eve, as their very names indicate, do have a symbolic significance in the story. *Adam* is just the Hebrew word for "man." So Genesis 1 is speaking in universal terms: in the beginning God created man – *adam*. This, I think, shows that Adam is a sort of symbol of mankind. Similarly, Eve is referred to as "the mother of all living persons." So, again, she has a wider significance than just a historical woman. Moreover, as we have seen, the narrative of the Fall is full of all sorts of symbolic or figurative elements like the tree of life, the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, the serpent in the Garden who deceives the woman, an anthropomorphic deity who is physically walking in the Garden, and so forth.

Nevertheless, in spite of the figurative language and the obvious symbolic function of the narrative, we also have good biblical grounds for thinking that Adam was an actual historical person. Let me review four such factors.

1. There is no break in the narrative between Adam and indisputably historical figures. The primeval history of Genesis 1-11 goes right on from Adam through Abraham and his descendants, who are indisputably intended to be historical persons. There is no suggestion that the first part of the story is purely symbolic and then the later parts are historical.

2. Adam is included in the genealogies that tell of the descent of historical persons. This is true both in the Old Testament and in the New Testament where the genealogy of Jesus given in the Gospels begins with Adam. At least part of the function of genealogies was to list actual historical ancestors. Adam is included in the genealogies with the other historical figures just like a historical person.

3. Paul treats Adam as a historical figure in a number of places in the New Testament. For example, in his address on Mars Hill in Athens that is recorded in Acts 17:26 Paul says this, “. . . from one man he made every nation of men to inhabit the face of the whole earth, and he determined the exact times and places that they should live.” So here Paul, at least according to Luke’s account, says that all of the nations of men that inhabit the Earth today are descended from one human ancestor – from one man. Paul refers to this man as Adam in various places in his epistles. For example, in 1 Corinthians 15:45 we read, “Thus it is written, ‘The first man Adam became a living being’; the last Adam became a life-giving spirit.” Here Paul refers to Adam as the first man, and he contrasts him with Christ who is the second Adam. Paul consistently treats Adam as a historical individual; someone who really lived, not simply as a symbolic figure. We saw previously however, that this point alone is not decisive, for many of these passages could be construed as referring not to the historical Adam, but merely the literary Adam, that is to say, the character in the story of Genesis 2-3 who says and does the things recorded there. The next point therefore becomes more important.

4. Paul draws parallels between Adam and Jesus as historical individuals, not merely as literary figures. Paul not only believed that Jesus of Nazareth was a historical person but that Adam was as well. He parallels Christ with Adam as the second Adam. Remember our discussion of Romans 5:12-21. Paul says that through Adam – the first man – sin came into the world and spread to all men. Similarly, through Christ life and forgiveness and redemption are made available to all men. Adam’s sin had consequences outside the story which were then rectified by Jesus. So there is a parallel between Adam and Jesus as historical persons.

It seems to me, therefore, that, despite their symbolic function in the Genesis narrative, Adam and Eve are regarded by the biblical writers as genuine historical persons. I think what we can say is that the creation and Fall of man are historical events that actually happened though they are told in a dramatic literary form involving figurative speech. The story of Adam and Eve has been called a historical drama. It is a dramatized, or figurative, story telling of an actual historical event. I've argued previously that a more sensitive genre analysis of Genesis 1-11 would classify the stories of the primeval history as mytho-history. Affirming the historicity of Adam and Eve as I've done implies that the human race is descended from a single ancestral couple. It commits us to the monogenesis of the human race, not merely in the sense that the human race originated in one time and place as opposed to multiple times and places, but monogenesis in a very peculiar sense, namely that there was an original ancestral human pair from which all of humanity is descended.

If the biblical Adam was a historical person who actually lived, then the obvious question arises, when did he live? For the answer to that question, we need to turn to modern science. So next time we'll take up the issue of when we can locate the historical Adam.¹

¹ ?Total Running Time: 11:15 (Copyright © 2020 William Lane Craig)