

The Hermeneutics of Adam: A Figurative Approach to Genesis 1 and the Historicity of Adam¹

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Abstract

The traditional view of the historicity of Adam and Eve, though once the near-unanimous view of Christians throughout the first 18 centuries of the church, has come into doubt by many evangelical scholars in recent years. Some views espoused today portray Adam and Eve as chieftains of a tribe, archetypes, literary figures who may or may not be historical, and non-historical. Due to specific details given in the text of Genesis, the *elleh toledoth* structural markers, the Hebrew *waw*-consecutive imperfect forms, the biblical genealogies, and the New Testament discussion of the Fall and Genesis 1–11, it is here argued that the best interpretation is that Adam and Eve are real, historical persons, created uniquely by God as the first human pair, the universal ancestors of the rest of humanity.

Keywords: Adam, Eve, historicity of Adam and Eve, universal ancestors, chieftains, archetypes, high-style literary prose, figurative, Genesis 1–11, specific details concerning Adam, Jewish accommodation, biblical inerrancy, *elleh toledoth*, *waw*-consecutive imperfect, narrative prose, Creation account, genealogies, New Testament references to Adam, 1 Corinthians 15:20–23, 1 Corinthians 15:45–29, Romans 5:12–19, human genome project, evolutionary assumptions, hermeneutics, the Fall

Introduction

The title of a recent book, *Did Adam and Eve Really Exist?*, asks a question that for many in evangelical circles might seem self-evident (Collins 2011). Of course Adam and Eve really existed, they might say, since without an actual Fall as described in Genesis 3, there would be no need for a Savior to redeem mankind from their fallen state. Such has been the near-unanimous view of Christians throughout the first 18 centuries of the church. As William VanDoodewaard observes, “nearly the entirety of Christendom held to an Adam and Eve who were the first human pair, without ancestry or contemporaries at their point of origin. Almost every Christian theologian, whether in the Roman Empire, the Eastern or Western church, Roman Catholicism or Reformation Protestantism—even most through the Enlightenment era—understood Adam and Eve as literally created in the manner described in Genesis 2:7 and Genesis 2:21–22” (2015, 281).

In recent years, however, many evangelical scholars have expressed doubts about a literal Adam and Eve as the first humans created by God and the universal ancestors of all human beings. More recent contributions from genetic analysis that suggests that the original population of humans was at least 10,000 people, not just two, have fueled further doubts (Collins 2006, 207). That the issue of a literal Adam and Eve is especially problematic for those who hold to theistic evolution (most of whom now rebrand

themselves as “evolutionary creationists”) is evident by this statement from Karl Giberson: “The historicity of Adam and Eve is the single most important issue driving evangelical Christianity’s widespread, deep, and disturbing opposition to science” (2015b).²

The result is that some scholars see Adam and Eve as (1) historical persons, though if there were many humans around at the same time, they would be chieftains of a tribe specially selected by God (Collins 2011, 121); (2) archetypes but historical people, though not necessarily the first or only humans (Walton 2015, 96–103); (3) literary figures who may or may not be historical (Longman 2013, 122); or (4) not historical at all, though Paul thought that they were (Enns 2012, 120–122, 138).

I marvel at the efforts of many of these scholars as they reinterpret the text of Genesis in an attempt to harmonize the Bible with modern scientific theory. But none of these reinterpretations are ultimately satisfying. As the remainder of this article will show, the best interpretation is that Adam and Eve are real, historical persons, created uniquely by God as the first human pair, the universal ancestors of the rest of humanity.

Adam and Eve in Genesis

The creation of man and woman is mentioned in Genesis 1:26–27, though they are not given proper names until later in the narrative. The Hebrew word for man (*adam*) used in Genesis 1:26–27 is identical to

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² See also Giberson (2015a).

the proper name “Adam,” but the proper name itself is not used until Genesis 2:20b (where the article is not used in the Masoretic Text, thus distinguishing Adam from “the man”) (Collins 2011, 55–56). All in all, “Adam” is used nine times in Genesis 1–5 (2:20b; 3:17, 21; 4:25; 5:1 [2], 3, 4, 5), but it seems to be used interchangeably with “the man” (used 22 times in Genesis 1–5) to designate the first human being (for further discussion, see Barrick 2016, 28–30). Elsewhere in the Old Testament, the proper noun “Adam” only occurs unambiguously in 1 Chronicles 1:1. The name “Eve” (meaning “life”) occurs only in Genesis 3:20 (where Adam names his wife Eve because she was “the mother of all the living”) and in Genesis 4:1. She is designated simply as “the woman” 18 times in Genesis 2–5.

The text of Genesis 1–5 seems clear that Adam is the first human being created by God in His image (Genesis 1:26–27) from the dust of the ground (Genesis 2:7), and that Eve is the first woman, fashioned by God from Adam’s rib (Genesis 2:21–22). Theirs is the first marriage (Genesis 2:24); Adam is given a specific command concerning a tree in the garden of Eden (Genesis 2:16–17); Eden itself is identified by four named rivers (Genesis 2:10–14); Eve and Adam then disobey God’s command (Genesis 3:6); and God expels them from the garden (Genesis 3:22–24). In Genesis 4:1, Adam and Eve have sexual relations and bear two children, the oldest of whom (Cain) kills the other (Abel). Cain then builds a city named after his son Enoch, and the genealogy of Cain is then given in detail (11 specific names are listed), with the various accomplishments (good and bad) of Cain’s descendants listed (4:17–24). Another son (Seth) is born to Adam and Eve in Genesis 4:25–26 as a replacement for Abel. The last mention of Adam is in Genesis 5:1–5, where the text indicates that Adam had many sons and daughters (thus answering the perennial question, “Where did Cain get his wife?”) in addition to the three mentioned in chapter 4. The exact age of Adam when he begot Seth is given (130 years old), as is Adam’s age upon his death (930 years old). All of these specific details demonstrate that the text presents Adam and Eve as historical individuals who lived in a particular place and had a real family with its own real problems (including sibling rivalry and murder) (see also Barrick 2013, 210–211). Adam is created specially by God from “the dust of the ground” (a non-living entity), not from living hominids or other creatures. The act of God breathing into man’s nostrils “the breath of life” (Genesis 2:7) distinguishes man’s creation from the creation of the animals. Similarly, Eve’s origin is depicted as a direct creation of God from the first man, Adam (Genesis 2:21–22).

Figurative Approaches to Adam and Eve in Genesis

All of the details given above support the conclusion that the text of Genesis presents a historical Adam and Eve specially created by God as the first human beings and the ancestors of all future human beings. Yet many take portions of Genesis 1–11 as figurative, not necessarily literal in all its detail. There are, in fact, a wide variety of positions, only a few of which will be discussed here. On one extreme is Denis Lamoureux’s position that “Adam never existed.” He is the “retrojective conclusion of an ancient taxonomy,” reflecting the Holy Spirit’s accommodation to the incorrect views of the “science-of-the-day” (2013, 58). As far as the New Testament is concerned, Lamoureux asserts that Jesus was simply “accommodating to the Jewish belief of the day that Adam was a real historical person” (2013, 60). As for Paul, he absolutely believed in the historicity of Adam, “like every other Jewish person at that time.” But, of course, according to Lamoureux, he was wrong (2013, 61). Peter Enns’ position appears to be similar: Paul clearly believed in a historical Adam, but he was incorrect (Enns 2012, 120–122, 138).

But these views of Lamoureux and Enns constitute a denial of biblical inerrancy. If Paul was “wrong” about Adam, then how can we be certain that he was right about the resurrection of Christ or, indeed, anything else (for further discussion, see Beall 2008, 132–146)?

Others do not go as far as Lamoureux or Enns in asserting that Paul was wrong. But Genesis 1–3 is still not to be taken literally in any sense. For purposes of discussion, we will look at the views of John Walton and Tremper Longman.

Primarily on the basis of the genealogies and the New Testament discussion of the Fall, Walton (rightly, in my view) acknowledges that Adam and Eve are historical persons, not merely mythological or legendary. However, since Walton sees their roles as archetypal, he believes that there may be elements “that are not intended to convey historical elements”: they present truths about Adam and Eve “rather than historical events” (2015, 101). Walton concludes that “one can accept the historical Adam without thereby making a decision about material human origins. This has the advantage of separating scientific elements (material human origins) from exegetical/theological elements, with the result that conflict between the claims of science and the claims of Scripture is minimized without compromise” (2015, 103). He asserts that the theological points made about Adam and Eve “do not require the scientific conclusions that Adam and Eve were the first people, the only people, or the progenitors of the entire human race. They are our first parents archetypically even if they may not be so materially” (Walton 2013, 116).

Tremper Longman's view is similar, except that he hedges on whether there is an actual historical first couple. Because Longman (2013, 122) views Genesis 1–2 as “high style literary prose,” he concludes that “it is not necessary that Adam be a historical individual for this text to be without error in what it intends to teach.” In his thinking, Paul is simply using the principles in the “story in Genesis 1–2” but not necessarily viewing the story itself as correct (2013, 124). In a recent symposium held at Trinity Evangelical Divinity School, this author tried to pin down what Longman actually believes with respect to a literal Adam. It was not an easy task:

Beall: *Is Adam humanity or is he an individual?*

Longman: *Well, my point would be is that even if he created humanity, that is still a historical reference. What I would say at this point is that I'm not willing to say he is humanity. What I am saying is that it is not necessary for Adam and Eve to be historical individuals for Genesis 1–3 or Romans 5:12 and following to be true. There are certain people even within evangelical protestant circles who are abandoning the historical nature of the Fall, and I think that's a serious issue, which is something that I would not do. Genesis 3 may be describing this rebellion using figurative language, but the figures aren't arbitrarily chosen. They are pointing to a reality, and so I think the genre insists on the fact that there was a historical Fall.*

Beall: *Was Eve deceived?*

Longman: *Yeah, Eve was deceived.*

Beall: *How? Paul says Eve was deceived!*

Longman: *Yeah, let's not go there.*

Beall: *Why not?*

Longman: *Well because I do think Paul is looking back at the story and not giving what we call a historical grammatical interpretation of it, because he is making arguments that would have made sense to his original audience (Beall, Longman, and Oswalt 2016).*

But Walton and Longman's approach to the text of Genesis 1–3 is problematic. There are many statements about Adam's direct creation from God and his function in Genesis 1–5 (over 20 are listed in the preceding discussion). How is the reader to determine which are historical and which are not? How can some of the details be accurate and others be non-historical, when all are presented as historical? Similar questions could be raised about the Flood, Babel, Abraham, and so forth. There is no internal marker to indicate that the text of Genesis 1–5 or Genesis 1–11 should be taken figuratively. The structure of Genesis revolves around the phrase *elleh toledoth* (“This is the account of...”). This phrase is used 10 times in the book: twice in Genesis 1–5 (2:4

and 5:1), four more times in Genesis 6–11, and four times in the rest of the book (Kaiser 1970, 59–61).

While some try to argue that Genesis 1 or Genesis 1–3 or Genesis 1–11 is a separate genre, in fact such is not the case. Virtually all of Genesis 1–11 is straightforward narrative prose. The standard form for consecutive narrative prose is the *waw*-consecutive imperfect (*wci*). The Creation account in Genesis 1:1–2:3 contains 55 *wci* forms in its 34 verses, or an average of 1.6 per verse. Similarly, all of Genesis 1:1–5:5 (from Creation through the narrative concerning Adam and Eve) contains 155 *wci* forms, or an average of 1.4 per verse. By contrast, the poetic section of Genesis 49:1b–27 contains only eight *wci* forms, or an average of only 0.30 per verse (Beall, Banks, and Smith 2000, 1–4, 46). The inescapable conclusion is that Genesis 1–5 (and Genesis 1–11 for that matter) is written in standard Hebrew narrative form, not poetry (Westermann 1984, 80). There is therefore no hermeneutical or structural basis for regarding portions of Genesis 1–2 (concerning Creation) or Genesis 1–5 (Creation, Adam, Eve, Fall) as figurative rather than straightforward historical narrative (see now the excellent critique of Walton's position by Ham [2016, 165–194]).

Genealogies

Another strong evidence for the historicity of Adam is found in the genealogies. Some scholars attempt to separate Genesis 1–11 from the remainder of Genesis, considering Genesis 1–11 as primeval history, while Genesis 12–50 reflects genuine history, but such a separation is not warranted.³ In addition to the structural marker *elleh toledoth* mentioned above, the genealogies found in Genesis 1–11 are foundational for Genesis 12. The first mention of the great patriarch Abram is not in 12:1 but in 11:26, as part of a long genealogy that stretches all the way back to Noah's son, Shem. But the mention of Shem connects it back to the genealogy of chapter 10, the Flood account in chapters 6–9, and the genealogy of chapter 5, where Noah and his sons are first mentioned (Genesis 5:29–32). In turn, Genesis 5 contains a genealogy that begins with Adam himself, going right back to Creation when God created “male and female” (Genesis 5:1–2). If Adam is simply “everyman,” as some attest, then one wonders why Genesis 5:3–5 gives Adam's age when begetting Seth and his age at his death. The same formula is continued throughout the genealogies of Adam. Whether some generations are “skipped” in the genealogies of Genesis (see Sexton 2015, 193–218) is irrelevant: the genealogies appear to be of real people, each of whom lived a specific number of years before

³ For one example of a scholar who tries to divide Genesis in this way, see Westermann (1984, 1–5).

they died.⁴ It is difficult to see any hermeneutical justification for taking Abraham and the patriarchs as historical people, but not Adam, Noah, and Noah's sons: all are presented as historical people who lived a certain age and then died (except for Enoch—Genesis 5:24).

Nor are the Genesis genealogies alone in linking Adam to the rest of human history. The last book of the Old Testament (according to the Masoretic Text), Chronicles, begins with a lengthy genealogy. This genealogy includes the patriarchs and the sons of Israel, but begins with Adam. Similar to Genesis, the genealogy goes through Seth's line to Noah and his sons, gives a limited genealogy of Ham and Japheth, and provides a more extensive genealogy of Shem, leading right to Abraham (1 Chronicles 1:1–28). Similarly, in the New Testament, Luke 3:23–28 traces the genealogy of Jesus all the way back to Adam, ending with these words: “the son of Enosh, the son of Seth, the son of Adam, the son of God.” Because of this last phrase, Longman (2013, 123) argues that Luke's genealogy is “ultimately a theological statement and not a purely historical” one, but in fact the last phrase seems to tie Adam directly to God, as one created in God's image, reaffirming exactly what Genesis 1:26–27 proclaims. Yes, the genealogy is a theological statement, but it is historical as well. Seventy-five names are mentioned in the genealogy, including David and Abraham. These are real people, presented as ancestors to Christ. Is Adam the only non-historical name in the list? Such a view strains credibility (see Beall 2008, 148). As Walton (2015, 102) observes, “Genealogies from the ancient world contain the names of real people who inhabited a real past. Consequently there would be no precedent for thinking of the biblical genealogies differently. By putting Adam in ancestor lists, the authors of Scripture are treating him as a historical person.”

New Testament References to Adam

In addition to the text of Genesis and the genealogies, the New Testament provides strong evidence that Adam and Eve were historical persons, created by God as the first human beings. In fact, the New Testament treats all of Genesis 1–11 in a historical, non-figurative manner (see Matthew 19:4–6; 24:37–38; Mark 10:6–8; Luke 3:38; 17:26–27; Romans 5:12–20; 8:19–22; 1 Corinthians 11:8–9; 15:22; 2 Corinthians 4:6; 1 Timothy 2:13–14; 1 Peter 3:20; 2 Peter 2:5; 3:5–6; Hebrews 4:4; 11:3–7; and 1 John 3:12) (see also Beall 2008, 146–149). But with specific reference to Adam, Eve, and Creation, the following passages are especially pertinent.

The gospels

When questioned concerning the issue of divorce, Jesus cites Genesis 1:27 and 2:24 as authoritative Scripture (Matthew 19:4–6; Mark 10:6–8). Not only does he reference the creation of man and woman in Genesis 1, noting that “from the beginning of the creation God made them male and female” (Mark 10:6), but he follows up by citing the statement made after the creation of Eve in Genesis 2 that “the two shall be one flesh.”

Acts

In his sermon to the Athenians in Acts 17, Paul first states that God “made the world and everything in it” (Acts 17:24) and then explains further: “From one man he made all the nations, that they should inhabit the whole earth” (Acts 17:26). Here Paul clearly states that all of the rest of humanity descended from one man, just as Genesis says.

Pauline letters

In his letters, Paul gives details about the creation of Adam and Eve and the Fall. In 2 Corinthians 11:3 Paul refers to the serpent tempting Eve; and in 1 Timothy 2:11–14, Paul states that “Adam was formed first, then Eve” (referring to Genesis 2:20–23) and that “it was the woman who was deceived” (referring to Genesis 3:1–13). Similarly, in 1 Corinthians 11:8–9 Paul explains that the woman was created from the man and for the man, just as Genesis 2:18–23 describes. In all these cases, Paul draws from specific details of the creation and Fall narratives in order to make his point. Longman somehow tries to argue that Paul is just taking the “stories,” but the point (which I was attempting to press in our symposium discussion mentioned above) is that Paul uses *specific details* of these accounts, not simply theological truths. Was there actually a serpent who deceived Eve? Longman never truly answers the question. In what sense was Eve deceived, if there wasn't actually a literal Eve? Does Paul believe that there was a literal serpent who tempted a literal Eve? If he does, and yet is wrong (as per Enns and Lamoureux), that would seem to deny inerrancy; if he doesn't (as apparently per Walton and Longman), then why does he use the details of a *fictional story* to prove his point? Frankly, in this regard, this author believes that Enns and Lamoureux are more consistent in their approach (much of Genesis is myth; Paul believed these myths, but Paul was wrong) than Walton and Longman (Paul knew that the details of Genesis weren't true, but he used them anyway).⁵

⁴ In other words, as Sexton (2015) argues persuasively, while there could perhaps be genealogical gaps (missing names), there can be no chronological gaps (missing years). See also Mortenson (2016, 139–164; also at <https://answersingenesis.org/bible-characters/adam-and-eve/when-was-adam-created/>).

⁵ Walton and Longman are rightfully concerned about denying any historical Fall, but they seem hard pressed to determine exactly what happened, since Genesis 3 apparently doesn't really tell us.

Two very important passages which contrast Adam and his sin with Christ and his redemption are 1 Corinthians 15:20–23, 45–49 and Romans 5:12–19. In 1 Corinthians 15:21–22, Paul says, “For since death came through a man, the resurrection of the dead comes also through a man. For as in Adam all die, so in Christ all will be made alive.” In 1 Corinthians 15:45 Paul states that “the first man, Adam, became a living being,” and in verse 47 Paul observes that Adam was made “of the dust of the earth.” Both phrases are taken from the creation narrative of Genesis 2:7. As Eugene Merrill (2016, 120) observes, “it makes little literary, logical, and theological sense to say that ‘as in the (mythical) Adam all died, so in the (historical) Christ shall all be made alive.’ The same Bible that speaks of the reality of the man-God Jesus Christ speaks similarly of the God-image Adam.” Furthermore, when Paul states in Romans 5:12 that “sin entered the world through one man,” he is referencing the Fall in Genesis 3 as well as viewing Adam as the ancestor of all people. Paul continues in verse 14, saying that “death reigned from Adam until Moses,” thus linking Adam with another historical figure, Moses. The remainder of the passage contrasts Adam’s sin and disobedience (leading to death) with Christ’s obedience and righteousness (leading to life). As Moo (1996, 325) cogently states, “it is difficult to see how Paul’s argument in Romans 5:12–21 hangs together if we regard Adam as mythical. For Adam and Christ are too closely compared in this passage to think that one could be ‘mythical’ and the other ‘historical.’ We must be honest and admit that if Adam’s sin is not ‘real,’ then any argument based on the presumption that it is must fall to the ground” (for a more extensive treatment, see Collins 2011, 78–90).

As to the idea that Jesus and Paul knew better, but were simply accommodating their teachings to the views of the people of their day, this position is fraught with problems. In each case mentioned above, Jesus and Paul brought up the passages in Genesis to authenticate their point. As I have written elsewhere:

There was no need for Jesus to cite Genesis 1 and 2 in His discussion about divorce, but He did. There was no need for Jesus to speak of Noah and the flood in discussing His second coming, but He did. There was no need for Paul to speak of the creation of Eve from Adam to verify his position on headship, but he did. Such alleged accommodation on the part of New Testament writers is not consistent with the doctrine of inerrancy. And accommodation on the part of

Jesus is doubly problematic—not only in terms of inerrancy but also in terms of Jesus’ integrity and sinlessness. Furthermore, Jesus did not hesitate to correct the wrong views of the day.⁶ In fact, five times in the Sermon on the Mount Jesus draws a contrast between what the religious leaders of the day were saying (“You have heard that it was said”) and what He taught (“but I say”).⁷ As one writer states concerning Jesus’ statements about the Old Testament, “they form together a great avalanche of cumulative evidence that cannot honestly be evaded” [Wenham 1980, 29]. Clearly Jesus and the apostles saw Genesis 1–11 as historical fact, not incorrect “packaging” of theological truth.⁸ (Beall 2008, 148–149)

What About the Data From Genetics?

As mentioned in the introduction to this paper, the recent scrutiny concerning a literal Adam and Eve arises because of the current view that genetic analysis suggests that the original population of humans was at least 10,000 people, not two. Yet, the data from the human genome project does not contradict a literal understanding of one original couple. Instead, a starting pool of 10,000 humans is an *inference* from the data—an inference made using the evolutionary assumptions of common ancestry, gradual change over long periods of time, and natural selection (Carter 2011). A recent study by Nathaniel Jeanson and Jeffrey Tomkins (geneticists with PhDs from Harvard and Clemson respectively) examines and debunks many of the assumptions of those advocating an initial pool of 10,000 humans (Jeanson and Tomkins 2016). Could not God have designed a multitude of genetic variants in Adam and Eve right from the start (Sanford and Carter 2014)? One wonders as well about the ramifications of God’s intervention at the Tower of Babel. Could genetic differentiation have been introduced at the same time as the confusion of languages? Trying to reinterpret Adam simply on the basis of the inferences of evolutionary geneticists, especially given the newness of the field (witness the rise and fall of “junk DNA” [Sanford and Carter 2014]), does not seem wise, and it does not agree with the witness of Scripture.

Conclusion

The evidence throughout the Scripture is that Adam and Eve are historical persons created uniquely by God as the universal ancestors of mankind. The data from the human genome project does not

⁶ As John Wenham (1980, 14) wryly observes, “He did not show Himself unduly sensitive about undermining current beliefs.”

⁷ Matthew 5:21–22, 27–28, 33–34, 38–39, 43–44.

⁸ It is sad that some evangelical authors pay so little attention to Jesus’ view of Genesis 1–11. For example, not one of the passages cited above is discussed in Enns (2015). Jude 14 is mentioned, but in an entirely different context.

contradict Scripture. There is no need to try to invent some convoluted explanation that regards Genesis 1–3 as largely fictional but somehow Paul uses this fictional story to teach essential theological truths. No, as always, Paul uses the Old Testament historical accounts accurately as the basis of his New Testament teaching. After all, it was Paul himself who stated that if the resurrection of Jesus didn't actually happen historically, "we are of all men the most pitiable" (1 Corinthians 15:19). History was very important to Paul, as it must be for us, to demonstrate the truth of what Scripture teaches. Yes, Karl Giberson (2015b) is correct when he says that "The historicity of Adam and Eve is the single most important issue" causing evangelical Christians to question evolutionary tenets. But the answer is *not* to abandon a literal Adam and Eve, which won't work hermeneutically; the answer instead is to take a hard look at the assumptions underlying current evolutionary theory.⁹ I believe that Peter Enns (2012, xvii) is indeed correct when he comments on those who try to introduce some sort of first pair in the evolutionary process in order to preserve Paul's theology: "The irony, however, is that in expending such effort to preserve biblical teaching, we are left with a first pair that is utterly foreign to the biblical portrait." Scripture's portrayal of Adam and Eve as the first couple uniquely created by God is consistent, clear, and correct.¹⁰

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⁹ See, for example, Behe (2006), Carter (2014), Snelling (2009), Mazur (2009), Meyer (2009), and Nevin (2009). As Barrick (2016, 51) writes: "Some scholars, like Peter Enns, insist that 'evolution requires us to revisit how the Bible thinks of human origins' [Enns 2012, 82]. To the contrary, the biblical record demands that we revisit, counter, and correct what the majority of secular scientists think about human origins."

¹⁰ Note Eugene Merrill's (2016, 138) excellent statement: "the implicit affirmation that one can have his cake of theological truth, conviction, and power, and, at the same time, relish the crumbs of a fractured historicism as though both were baked by the same heavenly Baker, have no good thing to offer to the Church of Jesus Christ. If the Adam of history is irrecoverably lost, the truth of a biblical theology founded on the eschatological Christ, the Last Adam, must ultimately perish."

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