

**William Lane Craig. *In Quest of the Historical Adam: A Biblical and Scientific Exploration*. Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2021. xvii+421 pp. \$24.99 (hbk).**

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I don't think it terribly bold to say up front that William Lane Craig's *In Quest of the Historical Adam* is one of the best, if not *the* best, of its kind—and this for two reasons. First, the clarity, analytic rigor, and attention to detail we have come to expect from Craig is on full display throughout the manuscript, and his nuanced and penetrating treatment of diverse (though interrelated) issues contained therein comes as a breath of strikingly fresh air in a region of Christian theology which, all too often, is decidedly lacking in these scholarly virtues. Secondly, Craig's book is basically *sui generis*: an analytic philosopher's wide-ranging treatment of the most fundamental exegetical and scientific issues pertaining to the question of a historical Adam. It is an ambitious cross-disciplinary work few would even consider attempting; Craig, however, pulls it off remarkably well.

These undeniable merits do not by themselves, of course, guarantee the ultimate success of the book's argument. This latter question will be explored in the second part of this review. First, however, I shall summarize the book's contents, laying stress on what I take to be the elements—both strengths and weaknesses—most pertinent to Craig's overall case.

## 1. Summary

Fundamentally, Craig's book revolves around two central questions: (1) Must Christians affirm the historical existence of Adam *qua* individual human being, progenitor of the whole human race, and fount of sin and (spiritual) death? If the answer to (1) is affirmative, then: (2) Where are we to locate Adam (paleo)anthropologically, chronologically, geographically, etc.? These questions are explored across thirteen chapters in four parts, with the second and third parts (chapters 2–12) doing much, but by no means all, of the heavy lifting.

Part 1 provides the motivation for Craig's book, evaluating the importance of asking the aforementioned questions in the first place. A mere 30 pages in length, this preliminary inquiry has an outsized importance, operating, in effect, as the justification for pursuing the project to be executed in the following chapters. As Craig indicates (3–6), if rejecting a historical Adam has no bearing on other Christian convictions one way or another, the whole question plausibly becomes an idle one: perhaps we should “decide instead to devote [our] resources to more important projects” (3). Refreshingly, Craig here rebuffs the common assumption that abandoning belief in a historical Adam—and with it, the doctrine of Original Sin—would necessarily prove deleterious to Christianity: it is, he avers, “dubious that the doctrine of original sin is essential to the Christian faith” (5).<sup>1</sup> But even

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<sup>1</sup> Noting, with Craig (5n4), that such a judgement does not apply to Roman Catholicism.

if rejecting Original Sin has no obvious hamartiological consequences, two other considerations render Craig very reluctant indeed to regard the historical existence of Adam a disposable “theological sideshow” (6).

First—and of paramount importance for his argument as a whole—is the issue of scriptural inspiration: “If the Scriptures clearly teach that there was a historical Adam at the headwaters of the human race, then the falsity of that doctrine would have a reverberatory effect on the doctrine of Scripture” (6). Second is a worry relating to Jesus’ beliefs about Adam. If, as seems likely, Christ himself positively affirmed Adam’s historicity, rejecting a historical Adam would commit us to saying Christ held false beliefs. But, since beliefs are held by persons and the only person in Christ is divine (and therefore omniscient), it cannot be the case that Christ held false beliefs. Hence, short of jettisoning conciliar Christology, we must hold that Adam was a historical individual (7–8). Craig concedes that a number of responses might be offered to blunt the force of these objections such that, if it turns out Adam did not exist, “the situation is not hopeless” for Christian theology (12); still, as the path of least revision is often to be preferred, we do “need to consider how Scripture’s teaching that there was a historical Adam is or might be compatible with the scientific evidence” (12–13).

Having motivated his book, Craig delivers in Part 2 a series of stimulating discussions on various literary and exegetical considerations germane to making a firm judgement about scripture’s teaching on Adam. Having already noted the resemblance of Gen. 1–11 to other myths of the ancient near east, Craig briefly discusses the nature of myth, and, drawing on the work of various scholars, lists ten “family resemblances” which enable interpreters to identify the presence of the myth genre (45–46). The obvious next step is to investigate more explicitly and systematically the extent to which Gen. 1–11 might evidence these resemblances; across the next two chapters, Craig carefully and convincingly argues that all but two (relatively unimportant) resemblances are indeed exemplified, and straightforwardly so.<sup>2</sup> Having established the mythical nature of Gen. 1–11, Craig then argues for the more specific genre classification of mytho-*history*, as these early chapters seem especially anxious to narrate a history terminating in real (non-mythical) states of affairs. For Craig, however, this salutary denomination does nothing to call into question the basic genus of myth to which Gen. 1–11 belongs; indeed, even the genealogies are “carefully constructed so as to share in the character of the myths they order, contributing to the overall etiological purpose” of the whole (157). Craig then wraps up the OT material with a discussion of some key questions the previous four chapters naturally invite: what in the mytho-historical text we call Gen. 1–11 is to be believed by Christians today? In what way are these things to be believed—literally, figuratively, or in some other manner? At the end of this chapter, Craig proposes a list of ten (literal) truths culled from this highly figurative narrative that seem plausibly authoritative for Christians today. None of these ten involve the historicity of Adam. Accordingly, he concludes, the narrative about him is likely “not to be taken literally” (201), and so we can be reasonably confident the OT does not teach the existence of a historical Adam.

Though formally the final chapter of Part 2, Chapter 7 has the unmistakable feel of a turning point in its own right. Up till now, the current has been moving steadily in favor of scriptural silence about a historical Adam. Currents, however, can be deceptive: appealing to a few NT texts in particular, Craig turns the tides against the would-be Adam denier, neutralizing at one fell swoop the looming threat to half the book’s *raison d’être*.

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<sup>2</sup> The one or two protracted digressions in these chapters are eminently forgivable, both on account of their insightfulness as well as their tacit witness to the desirability—even necessity—of inviting analytic philosophers/theologians to bring their expertise to bear on what we might call “meta-exegesis”—that is, the task of sifting through and evaluating the work of rival interpreters, exposing their biases, logical missteps, and hastily drawn conclusions, and so on. Craig, it seems to me, is a master of this art.

Craig begins this crucial chapter by drawing several important hermeneutical distinctions which, if not respected, would render many NT passages “unfounded in the OT and sometimes plausibly false” (209). Not everything in scripture need be believed by the Christian, but only those propositions which are positively *asserted* to be true of the real world. The result of deploying these distinctions is striking: of all the NT mentions of Adam, Craig thinks, only three actually assert—that is, teach—that Adam was a historical individual (Luke 3:23–38, Acts 17:26, Rom. 5:12–21). This is remarkable: in effect, Craig is conceding that if these texts can plausibly be shown to use the figure of Adam non-assertorically, then there will be no sound scriptural reason at all to affirm a historical Adam. But since, he thinks, these *do* assert the existence of Adam, so must the Christian, on pain of undermining scripture’s claim to inspiration and theological authority.

Part 3 attempts to locate the historical Adam in conversation with the evidence of paleoanthropology. Granted that Adam existed, when was he likely to have existed, and which particular kind of hominin was he likely to have been? The methodology is straightforward: determine when human beings first began to exist, and “the historical Adam may then be located around that time” (245). Craig commences this inquiry (as he must) with a brief discussion of the sufficient conditions for humanness. With these in hand, he proposes a broad *terminus a quo* and *terminus ad quem* for the origins of humanity. As for the former, the earliest hominins with a brain volume large enough to support human personhood were later specimens of *Homo erectus* (more than 1 million years ago); concerning the latter, Upper Paleolithic cave art “undoubtedly” bespeaks human manufacture (no less than 30,000 years ago) (262). Hence, the origin of humanity, with Adam as its head, must fall between these two periods.

Craig spends the rest of Part 3 attempting to narrow these parameters. Consulting recent work undertaken in paleoneurology, archaeology, and genetics, Craig provides a fascinating case for the identification of Adam as a member of *Homo heidelbergensis* more specifically, the last common ancestor shared by *Homo sapiens*, Neanderthals, and Denisovans. Living between 1 million and 750,000 years ago, he says, Adam “could even have lived in the Near East....His descendants migrated southward into Africa, where they gave rise to *Homo sapiens*, and westward into Europe, where they evolved into Neanderthals/Denisovans” (336). Craig wraps up this part by discussing various scientific challenges to the idea of a founding pair for all humanity, concluding that, at present, there is at least no theoretical incompatibility between the scientific evidence and a founding pair. Finally, in the last part (and chapter), Craig offers some brief, though nevertheless thought-provoking, reflections on eschatology, the *imago dei*, body-soul dualism, and Adam’s contemporaries.

## 2. Discussion

Lest the reader suspect me of being unduly critical in this section, let me repeat: this book is emphatically an impressive piece of cross-disciplinary scholarship. Moreover, I would highly recommend the chapters on myth and Gen. 1–11 to all and sundry, and especially to those focusing their energies on the Fall doctrine. Certainly for future analytic theological reflection on Original Sin, chapters 2–6 are essential reading (as is Chapter 7, but see my comments below). Similarly, the scientific material in Part 3 is superb, or so it seems to one antecedently unfamiliar with the scholarly paleoanthropological literature (I trust I am not alone). It will be understood, then, that what I shall say presently is not intended to detract from Craig’s many accomplishments.

Still, my primary criticism is a fairly serious one: I think Craig has been unsuccessful in the first part of his task, viz., making a case for the necessity of affirming a historical Adam.

In Part 1, we recall, explicit motivation is given for the book in the form of two potential consequences attending the rejection of Adam: it seems to threaten first the idea of scriptural inspiration, and then orthodox Christology along with it. Here, I shall evaluate only the first of these claims, as it is the only one developed at length in the book.

While it is tempting to accuse Craig of jumping the gun when, in the first chapter, he writes of scripture “teaching that there was a historical Adam” (13), it soon becomes plain that establishing this point is, in many ways, precisely the agenda of Part 2 (chapters 2–7). And what scripture *teaches* is, of course, of vital significance, since scriptural inspiration simply is, in Craig’s view, the idea that scripture is “God-breathed and authoritative in all that [an author] means to *teach*” (6, emphasis mine). As we have seen, Craig thinks the OT is silent about a historical Adam, and so it is to the NT that we must go to find a biblical reason to affirm one (Chapter 7). According to Craig, however, there are here only three passages that positively teach, or assert, Adam’s existence: Luke 3:23–38, Acts 17:26, and Rom. 5:12–21.

But, first, on what grounds does Craig allege that other texts like 1 Cor. 11:8–9, 2 Cor. 11:3, and 1 Tim. 2:13–14, among others (notably, 1 Cor. 15), do not compel Christian belief in a historical Adam? Here Craig enlists three hermeneutical distinctions which aim to sidestep what would otherwise be some fairly bizarre doxastic requirements for Christians. Craig distinguishes between (a) *truth* and *truth-in-a-story*, (b) *illustrative* and *assertoric* uses of other texts, and (c) *belief* and *assertion* (207–209). For Craig, we need to know:

- (a) If a NT author’s illustration is intended to assert something true of the objective world, or only something that is true within a certain story-world;
- (b) If this usage is intended “merely to provide an illustration, real or imagined, of the point that the author is trying to assert,” or if it is being elaborated (at least in part) for its own sake as an assertion of fact (207);
- (c) If the author simply happens to believe in the content of the illustration himself, or if he intends also to pronounce definitively on the matter.

To remain faithful to scripture, Craig thinks, it is necessary only to believe those illustrations that involve positive assertions of truth claims about the real world, are *assertoric* rather than merely *illustrative*, and are *assertions* rather than mere *beliefs* held by the author. These distinctions enable the Christian to disbelieve the historicity of the dubious extra-canonical source material for such NT texts as 2 Pet. 2:4–10 and Jude 9–10. To take the latter example, employing these distinctions allows us to disbelieve the historicity of the disputation over Moses’ body taken from *The Assumption of Moses* on the grounds that this text involves mere *truth-in-a-story* and is likely *illustrative*—and this holds regardless of Jude’s personal opinions about the story’s historicity.<sup>3</sup> And the same may be said for all NT texts about Adam apart from three.

So far so good. But then how are we to determine when a text genuinely asserts something? It is “difficult to know” (208), Craig admits; still, from what he says rather unsystematically throughout this pivotal chapter, the following rough criteria can be unearthed:

<sup>3</sup> Cf. my recent discussion of this text in Daniel Spencer, “Does St. Paul Believe in Original Sin? Yeah but so What?” *Journal of Analytic Theology* 9: (2021), 306–307.

- AU     A text is being used assertorically when the author intends to teach (assert) that (certain) content within this text is true.

On the epistemological front, the interpreter can have a good idea a text is being so used when one or more of the following criteria are satisfied:

- (i)     The author goes beyond the source text in order to connect it with a historical person or event (208).
- (ii)    The author *appears* to go beyond mere belief and illustration (209).
- (iii)   The aptness of the illustration is contingent on its historicity (214; cf. 226).

The trouble here is twofold. First, it isn't at all clear these criteria suffice to get around every NT text Craig wants. For instance, considered explicitly against these criteria, Jude 14–15, for Craig the “*reductio ad absurdum* of facile arguments for OT authorship and historicity on the basis of NT citation” (217), seems to be using *1 Enoch* assertorically: after all, Jude does appear to move beyond the content of *1 Enoch*, connecting the prophecy in question with a contemporary situation, as in the mentioned epistemic criterion (i). Hence, on Craig's criteria, the proponent of scriptural inspiration *should* “conclude that we hear in *1 Enoch* 1.9 the authentic voice of the antediluvian Enoch” (218). Granted that this is false, there seems to be something amiss with Craig's criteria.

Secondly, and more seriously, I am not convinced Craig's favored passage (Rom. 5) actually fulfils these criteria itself. Regarding the aforementioned epistemic criteria (i): Craig explicitly denies Paul goes beyond Gen. 2–3 here (242), and so this first criterion is, by his own admission, unmet. As for (ii), Craig marshals precious little in support of this; that Rom. 5 has “clear assertions of the historicity of Adam” (242) is more or less taken for granted, and more than once he begs the question by calling Paul's apparent *beliefs* about Adam his “teaching” or “doctrine” (229)—but that this *does* pass beyond mere belief and truth-in-a-story to veritable assertion (teaching) is *precisely what stands in need of demonstration*. So Craig's second criterion, too, remains unfulfilled. Finally, (iii): is the aptness of Paul's illustration contingent on Adam's historicity? Clearly not: as Craig himself affirms (231–32), it is easy enough to tell a story in which human beings find themselves enslaved to (and set free from) sin and death without needing to appeal to a historical fall. For us, “Adam” can simply stand for these enemies now overcome in Christ, and so the illustration remains apt, even compelling. It would seem, then, that Craig's own criteria fail to demonstrate the assertoric nature of Paul's Adam reference in Rom. 5.

These problems surrounding Craig's identification of genuine teaching/assertion in scripture seriously weaken his motivating worry about scriptural inspiration. Certainly the claim that we must believe in a historical Adam on the basis of Luke's genealogy and two words in a sermon of Paul's *alone*, even given Craig's high view of scripture, is a bit farfetched. No doubt the peculiar context and rhetorical function of these ‘assertions’, if genuine assertions they be, afford us ample room to doubt that scripture here *enjoins* such belief. Consequently, it seems Craig's case for a historical Adam now stands on only one leg: the objection from Christology. How strong *this* objection is I shall not decide here—but then neither does Craig, and so we are left wondering if the historical Adam isn't just an idle curiosity after all.

### 3. Conclusion

In conclusion, I do not see that Craig has provided a firm demonstration for the necessity of affirming a historical Adam. Indeed, I suspect many readers will come away with even

less reason to do so than before. To be sure, Craig will have done a fine job locating the historical Adam *should it turn out* he existed, and so we may say that Craig's overall quest is a smashing hypothetical success. Until more is done to convince readers that Adam's existence should be affirmed, however, purely hypothetical it shall remain.