

Adam and the Genome. Reading Scripture after Genetic Science

Dennis R. Venema and Scot McKnight
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225 pp. with notes and Index.

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D.Th., author of *Paul Ricoeur & Living Hermeneutics. Exploring Ricoeur's Contribution to Biblical Interpretation* (2016); *From Evolution to Eden. Making Sense of Early Genesis* (2015), and many other books.

The illustrious topic that Venema (biology) and McKnight (theology) address in their book is one of the most controversial we face today: where do Adam (and Eve), if at all, fit into an evolving world? While Christians have tended to steer clear of this issue, times are finally changing and this book is a good example of where an informed dialogue might lead us.

In the past, literal interpretations of the Genesis stories of creation and fall played a dominant role in determining the general contours of Christian belief. But such an interpretive orientation seems more tenuous than ever in light of our contemporary scientific knowledge. Taking science seriously for theology is no longer something that can be discredited or ignored, yet it is clear that without theology science on its own has severe limitations in the laboratory of life.

The first four chapters of *Adam and the Genome* are written by Venema and deal with science, more specifically evolution and genetics. The author does an excellent job of explaining in an accessible manner the theory of evolution, which does not mean “guess” or “conjec-

ture” about origins, as may be generally assumed, but an established hypothesis tested with experiments. A good theory, in the scientific sense, is a highly likely scenario as to how the natural world actually works. Venema offers several examples in support of evolution, before turning to discuss genetics. Genes, Venema suggests, tell a story that can be traced by a close examination and comparison of DNA. Such experiments show, according to Venema, that humans share a common ancestry with other apes and their predecessors and this clearly supports that humans evolved. On these grounds, the author goes on to develop a helpful and instructive account of population genetics that argues humans evolved from a population of around 10,000 individuals, not a pair. In his last chapter the author turns to address some of the objections to his position put forward by the Intelligent Design movement.

These four chapters serve as a valuable introduction to the scientific data confirming the likelihood of human evolution. They enable us to have a better picture of human origins based on scientific evidence gleaned from the natural world informer.

The next part of the book comprises four chapters by McKnight, who aims to explore some of the implications of the scientific thesis developed by Venema, when it comes to theology. McKnight acknowledges that he was brought up being told that evolution was for atheists and that evolution and the Bible were mutually exclusive. Over the years he had many discussions with believing scientists who strongly suggested that a God directed evolution was the way it all took

place. Accepting these perspectives and in doing his own research he came to see that Genesis needed to be read differently than the way he had traditionally been doing.

Early Genesis, according to McKnight, is an ancient Near Eastern text and it should be read and interpreted as such. In addition to this, the author suggests that four principles for reading the biblical text be in evidence.

- 1) Respect – listening to the text in context
- 2) Honesty – about science and the Bible
- 3) Sensitivity to science students – the conflict between evolution and theology is the number one reason young Christians leave the faith
- 4) The primacy of Scripture – attend to the Bible first, but not in exclusion to other informers

These principles are followed by a brief, but useful survey of which Adam and Eve and what is meant by ‘historical’ in this context.

After exploring four ANE creation stories, McKnight turns to Genesis 1-3 and proposes twelve theses that attempt to summarize in a somewhat condensed form key insights related to the interpretation of the text. The author next shows that the Adam (and Eve) of the Genesis

stories can be portrayed in various ways in Jewish literature, which implies there was no ‘fixed’ notion of Adam in Judaism. In some sense, Adam is stretched out and used for each author’s particular purpose. This valuable sketch leaves the reader with the exceedingly important question: who then is Adam? And McKnight subsequently now turns to the apostle Paul to assess his direction for a possible response. The classic passages that immediately arise in this discussion are Romans 5:12-21, and in particular Augustine’s influential, but perhaps wayward interpretation and 1 Corinthians 15:21-49. McKnight briefly deals with these and other central passages and offers five theses that carefully sketch out his views.

I highly recommend this book. We are in debt to these authors for making an outstanding contribution to what has today become one of the central issues for the Christian faith – human origins and all that is deeply connected to this debate. True, *Adam and the Genome*, is just a start, but Venema and McKnight have begun to deal with, rather than ignore, the thorny questions that now must be asked of the biblical text in light of our accelerating knowledge of the natural world over the last fifty years. For the sake of integrity and credibility it’s high time that Christians take on these issues and then see what comes of it.