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**How to Reconcile Adam and Eve and Noah's Flood with Modern Science**

Some Christians (*concordists*) take all of Genesis 1-11 in a literal sense while others (*accommodationists*) view it as ancient mythology that God can use to teach us things about Him and ourselves. There are several intermediate positions that see both history and myth together and I am going to focus on one of them here. While I do think there are several reasonable interpretations Christians can entertain, my goal is to offer a way to reconcile the view that Adam and Eve were the first humans and that a large regional flood occurred that wiped out all humanity save a single family with what we know about the world from science. The traditional rendering of both stories has certainly been called into question by some of the findings of modern science. The evidence against a universal deluge and first genetic couple is so strong many Christians would pronounce it dead in the water. A positive upshoot of this reconciliation is that it also provides a plausible way for understanding original sin and how physical death could have come into the world for humans due to Adam and Eve's sin, despite being a part life on earth for billions of years prior. This has implications for theodicy but they will not be discussed here and I can't argue for every point or corollary of my beliefs in a single article, so I am going to simply state some assumptions driving this view up front.

**Assumption or Beliefs Guiding this Reconciliation**

- Genetic evidence is against all humans evolving from a single couple several thousand years ago. Humans were spread far and wide during the customary timeframe Adam and Eve are assigned to and difficulties still exist if we push the dates back. New species emerge from *populations* and genetic data indicates we could not have come from a single pair of humans at any point going back many hundreds of thousands of years.
- Science indicates that if the Genesis flood occurred, it must have been localized or regional. A worldwide flood of that magnitude would leave behind plenty of geological evidence that we do not find. The flood view being reconciled below will be regional in nature.
- I tend to see the flood as *universal* in that it appears to teach all humans except Noah and company were killed. This is the thrust of the narrative and is strongly evidenced by how the account describes the undoing of God's creative work that was just laid out earlier in Genesis. Where God once prepared the world for his stewards, their sin is described as unraveling it. If you look closely at Genesis 1 and the flood story, we see a bunch of reversals and a large number of parallels
- Genesis 1-11 is primarily a mythological narrative that teaches theological truths and rearranges Mesopotamian furniture. The genre is not history but this does not

exclude actual historical events or people from being embedded in these stories. Any assumption to the contrary is a non-sequitur. Yet, without a historical narrative to work from, all that can be provided is a rough outline of the first human couple and the Biblical deluge. In order to understand the details of the story, it will help to interpret Genesis 1-11 in its ancient near-eastern context.

- Abstract thought is not reducible to biological evolution or any form of materialism. Humans with the potential for abstract thought are given a supernaturally created soul from God. Throughout the rest of this work, I will distinguish carefully between what I deem *biological* humans and *metaphysical* humans, the latter of which have rational souls.
- If I only had Genesis 1-11, I would be less inclined to viewing Adam and Eve as historical. This is not the case and I approach their historicity the flood account from a canonical dimension as will be made clear below.

**Why is this issue important?**

I firmly believe God accommodated and spoke through the ancient worldviews of the Biblical authors. The Bible does assume things we now know to be scientifically incorrect. I do not think it is necessary to harmonize all aspects of scripture with science. I don't care how long Jacob's ladder was, it is not reaching into heaven. God can certainly speak through mistaken, ancient near-eastern cosmology. There is also nothing wrong with seeing Adam and Eve as the story of us. I can fully identify with that. Fully. As Christians we believe scripture is inspired by God and that means we take it seriously. We may not all have the same understanding of inspiration, and some of us—myself included, do not subscribe to the doctrine of inerrancy but still, if we believe scripture teaches or assumes something about the world, we should approach it with a hermeneutic of trust and only disagree with it when we have exhausted the alternatives. You may disagree with that but it is my approach. That is where this reconciliation comes in. Am I absolutely certain we must believe in a historical Adam and Eve and a universal flood? No, but I think there are strong reasons for doing so from both scripture and church tradition.

**Why believe in a historical Adam and Eve?** John Walton answers this based on two points: 1) Biblical genealogies and 2) the fall or the New Testament's "punctiliar" view of sin and salvation. In *The Lost World of Adam and Eve*, he writes:

> "Studies in the ancient world have concluded that genealogies typically are more interested in political unity than in lineage ties, but as such their objectives would not be achieved if imaginary or legendary characters were used. Future discoveries may yet provide an example that could lead to a different conclusion, but based on

> the information currently available, 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."
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> "The New Testament views the reality of sin and its resulting need for redemption as having entered at a single point in time (punctiliar) through a specific event in time and space. Furthermore, Paul correlates that punctiliar event with a corresponding act of redemption: the death of Christ with its resulting atonement— also a punctiliar event. "

It should be noted that Paul also appears to view death in the same way, as coming into the world through a singular event. A number of ancient commentators thought similarly and could be quote-mined to that effect. While interpretations of Adam in our surviving sources are complex and nuanced, I don't think we can find a single example from antiquity that positively denies the historicity of Adam. In a marvelous speech narrated in Acts 17:22- 31, Paul specifically says, "From one ancestor he made all peoples to inhabit the whole earth." Romans 5 and 1 Corinthians 15 are also two places where Paul's own letters mention Adam. A few short quotations may be helpful:

Romans 5:12-14: Therefore, just as sin came into the world through one man, and death came through sin, and so death spread to all because all have sinned— **13** for sin was indeed in the world before the law, but sin is not reckoned when there is no law. **14** Yet death reigned from Adam to Moses, even over those who did not sin in the likeness of Adam, who is a pattern of the one who was to come.

1 Corinthians 15: 21: For since death came through a human, the resurrection of the dead has also come through a human, for as all die in Adam, so all will be made alive in Christ.

Both of those chapters are worth reading in full and you can certainly take a deep into into then and get buried in commentaries and full length books written about each. Many Christians organizations have very specific formulations of original sin that tend to require a first couple based significantly on Romans chapter 5 and a few other parts of scripture.

**Why believe in a historical Noah?** Many parts of our sacred scripture reference Noah surviving the flood as a historical event. Along with Adam, Noah shows up in a number of Biblical genealogies which as Walton argued, means the authors treated them as historical individuals. Isaiah 54:9 is framed as God speaking: "This is like the days of Noah to me: Just as I swore that the waters of Noah would never again go over the earth, so I have sworn that I will not be angry with you and will not rebuke you." Is the author of Isaiah responsible for putting these words on God's mouth, is God appealing to an event His audience believed occurred, but He knew did not to teach a point, or did the flood actually

happen? Ezekiel (14:14, 20) seemingly treats Noah, Daniel and Job as historical figures who alone would survive God's judgment due to their righteousness. Historically, there are certainly some difficulties regarding all three as narrated in their respective Biblical texts. In Matthew 24:37–39 and Luke 17:26–27, Jesus refers to the story of Noah when talking about the people who were eating and drinking up until the floodwaters came. Jesus, of course, was not interested in historical questions about the flood or its extent. He uses the well-known flood story to teach his followers to always be prepared for the arrival of God's kingdom or the unexpected coming of the Son of man. We certainly can distinguish between background knowledge Jesus assumes to make a point, and what he intends to teach using that background knowledge. For many exegetes, the important aspect is what Scripture intends to teach but I digress. The flood story also shows up in both epistles of Peter. Only 8 individuals survive and Noah is deemed a "preacher of righteousness" and the flood is described as a judgment on the "world of ungodly men" (2 Peter 2:5, 3:6–7). Hebrews 11:7 highlights Noah's faith in building the ark and mentions a host of individuals it considers "ancestors" or historical individuals: Cain, Abel, Enoch, Noah, Abraham, Jacob, Isaac, Sarah, Esau, Joseph, Moses and on and on.

In *A Catholic Introduction to the Bible*, Pitre and Bergma write:

> "Moreover, after the Flood, the point of the "Table of Nations" is to show that all the peoples of the world are descended from the sons of Noah (Gen 10:1-32). This interpretation is taken by the New Testament, which repeatedly interprets the Flood at the time of Noah as a cosmic destruction (Mt 24:37-44; Lk 17:26-27; 1 Pet 3:20-22; 2 Pet 3:1-13)."

Many Christians might accept a regional flood while jettisoning the idea that *all* humans died as opposed to those inhabiting the earth from the reference frame of the author. This is driven significantly by external need (science) as opposed to pure exegesis. Of course, this would also have in impact on 1 Peter 3:18-20 (and 2 Pet 2:5) where we are told that after Jesus died in body but was made alive in spirit, he specifically went to preach to those "imprisoned spirits" . . . "who were disobedient long ago when God waited patiently in the days of Noah while the ark was being built. In it only a few people, eight in all, were saved through water."

Numerous writings from Paul are a part of our canon and while I am not convinced Peter the apostle is behind the second epistle of Peter, a strong case can be made that first Peter does stem from the apostle Peter (with the help of an amanuensis given the elaborate Greek). Given that I believe Paul and Peter were both specially chosen by Jesus himself and commissioned to spread the Gospel and author Biblical books that the Church has considered authoritative since, I have to take what they say and believe seriously. I do not

have to believe something is true because a Biblical author assumed it as part of their background knowledge about the world, but from a scriptural standpoint, we have good enough reasons for thinking Adam, Eve and Noah are historical individuals, and the fall and the flood are events that occurred in the past. I think a further case can be made for the universal nature of the flood but I think that evidence is less probative.

This is without getting into the doctrine of original sin which, depending on your position, is going to seriously sway how you might resolve the question of Adam and Eve's historicity. Catholic theology – which represents well over a billion Christians on the planet--is absolutely intertwined with the notion of a fall and an original primal couple.

**The Reconciliation.**

Keep in mind that I do not claim to be able to prove everything I mention below. This is an exercise in showing how we can harmonize a specific interpretation of scripture with what we know from science. It assumes that both provide true descriptions of reality and works out a compatible solution from there. I do not think it is far-fetched as it does not revise any doctrine but changes how we understand the facts leading to that doctrine. James Chastek from the Just Thomism blog notes, "The revision that is called for is not a revision in doctrine but a move from the simplest set of facts congruent with a doctrine to a less simple set of facts congruent with the *same* doctrine." With that caveat out of the way, here is the story of humanity's genesis.

Human evolution is said to have occurred over millions of years as our apelike ancestors evolved into anatomical modern humans known as *homo sapiens*. *Homo* means human and *sapien* means wise. Some key traits of this evolution involved bipedalism, increasing brain size and the use of tools. There are a number of species that can be classified as biological humans (e.g. homo erectus) but anatomically modern humans seemed to have originated in Africa around 300,000 years ago. It is my belief from careful metaphysical arguments that abstract thought is not reducible solely to the material world. Our physical brains are necessary but not sufficient alone to explain abstract though. In other words, the rational soul could not be a product of evolution. That God elevates a human animal into a full theological human created in his image with a rational soul is a key component of my view.

At some point during the process of human evolution, in the fullness of time, God chose two biological humans and supernaturally endowed them with souls. This makes them not simply animals or biological humans, but full metaphysical humans capable of abstract thought. These two individuals are the first two true metaphysical humans that are made in

the image of God (*imagio dei*). When creating their souls, God also gives them preternatural gifts, access to him their natures otherwise do not permit and if these two individuals do not sin, they would not taste death. Neither would their offspring who would be born in that same state of grace. Though I do not accept a literal garden story, this belief draws on the theme of a special garden with a tree of life, and God's covenant with Adam. Walton considers the garden a "sacred space":

> "When we understand the garden as sacred space and see that the presence of God (and all that he has to offer) is the main point, we can begin to comprehend that the account in Genesis 2 is not essentially about material human origins. God reveals to Adam that he (Adam) is mortal, but then sets up sacred space (the garden) where relationship to God can bring the remedy, life. God puts Adam into this sacred space, commissioned to serve there." – The Lost World of Adam and Eve

This view provides a portrait consistent with Paul's punctiliar understanding of sin and death as stemming from one man. In the narrative, Adam and Eve are cut off from the tree of life which I take as indicting the story saw them as living forever otherwise. Since God must supernaturally create each human soul, we can easily imagine that after choosing Adam and Eve, God continued creating souls for all their children and children's children. This makes Adam and Eve not the genetic ancestor of all full metaphysical humans alive today, but the *genealogical ancestor* of all full metaphysical humans alive today.

This alleviates the genetic difficulties, and it also allows us to affirm that while biological death was a natural part of life since it first formed, death came into the world for metaphysical humans as a result of sin. The original humans were aware of death but had access to life. For those of us who think scripture teaches original sin, we do not need to view it as a positive punishment God inflicts on us so much as a privation of the gifts bestowed to the first couple. Since Adam and Eve disobeyed God and were banished from Eden (Sacred Space) as the story goes, we lose access to the preternatural gifts God granted them. This is similar to a wealthy couple squandering away their money. Their children will now grow up lacking access to the wealth that otherwise would have been theirs had their parents not screwed up. Ed Feser uses an interesting analogy of a landowner to make this point.

> "You might compare the situation to that of a landowner who has sold an unimproved parcel of land to a certain family – which, just to be cute, we'll call the Adams family. In allowing the Adamses to take possession of the parcel, he's given them everything he owed them. But suppose he offers to throw in, for free,

> something extra – to plant on the land a vineyard using the finest quality vines, whose fruit will make possible the best wine. This is something that all the descendents of the original Adamses who bought the land will profit from. But the landowner makes the offer only conditionally. He wants to see how Mr. and Mrs. Adams are going to handle things before turning the vineyard over to the Adams family as a whole, including the many descendents who are not likely to do any better with the vines than their ancestors are. So if Mr. and Mrs. Adams do well with the first vines planted, they and their descendents will get to keep them and reap the benefits. If not, the landowner will tear them out and leave the Adamses and their descendents with only the original unimproved parcel, which is all they were owed in the first place."

Original sin has nothing to do with inheriting guilt. It is best understood as a privation and that is the Catholic understanding today. The Catechism says it is called "sin" only in an "analogical sense" and that it "is a deprivation of original holiness and justice." I make no claim as to how long Adam and Eve remained in a state of grace or original holiness before being expelled by God. The story is not about an ignorant, child-like couple choosing to eat a piece of fruit at the suggestion of a talking serpent. These details must be understood in their ancient-near eastern context. Walton writes:

> "In the ancient Near East, life and wisdom are the prerogatives of the gods that they are reluctant to grant as they try to maintain distance between themselves and humanity. In the Bible, life and wisdom are possessed by God, and they are made available to humans as they are in relationship to him. The trouble comes when humans try to seize wisdom on their own terms. They are told that the fruit will make them like God, but unfortunately this is as independent agents rather than in relationship to him. In this way, the Bible has a very different read on these issues than its ancient Near Eastern counterparts." – The Lost World of Adam and Eve

Astute readers can guess from here how a universal flood is no longer a problem . Since we can plausibly imagine the flood occurring before Adam and Eve descendants multiplied and filled the earth, we can understand the flood as killing all full metaphysical humans except those spared by God. Any biological humans on the earth far outside the region could have survived. But without a rational soul they are no more capable of sin than any other animals and are not full humans. Noah, his wife and their three sons along with their three wives are not the genetic ancestors of all modern humans. They would be the genealogical ancestors of all humans in the same way Adam and Eve are.

The idea that God chose two humans to ensoul out of a large population of existing biological humans and they serve as our genealogical ancestors alleviates a number of scientific difficulties with certain interpretations of Biblical texts. One does not need to subscribe to all that I have written here to agree with some of the basics. For those of us who believe original sin is taught by scripture and requires a first couple, and for those of us who want to accept the larger witness of scripture in arguing for a literal first couple and actual genesis flood, we have a plausible way forward.

**Incest and Bestiality?**

It is sometimes pushed back that this means rational, metaphysical humans would have engaged in sexual acts and reproduction with biological human animals. This is true but this is the result of sin or Adam and Eve being kicked from Eden. We do not know the plan for their children if Adam and Eve would have chosen to obey God and maintain their covenant. But yes, Adam and Eve's children would have had to breed with biological humans once expunged from the garden unless God ensouled more individuals or they had more siblings to marry (Gen 5:4). There is no hard data on this point and some views would be an *ad hoc* solution to what some would already deem an an *ad hoc* reconciliation. We only know that incest or bestiality did occur, this can be viewed as a consequence of sin. This is not what God wanted. He wanted Adam and Eve to remain in state or original holiness and fellowship with him. As the story goes, Cain was certainly worried about being killed by *other people* on the earth after murdering his own brother but I would not over-press any details or do what some commentators do and try to figure out where "Eden" was located as the account is largely mythological.

Depending on how far back we push Adam and Eve and Noah, the same logic applies. If Noah's grandchildren did not engage in bestiality with biological humans, they would have had to sleep with their own cousins. Pitre and Bergma write:

"Christian and Jewish traditions have always recognized that the first generations of the human race had to have married close relations, based on the evidence that Adam had "other sons and daughters" besides the three sons named in Scripture (Gen 5:4). For example, one early extra-biblical Jewish writing, the Book of Jubilees, explicitly states that Cain married a sister and provides her with a name (Jub. 4:8). Likewise, in the patristic era, Augustine argued that marriage between siblings in the first generation was "dictated by necessity" in order that the human race "might multiply". Augustine goes on to point out that this would have required only one generation: "the grandchildren of the first pair" would have been "able to choose their cousins for wives"—the standard practice throughout biblical times."

Maybe this is not what God wanted but the marriage of cousins seems to have been standard practice in antiquity. The story portrays God as so distraught by human sin that he was grieved to his heart and sorry that he made us. Any such negative consequences are the result of human sin. Lot's daughters certainly sin in getting him drunk and having sexual relations with him to continue their family line (Genesis 19:30-36). None of this should come as a surprise. Sin is bad and leads to disastrous consequences for humans. Regardless of how we interpret the Eden and Flood narratives, if nothing else, they both teach this.