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How Can We Reconcile the Theory of Evolution and Our Theology of the Fall? (Leader's Guide)

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Eppinga, Robbin; Huizinga, Ashley; and Marcus, Lydia, "How Can We Reconcile the Theory of Evolution and Our Theology of the Fall? (Leader's Guide)" (2017). *Study Guides for Faith & Science Integration*. 27.

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Leader's Guide to

How Can We Reconcile the Theory of Evolution and Our Theology of the Fall?

A Study of William Cavanaugh and James K. A. Smith's
Evolution and the Fall

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Summer 2017

How to Use This Material?

This study of various ways to view the theology of the Fall and original sin in light of modern science (the theory of evolution in particular) and cultural influences is composed of six modules (not counting the introductory module). Each module contains two sections. The first section presents a set of Reading and Reflection questions that are to be completed before each meeting and are meant to help the participant wrestle with the concepts introduced in that week's chapters. The second section consists of two (or more) Discussion questions, which will be written by the participants and the leader as they read. Both sets of questions are meant to foster discussion, but your group should by no means limit itself to the questions contained in these sections.

This study is intended for **informal, small group** discussion, such as that of a Bible study, catechism, or family reunion. Each theme may be unpacked on its own, but it is the hope of the authors that the entire study may be useful to the interested reader (leader and participant alike). The study is also aimed toward **high school students, college students, and post-college adults** with an interest in how science and the Christian faith interact.

As you read, it is our hope that you will come across (and come up with) questions which challenge you, both in understanding your personal faith and in understanding science. In these questions, you will have the opportunity to grow through asking and answering these questions in a healthy setting. Consider the context and history of these questions: Why has the church historically believed in *this* answer or *that* answer? What might you say if you were a Christian scientist? How might you be challenged to defend your answer?

Planning and Preparing for a Session

The material assumes that each session will have about 30–45 minutes in which to meet. It also assumes that each participant will have read the assigned sections of *Evolution and the Fall* ahead of time, as well as studying the Reading and Reflection questions associated with that week. In order to prepare effectively for each meeting, all participants (including the leader or co-leaders) must answer the Reading and Reflection questions before the session.

More material has been included in each week than is likely to be covered in a single session. Discussion questions might often take priority over Reading and Reflection questions in-session, but the material covered in the readings will always be relevant to the concepts and ideas explored in small group. It must also be noted that these questions are intended as a guide for your discussion, but a spirited discussion may head off in any direction – plan accordingly for the flexibility of your small group.

Equipped for Service

This “Leader’s Guide” is meant to **equip leaders** of these small group discussions, and thus the following pages are far more detailed and expansive than the average participant may judge necessary for complex discussion. We offer as much information as a discussion might need, including *topics* for each session (as implied by session titles) and *suggested answers* to the questions posed in the text. This has been done in the hope that you, as the leader, may more easily facilitate and moderate discussion in and amongst your peers in the small group. Your small group may be made up of the generation that initiates change in how the common Christian comes to understand these questions and answers – in the service of your peers, do not underestimate your own significance as a leader or co-leader.

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Week 0: Before You Begin

Overview Questions

Over the next six weeks, you and your small group will discuss Evolution and the Fall and topics related to the theory of evolution and our theology of the Fall. These pre-questions are designed to help you think about these topics and to provide you with a record of how your thoughts have developed throughout the session. These questions might not be discussed, but please answer them thoughtfully and honestly nonetheless.

How do you interpret the story in Genesis 3?

What impact has the Fall had on humankind?

What impact has the Fall had on the natural world?

What implications might biological evolution have for your understanding of the Fall? Can your theology of the Fall and biological evolution be compatible?

Read the bios of the authors who contributed to this book. How many theologians are represented? How many biologists are represented?

Do these authors seem qualified to speak on the theology of the Fall? On the theory of evolution?

Module 1: An Introduction to Human Origins

Chapters covered: "Introduction," "Human Origins"

Reading and Reflection

"Introduction: Beyond Galileo to Chalcedon"

1. Neither William Cavanaugh nor James K. A. Smith are scientists. How might their educational or occupational background impact how they approach the topic of biological evolution and the Fall?

Suggested Answer: Smith and Cavanaugh are probably more concerned and more informed about the theological implications of biological evolution because they both have backgrounds in theology. Though it probably is not apparent to the non-scientist, Smith and Cavanaugh do not seem to view science like scientists. In the first paragraph of the first chapter, Smith and Cavanaugh say that "The scientific theories are, of course, a moving target; new evidence is unearthed, and different theories are frequently proposed, attacked, defended, and discarded." This sentence makes it sound as though scientific theories are rapidly changing. Scientists are constantly testing hypotheses, but scientific theories are not accepted and then rejected willy-nilly. Scientists would probably acknowledge the fluid nature of science, however. It is helpful to consider a person's background and bias when reading their views on topics such as the Fall; encourage participants to consider the authors' backgrounds while reading the subsequent essays in this book.

2. What do you think of the Galilean model? What is your perception of the interaction between Galileo and the Catholic Church? Do you think that geocentrism (the idea that the sun orbits the earth) was a "key theological conviction"? What parallels do you see between conflict about what lies at the center of the solar system and conflict about the nature of the Fall?

Suggested Answer: Answers will vary. In my mind, geocentrism is much less significant to a Christian theology than our understanding of the Fall is, though perhaps Galileo's clergy contemporaries would disagree. Geocentrism does not seem to be a "key theological conviction." Smith and Cavanaugh's interpretation of the Galilean model reflect the frustrations of non-scientists being abruptly confronted with a scientific concept that some have used to undermine a basic tenant of Christian theology. In that

regard, this scientific development-induced anxiety does parallel the anxiety caused by Galileo's proclamation of heliocentrism.

3. Smith and Cavanaugh say that the Galilean model assumes "a paradigm in which science is taken to be a neutral 'describer' of 'the way things are'" (xvi). Describe your understanding of what science is. What is the goal of science? Does it fit or conflict with the model that science serves to describe the nature of Creation?

Suggested Answer: Ideally, the goal of science *is* to objectively describe the way the natural world functions. Human bias and finiteness always influence the way we interpret the data we gather, of course, but science does aim for neutrality. As a scientist, my understanding of science is that it is influenced by human limitations, but it is generally reliable and it is an accurate description of reality.

4. What do you think the "core" markers of the Christian tradition are?

Suggested Answer: God's creation of the world, man's initial disobedience to God, God's promise to redeem humankind, and Christ's fulfilment of that promise through his life, death, and resurrection are the generally agreed upon essentials of the Christian faith.

"Human Origins: The Scientific Story"

1. What sort of data have scientists used to study human evolution?

Suggested Answer: Scientists have used the fossil record, radiometric dating, and genetics as the primary means of piecing together the evolutionary history of humankind.

2. What do you know of pre-*Homo Sapiens* creatures, such as Neanderthals? How do they fit with your understanding of humankind?

Suggested Answer: Answers will vary. Some people may be vaguely familiar with Neanderthals, other may be acquainted with other hominins. Many people will be uncomfortable with the idea that human-like creatures once existed and have since died out.

3. Summarize what scientists mean when they say “mitochondrial Eve” and “Y-chromosome Adam.”

Suggested Answer: Make sure that your group members understand Falk’s discussion of genetics. It may help to show them some of the pedigree charts Dennis Venema uses in his article “Mitochondrial Eve and Y-Chromosome Adam” (see Digging Deeper). Basically, mitochondrial Eve and Y-chromosome Adam are two last common ancestors of all modern humans. These individuals were part of a larger population of humans, but the lineages of the other humans have since been lost. (As Venema says, these individuals are common ancestors, but not “sole” ancestors.) Mitochondrial DNA is inherited from the mother, so if a mother only has sons, her particular mitochondrial DNA will not be passed to her grandchildren. Similarly, the Y-chromosome is only passed from father to son, so if a father has only daughters, his particular Y-chromosome will not be passed to his children. Y-chromosome Adam and mitochondrial Eve are our common ancestors for only a small bit of our genomes (i.e. a sex chromosome and our mitochondria).

Discussion Questions

In addition to answering the Reading and Reflection questions, please write two of your own questions based on the reading for this week.

1.

2.

Digging Deeper

Did Falk’s discussion of mitochondrial Eve and Y-chromosome Adam make sense to you? For further clarification, read [“Evolution Basics: Becoming Human Part 1: Mitochondrial Eve and Y-Chromosome Adam”](#) by Dennis Venema.

Module 2: Thoughts on Original Sin

Chapters covered: "In Adam All Die," "What Stands on the Fall"

Reading and Reflection

"In Adam All Die?"

1. What might it mean for Jack Mahoney to reject the Fall and original sin? What do you know of the development of the theology of original sin?

Suggested Answer: Saint Augustine of Hippo was one of the first theologians to write extensively on the doctrine of original sin. He proposed that, when Adam sinned, human nature was fundamentally transformed. Sexual reproduction propagated sinful human nature. Sinfulness has left humans without the freedom to choose God or do good without God's grace. Martin Luther and his students concurred that men are "unable by nature to have true fear of God and true faith in God" because of original sin.ⁱ John Calvin thought similarly, adding that Adam served as the representative head of the human race, so humankind inherits Adam's guilt as well as his fallen nature. Today, the Catholic Church maintains that we do not inherit Adam's guilt, just his sinful nature. The Fall and original sin are long-standing components of the Christian tradition. However, original sin and the Fall are not outlined in Genesis 1-3 as such. Passages such as Romans 5:12, Ephesians 2:2, Psalm 51:5 are used to support the doctrine. By rejecting the Fall and original sin, Mahoney counters centuries of Christian tradition (though he is not the first to question those doctrines).

2. On page 30, Deane-Drummond says that, "Theology is to be written anew in every generation, even if that means that it is in need of constant revision." What do you think of that statement? Do you think that this is a helpful way to view theology?

Suggested Answer: Many people will be more comfortable viewing science as an ever-changing field than they will viewing theology as changeable. It is important to remember that theology is a human activity, and that we must practice humility both when dealing with our theology and with science. Help group members think about the reasons why theology might change with each generation.

3. What is niche construction theory? How is it related to a theology of original sin?

Suggested Answer: Niche construction describes the process in which an organism alters its environment. Niche construction theory (NCT) suggests that alteration of an organism's environment can be just as important to its survival and development as natural selection. Humans have constructed niches through cultural activities, and subsequent generations necessarily learn the niche construction behaviour of their parents.ⁱⁱ NCT gives organisms some agency in their evolutionary history—it is less deterministic than some other approaches to natural history, and therefore gives humans more personal responsibility in their rebellion against God. Some suggest that original sin is propagated through niche construction behaviour. Humans are sinful by nature because they necessarily learn the sinful niche construction behaviour of their parents and communities, who picked up sinful behaviours from their ancestors.

4. How does Deane-Drummond understand original sin? Do you agree or disagree with this position, and why?

Suggested Answer: Deane-Drummond suggests that original sin should be understood as a fracturing of community relationships. Humans are born into broken communities, and “that original sin creates the distorted social context in which it is impossible not to be a sinner” (45).

“What Stands on the Fall?”

1. What did John Schneider mean when he said that “matters of western teachings on origins cannot be resolved hermeneutically, but can only be resolved *theologically*” (49)?

Suggested Answer: Hermeneutic means a method of interpretation; theology is a system of religious beliefs. Schneider is suggesting that we cannot reinterpret Scripture to fit with our current theology of origins. Rather, we must reconsider our whole system of understanding human origins.

2. What stages compose the basic plot of the Biblical story, according to Smith?

Suggested Answer: Creation, fall, redemption, consummation. This is a reading comprehension question because, if they don't get this idea, they will be unable to really appreciate what Smith is trying to say.

3. What do you think of the idea that pre-Fall humanity was not perfect? What implications might this have for our understanding of the basic plot of the Biblical story?

Suggested Answer: Most Christians readily affirm the goodness of Creation before the Fall, but goodness is often confused with perfection. The two are clearly distinct. If humanity was not initially perfect, redemption and consummation do not mean that humankind will be returned to its original, perfect state. Even in the initial creation, there was room for development and growth.

Discussion Questions

In addition to answering the Reading and Reflection questions, please write two of your own questions based on the reading for this week.

- 1.

- 2.

Module 3: Reading Genesis 3 for the Themes

Chapters covered: “Reading Genesis 3 Attentive to Human Evolution”

Reading and Reflection

“Reading Genesis 3 Attentive to Human Evolution”

1. What do you think of the statement, “As an alternative to a naively concordist attempt at reconciling scripture with science, the embrace of NOMA by contemporary Christians is fully understandable” (70)? Do you think Middleton is right to describe positions that try to maintain the literal historicity of the creation account while affirming certain parts of modern science as “naively concordist”?

Suggested Answer: This is a thought question that also aims to make sure that the participant understands the ideas Middleton has covered thus far. Middleton clearly has a bias against a concordist reading of scripture and science, and this may not sit well with some students who affirm this position. Talk about why Middleton might call this perspective “naively” concordist.

2. What do you think of Brown’s idea that science may “nudge the work of biblical theology in directions it has not yet ventured” (71)? Do you think that science should inform our theology and/or that theology should inform our science?

Suggested Answer: This is a thought question, and answers will probably vary.

3. What do you think of Middleton’s description of what it means for humans to bear the image of God (*imago Dei*)?

Suggested Answer: Middleton says that Old Testament scholars suggest that bearing the image of God is equivalent to being called by God to represent Him in the world. He says that *imago Dei* can be considered “analogous to the biblical notion of *election*” (76). This is a thought question, so participant responses to the question will vary.

4. What do you think of the idea that death is “the antithesis of flourishing” (79)? Does it fit with your understanding of the creation account?

Suggested Answer: Many students will be unfamiliar with this understanding of death; their answers may vary.

Discussion Questions

In addition to answering the Reading and Reflection questions, please write two of your own questions based on the reading for this week.

- 1.

- 2.

Module 4: New Testament Views and Apologetics of Tradition

Chapters covered: “Adam, What Have You Done?” and “The Mystery of Adam”

Reading and Reflection

“Adam, What Have You Done?”

1. What do you think of the statement “Sin is not compulsory, even if its ubiquity might suggest its inevitability” (105)?

Suggested Answer: This is a discussion question. Participants should draw on the second temple texts Green cites to explore whether or not they believe this statement to be accurate.

2. How does Paul understand “sin”? Does this understanding of sin fit with how you understand sin?

Suggested Answer: Paul understands sin to be “a power from which humans need to be liberated,” not as “individual, wrongful deeds for which humans require forgiveness” (106). Sin is a refusal “to honor God as God and render Him thanks” (107). Answers to the second part of the question will vary.

3. Green concludes that the doctrine of original sin is not an unavoidable conclusion based on readings of New Testament and second temple literature. Did the case he makes convince you? What evidences did you find most compelling or most troubling?

Suggested Answer: Answers will vary because this is a thought question.

“The Mystery of Adam”

1. What (Who) is the “Paradox of paradoxes,” and why do you think that Riches use that phrase?

Suggested Answer: Jesus Christ is the “Paradox of paradoxes.” Riches may use the phrase “Paradox of paradoxes” to describe Christ’s divinity and humanity.

2. Do you know of anyone who holds either of the two “border positions” Riches describes? Do you yourself fall into one of the two categories? What are the strengths of each position? What are the dangers?

Suggested Answer: Answers to the first two questions will vary. The first position accepts the study of Creation as a valuable means of learning theological truths. However, it seems to recklessly disregard theological traditions about Adam and Genesis. The second position seems to preserve the importance of a traditionally concordist interpretation of Genesis, but it assumes a sort of natural theology. It tries to prove faith empirically, which makes perceived tensions between what Scripture says and what we learn through the natural world even more prickly.

3. Why does Riches believe that Adam must be more than an image or “idea” (124)? Do you agree with his assessment? Why or why not?

Suggested Answer: Paul believed that Adam was a literal, historical person. The New Testament authors draw parallels between the carnal, historical person of Christ and Adam. The man Adam brought sin into the world, and the man Christ brings us salvation. This parallel would seem to necessitate that Adam was equally carnal and historical as Christ. The second part of this question is simply a thought question. Encourage participants to ponder the concept of “accommodation” (God speaking to us in terms we understand) as it relates to the imagery used in the New Testament.

Discussion Questions

In addition to answering the Reading and Reflection questions, please write two of your own questions based on the reading for this week.

- 1.

- 2.

Module 5: Cultural Responses

Chapters covered: “Being All We Should Have Been and More” and “On Learning to See a Fallen and Flourishing Creation”

Reading and Reflection

“Being All We Should Have Been and More?”

1. What are the three religious and secular responses to the Fall (page 140)? Do any of the three match with your beliefs about the Fall? What are the strengths of each response? What are the weaknesses?

Suggested Answer: The first is that any human attempts at improving the human condition are futile, so humans should just wait for God to “complete the redemption of creation” (140). This position is right in asserting that human efforts to overcome sin will fall short, but it seems to prescribe a sort of laziness; humans are wholly uninvolved in God’s redemptive work. The second position suggests that humans can improve their fallen state by willpower. Pelagianism, or the belief that humans are capable of choosing good or evil without divine help because original sin did not effect human nature, can essentially remove God from the equation of salvation. This position does, however, give humans some moral responsibility in seeking to combat sin. The third position holds that humans can coerce themselves into choosing right by building good technology, political systems, social systems, etc. While environments can courage people to more consistently choose right, these systems do not work especially well in pluralistic societies.

2. What do you think of transhumanism and the means of immortality they propose? Do you think these ideas are reasonable?

Suggested Answer: This is a thought question. Help participants think through their view on the merits of immortality and the ethical implications of the three paths to immortality transhumanists propose.

3. How do the ideas of a “post-human” world fit with your understanding of God’s redemptive plan? What points of contention do you see? Are there any points of compatibility?

Suggested Answer: The ideas of “posthumanism” do (in a way) agree that the whole of creation is in need of restoration or salvation. However, the telos of Creation and the way forward for humankind envisioned by posthumanists varies. The points of contention participants highlight will vary. Participants will likely (we hope) agree that painting humans as the primary vehicles of “salvation” is not consistent with Scripture.

“On Learning to See a Fallen and Flourishing Creation”

1. How do your physical location, time, philosophical and religious commitments, and standing within your culture impact how you view the world generally (and your Christian faith in particular)? It may be helpful to consider the way someone in a different cultural and historical context may view the world and Christianity so you can contrast your view with his or hers.

Suggested Answer: This is a broad question, and people may have a difficult time answering it. Discussing potential influences on one’s worldview (and reading of Scripture) as a group would be very helpful. One example of a physical/temporal influence on one’s faith is that members of Western culture tend to be more individualistic in their views of faith and society than people living in collectivist cultures. They may emphasize the personal aspect of religion more than collectivist cultures, which may emphasize the importance of a religious community.

2. Summarize Wirzba’s thoughts on a “Christian Way of Seeing” (164). Do you agree with his thoughts about a Christian hermeneutic of the world?

Suggested Answer: Christians view the world as God’s Creation (not merely “as nature”), and God is constantly involved in the world, joining “creaturely life with the lie of God” (165). Wirzba’s thoughts on a Christian worldview are not especially contentious, so most participants will probably be comfortable affirming what he says. Some may argue that a “Christian deistic” view of the world and a more Biblical view of the world do not have significant implications for the day-to-day life of a Christian.

3. On page 167, Wirzba says that “Jesus is the interpretive key that allows us to unlock the meaning and significance of everything that is.” What do you think of that assessment? Does it fit with the way you view Creation? (If not, why?)

Suggested Answer: This statement makes Christ “the hermenutical lens” through which we interpret Creation. This seems to be a faithful understanding of both Christ’s work. How does this impact the way we read Genesis’s creation account? Do you view Christ as the one Who will bring redemption to both humankind and the natural world?

Discussion Questions

In addition to answering the Reading and Reflection questions, please write two of your own questions based on the reading for this week.

1.

2.

Module 6: Political Theologies and Another Perspective on the Relationship Between Science & Religion

Chapters covered: “Being All We Should Have Been and More” and “On Learning to See a Fallen and Flourishing Creation”

Reading and Reflection

“The Fall of the Fall in Early Modern Political Theory”

1. Have you considered the ways that political systems or philosophies influence our views of human nature and sinfulness previously? If so, in what contexts? What were your conclusions?

Suggested Answer: Some people may have discussed the way political philosophers such as Thomas Hobbes and John Locke viewed human nature in high school or even college. For example, Hobbes’s political philosophy definitely did account for original sin.

2. Do you agree with Thomas Aquinas’s assessment that “political community is natural” (185)?

Suggested Answer: This is a thought question. Do we see evidence of political communities in the pre-Fall world? Was Adam and Eve’s relationship political (As Filmer would suggest)?

3. Does the case Cavanaugh makes for the secularizing influence of politics convince you? If you believe that what Cavanaugh has written is accurate, how would that influence how you view politics? If you believe that his claims are untrue, how would you refute them?

Suggested Answer: Cavanaugh’s chapter may not seem immediately relevant to the subject at hand (i.e. how our understanding of human evolution influences our understanding of the Fall). Even so, help participants consider how your view of original sin and the Fall influence how you view the role of politics. What view of human nature does the United State’s government or Canada’s government seem to hold? What about North Korea’s?

“Is Science-Religion Conflict Always a Bad Thing?”

1. Do you agree that “mainstream Christian denominations take a similarly dim view of scientific creationism” (204)?

Suggested Answer: Responses to this question will probably vary based on how people define “mainstream Christian denominations.” Young earth creationism is often affirmed by evangelical denominations, but certain communities of Christian churches are more open to modern scientific theories.

2. Some people pursue peace between science and faith by maintaining that science and religion deal with wholly different realms, and thus have no overlap. Others believe that science and faith cannot be in conflict because God authored both the book of Creation and the book of Scripture. Which position do you align with most closely? What are the strengths of each position? What are the weaknesses?

Suggested Answer: Answers to the first question will vary. The first position neatly avoids all science-faith conflict because the two never interact. However, it tends to be a bit dualistic. The second position forces you to deal with difficult questions about instances in which the truth Scripture seems to teach and the truth Creation seems to teach do not neatly align, but it also allows for a more holistic view of the world. However, this articulation of the position says *science* (the human activity) and *religion* are never in conflict, which is different from saying Creation and Scripture are never in conflict. (Important side note: irenic means peace-seeking.)

3. What is the soft irenic position? Does this perspective align with your view of science and religion, or does it conflict with your view? In what ways?

Suggested Answer: The soft irenic position maintains that just because science and faith do not currently conflict does not mean that science and faith will continue to not conflict in the future. There may be instances in history in which science and faith are discordant because science may get things wrong (or theology may get things wrong). This is perhaps a less common view of science and faith, but it is possible that some participants hold this perspective. This view takes into account the fallibility of human activity.

4. Is the idea that science is not consistently “truth tracking” sufficient evidence to mistrust science as a whole? Why or why not?

Suggested Answer: We hope that most participants say “no,” but the reality of shifts in scientific paradigms is a troubling concept to deal with (especially for those who are unfamiliar with how science works).

5. Have there been instances in which theology is not consistently “truth tracking” either? If there have been, should we mistrust theology as well? If not, how should we understand both theology and science, given what we know about human propensity to error?

Suggested Answer: There have been times in history where the Church’s behaviour has not been obedient to Scripture. For example, the sale of indulgences in the pre-Reformation European Church was not (in our opinion) good theology. Theology is a *human* study of infallible Scripture. However, theology is also essential for a healthy faith. I suggest that we should view both science and theology with humility. We should hold the things we learn about Creation loosely, and we should be aware that there are many interpretations of the non-essential aspects of Scripture (so, excluding the basics such as Christ’s gift of salvation through His life, death, and resurrection). “On obscure questions it is best not to be overcommitted to any prevailing doctrine, since the truth ‘may later be revealed’” (211).

6. Do you agree that pursuing knowledge of nature has less value than the pursuit of virtue (214)? What purpose does exploration of Creation serve?

Suggested Answer: Pursuit of scientific knowledge should not replace the pursuit of virtue, but I’d argue that the two are not mutually exclusive. Studying Creation can teach us about God and instill us with attitudes (such as awe) that help us pursue virtue better. Still, it is important that those pursuing knowledge about the natural world do not neglect the pursuit of personal virtue.

Discussion Questions

In addition to answering the Reading and Reflection questions, please write two of your own questions based on the reading for this week.

1.

2.

Bibliography and References

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ⁱ (Melanchthon, 1530)

ⁱⁱ (Laland, Matthews, & Feldman, 2016)