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Working through Possibilities: A Scientist Reviews When Did Sin Begin?

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Working through Possibilities: A Scientist Reviews When Did Sin Begin?

Abstract

"... [Haarsma] lays out the challenges of reconciling an evolutionary history with a biblical understanding of original sin."

Posting about the book *When Did Sin Begin?* from *In All Things* - an online journal for critical reflection on faith, culture, art, and every ordinary-yet-graced square inch of God's creation.

<https://inallthings.org/from-a-scientist-a-review-of-when-did-sin-begin/>

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Comments

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Working through Possibilities: A Scientist Reviews *When Did Sin Begin?*

Tony Jelsma

May 31, 2022

Title: *When Did Sin Begin? Human Evolution and the Doctrine of Original Sin*

Author: Loren Haarsma

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I was in my late twenties, with a Ph. D. in Biochemistry, and I was a Young Earth Creationist (YEC). I had been exposed to a few of the arguments for old earth and evolution, but not enough to make me waver in my convictions. But over the next few years, I started to read more books and articles that challenged my position. This left me in tension between what my scientific training told me and what I thought that Scripture taught. However, when I saw that there were other and better interpretations of Genesis 1 than a literal six-day view, the tension resolved. In other words, for me, the issue was theological, not scientific.

Yet resolving apparent conflicts between Scripture and science goes well beyond reinterpreting the days of creation. A bigger challenge is how to interpret Genesis 3 in the light of evolutionary science, and that's where Loren Haarsma directs his attention. The view of many churches of the Reformed persuasion appears to be based on a literal translation of Genesis 3 as Augustine understood it:

- – The whole human population has descended from an original pair, Adam (created from dust) and Eve (made from Adam's rib).
- – These existed in a state of righteousness, being able not to sin.
- – However, Adam and Eve did sin, and as a result humanity is fallen and unable not to sin. This state we call original sin.

This view is also reflected in the Reformed catechisms (Heidelberg Catechism LD 3, Westminster Shorter Catechism Q&A 10-18). But how can we understand the traditional doctrines of the church in light of an evolutionary history of humans? If the whole world fell through Adam's sin, how do we reconcile that with the evidence that the human population was always at least a few thousand individuals? Was there a real Adam, and if so, when did he live? Given that people of European descent have some Neanderthal DNA, and people of far

eastern descent have some Denisovan DNA, does this mean that Adam existed hundreds of thousands of years ago, before these lines separated from humans? That strains the credibility of a historical aspect to the story of the Fall. Maybe there wasn't a historical event that we call the Fall. If humans have an evolutionary history, how do we reconcile what appear to be sinful behaviors with an initial sinless state? Does that make God the author of sin?

In his winsome style, Haarsma painstakingly addresses many such challenges that are raised by an evolutionary history of humans and lays out the various options. One's view of the Fall depends on one's view of Adam and Eve. If Adam and Eve were historical individuals i.e., "real persons," placing them in time would affect how one sees the Fall. If they are placed in the distant past, then original sin might have developed over time, with their growing awareness of what is right and wrong. Alternatively, a later Adam and Eve, as representatives of modern humans, might have exhibited what we would think of as sinful behavior but, as God had not yet revealed His will to them, it was not counted as sin. Once they disobeyed God's command they fell, and that fallen nature could have spread culturally or genealogically. On the other hand, the early chapters of Genesis might be a highly compressed history, and "Adam and Eve" could refer to many individuals. Yet another option is that these chapters are not meant to be historical, but an example of ancient Near Eastern mythology, so there never was a real Adam and Eve.

Haarsma does not press any particular agenda, aside from affirming an evolutionary history of humans. Instead, he lays out the challenges of reconciling an evolutionary history with a biblical understanding of original sin. He gives different ways to address that problem, then lists the strengths and weaknesses of each approach. These issues aren't necessarily resolved; his conclusion states that there may be many questions that are left unanswered in Scripture, and we must work with what we have been given. It's not that there are no possible explanations, the problem is that there are too many.

While Haarsma's thorough and systematic approach makes the book's organization easy to follow, it is also a weakness. Each response begins with the same wording, and every nuance is addressed in detail. Consequently, I often had the sense of, "Didn't I just read that?" when going through the book. As a scientist, I am used to reading figures and tables, and some abbreviated summaries in table form might have been helpful.

Still, there are many nuggets that I hadn't fully considered which can help me think through some of the challenges. One of these is Paul's statements in Romans 5:13, that "...sin is not counted where there is no law." That might mean that what we would think of as selfish and sinful behaviors in our evolutionary history were not counted as sin because God had not yet revealed his law. But how do we reconcile this view with Paul's statement in Romans 1:20 that God's general revelation leaves us without excuse?

One of the passages in early Genesis that receives less attention in these discussions is the line of Cain, described in Genesis 4, particularly the sons of Lamech and the origin of keeping

livestock, music, and metal working. Haarsma points out that archeological studies have shown that these activities were separated by tens of thousands of years, suggesting that this passage presents a stylized and compressed history¹. If so, can we read Genesis 3 in a similar stylized way?

I teach a class at Dordt University that addresses questions of origins. One of the first things I tell them is that this class will not answer all their questions. Instead, they will see the complexity of this issue, and that people who honor both Scripture and science can come to different conclusions. Haarsma's book is a good illustration of this fact. Even if one agrees on the science, the theological interpretations are more difficult, but not impossible, to sort out. It almost makes one long for the simple and clear answers that Augustine provided. Almost, but not quite.

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