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Four Views on the Historical Adam (Book Review)

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What did you do after graduating from Dordt?

After graduating from Dordt College, I waited tables in a couple of restaurants, built picture frames in a framing shop, and managed an apartment building. I realized that none of these jobs gave me the focus on literature that I really wanted. I decided to return to school and earn my MA in education. I became a high school English teacher and have been hanging out with teens and young adults ever since.

What is the most important thing in your life?

My family is an enormous element in my life. I have two boys who like to play soccer, play guitar, stick darts to all of the windows in the house, and torment the cats. They are wondrous and amazing, and I am blessed to have them in my life.

You are a high school English teacher. What school do you teach at? How long have you been there?

Currently I teach at The Metro East Web Academy and have been there for five years. It is an online middle school and high school, catering to alternative students who have discovered that the bricks-and-mortar traditional school is not a good fit for them. We have many home-school students, many credit deficient students, and many students with social anxiety disorders. They are a high-needs group of kids, and my heart goes out to them. These students are also the inspiration for much of my writing.

Did your mother, who was a special education teacher, create the climate where you choose to write about “rejects?”

My mother and father, who were both instructors at Dordt, taught me about acceptance and inclusion in all walks of life. I was raised in a family that worked to avoid judgment or stigmatization of all people. I remember many a Sunday dinner when we gathered

around the table with students from Dordt, many of whom didn't have families they could readily eat Sunday dinner with. That time in my life was about acceptance and understanding and greatly influenced who I am today and what I choose to write about.

It says a thesis advisor at the back of your book? Was this part of a degree completion?

Yes, *Whisper* was my thesis for the MFA program at Portland State University. I graduated from this program in 2011, and Tony Wolk, my thesis advisor, was a positive and supportive factor in finishing the book and moving it towards publication. He patiently and diligently read my thesis again and again and again. Without his tutelage and honesty, it would not be the book it is today.

Does being a Christian influence how you think, act, and write? In what way?

This question brings to mind Micah 6:8: “And what does your Lord require of you? To act justly and to love mercy and to walk humbly with your God.” To me, this passage is about social justice. It is about inclusion and acceptance. It is about being merciful and kind. I believe that *Whisper* embodies many of these ideals and I work to include these principles in future writing pieces as well.

I understand you are writing another book. What is it about?

My next project, *My Feet Are Beautiful*, is again about a main character who is not accepted in society. She has beautiful feet, sings like an angel, and is a calm and patient person, but she is judged by her appearance and teased because of it. Through the course of the book, she finds her voice and decides that she is proud of who she is, and if others only judge her on appearance, then they are the ones who need to adapt and change.

Four Views on the Historical Adam. eds. Matthew Barrett and Ardel B. Caneday. Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2013. 288 pp. ISBN: 978-0310499275. Reviewed by Joshua Matthews, Associate Professor English, Dordt College.

Few topics are thornier in Christianity today than that of human origins. Some churches and denominations take adamant stances, stressing or even requiring certain views on the historical Adam, the right way to read Genesis 1-3, and the age of the Earth and universe. Some positions on these issues, including young-earth creationism, seem quite reasonable. If the universe was not created in six 24-hour periods, how do we read Genesis 1-2? If Adam was not a real person, how do we reconcile his non-existence with the traditional doctrine of the Fall and origin of suffering and death? If humans

and their ancestors suffered and died eons before Adam could have existed, does the Gospel lose its potency?

Like many of you, I—a layperson on all aspects of this debate—have long wrestled with these issues. Watching recently the 2014 *Cosmos* series and walking through the magnificent Omaha Zoo stirred up dozens of critical questions for me. Their message is clear: “Adam” and the rest of us share a common ancestor with all other living beings. Moreover, “Adam and Eve” were really an ancestral population of 5,000-100,000 *homo sapiens* in East Africa some 50,000-100,000 years

ago (estimates vary, as they always do). They bequeathed to us men the same Y chromosome, which comes from an “Adam,” and to us all the same mitochondrial DNA, thanks to a single shared female ancestor or small group of female ancestors known as “Eve.” Aiding this view are the latest observations in biology and anthropology. These disciplines supposedly concur with geology, chemistry, astrogeology, and astronomy, giving us our present story of the Earth’s and the universe’s history, a story that may be adjusted (slightly or significantly) with the future collection of evidence now unknown.

Anyone who wrestles with questions about the early chapters of Genesis and the possible existence of a real, individual Adam will benefit, then, from *Four Views on the Historical Adam*. This is another entry in Zondervan’s “Counterpoints” series, which puts different positions on the same topic in Christian theology within the same volume. Here, four scholars each offer a reasoned position on whether Adam existed, what Adam’s purpose in the Bible is, and what the theological and philosophical ramifications for each position are. After each scholar offers his position, the other three each present a critical response to the position. These responses are followed by a rejoinder from the original writer, who discusses the criticisms of his interlocutors. The book thus attempts to simulate dialogue and oral debate in print. Also included are a robust introduction to the four views and two concluding “pastoral reflections” by Gregory Boyd and Philip G. Ryken, both of whom discuss the practical and pastoral applications of the question of a historical Adam.

The four scholars are well-chosen for those who favor traditional Protestant doctrine and orthodoxy: Denis Lamoureux, John Walton, C. John Collins, and William Barrick. All of them should be classified as orthodox Christians; they all believe in the key doctrines found in the ancient creeds, including a literal resurrection of Christ. As well, the last three argue that there was a real, historical Adam. So this is in part a book deliberately aimed at Christians who appreciate doctrinal orthodoxy.

What then are the differences between the four views? Lamoureux initially appears to be the odd man of the four. A Pentecostal who accepts theistic evolution, he argues that Adam did not exist, even though the Hebrews believed he did. Genesis 1-11 is a literal account, but “literal” only in terms of ancient Hebrew culture. The Bible, he argues, is presented from “an ancient phenomenological perspective” (46). The Holy Spirit revealed “inerrant spiritual truths” to the Hebrews by “accommodating” to their own cultural understanding of nature and history, which is very different from our own (53). The same idea of accommodation applies to the rest of the Bible, including to Paul’s idea of a “three-tier universe” in Philippians 2:10, an ancient Roman

idea that no one today adheres to (63).

By contrast, Walton says that Adam was a historical person, but that that fact is not very important to the Genesis account or to its writers. Instead, Adam primarily functions in Genesis as an “archetype,” as a historical and literary representative for all humans—the name “Adam” means humankind, for example (91). This is the intention of the writers of Genesis, who, in Walton’s view, were deeply influenced by the literatures and cultures of the Ancient Near East. For Walton, this archetypal view can accommodate the observations and theories of modern science, including theistic evolution, since Genesis itself is not concerned with science.

Collins is more cautious than Lamoureux and Walton about accepting evolution, yet he still affirms an old-earth position. He argues that the Genesis account is inerrant history, but that “history” is never strictly literal. Instead, history necessarily includes genre and theme; it may omit details, and it may be literary, imaginative, non-chronological, and biased (148). This view allows for a more flexible (or flimsy, depending on your perspective) Genesis account. Collins, more than the other three presenters, interrogates the meaning of “history” and “literalness,” and he rightly complicates what people mean when they say that the histories in the Bible are “literal.”

Barrick presents a young-earth view that draws serious theological boundaries. He argues not only that Adam must be a historical person but that the question of a historical Adam is necessarily a “gospel issue.” Questioning Adam’s existence easily leads to the questioning of other events recorded in the Bible, including Christ’s resurrection. If one part of the Bible is not true, he says, then all the rest of it is doubt (80). In fact, “denial of the historicity of Adam ... destroys the foundations of the Christian faith” (223). Interestingly, though they have radical differences, Barrick and Lamoureux both agree that Genesis must be read as a literal account, which its writers believed to be true. As well, Barrick agrees with the other three debaters that the Bible is not a “science textbook,” and he suggests that science of any stripe—including so-called “creation science”—cannot prove or disprove the veracity of the Bible, since the Bible is the ultimate authority on what it discusses.

Although Lamoureux is the only one to deny a historical Adam, it is Barrick who separates himself from the other three. In his response to each position, Barrick repeats his claim several times that the other views—including Walton’s and Collins’—challenge the “integrity of Scripture” and force the Bible to fit modern science’s account of origins. This stance leads to much frustration. Walton, in his response to Barrick, says that Barrick too often tried to knock down straw men and that he “tended to state his conclusion, as if it were the

only possibility and obvious to anyone, yet did not offer evidence” (238). Indeed, with only a 30-page position paper, three responses, and a rejoinder from each presenter, repetition and assertions without evidence do occur. This is really a benefit of this book, though. Each view is exposed and well critiqued.

As is common with most debates, readers may not find here the firm conclusions they are looking for. Instead, what they will find is an appreciation for the enormous complexity of the debate over the historical existence of just one man (and woman—let’s not leave Eve out of this). Most of the arguments in the book focus on Genesis, but they occasionally and fruitfully veer off into the New Testament, asking questions about what Jesus and Paul believed about Adam. Indeed, *Four Views on the Historical Adam* is really about how we read the Bible, which exposes what we assume right interpretation is.

Despite the four views presented, the book demonstrates the quite obvious point that there are and must be more than four views on Adam’s possible existence. Gaps in logic, shoddy arguments, and short-sightedness

abound, which is a feature of the book, not a defect. I was quite frustrated with each presenter at times. None of them put everything together, though Walton’s view is persuasive, and he is the most exacting about the logic of the other writers. They all ignore something crucial in key moments, especially modern anthropological findings and the impact that each of their views has on the doctrine of the Fall. But that’s because they cannot address all of the subjects and problems that loom over the question of the historical Adam. This is a topic that requires the most erudite of polymaths to be rhetorically savvy; anyone else who weighs in, beware. Questions about Genesis 1-11, a historical Adam, and human origins demand seasoned thinkers who are reasonably well-read in ancient history, anthropology, population genetics, linguistics, hermeneutics, Christian theology, the philosophy of science, geology, literary theory, evolutionary psychology, and other disciplines that give insight into the question at hand. Yes, all that and more. May the Lord raise up such faithful, humble thinkers for His church and for His kingdom.

Ordinary Sins: After Theophrastus. Jim Heynen. Minneapolis, MN: Milkweed Editions. 150 pp. ISBN: 978-1571310903. Reviewed by Jim Schaap, Professor Emeritus, Dordt College..

Hoarders is, at least for me, a reality show that smarts. After all, I’m in it. Not me exactly, but I can’t help but recognize that more than just the outline of something similarly psychopathic abides in my soul too. There but for the grace of God and all that.

Or how about this? You walk down a midway and stumble on an artist doing quick caricatures. You pose, and hefty Magic Markers fly around freezer paper. A crowd gathers, judging the likeness as the image appears. Ten minutes pass, the artist rips off the portrait, and you see a chin three times larger than you’ve ever imagined, or a pear for a nose, maybe two bulbous eyes.

It’s exaggeration, but you can’t help but smile because, dang it!—it’s you.

The gang of eccentrics that people Jim Heynen’s latest collection of stories, *Ordinary Sins: After Theophrastus*, is a collection of midway portraits of men and women, many of whom deserve their own reality shows, most of whom we recognize not because they are strange—they often are—but because, as the title suggests, they are, well, ordinary, just exceedingly so. They’re not us, but they’re not all that distanced.

Take, for example, a character in Heynen’s story, “The Grim Reaper”: “When others chuckled, he sneered. If someone laughed at a joke, he stared at them as if they’d passed gas on an elevator.” He’s Heynen’s version of Young Goodman Brown, which is why Heynen says people had no trouble giving him his nickname. I

know people just like him. They exist, and they exist within me too.

Wonderful characters too have a place on stage, like the woman who lives “The Wondrous Quiet Life,” visiting animal shelters and libraries. “In this woman’s life, there were more books than traffic lights, more cars than cell phones, more vegetables than credit cards.”

She is, bless her soul, sanctified.

Ordinary Sins is full of caricatures you can’t help but smile to meet because you know them, both in life and in yourself.

Sometimes magical things happen in Heynen’s little sketches. When a bar owner decided to create a “Sad Hour” as a way of getting rid of customers more quickly after Happy Hour, the move surprisingly caught on, despite the fact that he deliberately hiked the prices for drinks. Those who purposely arrived for “Sad Hour” sat quietly alone and seemed to fade away into nothing, “looking more like hats and coats draped over counters and tables than they did like people.”

So the bartender let them know it was time, turned up the volume on the juke box, flipped on the lights, and lifted his arms “the way a minister might gesture for a congregation to rise.” All do. Life returns. “Calmly, they walked out onto the noisy streets, almost smiling.” Something magic sometimes happens.

The namelessness of the characters increases the sense of parable in these poetic portraits. “The Love