

William Lane Craig

In Quest of the Historical Adam: A Biblical and Scientific Exploration

Grand Rapids, Michigan: William B. Eerdmans Publishing, 2021, pp. 421

The title of the book somehow irresistibly reminds us of another book and another quest, namely of the classical theological book written by Albert Schweitzer, *The Quest of the Historical Jesus*. And while Schweitzer is searching for the historical person of Jesus Christ, Dr. Craig is going even further back on the historical timeline and in his book is searching for the historical progenitor of the human race, namely the biblical Adam himself.

However, before we go into the very content of the book, we should first briefly present its worldwide known author. Dr. William Lane Craig (born 1949) is an American Christian apologist, philosopher, and theologian. He holds a Ph.D. in philosophy from the University of Birmingham, England, and a Ph.D. in theology from the University of Munich, Germany. In his career he was teaching Philosophy of Religion at Trinity Evangelical Divinity School in Chicago, was a visiting scholar at the Katholieke Universiteit Leuven in Belgium, a research professor of philosophy at Talbot School of Theology in Los Angeles, while currently, he is a professor of philosophy at Houston Baptist University and a visiting scholar at Talbot School of Theology. He was president of the Evangelical Philosophical Society (1996 - 2005) and president of the Philosophy of Time Society (1999 - 2006). Dr. Craig authored or edited over 40 books, to name just a few of the most prominent ones, such as *The Kalam Cosmological Argument* (1979), *Reasonable Faith* (1984), *Assessing the New Testament Evidence for the Historicity of the Resurrection of Jesus* (1989), *Divine Foreknowledge and Human Freedom* (1990), *Theism, Atheism, and Big Bang Cosmology* (1993), *God, Time, and Eternity* (2001), *On Guard: Defending Your Faith with Reason and Precision* (2010), etc. He also wrote nearly 200 articles and in 2016 was named “The Best Schools” one of the 50 most influential living philosophers.

Dr. Craig in his most recent book, *In Quest of the Historical Adam*, deals with a very interesting and complex subject, where he is very much aware that, in the words of Richard Averbeck, “No matter what you say (or write) about the early chapters of Genesis, you are in a lot of trouble with a lot of people” (p. xi). However, Dr. Craig “dares” to say something about these matters, especially about the historicity of the biblical Adam, and he argues that this is an important question, because the historicity of Adam has many theological implications. Among other things, it is related to the question of original sin, hamartiology in general, doctrine of the atonement, etc., but also it has to be taken into consideration that

Jesus himself believed in the historicity of Adam and Eve (Matt 19:4-6), and he, as divine Son of God, should not be able to teach doctrinal error or to hold false beliefs. Therefore, Dr. Craig concludes that “as crazy as it sounds, denial of the historical Adam threatens to undo the deity of Christ and thus to destroy orthodox Christian faith” (p. 8).

The author does not consider his book to be a scholarly treatise, but neither is it a “superficial popularization,” while the target audience is Christian philosophers, theologians, and other academics, but who are not Old Testament scholars nor scientists. He also thinks that the book might be useful to intelligent laymen who are not academics. However, it is difficult to categorize the book, because the author puts the main problem of the book under so many different highly professional and scientific lights: biblical, historical, literary, philosophical, paleontological, anthropological, biological, etc., but generally we might say that the book belongs in the area of Christian apologetics.

The content of the book is structured in four parts or 13 chapters. In the first part, *The Importance of the Historical Adam*, the author in one belonging chapter titled *What is at Stake* explains the importance of the quest of the historical Adam, mainly elaborating the arguments for the importance of the subject which we have already mentioned. The author also gives an overview of the Mesopotamian and Egyptian gods and mythology to better understand the religions, cultural context, and surroundings of the events described in Gen 1-11.

In Part 2 *Biblical Data Concerning the Historical Adam*, which contains six chapters, the author deals with the questions such as what is *The Nature of Myth* (ch. 2), *Are the Primaevial Narratives of Genesis 1-11 Myth* (ch. 3 and 4), *Is Genesis 1-11 Mytho-History?* (ch. 5), *Are Myths believed to Be True?* (ch. 6), and *Adam in the New Testament* (ch. 7). Dr. Craig here presents different definitions and understandings of myth and gives a summary of family resemblances among myths. He applies these ten characteristic resemblances of myth to Gen 1-11 and analyzes it. It might be said that the chapters contained in Part 2 are perhaps the central and probably some of the most controversial sections of the book. Hence, one of the conclusions of Dr. Craig’s detailed analysis is the following:

In summation, the narratives of Gen 1-11 exhibit, sometimes dramatically, the family resemblances that mark the folklorist’s genre of myth. They are traditional, sacred narratives set in a primeval age, featuring a deity as a central character, that seeks to anchor realities present to the pentateuchal author in a primordial time. Sometimes fantastic, but untroubled by inconsistencies, they were objects of belief for ancient Israelites (...). We have seen that the narratives of Gen 1-11 share enough of the family resemblances of myths to qualify as myths (pp. 131–132).

Moreover, speaking of the question are myths believed to be true, by comparing anthropological data and researching Ancient Near Eastern literary evidence, Dr. Craig comes to the following conclusion:

If Gen 1-11 functions as mytho-history, then these chapters need not be read literally. Some of the accounts, such as the origin and fall of man, are clearly metaphorical or figurative in nature, featuring as they do a humanoid deity incompatible with the transcendent God of the creation story. Others, as we have seen, would be fantastic, even to the author himself, if taken literally. Since all we have of the primeval history is the one written account, it is very difficult to know, given the lack of consensus concerning the traditional history of these accounts, the degree to which these narratives exhibit the plasticity and flexibility characteristic of myth (p. 198).

In his quest for the historical Adam, Dr. Craig makes a distinction between the literary Adam and the historical Adam. Hence, “the literary Adam is a character in a story, specifically the stories of Gen 2-3. The historical Adam is the person, if such there be, who actually existed, the actual individual that the stories are allegedly about” (pp. 206–207), and “we want to know how closely the literary Adam of Gen 2-3 descriptively resembles the historical Adam, if such there be, or more precisely whether NT authors assert that the literary Adam of Gen 2-3 closely resembles the historical Adam” (p. 207). Therefore, in this chapter, the author observes the figure of Adam in the New Testament by examining the New Testament authors’ use of extrabiblical literary figures and the New Testament authors’ use of the literary Adam.

Part 3 of the book titled *Scientific Evidence and the Historical Adam* is divided into five chapters. In chapter 8 *Scientific and Philosophical Preliminaries* Dr. Craig seeks to “summarize briefly the scientific evidence concerning human origins with a view toward determining approximately when human beings first began to exist. The historical Adam may then be located around that time” (p. 245). Hence, in the following chapters the author examines *The Evidence of Palaeoneurology* (ch. 9) and *The Evidence of Archaeology* (ch. 10 and 11), he consults various geological and archeological timescales, takes into consideration palaeoanthropological classifications, studies paleontology, genetics, archaeology, ancient technology, economy, and social organization, etc., and then in the last chapter in Part 3 of the book he is finally *Locating the Historical Adam* (ch. 12) and saying: “As we have probed human origins, the evidence has pointed us again and again to the progenitor of *Homo sapiens* and *Homo neanderthalensis* as the fount of humanity, ‘the ever mysterious *Homo heidelbergensis*’” (p. 330). Furthermore, Dr. Craig claims:

Adam, then, may be plausibly identified as a member of *Homo heidelbergensis*, living perhaps >750 kya. He could even have lived in the Near East in the biblical site of the Garden of Eden – though vastly earlier than usually thought, of course. His descendants migrated southward into Africa, where they gave rise to *Homo sapiens*, and westward into Europe, where they evolved into Neanderthals/Denisovans. Once *Homo sapiens* began to migrate out of Africa >130 kya, these separate lines of his descendants began to interbreed (p. 336).

In Part 4 *Reflections on the Historical Adam*, which contains only one chapter titled *Putting it All Together* (ch. 13), the author presents his eschatological reflections on the subject, he reflects on the meaning of the concept of the image of God, on the body-soul dualism, and offers his view of a possible functioning of Adam and Eve as the founding pair of humanity, surrounded by their nonhuman contemporaries. And finally, Dr. Craig concludes his long quest with the following words:

Given the incompleteness of the data and the provisionality of the science, the quest of the historical Adam will doubtless never be concluded in our lifetime – or in anyone’s lifetime, for that matter. Fortunately, because of the relatively low theoretical level of the science of archaeology, our tentative conclusions are not highly susceptible to sweeping changes. The Bruniquel Cave constructions and the Schöningen spears are not going to disappear. At most they are subject to redating, but while dates can be revised to more recent times, that is unlikely in these and most cases. If anything, dates are usually revised to more distant times. Despite the inconclusiveness of the quest, we have managed to narrow the window of opportunity considerably as to Adam’s place in history. Adam plausibly lived sometime between around 1 mya and 750 kya, a conclusion consistent with the evidence of population genetics. The *terminus ad quem* will probably be pushed back with further palaeontological and archaeological discoveries. We may also expect clarification of the place of *Homo heidelbergensis* through palaeoproteomic analysis of the remains of this species. The name serves at least as a useful placeholder for that large-brained human species that was ancestral to *Homo sapiens* and our various sister species of the human family. We can live with uncertainty. For though we now see through a glass darkly, we shall one day see face to face (1 Cor 13:12). In the meantime, we await new discoveries with excitement and anticipation (p. 380).

The book *In Quest of the Historical Adam* is maybe not unique in the terms of the subject it is dealing with, but it is the last and the freshest work on the subject. However, the author’s all-encompassing approach to the subject is certainly unique. In the opinion of this reader, the comprehensiveness of the book is at the same time strength and weakness of the book. The book offers a broadness and depth, but sometimes that can be more a distraction than a benefit, because it tends to lead the reader too far from the subject, and an average reader is not able to follow the erudite author so deep in so many areas.

Scientifically, this book is on a very high level, both in its content and methodology. Dr. Craig demonstrates an impressive knowledge of so many facts and understanding of various ideas and concepts, not only in theology but also in anthropology, ancient literature, history, natural sciences, archaeology, etc. Sometimes it seems that he wants to say so much about a particular issue or subject, but he cannot put everything into the main body of the text, so he uses extensive footnotes for that. There are more than 800 footnotes and hundreds of sources consulted by the author in writing this book, and that is visible in a very extensive Bibliography of more than 370 titles at the end of the book. Therefore, this book

must be an important source for anyone who is already studying or about to study Gen 1-11, from whichever angle or perspective.

In presenting his arguments, the author is objective, and as a Christian author he is not biased, he is not trying to accommodate his arguments to fit into already established Christian assumptions. It is vice versa, sometimes he goes against the established “truths,” but argumentatively, and because of that he could easily get into trouble with the (conservative) Christian community. However, agreeing with him or not, he is basing his conclusions on seriously researched evidence and therefore he convincingly presents his theses.

The organization and the structure of the book are pretty logical, where the author is gradually building his argumentation, drawing from various sources. He starts with only one chapter in the first part of the book where he explains the importance of the researching subject and concludes with only one chapter in the fourth part of the book where he brings all the conclusions together in one place, while the 11 chapters in between serve as developing of the argumentation. As has been said already, there are many footnotes, and for some of them, it seems that they are too extensive, while the book also contains several charts, maps, illustrations, photos, an Index of Names and Subjects, and an Index of Scripture and Other Ancient Texts at the end of the book, to help in the comprehension of the material.

In his methodological approach, the author uses the Bible, and deals with, for his research, various significant canonical biblical texts, but he also goes wider than that and consults Apocrypha, Pseudepigrapha, ancient Jewish writers, Midrash, Targum, various rabbinic writers, early Christian theologians, Greco-Roman literature, and Ancient Near Eastern Works. Therefore, this is not a book that deals with Gen 1-11 from the biblical or Christian theological perspective only, but it goes much wider than that. The author’s interaction with these, and all the other sources he uses, is purposeful, argumentative, dialogical, respectful, and constructive.

At the end of this brief overview of the book, this reader has to admit that this is not an easy read. One cannot read this book fast, skimming, distracted, or deconcentrated if he wants to understand the argumentation and to get the most from the book. The footnotes are also very important to read, one should not skip them, because they help in the understanding of the main text. However, even if one reads the book in a very focused manner, there are still some sections that are not so easy to comprehend. Therefore, this book is not for an average Christian, but someone with more solid theological foundations, but also with wider general knowledge, understanding of ancient history, geography, anthropology, etc. But, if one takes this book to read, reads it carefully, and “survives” to the very end, the book will teach him and challenge him. Just to be sure regarding the challenge, there might be some things in this book that a Christian believer might consider

unacceptable for his or her beliefs, and that he or she might not agree with, but these challenging things should not be harmful to someone's faith. Moreover, this book is an apologetical book, written by a Christian author, to help a Christian to better understand his/her humanity and God's creation, but also to help in the understanding of his/her theology and beliefs. And this book does that. Dr. Craig's goal and intentions of this quest were clear, but are we satisfied with the journey how we came to the goal and with the conclusions at the end of the road, that is something else, it is subjective, and it depends on every reader individually.

Dalibor Kraljik