

# Adam & Eve: Were they historical figures and does it matter?

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## 1. Introduction

## 2. Two interpretive assumptions

- The authority of scripture
- The clarity of scripture:
  - The ‘analogy of scripture’
  - The ‘analogy of faith’

## 3. Genesis and history: different interpretive approaches

- Genesis 1-3 & Adam:

At face value, what does the text say about Adam? Chapter 1.24, on the sixth day, we are told, God called forth living creatures from the land, the wild animals, the livestock, and all the creatures that move along the ground, and he saw it was good. Then God said, verse 26, let us make mankind in our image, in our likeness, so that they may rule over the fish in the sea, the birds in the sky, and so on. Male and female, he created them. He blessed them, verse 28, and commanded them to be fruitful, to increase in number, and to fill the earth and subdue it. ‘God saw all that he had made, and behold it was very good. And there was evening and there was morning—the sixth day’ (verse 31). ‘Thus the heavens and earth were completed in all their vast array’ (2.1), and God rested from his finished work on the seventh day and hallowed it (2.2).

Then in chapter 2, we are given what at first seems to be another account of creation: ‘This is the account (literally, ‘these are the generations’) of the heavens and the earth when they were created, when the LORD God made the earth and the heavens’ (2.4). Whether this is a distinct creation account from chapter one, or more traditionally, a detailed explication of the sixth day is a question I shall leave to one side. Whatever the case, chapter 2 makes its own specific claims about Adam. Verses 5 and 6 provide the prelude and setting for the specific statement about Adam’s creation in verse 7. The earth (verse 6)—most likely, in the broadest cosmic sense—has not yet produced any shrubs or edible crops because there was neither rain nor any man to work the land.

I don’t think we are supposed to picture the *whole* earth as being dry and arid like a desert, because it seems from verse 6 that streams are coming up from the earth to water the whole surface of a specific place or

part of the earth, namely, the 'land' (which is translated 'ground' at the end of verse 6). So out of the whole earth, there is a specific place, the 'land', which has potential for habitation where water is plentiful. Indeed, in verse 9 we are told that God made all kinds of trees grow out of this land, so it is clearly capable of vegetation. It is also capable of sustaining animal life (verse 19). But while it has this potential, it cannot be cultivated to produce edible crops without human labour and industry, it seems. And that is the setting for verse 7: 'Then the LORD God formed a man from the dust of this place—the land (literally)—and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life and the man became a living being'.

After this, we are told about a specific part of this habitable space, this land—a garden which God has planted in the East, in Eden (verse 8). There are various rivers which flow out of a single river watering this Garden (verses 10-14). Two of these are clearly recognisable, namely, the Tigris and Euphrates, meaning that the writer is most probably thinking of a real location somewhere in ancient Mesopotamia. Moreover, when Eden is mentioned elsewhere in the Bible, it is specifically described as the 'Garden of God' (Ezek 31.9) or the 'Garden of the LORD' (Isa 51.3), suggesting we understand it as a sanctuary or holy place where God dwells. And Adam is put in this Garden sanctuary, we are told, to work it and take care of it (verse 15), echoing what we saw in chapter 1.28. There are two trees in this Garden: a tree of life, from which he is free to eat, and a tree of the knowledge of good and evil, from which he is forbidden to eat, with a specific sanction in verse 17, 'for when you eat from it you will certainly die'.

Finally, it is clear that Adam at this point is alone. Of all the animals he names, there is no suitable helper to enable him to fulfil his mandate. This is something God explicitly describes as 'not good', verse 18. And so, God causes Adam to fall into a deep sleep, and from his side forms a woman, who, unlike the animals, Adam can then describe as 'bone of my bones and flesh of my flesh' (verse 23). There they are in the garden, husband and wife, both naked and unashamed.

If that is how chapter 2 finishes, by the time we get to the end of chapter 3, things are dramatically different. You will undoubtedly know the details of Adam's tragic fall. A serpent—God's most crafty creature—is there in the Garden. He first questions what God did or didn't say about the trees in the Garden (verse 2). He then questions the truthfulness of the sanction (verses 4 & 5). The woman desires the fruit both as food and as source of wisdom, and then openly defies God's command by taking the fruit, eating it, and giving it to her husband. They now have a sense of nakedness and shame, especially in the presence of God from whom they feel the need to hide (verse 10). They evade responsibility for their actions, and as a result, God issues his curse. He first curses the serpent, promising enmity between its offspring and those of the woman, along with the prospect that eventually the serpent will be crushed by one of her offspring. God then curses the woman, pronouncing judgment on childbirth and her relationship with her husband. Finally, he curses Adam. Specifically, there are implications for the land. It is cursed as a result of Adam's sin, so that if the woman's role in childbearing is now ridden with difficulty, so too is Adam's role as a farmer and cultivator of the land. Interestingly, neither of them die physically, at least they don't immediately. But God does banish them from the Garden and in doing so forbids them access to the tree which could grant them ongoing life (verse 22).

- Approach 1: Genesis 1-3 as a literal historical record

[E.g., William VanDoodewaard, *The Quest for The Historical Adam: Genesis Hermeneutics, and Human Origins* (Reformation Heritage, 2015)]

- Approaches 2 & 3: Genesis 1-11 as an ancient 'worldview' story
  - Comparisons with Ancient Near Eastern literature
    - Approach 2: Genesis 1-11 is a 'myth' that makes very little claim on history

[E.g., Peter Enns, *The Evolution of Adam* (Brazos, 2012)]

- Approach 3: Genesis 1-11 is ‘pre-history’ with an historical ‘core’

[E.g., C. John Collins, *Did Adam and Eve really exist?* (IVP, 2011);  
John H. Walton, *The Lost World of Adam and Eve* (IVP, 2015)]

## 4. An historical Adam: how do we decide?

- Applying the analogy of scripture:
  - The function of Adam in biblical genealogies (e.g., Gen 5; 10-11; 1 Chron 1; Luke 3.23-38)
  - Adam’s function as a type of Israel’s role in God’s plan of redemption
    - Noah (cf., Gen 9.1)
    - Abraham and his ‘offspring’ (cf., Gen 12.2-3; 22.17-18; 26.3-4; 28.3, 14)
    - A royal son of David (Ps 72; cf., v. 17)
  - The Apostle Paul’s interpretation of Genesis:
    - 1 Tim 2.11-15
    - 1 Cor 15.22, 45-9
    - Rom 5.12-21
- Implications?
- Applying the analogy of faith:

## 5. Conclusion

