

Finding humans origins from biblical theology #2

Posted on [03/11/2017](#) by [Jon Garvey](#)

In the [last post](#) I tried to show the overall thematic “plot” inherent in the Pentateuch or *Torah*, which John Sailhamer calls its “compositional strategy”. This makes the foundation-document of Israel a narrative of linked themes, which I will list below the fold.

1. Israel was called, according to the covenant God made with Abraham, to a “face-to-face” faith relationship with God, to start on Mount Sinai (Ex. 3:12).
2. This would make them into a “kingdom of priests” to bring such blessing to the rest of mankind (Ex. 19:6; cf 9:16; Gen 12:1-3; Deut. 32:43; Isa. 42:6).
3. They failed from the start by refusing to meet God on the mountain, making Moses their mediator instead and leaving themselves only with an inferior “covenant of law” (Deut 5:1-5).
4. Their failure to keep this covenant led to their exile and the abrogation of the covenant being foretold and eventually fulfilled (Deut. 4:25-31; 29:22-28; 31:15-22; 32:1-38; cf 2 Chr. 36:15-23 – the close of Hebrew Bible or *Tanach*).
5. Eventual salvation, and their fulfilment of their mission to the world, would come by transformation of their hearts through a coming prophet/king (Deut:18:15-19; 17:14-20; 30:1-10) “*in the last days*”.

[Seth Postell](#) agrees with this overall “authorial intent”, and makes an excellent case for subordinating the accounts in Genesis 1:1-2:4 and 2:5-ch.3 to it. Thus Adam becomes an archetype of this whole “tragedy with hope” narrative – he is represented as an ancestral “proto-Israel” whose failure both prefigures Israel’s, and to some extent also explains it by his being the fountainhead of sin and rebellion against Yahweh. In a similar way, the cosmos in Genesis 1 is presented as a sacred space subdivided and gradated in holiness, typological of the promised land of Israel, or of its temple.

Postell, with Sailhamer, sees Genesis 1 as describing (in keeping with its genre, of course) the creation of Israel itself, rather than of the whole cosmos. From the “origins” point of view this text-based conclusion has the advantage of circumventing entirely arguments about the age of the earth, evolution and so on. In this view one supposes “creation” to be used in the way that John H Walton suggests it is, *ie* functionally: all the elements in creation are “created” by being designated for the use of his special people Israel.

But for reasons I sketched [here](#), and will now try to develop, I think the creation account has in mind a wider context than the land of Canaan alone. And it’s the overview of the text that leads me to that conclusion (and thus demands rather more work in matching it to the world!). For in that overview, underlying the failure of Israel, and its most profound consequence in God’s purpose, is its failure to minister to the nations as priests – and so I would expect those non-Israelite nations to be represented in the typology of the first chapters of Genesis.

My general thinking here is this: both Sailhamer’s and Postell’s work is relatively recent, and provides an almost entirely new lens with which to interpret the Old Testament as a

theological work. But it's also a new lens with which to consider the "origins texts" in Genesis in relation to "physical reality". Little, if any, work has been done in approaching the origins discussion that way, so it's virgin territory. Maybe we'll find the text itself has some definite things to say on the matter that are helpful to the science-faith discussion, and superior to the existing views because *derived from the intended meaning of the text*, rather than being grafted on to an under-determined "assemblage of ancient sources" merely as "possible" accommodations between science and Christian doctrine.

Let's start with Adam, then, and the significant distinction I drew in [this post](#) between the "tabernacle" imagery of Genesis 1 and the "open access" imagery of the garden of Genesis ch.2.

Adam is created in the former – a "very good" world in its Creator's estimation, but one in which heaven and earth are as separated by cosmic barriers as the worshippers' courtyard of the tabernacle and the Holy of holies were by physical ones. But the text tells us that he is taken *from* there and placed in a divinely-planted, closed, garden within it, where he is in free relationship to God, and even has access to eternal life. There is only one stipulation, not to eat of the tree of knowledge, in the "covenant relationship" he has with God.

Postell cites a good number of sources supporting the conclusion that the garden of Eden did involve a true covenant relationship, and the parallelism between Adam and Israel demands it. But if nothing else the transition from "the created earth" to "special relationship with God" is shown by the change in God's name from the generic "Elohim" to the covenant name "Yahweh" between chapter 1 and chapter 2 – which the source critics for over a century took as a sure sign of contradictory sources, but which is now increasingly seen as deliberate compositional strategy.

This change in the nature of relationship is exactly the same as that given to Moses, to whom God revealed his covenant name as he called Israel out of the profane land of Egypt, and into open relationship with himself, initially on the holy mountain of Horeb. In Egypt, as in Genesis 1, he was "God Almighty", but on Sinai, like Eden, he is to be "Yahweh".

This covenant, of course, is to be expected – and is virtually a necessity – if Adam is to be regarded in the context of the Pentateuch as the archetype of Israel. What is more, if Sailhamer's reading of the *kind* of covenant Israel had originally been offered by God, discussed in the [last post](#), is correct, Adam in Eden was in a covenant of trusting faith, like Abraham's, and not one of works (as has been the understanding in Reformed covenant theology over the centuries).

A few things follow from this. It implies, to begin with, that the contrast between the land outside the garden, where Adam had been formed from the dust of the earth, and the garden, is equivalent typologically to Israel's coming *out of* land of Egypt and *into* the land of Canaan, just as Abraham too came *out of* Ur in order to begin to receive the promise *in* Canaan (though in his case, of course, the fulfilment had to wait 400 years for the Exodus). I'll explore that "outside world" in another post.

But if we are fairly strict with the Adam/Israel parallelism, Adam might well have been seen by the author as, like Israel, the representative of a wider population who was called for

special blessing, rather than the emphasis being on his primogeniture of all mankind. He would be of the same stock as that human race created in ch 1 (Heb. *adam*), but we have less reason, under “Adam as Israel”, to *assume* that the author intended us to see him and Eve as identical with the “male and female” created in ch 1.

I did a [post](#) not long ago enumerating the various hints in Genesis that other people existed outside the garden. If Adam in Genesis is, according to the “Sailhamer overview”, being shown principally as the forerunner of Israel, then it is that much more likely that other people are not specifically mentioned simply because they were irrelevant to the story, rather than because they didn’t exist.

After all, the same “isolation” is largely the case in the Sinai account. Once the Amalekites are beaten, and Moses’s father-in-law Jethro has gone home, it is as if the only people in the world are the Israelites, in the brooding presence of their God. The covenant is described in terms of their forefathers the Patriarchs, even though Exodus itself has already informed us that a “mixed multitude” of non-Israelites had accompanied the physical descendants of Israel out of Egypt. They had presumably somehow been incorporated into the population – but the account is focused on essentials, not such exhaustive details.

Israel has its dealings with God in a desert, of course – but equally, Adam had his dealings in a sacred garden closed off, in either a natural or supernatural way, from other people. We may also see parallels in this with the life-changing encounters of Abraham or Jacob with Yahweh, which were also entirely private. In any case, both Adam and Israel have been singled out for a relationship with Yahweh which is, in the first instance, to be a unique spiritual calling: it would be inappropriate to be cluttering up either story with those excluded from the events.

Now, if we run with these arguments, then the spiritual relationship of Adam to his world, like that of Israel to *theirs*, becomes important afterwards rather than before. Of course, according to our storyline, in both cases that relationship did not achieve (until Jesus came) all that it was intended to.

But there is no doubt that in the Christian narrative, Adam, again like the nation of Israel, is of pivotal importance. So the narrative of Genesis 4-11, as the spread of Adam’s knowledge of Yahweh as the true God (Gen 4:26), and also the spread of sin and the Adamic line across the world (chs. 6-11), may be taken as theologians have always taken it. But we need not assume that the author is unaware of men ignorant of Yahweh, and so not yet embroiled in the results of Adam’s sin (which was, it can never be too often stressed, that of rejecting relationship with Yahweh, *not* that of disobedience to a moral law that came only millennia later).

In this scenario, since it was only Adam and Eve who had been offered eternal life in the garden, it was only their spiritual progeny to whom death was a penalty for disobedience. Once again applying our “measuring stick” of the Pentateuchal author’s “compositional strategy”, that is parallel to Israel on Sinai – failing to realise the promised intimate relationship with God left them, apparently, in the same situation as the gentiles across the world whom Paul describes as “without God and without hope in the world.”

The difference is that the latter had never been offered such a special relationship – it had been intended that Israel would teach it to the rest of mankind. For the Israelites to be in an

impaired relationship, rather than no relationship, however, brought its own problems: the exile arising from their worship of Baal made them a byword among the nations, in a way that the identical idolatry of the surrounding nations did not. On the other hand, in the grand scheme of things even that was an advantage over the ignorance of the gentiles (as Paul stresses in Rom 3:1-8; 9:1-6).

Likewise, in some way or another, death became a penalty for man only because he had been offered, in relationship to Yahweh represented as access to the tree of life, an alternative to his intrinsic mortality. 1 Corinthians 15 is relevant here, for in discussing eternal life, we should notice how Paul contrasts the spiritual resurrection body with Adam's *natural* body, and not with his fallen state (vv.42-49). From this passage it is clear that being made from "the dust of the earth" rendered Adam mortal; *ergo* the avoidance of death was something *over and above* the initial creation, that is, it was the fruit of the special covenant relationship with Yahweh in the garden. Hence I have to disagree with Aquinas that rationality entails intrinsic immortality, for Paul appears to deny it here. That has implications for our exploration of "non-adamic" man next time.

So heavy theological lifting still needs to be done to account for the link between Adam's sin and that of the rest of us. We cannot ignore it, just as trying to understand Christianity apart from Israel, and her story, is doomed to misunderstanding, for "salvation is from the Jews", and Christ had to be of the line not only of Judah, but of David. Salvation arises in history, not philosophy or psychology. Not only Romans 5, but 1 Corinthians 15, and Matthew 19:8, also suggest that, in some way, Adam stands at the head of *our* gentile family tree too, and that that has a bearing on why we are in need of salvation.

To my mind, the [genealogical Adam hypothesis](#) is a strong, recent, explanatory contender for how that kind of "common descent" might be true. That's so even given the neolithic (or perhaps better chalcolithic) Adam that Genesis describes, and whose chronology the genealogies and the literary sources broadly match. There are, of course, still many loose ends, such as the *how* of the transmission of Adam's sin, whether by genealogy, socialisation, federal headship or something else.

But note that what needs to be accounted for by this, *according to the text*, is accountability before the covenant God Yahweh (for it was that *personal* knowledge which Adam lost, condemning his offspring, all of us, to the penalty of death), and the consequent escalation of human evil. Nothing in Genesis suggests the individual Adam to be the source of all human abilities, or the power of thought or speech, or culture or even religion. For those we need to look elsewhere, and I think it likely not only that they are to be found in Genesis 1, but that the author of the Pentateuch intended to place them there.

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