

# Theistic evolutionists' views of the Fall fall short

## *Evolution and the Fall*

William T. Cavanaugh and James Smith (Eds.)

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Joel Tay

*Evolution and the Fall* is a collection of ten essays by a team of theistic evolutionists and funded by Biologos. The book starts out by acknowledging that the scientific consensus (i.e. evolution) is problematic for a plain reading of biblical creation. Evolution tells us that all humans emerged from a group of primates and not an original human pair (i.e. Adam and Eve (p. xv)). This is incompatible with the biblical teaching of a ‘good’ creation, an ‘original righteousness’, and a historical ‘Fall’ from innocence (pp. xvii–xviii). Since evolution teaches that mankind did not come from an ancestral pair, this undermines the traditional understanding of Original Sin.

This Scripture/evolution ‘tension’ is then portrayed as the modern-day equivalent of the ‘hypostatic’ controversy—the conundrum faced by the Council of Chalcedon (figure 1), where theologians struggled with two seemingly incompatible concepts (i.e. the divinity and humanity of Christ), resulting in what has now come to be known as the hypostatic union—the doctrine that Jesus is fully God and fully man.

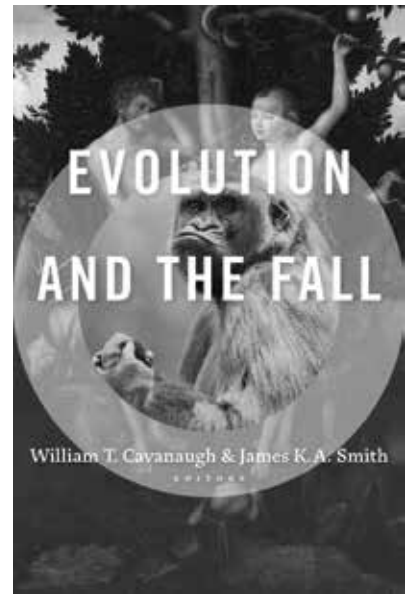
Presenting this tension between evolution and biblical creation as a Chalcedon moment and not a church vs Galileo moment, when Galileo’s heliocentrism rocked the church in his day (p. xvi), the authors declare that

we need to marry evolution and the Bible equally. But this is disingenuous, because BioLogos has itself openly refused to affirm biblical inerrancy and even gone as far as to say that Jesus and Paul got it wrong when it comes to creation.<sup>1</sup>

Interestingly, the irony with this Chalcedonian analogy is missed by the authors: it was the Council of Chalcedon’s refusal to deviate from the plain reading of Scripture that led to the formulation of the doctrine of hypostatic union. In contrast, *Evolution and the Fall* proposes moving away from a straightforward reading of biblical texts to conform the Bible to evolution.

After the introductory chapter, which acknowledges the challenges theistic evolutionists face when explaining Original Sin, the rest of the book pivots around the next chapter—numbered as chapter 1. Chapter 1 reads like a secular evolution textbook, summarizing the current evolutionary consensus on hominin origins. The chapter concludes by asserting that evolutionary science shows that modern humans were not descendants of an Adam and Eve pair, but rather evolved out of a group of at least 10,000 individuals in sub-Saharan Africa.

The authors did not seem to be aware of, or at least chose not to mention to their readers, creationist literature that shows that human genetics fits nicely with what we would expect if we were to start with biblical history and an Adam and Eve pair. For example, Robert Carter, as far back as 2011, demonstrated that the “data fit(s) nicely into the straightforward biblical model, including a single starting couple a mere 6,000 years ago”.<sup>2</sup> More recent publications by Carter further drive home this point.<sup>3</sup>



This literary sleight of hand in chapter 1 is significant, because every subsequent chapter in this book simply assumes (wrongly) that genetics rejects a historical Adam and Eve. This wrong assumption consequently leads the authors to require abandoning the doctrine of Original Sin; claiming that Paul and Jesus got it wrong; allegorizing the creation account; or just modifying the traditional interpretation of the Bible—since it contradicts evolution.

A chapter-by-chapter analysis follows for clarification.

## Chapter 1: By Darrel Falk (human anthropology and genetics)

There are three parts to this chapter. First, Falk goes through evolutionary anthropology and argues for an evolutionary progression leading to the emergence of *H. sapiens*, ~195 ka. E.g. *H. naledi* (figure 2) is presented in this chapter as an example of this progression (p. 6). Falk writes, “At this writing, the specimens (i.e. *H. naledi*) remained undated” (p. 6).

Granting that Falk could have written this chapter before 2017, this does not change the fact that the book was already outdated at the time of publication. The new

dates for *H. naledi* contradict Falk's evolutionary expectations. Peter Line explains that *H. naledi* was first thought to be at least 1.8 Ma, existing before the first occurrence of *H. erectus*, but a phylogenetic study in 2016 dated it at 912 ka. By May 2017, it was redated at 236 ka to 414 ka. And, finally, a radiocarbon date of 33.0 ka to 35.5 ka was also obtained, but this was rejected altogether as it did not fit the evolutionary timescale.<sup>4</sup> The currently accepted date for *H. naledi* is 236–335 ka.

The evolutionary 'science' had already moved on before Falk's chapter was even published—three times! Similarly, he dates *H. sapiens* as first appearing around 200 ka, although since the middle of 2017, the evolutionary paradigm has already redated the oldest *H. sapiens* found at 300 ka, in Jebel Irhoud, Morocco—making *H. sapiens* contemporaneous to *naledi*, *erectus*, and Neandertals. So this book is already outdated by evolutionary standards! Yet this ever-changing evidence is supposed to be the firm 'scientific consensus' that Falk insists demands the reinterpretation of Genesis. Furthermore, Christopher Rupe and

John Sanford, in their newly published book *Contested Bones*, have now convincingly concluded that *H. naledi* is simply just a “degenerant human population that lived in isolation”.<sup>5</sup>

The second part focuses on genetics. Falk claims that the number of mutations present in humans cannot be traced back to a human ancestral pair. This ignores Robert Carter's research from as far back as 2011, which demonstrates that, contrary to the claims of BioLogos, the genetic data actually fits well with biblical teaching that all humans descended from a human pair.<sup>6</sup> Once again, Falk is found guilty of using outdated science at best, or, at worst, being ignorant of the published works on the subject.

Falk ends his chapter arguing that natural selection alone requires too much 'luck' to account for the evolution of man; thus, it makes more sense to view human evolution as an act of divine providence. Here again, we see Falk's inconsistency, where he is willing to invoke a miracle for the evolution of man—to account for 'luck', but is not willing to invoke a miracle for biblical creation when the Scripture is clear.

## Chapter 2: Celia Deane-Drummond (theology)

The last century has seen the gradual acceptance of evolution by Roman Catholic Popes. Thus, the author concludes, theologians today do not have to be afraid of science even if it changes all the time. After all, theology is also constantly being revised with each passing generation. According to Deane-Drummond, Roman Catholicism teaches that death did not enter the world through sin. Instead, original sin simply means that man “ought to possess divine grace but does not do so” (p. 32).

Niche Construction Theory (NCT) is the idea that changes made by a creature to its environment affect selection pressure; and selection pressure in turn affects the creature's very own evolution and that of those that share its environmental niche. In this sense, creatures become co-directors of their own evolution (pp. 33–34). Reinterpreting the Fall within the context of NCT, she interprets the Fall as “a spreading of destructive behaviour”, where those who fail to cooperate with others in community are labelled as sinners and punished accordingly. She rejects the “literal figures of Adam and Eve or a literal paradisiacal Eden before the Fall” (pp. 35–36).

She insists that the Apostle Paul is mistaken for thinking of Adam “as a single individual in whose sin all humanity in subsequent generation” participates (p. 46). Instead, the Fall is re-interpreted to represent the failure of the human race to achieve its potential: “... the ideal state should be viewed in community relationships, including multispecies relationship with other creatures, and that the Fall results in a distortion in those relationships” (p. 43). Original Sin, according to Deane-Drummond, is not required for the Christian faith (p. 44). Instead, original sin just means that we are born into an imperfect community where it is impossible not to be a sinner. Original



Figure 1. Artist's impression of the Council of Chalcedon, AD 451

sin has nothing to do with inherited guilt (p. 45).

### Chapter 3: James Smith (philosophy)

According to the Smith philosophy, the Fall offers “a theological account of human origins that doesn’t jeopardize the goodness of God or human responsibility” (pp. 49–50). Since he believes that the goodness of creation preserves the doctrine of the goodness of God (p. 53), he reasons that goodness necessarily existed prior to evil, and that creation was *ex nihilo* (pp. 52–53). However, he sees the traditional teaching of human descent from an original human couple as clearly contradicting evolution. To reconcile Scripture with evolution, Smith suggests that it is possible to recognize that humanity descended from a larger pool of individuals and yet still affirm that God has created man in his image.

Smith goes on to suggest that the Fall is not a literal historical event where Adam and Eve ‘fell’ into sin because of a decision they made. Such an understanding would certainly contradict evolution. But

it might be possible, he suggests, to reject the “punctiliar aspect of the traditional model” and yet retain a “temporal, historical” understanding of the Fall. That is, Smith is saying that we can reject that the Fall was a literal one-time event in one sense, and yet separately affirm its historicity within a theological framework as a kind of ‘episode-in-process’ (p. 63). This modification to the traditional interpretation is necessary “if we—for theological reasons—are going to take the science seriously” (p. 58).

As a reader, this comes across as eerily similar to the Barthian Neo-orthodox doctrine of the *Geschichte vs Historie* divide, where one can claim that an event happened in the theological sense, all the while denying it occurred as a real historical event. Notice how the Bible is always reinterpreted so as to fit evolution. Belief in evolution is never questioned.

### Chapter 4: J. Richard Middleton (Old Testament)

*H. sapiens* are asserted to have evolved 200,000 years ago from a population of 2,000 to 10,000 individuals (p. 67). This contradicts

the biblical account. Creationists, in particular, assume the “Bible intends to teach a true scientific account of cosmic origin—including a young earth and the discontinuity of species (particularly the discontinuity of humans from other primates)” (p. 668). Unfortunately, Richard Middleton promotes another straw man argument here when he wrongly claims that biblical creationists believe in the fixity of species—yet another example of the shoddy scholarship that pervades the entire book.

Middleton asserts that a straightforward reading of creation “clearly contradicts ... modern science” (p. 68). He claims that the doctrine of ‘Original Sin’ is not required for creedal orthodoxy even if, at a superficial level, the biblical origin of evil and the Fall seem to contradict evolutionary biology (p. 69). Rejecting Stephen Jay Gould’s Non-overlapping Magisteria (NOMA), where theological truth and scientific truths belong in different conceptual domains and thus do not contradict one another (p. 69), Middleton thinks that science should shape our theology (p. 70). Thus, Middleton uses the evolutionary history of *H. sapiens* as the interpretive framework for the Fall (p. 72).

### Chapter 5: Joel Green (New Testament)

Green wrongly asserts that the traditional view, where we are accountable for the actions of Adam, is a “historical and moral non-starter” (p. 99). Furthermore, he wrongly claims that biology tells us that it is absurd to believe in a single original couple that divided history into a pre-Fall and post-Fall era. Since Original Sin is never mentioned in the ecumenical creeds, Green asserts that an acceptance of this doctrine is not a requirement for orthodoxy (p. 99). He ignores that creeds were responses to particular heresies, e.g. the Nicene Creed refuted the Arian heresy.



**Figure 2.** *H. naledi* skull recreated by digital reconstruction of fossil fragments from different individuals at the fossil site

Green asserts that the whole church has never reached a consensus on Original Sin. Here, he fails to inform his readers that the Western church certainly followed Augustine (figure 3) and rejected Pelagius, and while not ecumenical in the sense of uniting the Eastern and Western church, the Council of Orange (529) clearly declared a rejection of Original Sin to be heresy. Continuing from this error, Green asserts that the Bible never teaches that sin is a physical inheritance. Physical inheritance of sin, according to Green, is a much later development by Christian theologians. Appealing to a liberal understanding of the early church and its tradition, he asserts that second temple literature never understands sin as an inherent human condition (pp. 114–115). Paul and James are said to have assumed sin’s heritability and its corporate dimensions through Adam, but only in the sense of sin’s influence and pattern.

James’ emphasis is that God is not the author of sin, while Paul’s emphasis was the pattern set for all humanity by Adam (p. 116). However, neither Paul nor James teaches that sin is passed down through procreation.

Since evolutionary biology has undermined the idea that sin was imputed to all humanity through Adam and Eve, Green rejects the ‘Fall’ as a real historical event and concludes that the biblical account of the Fall does not require belief in original sin (p. 144–146).

### Chapter 6: Aaron Riches (theology)

Aaron Riches tells us that the Catholic Church has always affirmed a historical Adam whose deed brought sin into this world. However, evolution teaches that the human race was derived from an ancestral population of around 10,000 individuals. Thus,

the creation account has been relegated to a mere myth. We’re told there was no original Adam, and thus actions purported to have been committed by him cannot be responsible for the negative experience of human history. To reconcile Genesis with evolution, we’re told we must interpret Genesis as a poetic and powerful allegory (p. 120); instead of looking at Adam and interpreting Christ through Adam, we should look at Christ to understand Adam, Adam is the type; Christ is the archetype.

Riches’s error should be obvious to any discerning Christian: Adam is never called the first Christ in Scripture. Instead, in 1 Corinthians 15, it is the other way around—Jesus Christ is called ‘the last Adam’, in contrast to the ‘first man, Adam’. In an attempt to avoid the clear historical teaching of the Creation Week, Riches resorts to turning theology on its head.

### Chapter 7: Brent Waters (ethics)

The author posits that the creation account represents the impulse to overcome human limitations through our own effort. He gives the example of humans’ attempt to overcome aging and death through the use of technology—something he calls ‘transhumanism’. Prosthetic limbs, organs, and artificial blood vessels, he says, are examples of this war against our mortality. He considers transhumanism a heretical mutation of Christian eschatology. Instead, he encourages Christians to recognize their own fallenness and their need for forgiveness and to forgive.

### Chapter 8: Norman Wirzba (theology and ecology)

Wirzba claims that original sin is the lack of awareness that God is all in all. The creation account is about the way things now are contrasted with the way they could be if the world were to participate fully in God’s rule. Creation lays out the responsibilities

**Table 1.** Explanation of how Middleton allegorizes the creation account as symbolic of man’s struggle

Symbol	Meaning
Adam	Archetype of humankind. Earth Creatures, just like animals (p. 73–74)
Eden	Ancient Near East sacred grove where dirt is transformed into God’s image (p. 74)
Image of God	At the end of hominid evolution, <i>H. sapiens</i> represents God in the world. (p. 75–76)
Garden	Manifestation of God’s presence through God-glorifying culture (p. 76–77)
Tree of Life	Wisdom (Proverbs 3:18) and earthly flourishing (p. 79)
Life and death	Life conformed to God’s wisdom (p. 79)
Genesis 3:15	Not Protoevangelium (p. 91), but a struggle with the snake, a symbol of human ethical choice (p. 86) and man’s struggle with idolatry (p. 91).
Genesis 6	Increasing sinfulness: the communal and systematic evil we are born into (p. 96)
Violence before the Fall	Not a problem in the beginning since it is only sin after a creature evolves the ability to understand the word ‘No!’ (p. 83)

of humans. Christ is the lens that helps us interpret creation and whether the world is flourishing or fallen, and the Fall is an account of struggle. Creation is not teaching us the science of origins. Rather, it tells us about God and his reconciliation of all creatures to Himself. Taken this way, creation gives voice to the mission of the church, theosis, sin, and the meaning of life. Lastly, fallenness is interpreted as a description of a creature's inability or refusal to find its fulfillment in God and divine love.

### **Chapter 9: William Cavanaugh (politics)**

Cavanaugh tells us that the rejection of 'the Fall' in Genesis has political rather than scientific roots. He gives an overview of important philosophers (especially Locke and Hobbes) and shows how their view shaped their politics. Historically, 'the Fall' served medieval politics by contrasting the difference between the world in its broken state and that of the biblical utopia. This emphasis on 'the Fall' waned away over time in early modern political theory and was replaced by a view that politics is a response to the fallenness in nature. Finally, he asserts that in the long run science will be increasingly divorced from theology and from the church, and it will be increasingly divorced from teleology, with 'the Fall' eventually being discarded as a quaint myth.

### **Chapter 10: Peter Harrison (history of science/religion)**

Harrison is a noted historian on the history of religion and science.<sup>7</sup> He writes that young-earth creationism is associated with an undesirable religious fundamentalism, right wing politics, bigotry, and backwardness. Even mainstream Christian denominations, we're told, take a dim view of scientific creationism. But tension between Christianity and science is not always bad. Harrison lists BioLogos

and several other institutions that have been foremost in promoting peaceful relations between science (i.e. evolution) and religion. The theory of evolution needs to be viewed apart from its specific mechanisms and implications.

In this chapter, Harrison attempts to lay out a proper 'Christian' approach so that, even in embracing evolution, we can say that in Christ "all things hold together". We are to read Scripture literally first, he says, but if there is a conflict about a proven truth of nature and an interpretation of Scripture, Scripture should be reinterpreted. If there is a conflict and the science cannot be proven, follow Scripture (actually, Augustine would have agreed that evolution falls far short of being proven science<sup>8</sup>). Lastly, he concludes that the words of Scripture were adapted to the capacities of its readers and that its primary concern is salvation, not science.

Bringing the book to a close, Harrison points out that it would be unrealistic to expect science and Christianity to always agree; and when they are incompatible, it does not necessarily mean that our theology must change. It could be that the science is wrong. He also concedes that evolution is wrong in its idea of common descent with modifications.

### **Conclusion**

Since the authors in this book recognize that the doctrine of Original Sin is problematic for evolution, and yet decide to abandon not evolution but the traditional view of original sin, one can only conclude that these individuals have fallen into the Pelagian heresy.<sup>9</sup> *Evolution and the Fall* is poorly written, filled with poor scholarship, and falls outside the boundaries of Christian Orthodoxy. The entire book revolves around the premise that humans evolved from a group of 10,000 individuals in Sub-Saharan Africa. The authors acknowledge that this is problematic

for the traditional understanding of Original Sin which requires all humans to be the offspring of Adam and Eve. Each essay in this book proceeds to either modify or reject Original Sin. *Evolution and the Fall* was funded by Biologos. This is significant because Dennis Venema, who recently stepped down as the Fellow of Biology at Biologos, published *Adam and the Genome*, prior to the release of *Evolution and the Fall*. *Adam and the Genome* provided the scientific basis for arguing that we could not have evolved from a human ancestral pair. *Evolution and the Fall* assumes this to be true and for this very reason, its authors modify or reject Original Sin. But Dennis Venema has now backtracked from his earlier assertion. Furthermore, at the recent ICC 2018, Dr John Sanford published a paper showing that contrary to what the authors of this book propose, the genetic diversity in human beings not only fits what we would expect if we came from a human couple, but it actually fits the biblical creation model better than the evolutionary model and 'old-earth' creation models.<sup>10</sup> Robert Carter followed up with another paper on Y-Chromosome Noah and mitochondrial Eve showing that we can not only trace our human genetic lineage back to Noah, but we can also trace the historical lineages of humans such that we can even identify the genetic lineage of the three sons of Noah that are now ancestral to all people groups today.<sup>11</sup> He now admits that genetics does not exclude the possibility that all humans descended from a human couple.<sup>12</sup> This undermines the central premise of *Evolution and Fall*. If all humans could have descended from an Adam and Eve couple, there is no need to reject or modify Original Sin. In other words, *Evolution and the Fall* serves no purpose. *Evolution and the Fall* is a classic example of what happens when we reject sound doctrine to fit the science, only to have the *science* change a year later.

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