



10TH
ANNIVERSARY
EDITION

THE
EVOLUTION
OF
ADAM

WHAT THE BIBLE DOES AND DOESN'T

SAY ABOUT HUMAN ORIGINS

PETER ENNS

10TH ANNIVERSARY EDITION

THE EVOLUTION OF ADAM

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ABOUT HUMAN ORIGINS

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Introduction

Why This Book?

Evolutionary theory has been around for generations, but in recent years two factors are bringing the issue back into the public eye. The first is the relentless, articulate, and popular attacks on Christianity by the New Atheists. Jerry Coyne, Richard Dawkins, Daniel Dennett, and others have aggressively promoted evolution and argued that evolution has destroyed the possibility of religious faith, especially a faith like Christianity, whose sacred writings contain the story of Adam, the first man created out of dust several thousand years ago. The second factor has been well-publicized advances in our understanding of evolution, particularly genetics. The Human Genome Project, completed in 2003, has shown beyond any reasonable scientific doubt that humans and primates share common ancestry.

Evolution has crept back into the popular consciousness and has become a pressing issue for many Christians because evolution is typically understood to challenge, if not simply undermine, the story of origins presented in the Bible.

My goal in this book is not to arrive at final solutions, and it is certainly not to cover the many vital, complex, interwoven

issues that evolution has brought to the theological table.¹ My goal, rather, is to focus solely on how the Bible fits into all of this—or perhaps to challenge some notions of how the Bible ought to adjudicate this topic.

The biblical authors tell a very different story of human origins than does science. For many Christians, the question that quickly surfaces is how to accept evolution and also value Scripture as God's Word. In other words, if evolution is true, what do I do with my Bible? Even limiting the focus this way is far more than any one book can adequately handle. My intention, therefore, is somewhat modest. I hope to clear away some misunderstandings and suggest different ways of thinking through some perennial problems concerning Scripture in order to put interested readers on a constructive path forward and thus hopefully encourage further substantive discussion.

Let me begin by explaining whom I see as my primary audience. I make two assumptions about my readers. The first is that they consider themselves Christian, of whatever tradition or stripe, and so respect Scripture and recognize that what it says must be accounted for somehow. A significant subset of this group is an evangelical readership, particularly in an American context.

Evangelical readers generally tend to live more in the tensions between their instinctual commitment to Scripture and the challenges to that commitment that arise in life in the modern world. Often those challenges come from the sciences. This type of burden does not seem to be as pressing either in mainline forms of Christianity or in fundamentalism, and in saying so, I mean no slight to either. I am simply addressing here the audience that will likely connect more immediately to the types of arguments laid out in this book and the *need* for engagement that I presume about my readers.

I would also suggest that the matter of evolution, particularly as it touches notions of biblical authority and a historical

Adam (the heart of the challenge of evolution), seems to be—at least in my experience—more of an American evangelical problem than a British evangelical problem. I therefore expect that not all self-identified evangelicals will recognize their own frame of mind in this book (although I still hope something might be gained from reading it).

My second assumption is that these same people who respect Scripture are also convinced that evolution will not simply go away but must be taken seriously. They may not all agree on how specifically life has evolved, but they accept that “evolution” is the proper word to describe the process.

My aim, therefore, is not to convince anyone that the Bible is important for Christian faith, nor is it to make people see that evolution is true. My aim is to speak to those who already feel that a synthesis between a biblically conversant Christian faith and evolution is a pressing concern. And my purpose here is certainly not to undermine the faith of those who see things differently even if the way forward might require a rethinking of familiar theological categories.

I also wish to state here—however briefly—my own precommitments as I engage this topic (fleshed out in a bit more detail in the afterword). I write as someone on the Christian journey of faith. I am driven by both spiritual and intellectual concerns to bring the ancient (and ever-moving) Christian tradition into conversation with modern pilgrims who must address issues that the authors of Scripture not only never addressed but never remotely imagined. In a true sense, every community of faith that has lived in different times and places than the authors and compilers of the Bible has faced the same challenge of bringing the scriptural past and their present settings into conversation. Such a conversation is at the heart of Christian theology, and I seek to rely on the presence and love of the Spirit of Christ (Rom. 8:9) as I play a small role in that conversation.

The nature and function of Scripture are clearly central to this discussion, and I have sketched some of my views on that topic in several books. I do not expect readers of this book to have read those, though one of them, *Inspiration and Incarnation*, written before the first edition of *The Evolution of Adam*, informs my approach to evolution, and so I should state briefly its thesis.²

A truly faithful Christian reading of sacred Scripture is one that recognizes Scripture as a product of the times in which it was written and/or the events took place—not merely so but unalterably so. In my aforementioned book I tried to advocate for this position by drawing on the analogy of the incarnation. As Jesus, the Word, is of divine origin as well as a thoroughly human figure of first-century Palestine, so is the Bible of ultimately divine origin yet also thoroughly a product of its time.

Stating the matter this way does not provide a solution for how the Bible should be interpreted in its particulars. Rather, it provides a general attitude for how readers today should approach the Bible: we should gladly accept and expect that the Bible will through and through bear the marks of its historical settings.

In *Inspiration and Incarnation*, I touch on three specific areas, all of which play some role in this book, but in particular the first and third do: (1) Our knowledge of the cultures that surrounded ancient Israel greatly affects how we now understand the Old Testament—not only here and there but also what the Old Testament as a whole is designed to do. (2) Because Scripture is a collection of discrete writings from widely diverse times and places and was written for diverse purposes, the significant theological diversity of Scripture we find should hardly be a surprise. (3) How the New Testament authors interpret the Old Testament reflects the Jewish thought world of the time and thus accounts for their creative engagement of the Old Testament. It also helps Christians today understand

how the New Testament authors brought together Israel's story and the gospel.

Further, this "human dimension" of Scripture is not an unfortunate state of affairs that must be tolerated, an unhappy condescension on God's part. Instead, the "incarnational" reality of Scripture is—as is the actual incarnation of Christ—a mark of God's great love for God's people, evidence of how low God is willing to stoop in order to commune with God's creation.

I make no ontological claim here. I am not suggesting that Scripture is an actual union of divine and human "substances" as is ascribed to Jesus of Nazareth. The incarnation is an *analogy*, a means of explaining one thing in terms of another. I only mean to make the point that we should expect of Scripture the same sort of embrace of the human that the Son willingly took on, even to the point of emptying himself of his divine prerogative and becoming our brother (Phil. 2:6–8). I also emphasize that the incarnation is the grand mystery of the Christian faith—essentially incomprehensible. This by no means diminishes its value as an analogy for Scripture, although I readily admit it means that using such an analogy is hardly the final word—and I have never intended it to be.

Following upon that, I firmly believe that understanding Scripture from the vantage point of those historical circumstances in which it was written or its events took place is a vital responsibility of Christian readers (and where trained biblical scholars can be of help). *I do not mean to suggest that historically oriented readings informed by modern critical scholarship are the only viable approaches.* The church has a grand history of contemplative readings of Scripture (*lectio divina*) or other similar methods that are aimed directly at communing with God in a deeply spiritual sense. The historical approach I take in this book is in no way a slight to such readings. Nor do I wish to say that academic readings of Scripture have greater

worth than how Christians in general read the Bible for spiritual nourishment.

Yet the topic before us in this book requires nothing less than an enthusiastic engagement of Scripture in context, for the question of evolution cannot be addressed any other way. Hence, I wish to be crystal clear at this point—respecting at the outset differences of opinion on this matter—that the issues I raise in this book and the conclusions (exploratory and tentative at some points) that I reach are an *outworking of my Christian convictions* of what it means to be a responsible reader of Scripture in my time and place. Scripture records a story with deep historical impulses,³ and thus we must engage Scripture on that level when the situation calls for it, as it does here.

Although there is certainly a core set of convictions that define historic Christian doctrine, I believe that our theological articulations are always works in progress. The truth value of any theological iteration cannot be judged simply by how well it conforms to convention. Certainly we must be careful not to veer toward either hardened traditionalism for its own sake or airy speculation for the sake of novelty. Both are wrong, but I take it as axiomatic that a healthy theology is one that shows a willingness—even an expectation—to revisit ways of thinking and to change them when need be. Although veterans of the science-faith discussion will quickly see there is little truly novel in what follows, I realize that at least some readers will be venturing into new territory.

Finally, the title of the book, *The Evolution of Adam*, reflects my contention that our thinking about Adam must change—or perhaps better, must continue to change. As will be clear from the chapters that follow, I am not arguing that Adam evolved. Rather, I am arguing that *our understanding of Adam has evolved* over the years and that it must now be adjusted in light of the preponderance of (1) scientific evidence supporting evolution and (2) literary evidence from the world of the

Bible that helps clarify the kind of literature the Bible is—that is, what it means to read it as it was meant to be read. Furthermore, all of this can be done in a way that respects and honors the authority of the Bible. Indeed, reflecting on the nature of Scripture like this is the very expression of honor and respect.

“Science and Faith” or “Evolution and Christianity”?

There are many thoughtful books out there that speak to the compatibility of natural science and Christian faith.⁴ But this phrasing is too general and therefore will be of little help in addressing the specific tensions between evolution and Christianity.

The biblical writers assumed that the earth is flat, that it was made by God in relatively recent history (about four thousand years before Jesus) just as it looks now, and that it is the fixed point in the cosmos over which the sun actually rises and sets. Most Christians don’t have a problem reconciling this biblical view with science. I say “most” because there are groups that do not seem to be convinced. There is in fact a Flat Earth Society,⁵ and one well-known group continues to advocate for a six-thousand-year-old earth where humans and dinosaurs coexisted.⁶ Others contend that the universe only looks old, that God created the cosmos with “apparent age.”⁷

In my opinion, these specific positions are problematic—scientifically and theologically—but I will leave it to others to make the case. As I said, the readers I have in mind here are already committed to keeping Scripture and natural science in conversation. These other views, rooted in a precommitment to read the Bible literally at virtually every point despite evidence to the contrary, avoid engaging science by reinterpreting it to conform to that conviction. To the contrary, it is clear that from a *scientific* point of view, the Bible does not always describe physical reality accurately; it simply speaks in an ancient idiom,

as one might expect ancient people to do. It is God's Word, but it has an ancient view of the natural world, not a modern one.

Evolution, however, is a game changer. The general science-and-faith rapprochement is not adequate because evolution uniquely strikes at central aspects of the Christian faith.⁸ Evolution tells us that human beings are not, as the Bible says, the product of a special creative act by God but are the end product of a process of trial-and-error adaptation and natural selection. This process began billions of years ago, with the simplest of one-cell life forms, and gave rise to the vast array of life on this planet—plants, reptiles, fish, mammals, and so forth—and humanity. Humans also happen to share a close common ancestry with primates. Some Christians reconcile their faith with evolution by saying that God in some sense initiated and guides this process, which is fine (and which I believe), but that is not the point here. The tensions that evolution creates with the Bible remain, and they are far more significant for Christian faith than whether the earth is at the center of the cosmos, how old it is, and whether it is round or flat.

If evolution is correct, one can no longer accept, in any true sense of the word “historical,” the instantaneous and special creation of humanity described in Genesis, specifically in 1:26–31 and 2:7, 22. To reconcile evolution and Christianity, some assert that there was a point in the evolutionary chain where God elevated two hominins (or a group of hominins) to the status of image-bearer of God (Gen. 1:26–27).⁹ According to this scheme, God's “image” is understood as the soul, God consciousness, reason, or another quality that makes us human. That way of thinking allows evolution and Genesis to coexist somewhat but eventually proves inadequate for me. One reason is that it does little to ease the tensions with the Bible, for this hybrid of modern and ancient accounts of human origins is hardly what the Bible depicts: two humans created specially by God. This hybrid view does not adhere to the Bible but rewrites it.

Also, although what “image of God” means in its fullest biblical witness may be open for discussion, in Genesis it does not refer to a soul or a psychological or spiritual quality that separates humans from animals. It refers to humanity’s role of ruling God’s creation as God’s representative. We see this played out in the ancient Near Eastern¹⁰ world, where kings were divine image-bearers, appointed representatives of God on earth. This concept is further reflected in kings placing statues of themselves (images) in distant parts of their kingdoms so they could remind their subjects of their “presence.” Further, idols were images of gods placed in ancient temples as a way of having a distant god present with the worshippers.

Genesis 1:26 clearly operates within the same thought world: “Let us make humankind in our image, according to our likeness; and *let them have dominion* over the fish, . . . birds, . . . cattle, . . . all the wild animals, . . . every creeping thing” (emphasis added). Humankind, created on day 6, is given authority to rule over what God had made on days 4 and 5. The image of God is not that spark in us that makes us human rather than animal. In Genesis it refers to humans representing God in the world, nothing less but certainly nothing more. This is not to dismiss the question of what makes us human and how humanity uniquely reflects God, especially given the challenge of evolution, but “image of God” is not the biblical way of addressing those ideas.

Attempts to reconcile Genesis and evolution invariably lead to making some adjustments in the biblical story, and these adjustments always move us away from a strictly literal/historical reading of Genesis toward something else—call it “symbolic” or “metaphorical.” Unless one simply rejects scientific evidence (as some continue to do), adjustments to the biblical story are always necessary. The only question is what sorts of adjustments best account for the data. Part of this book is aimed at thinking through the parameters for answering that question.

Yet Christians have a bigger problem than dealing with Genesis if they want to reconcile Christianity and evolution: Paul. Here we come to the heart of the matter, what I believe is the ultimate source of concern for Christians who are seeking a synthesis between the Bible and evolution.

After virtual silence in the Old Testament after Genesis 5:5, Adam makes a sudden and unprecedented appearance in two of Paul's Letters (Rom. 5; 1 Cor. 15).¹¹ There Paul draws an important analogy between Adam and Jesus. Just as the first Adam introduced *sin and death* to all humanity through his *disobedience* in the garden of Eden (eating the forbidden fruit), now Jesus, the second Adam (see 1 Cor. 15:47), introduces *life* through his *obedience* (death on the cross and resurrection). The first Adam is a "pattern" for the second (Rom. 5:14), and Paul's point looks straightforward enough:

Adam → disobedience → death

Jesus → obedience → life

For Paul's analogy to have any force, it seems that both Adam and Jesus must be actual historical figures. Not all Christian traditions will necessarily see it that way, but this is a commonly held assumption today and, in my opinion, the root reason why Christianity and evolution are in such tension for many. And it is certainly true that a historical Adam has been the dominant Christian view for two thousand years. We must add, however, that this view was more an assumption than a conclusion, as it was formed before the advent of evolutionary theory. To appeal to this older consensus as a way of keeping the challenge of evolution at bay is not a viable option for readers today. The same argument from consensus was used against Galileo's observation that the earth revolves around the sun, and that old consensus eventually (slowly) failed to persuade. We should be cautious not to repeat that mistake.

The problem is self-evident. Evolution demands that the special creation of the first Adam as described in the Bible is not literally historical; Paul, however, seems to require the opposite.¹² After all, what purpose does the actual obedience of the second Adam (Christ) have if there was no first Adam who disobeyed? So, as the argument often goes, if there was no first Adam, then there was no fall. If there was no fall, then there is no truly inescapable sinful condition and so no need for a Savior. If evolution is true, then Christianity is false. When the issue is framed this way, the discussion tends to move toward one of two extremes: Christians either choose Paul over Darwin or abandon their faith in favor of natural science.

As we can see, the issue is not whether science and religion can be reconciled in general. The issue before us is more pressing: Can evolution and a biblically rooted Christian faith coexist?

When the biblical authors presented their view that the earth does not move (Pss. 96:10; 104:5), they were only expressing their assumptions about the nature of the cosmos and were hardly touching on matters central to the faith. But with Genesis and Paul on the origin of humanity, we seem to be dealing with biblical teachings that are of far greater importance: they address questions of who we are and why we do what we do. It is easy to see how, for some, a clear choice has to be made: either evolution is right about human origins, or Paul and Genesis are right. That is the dilemma many face. Deep Christian commitments lead one to read Paul and Genesis with utmost seriousness, but scientific sensibilities do not allow one to dismiss evolution.

As I see it, four options are before us:

1. *Accept evolution and reject Christianity.* Plenty of people find themselves here, but their assumptions about how Genesis and Paul ought to be read may be

part of the problem. If one is convinced of evolution and also assumes that the Bible—since it is the Word of God—is required to give a scientifically and historically accurate account of human origins, this may be the only option. One of the purposes of this book is to offer a different path for learning what to expect from the Bible where it touches on creation.

2. *Accept Paul's view of Adam as binding and reject evolution.* This option means that the overwhelming evidence for evolution must be rejected. It shares with the first option the assumption that the Bible is prepared to yield accurate information about human origins, and so one must choose between the two.
3. *Reconcile evolution and Christianity by positing a first human pair (or group) at some point in the evolutionary process.* This option is seriously considered by respected thinkers who are trying to bring evolution and Christianity into meaningful conversation. I respect their efforts, but as I hinted above and hope to make clear in what follows, I do not think this is the best way to proceed. It seems to me that this approach is driven by a perceived theological need to preserve some sort of a first pair in order to preserve a *particular understanding* of Paul's theology. The irony is that in expending such effort to preserve biblical teaching, we are left with a first pair that is foreign to the biblical portrait—whether in Genesis or in Paul's Letters. As I see it, this is enough of a problem to warrant alternate solutions.

This third option also shares one shortcoming with the previous two: a failure to properly address Genesis and Paul's Letters as ancient literature. Once those ancient settings are adequately understood, there will be less of an urgency to align scientific models and biblical

literature (an urgency that is far less pronounced in the third option, to be sure). This brings us to the fourth option.

4. *Rethink Genesis and Paul*. The only way forward, as I see it, is to reevaluate what we have *the right to expect* from Genesis and Paul. This will help us think synthetically about how Christianity and evolution can be in dialogue. I am writing this book to present one way of pressing forward that synthesis for those interested in such an exercise.¹³

Overview

This book is divided into two parts, the first dealing with Genesis and the second with Paul. In part 1 we will look at when Genesis was written and why, which are two related questions. Convincing answers to those questions have been offered over the last several generations of biblical scholarship, and becoming familiar with them may help us look more productively at the evolution-Christianity discussion.

Specifically, two important developments in biblical scholarship in the nineteenth century have had significant and deserved influence on how we read Genesis today. One was the new field of biblical archaeology. The other was an innovative answer to long-standing problems concerning when the Pentateuch was written and by whom. These developments are not above criticism, to be sure, but they started conversations that have shed considerable light on *when and why Genesis was written*. Answers to those questions in broad outline have been accepted in some form by most biblical scholars, including some evangelicals. Listening in on that conversation helps disarm the alleged “conflict” between Genesis and evolution, for it shows us that Genesis is an ancient Israelite narrative written to answer pressing *ancient* Israelite questions.

To anticipate the point, modern scholarship understands the Old Testament as a whole, and Genesis and the Pentateuch in particular, to be Israel's statement of national self-definition in the wake of Babylonian captivity (586–539 BC). The Old Testament is not aimed at simply providing objective historical information, and certainly not scientific information that conforms to modern expectations. Genesis in particular shows us how Israel thought about itself amid its own troubled history and among the surrounding nations.

Having a good handle on what a portion of Scripture was written to do, especially the opening chapters of Genesis, re-orient the kinds of questions we might ask of Genesis when the topic turns to evolution. To be direct, the more we understand the kind of information Genesis is prepared to offer, the less likely it is that we will feel the need to reject Genesis in view of evolution, reject evolution in view of Genesis, or bring the two into uneasy “harmony.” Science and Scripture speak two different languages and accomplish quite different things. My goal in part 1 is to reflect on the “language” of Genesis.

But again, the central concern for many Christians is not so much Genesis but Paul's appeal to Adam in Romans 5 and 1 Corinthians 15. As mentioned above, for many Christians the analogy requires that both Adam and Jesus be historical figures. But understanding Paul's Adam is actually quite challenging, much more than a matter of accessing the “plain meaning” of a few verses in his letters.

Paul's understanding of Adam is presented against a broader backdrop—namely, Paul's religious and cultural context. Clarifying that context has been the ongoing work of scholars of the New Testament and Second Temple Judaism.¹⁴ This academic conversation is broad and deep, yet important dimensions of that conversation do not always filter down to where they are needed. I hope part 2 will help address this problem, especially

with respect to how Paul handles his Scriptures (the Old Testament) in general, and Adam specifically.

Paul's use of the Adam story, as we will see, serves a vital theological purpose in explaining to his ancient readers the significance for all humanity of *Christ's death and resurrection*. His use of the Adam story, however, cannot and should not be the determining factor in whether biblically faithful Christians can accept evolution as the scientific account of human origins—and the gospel does not hang in the balance.

In the concluding chapter I offer nine theses for how Adam can be understood today. Some of these theses summarize main points in the book, while others add further points for consideration.

At this moment in history, the state of scientific knowledge is driving Christians to rethink some important theological issues. One of those scientific challenges is evolution, which is here to stay and must be deliberately addressed from a posture of curiosity and expectation rather than of protection of theological boundaries.

It is always a difficult subject to suggest that something outside the Bible can significantly affect how the Bible is to be read. We will come back to this now and then throughout the course of the book. Let me say here that I understand the theological sensitivities surrounding such reluctance; what we “have always believed” seems to be at the mercy of the dictates of science. The matter cannot be expressed quite so simply, however, as we shall see.

Moreover, as much attention as we might give to preserving the past, it is equally important to give adequate thought to preparing the church for the future. I feel that if we do not engage Scripture with future believers in mind, we will unwittingly erect unnecessary and tragic obstacles to belief. Part of what drives this book is my concern to help prevent that regrettable and absolutely unnecessary scenario.

PART 1

GENESIS

AN ANCIENT STORY
OF ISRAELITE SELF-DEFINITION

1

Genesis and the Challenges of the Nineteenth Century

*Science, Biblical Criticism,
and Biblical Archaeology*

For Christians, the nineteenth century was rough. In the span of about twenty years, three independent, technical, and powerful forces converged to challenge the historical reliability of Genesis (not to mention other parts of the Old Testament): the natural sciences, biblical criticism, and archaeology. Separately each of these forces was a handful. Together they formed a relentless tidal wave that has had a lasting and powerful impact on how Genesis is read. The conflicts that ensued are the very stuff of the liberal-versus-conservative divide, particularly in the United States, that a century and a half later still generates considerable heat and precious little light.

Despite this relatively negative appraisal, familiarity with the legacy of the nineteenth century can help move the discussion

forward by clarifying the nature of the conflict that still exists for some today. In other words, moving forward requires first looking back.

One of the three forces that reared its head in the nineteenth century is *the natural sciences*. Since the eighteenth century, geology had made its presence known, showing by means of the fossil record that the earth is millions upon millions of years old—far older than most people had taken for granted, far older than a literal interpretation of the Bible allows. In the nineteenth century, Darwin brought to bear his theory of human origins that directly challenged the biblical view of the origin of life. Understandably, evolution and the account in Genesis were deemed incompatible on the scientific level.

Almost everyone knows something about the basic impact of evolution;¹ a theory claiming that humans and primates are cousins was bound to get its fair share of press. But the second and third forces, generally lesser known, are equally important for understanding the major shift in reading Genesis.

The second force is developments in biblical studies (modern biblical scholarship), often called *biblical criticism*. Biblical criticism is sometimes caricatured as condescending toward the Bible, or even atheistic. It is not uncommon to hear the objection that biblical criticism does little more than undermine the Bible and poison the faith of unsuspecting believers. But such a view hardly does justice to the impact it has had on our understanding of the Bible in its ancient contexts.

Biblical criticism is better understood as the academic study of the Bible that centers on a historical investigation into the date and authorship of biblical books. In this sense, evangelical biblical scholars today are engaged in biblical criticism and in many cases find themselves in some level of agreement with nonevangelical counterparts—although this observation hardly does justice to the long history of unease. At any rate, in the early stages of biblical criticism, the focus of attention was on

the date and authorship of Genesis; it is even fair to say that the modern academic study of the Old Testament began as a series of questions about who wrote Genesis, questions that extended to the Pentateuch as a whole.²

Biblical criticism is a far less exciting topic than evolution: no media coverage or mass controversy—just a lot of Hebrew and some other ancient languages. But the impact has been significant.

Concerning the Pentateuch, the traditional view was that one man, Moses, living in the middle of the second millennium BC, was solely (more or less) responsible for writing all five books. A few premodern readers had already begun to question the traditional view, however gently, and we will look at two examples below. But it is not until the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries that we begin to see some earlier questions bubble over into detailed arguments for why the Pentateuch could not have been written by one man at one time in the second millennium BC.

The issue came to a boiling point in the work of the nineteenth-century German Old Testament scholar Julius Wellhausen (1844–1918), whom we will meet more properly in the next chapter. He proposed a theory about the authorship of the Pentateuch that, although both strongly contested and widely accepted, has had an unparalleled effect on how the Pentateuch is viewed—and Old Testament scholarship has not been the same since.

The bottom line is that, for Wellhausen and many other biblical scholars before and since, the Pentateuch *as we know it* (an important qualification) was not completed until the postexilic period (after the Israelites were allowed to return to their homeland from Babylon beginning in 539 BC). There were certainly long-standing written documents and oral traditions that the postexilic Israelites drew on, which biblical scholars continue to discuss vigorously, but the Pentateuch as we know it was formed as a response to the Babylonian exile. The specifics

of Wellhausen’s work no longer dominate the academic landscape, but the postexilic setting for the Pentateuch remains the dominant view among biblical scholars today.

This is extremely significant. Knowing something of when the Pentateuch came to be, even generally, affects our understanding of why it was produced in the first place—which is the entire reason why we are dipping our toes into this otherwise esoteric pool of Old Testament studies.

Specifically, the final form of the creation story in Genesis 1 reflects the concerns of the postexilic Israelites who had experienced God’s rejection in Babylon. The Genesis creation narrative we have in our Bibles today, although surely rooted in much older material, was shaped as a theological response to Israel’s national crisis of exile. These stories were not written to speak of “origins” as we might think of them today (in a natural-science sense). They were written to say something of God and of Israel’s place in the world as God’s chosen people.

Complementing the work of biblical criticism was a third force: the growing field of the *archaeology* of ancient Israel and the surrounding area, commonly referred to as “biblical archaeology.” This field posed serious challenges of its own, in some respects more serious than the work of Wellhausen and other biblical critics. Wellhausen worked wholly with “internal data,” the Bible itself. But archaeology introduced “external data”: texts and artifacts from the ancient Near Eastern world, Israel’s neighbors and predecessors. Its findings have helped us understand more deeply the intellectual world in which the Bible was written. Israel now had a context, which meant that scholars could compare and contrast Israel’s religious beliefs with those of the surrounding nations.

The most famous of these findings are Babylonian texts that look very similar to Genesis 1 and the flood story (Gen. 6–9), both of which we will explore in chapter 3. These texts do not directly affect the question of Adam, which is the central issue

for the evolution-Christianity dialogue. Other texts that later came to light are more immediately relevant for Adam, but we will only glimpse them, leaving our discussion of Adam mainly for part 2. Here in part 1 we will focus on the profound and lasting impact these other nineteenth-century discoveries had—and continue to have—on our understanding of the nature of the opening chapters of Genesis (chaps. 1–11). Focusing there is not beside the point, however. A proper understanding of the Adam story is directly affected by how we understand Israel’s primordial stories as a whole in light of the nineteenth-century developments in biblical scholarship.

These Babylonian texts helped scholars to see how Genesis functioned for Israel, and in this sense they complemented the internal analysis of Wellhausen and other biblical critics. Placing Genesis in its ancient Near Eastern setting strongly suggests that it was written as a self-defining document, as a means of declaring the distinctiveness of Israel’s own beliefs from those of the surrounding nations. In other words, Genesis is an argument, a polemic, declaring how Israel’s God is different from all the other gods, and therefore how Israel is different from all the other nations.

This is all well and good, but here is the problem: the ancient Israelites, in making this polemical case, freely adapted the themes of the much-older stories of the nations around them. It quickly became evident that the rather bizarre Babylonian stories were disturbingly (if only partly) similar to the creation and flood stories of Genesis, which raised the obvious question of the historical value of Genesis 1–11 as a whole. If these chapters look so much like Mesopotamian myth, how can they still be God’s revealed Word? The stories of the early chapters of Genesis may have seemed fanciful to modern readers beforehand—with a talking serpent and trees with magical fruit. But there was now external, corroborating evidence that Genesis and pagan mythologies were connected somehow, at least indirectly.

It is not hard to understand why traditionalists reacted vigorously and unyieldingly against these two developments in biblical scholarship. For some the truth of the gospel itself was under attack—casting doubt on the historical value of Genesis was only a few steps removed from casting doubt on anything the Bible says, including Jesus and the resurrection. After all, if God is the author of all of Scripture, undermining one part undermines the whole.

Given the assumption that inspiration and historical accuracy are inseparable, conservatives sensed that the trapdoor to the slippery slide to unbelief was cracking open, and it needed to be slammed shut quickly. That is why there was such resistance to biblical criticism of the Pentateuch and to accepting the implications of the ancient Near Eastern archaeological evidence. And with all that on the table, as if conservatives did not have enough to worry about from biblical scholars, throw Darwin into the mix. Now we have a scientific theory of origins that converged with biblical criticism and biblical archaeology to produce powerfully coherent and persuasive explanations for what Genesis is and how it should be understood. The tensions that resulted were considerable and, from a historical point of view, wholly understandable.

I do not mean to imply that Genesis got a free pass before the nineteenth century. As I mentioned above, European scholars (such as the philosopher Benedict Spinoza, 1632–77) began challenging traditional views of Genesis (and other portions of the Bible) as early as the seventeenth century, and geology had been a force to be reckoned with since the eighteenth century. But the nineteenth century was a profoundly influential time. It did away with any hope for pasting new ideas piecemeal onto old views. Now the one-two-three punch of biblical criticism, biblical archaeology, and science demanded a fresh synthesis of new and old.

That synthesis proved to be a difficult step for many to take, for it required rethinking some long-held beliefs about the Bible, particularly regarding its historical value and whether the books were written by eyewitnesses or were written long after the events they describe. Instead of synthesis, there was deep conflict, and clear battle lines were quickly drawn. Generations of traditionally minded biblical scholars dedicated their entire careers to defending the Bible from these threats, and separatist Bible colleges and seminaries began dotting the landscape with greater density. Contemporary evangelicalism and fundamentalism arose out of this conflict; although some of the emotion has subsided, the debris from early bombshells still clutters much of the evangelical and fundamentalist landscape, and neutrality is rare. Those who are part of an American mainline denomination or were reared in evangelical or fundamentalist denominations likely owe their ecclesiastical identity to this unfolding of events; they are living among these old tensions.

The question of Genesis was not definitively settled during the nineteenth century—far from it, as anyone familiar with Old Testament studies can attest. Important trajectories were set, but in the same way that evolutionary theory has not stood still since Darwin, Old Testament scholarship has not stood still since Wellhausen. Not every theory posed during that generative era has remained convincing, and some things have been rejected. Biblical scholarship has moved beyond some initially unguarded conclusions, and rightly so. To be clear, I am not advocating a return to the glory days of the nineteenth century any more than contemporary evolutionists are advocating a return to Darwin.

Still, the nineteenth century was unquestionably a pivotal moment in recent intellectual history, with huge implications for a good many things, including how we read Genesis, and thus also for the evolution discussion. These developments are foundational to the academic study of Scripture, but they are

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not always understood where they most need to be: in on-the-ground discussions concerning evolution and Christianity. In the remaining chapters of part 1, we will look at these academic developments a bit more closely for what they have to say about when Genesis was written and why, and what difference that makes for how we think about Genesis and evolution.