Adam

Anthony Rees (United Theological College , CSU School of Theology)

Adam, his partner Eve, and their antagonist the serpent are, in terms of the bible, well known figures. Indeed, aside from David and his giant from Gath, Goliath, it is hard to think of any figures who might be more well known. The cinema has given Moses a cultural capital he might have otherwise lacked, but Adam and Eve have not needed such popular means to create and maintain their place in the human imagination. Their story has etched itself into social consciousness, and artists, advertisers and so on find in them a powerful image, instantly recognized and understood.

It would be easy to assume that given the ubiquity of Adam and Eve in cultural representation, that they must be major figures in the biblical tradition. It would be a simple thing to assume that the memory of Adam, the first human, works its way through the biblical record, an object of the memory, a symbolic warning, or something similar. But nothing could be more untrue. Indeed, Adam disappears just as suddenly as he appears, and aside from a few stylized genealogies, seems to leave no trace. It is not until the inter-testamental period, and culminating in the work of the first-century apostle, Paul, that Adam reappears as a way of framing human history between Adam and Jesus. We will return to this, and explore possible reasons for this later. What I would like to do as a beginning, is to examine the use of the word Adam in both creation accounts in Genesis, then to think about the thematic relationship between Adam and Israel as a way of thinking through the intention of the Eden story, then we will turn to Paul's use of Adam in his soteriological scheme, and the subsequent influence of Paul's reading in Christian tradition.

The Word "adam"

As I have noted, the book of Genesis commences with two creation accounts. The first, thought to be later than the first, is characterized by a poetic tone and a liturgical rhythm which works through the famous seven days of creation. On the sixth day, following the creation of the sky, oceans, lights, plants, and animals of sea and sky, God brings forth from the earth living creatures of every kind, and finally, God declares the creation of *adam* in "our" (that is, divine) image. This *adam* is given dominion over the rest of the created order, and is differentiated from the other creatures by the virtue of being created in the divine likeness: God created *adam* in God's image: male and female God created them. What this likeness actually is, is a question which has animated scholars across the centuries, but really stands outside my investigation here. I simply note is as a possible point of discussion later.

This verse makes it clear that *adam* is not imagined in the first creation account as an individual person. That is, *adam* is not the name of a man, nor a woman, but instead is a collective singular noun which means 'humanity' or what older translations rendered as 'mankind.' In Genesis 1, *adam* is a gender differentiated creation (male and female) without hint of hierarchy. There is no first and second sex here, just *adam*: male and female, with a commission to exercise dominion of the rest of the created order, and to multiply and to fill the earth with the human experiment. When God says "I have given you…" the object of that statement is a plural, the you being *adam:* male and female.

In Genesis 1, the use of *Adam*, then, does not have in view a character called Adam. Adam is not being used as a proper name like Mustafa, Michael or Melania, but instead is a simple noun meaning humanity. And notice that in most modern translations, this is how the word is treated. Across the overwhelming majority of uses in the Old Testament, this is the way the word is used. Some famous examples might help illustrate this: No man (Adam) can see the Lord and live (Exod. 33:20); man (*adam*) looks on outward appearance, but God looks on the heart (1 Sam. 16:7). It would be nonsensical to think of these uses as referring to a particular individual. Clearly, this is just a general, abstract use of the word, demonstrating a more universal understanding rather than having a specific individual in mind. Likewise, the common expression '*ben Adam'*, most famously present in the book of Ezekiel, is most commonly translated son of man, mortal, human one, or something similar. These are not references to a primordial figure called Adam, and this might be useful to us as we turn our attention to the garden of Eden.

The Adam and Eve of cultural knowledge are the innocent couple who exist in the idyllic surrounds of God's own garden. This is the story which we learn early on in our Sunday School careers, and we are fascinated by unashamed nudity (though this is always suitably censored by the publishers of the material), the presence of all the dangerous animals which appear to pose no risk to the first couple, and the talking snake which dupes them into eating from the one tree which is forbidden.

As we have seen, in Gen 1, *adam* is used as a generic noun - a representative word. In the Eden story, we imagine things very differently. This is not a lofty liturgical work giving an account of particular classes of the created order. It is not loaded with the theological claim that the world is spoken into existence. Instead, it tells us a story of a god of action – engaging in the work of creation, molding and shaping things into being, rather than just speaking them into existence. The effect of this is to characterize god as far more human-like than the god imagined in Gen 1, a feature which is amplified by the personal relationship that emerges between God and the humans who live in the garden. Famously, God spends the evening working through the garden, enjoying the cooling breeze, and presumably, engaging with the humans.

And here, I turn to the human character of our imagination, Adam, who really emerges in Gen. 2 and 3. The translation of the KJV which I have provided bears this out. Adam is used as a proper name in that translation, and the effect of a character having a name is to create a person in our mind. And there are good reasons for this. As we have seen, the *adam* of Gen 1 was not a singular figure, but rather, the word seemed to represent a broader group: male and female. But in Gen 2 and 3, the scope is different. Whoever Adam is, he is a man, and on his own. This

is clarified by God's awareness of the loneliness of Adam, and the subsequent fashioning of a partner for him, who is in the first instance named woman, and later, Eve. [Note: the NIV translates Adam as 'the man' throughout this story, but the title the editors give to it is Adam and Eve] The things which happen to Adam and Eve in the garden need not be rehearsed here, though they will certainly form a part of discussions, in so far as the curses which are meted out in chapter 3 give shape to the tradition, but I want to raise a couple of other points first.

The first relates to translation. Most commonly, the form used in Hebrew word is not simply adam, but ha'adam, which is to say, "the adam", "the human", "the man", the particle transliterated as "ha" being the definite article. Even in this story, the narrator is refraining from giving the human creature a name. This is not Adam, but ha'adam, the human. When Eve is created, the terminology shifts momentarily. No longer is the male figure Adam, but instead another word is used: *Ish*, also meaning man. When the female is presented to him, the name he gives her is *issha*, woman or wife, and clearly derived from this word *Ish*.

The second relates to the status of the humans in the created world. There is an obvious link between the words *adam* and *adamah* (dirt/ground etc.) The closeness of the human to the stuff of earth is more than just biological: there is a clear play by the narrator here to show that the human is not above, but instead inextricably linked to the rest of the created order. [This trope of the human created from dust is well known through Ancient West Asia, demonstrated in the stories of Atrahasis and Enuma Elish, as well as in Egyptian mythology.] Despite this, the human does have a differentiated role within the created order. In this instance it is not related to the divine image, but instead comes through the report that the human is animated by the divine breath – an indicator of the lordship of humanity in relation to the created order. This lordship is most clearly evident in the process of naming the rest of the animals, which indicates a power over. The domestication of the animals, which we have already noted, becomes a major symbol in apocalyptic literature, where things of the end are imagined as they were at the beginning, so we have Isaiah's famous image of the lion and lamb together, the child playing with snakes, and so on.

The uniqueness of humanity is also highlighted by the identification of gender, across both creation accounts. As we have seen, male and female god created them in Gen 1, and in the second creation story we have the crisis created by male loneliness, and the subsequent creation of female. But no other creature is marked in this fashion.

The final point returns to the matter of terminology and translation. I don't mean to labor this point, but I hope it is reasonably clear that the romantic image of a character called Adam and a character called Eve are seriously called into question by the nature of language as it is presented to us in the Hebrew text. It might be right to refer to Adam as the first person, but that should only be understood in an abstract sense. That is, Adam is a symbolic, representative figure rather than a specific, known individual. There are segments of Christianity who would take some offense at what I am suggesting, yet none of it is in any way wildly controversial. As I have said repeatedly, Adam is not a proper name, and is only used in that way in genealogies (For example, Gen 5) which we know to be highly crafted. It is impossible to imagine that a person living in the biblical period understood the Adam of Genesis 2 as a real person. They understood that Adam was a representative figure.

Adam and Israel

Want to come now to the relationship between Adam and Israel, which brings us to the matter of historical details surrounding the composition of the Adam story and its relationship to the rest of the canon. I have no interest in trawling through matters of source criticism here, except to say that traditionally, the Adam and Eve story has been understood as being earlier in provenance than the Priestly account of creation – that of Genesis 1. By and large, I suspect that is true. However, I do think that we can detect a Priestly influence in the Eden story, in so far as the terminology used to describe the human relationship with the rest of the created order mirrors the terminology used to describe the relationship between the priesthood and the people. Given that the final stages of redaction of the scriptures were undertaken by a priestly class, this is not such a surprise. What I want to do is read the divine warnings against this context.

Adam is commanded to not eat from the tree, lest he die. That is, he is offered a choice between life and death, an option not offered to the other creatures. What would have happened if a donkey ate from those trees? The nature of death is of course, much debated. Some argue that this is the point at which death enters the world, and that Adam had been created immortal, though this is hardly a reasonable reading of the text, nor of other attitudes towards the human experience found within the canon. Others suggest that this is a spiritual death, anachronistically importing a concept completely foreign to an ancient person. Instead, the choice of life and death is analogous to the choice offered to Israel by the person of Moses in the book of Deuteronomy: I have set before you life and death: choose life. This is not a choice between existence and non-existence. It is not about mortality of immortality. Rather, it is about choosing a manner of life which is positive rather than negative.

This similarity is telling, because as I have mentioned previously, Adam in unknown as a person throughout the Old Testament. He is not remembered anywhere. The same is also true of Moses. Moses appears out of nowhere, becomes the towering figure of biblical tradition, and then disappears just as quickly, remembered only in speeches of his immediate successor. Then, in the period when the Old Testament is put together, hundreds of years after their supposed lives, Moses and Adam reappear (or, perhaps, they just appear). There is a historically significant reason for my argument here, and that is that the post-exilic period – the time when the canon is widely held to be put together – the newly constituted people of Yehud are piecing together a story that will hold them. The priestly class, the leaders of the community, are responsible for this story, and it should be no surprise to us that their fingerprints are seen right through this work. And so the authoritative story that binds Israel to their god – that of Moses and the covenant, is buttressed by a story which reaches even further back into history, connecting God not only to Israel, but to the whole of the creation: one god, all people. And so I think there is reason to see that the Adam story is crafted as a mirror of the Israel story: one of creation, choice, failure, and ultimately, grace.

Adam Remembered

As I have suggested, Adam is hardly a ubiquitous biblical figure, and reading from the beginning of the bible, one is struck by the paucity of references to this figure. I have suggested an explanation for this on historical grounds, with the idea that the Adam story comes quite late in the development of the Old Testament materials, and that the figure of Adam, theologically framed as it is within the trajectory of Israel's story, serves a particular function at a particular time.

The appearance of that story has a generative effect. The period that comes between the Old and New Testament (that is from the fifth century or so through to the first of the common era) witnessed a flourishing of this story as people of the time speculated about all manner of things in regard to this story of beginnings. The New Testament writings bear witness to this cultural phenomenon, as the writers make appeal to the story to buttress particular claims about the roles of men and women, marriage, and so on. This tradition continues apace today, with various claims about the first couple being used to support subordination of women in all social spaces, traditional marriage practices and so on.

However, the point I want to highlight here regards the use of Adam by the Apostle Paul in his soteriology. For Paul, Adam stands as the archetype, and Jesus comes as the 'anti-type'. That is, through Adam, sin, death and alienation enter the world, and world groans under the weight of the effect. But in Christ, this damage is overcome. That is, the ills of the first man are overcome and made right by the perfection of the last man. Death for all becomes life for all. Adam, then, is again being used in a symbolic fashion – a type against which Christ stands as anti-type. This is an exercise in typological exegesis, not literal. Paul shows no interest in the details of the story of Adam, only in adapting various aspects of it to elucidate his theological construction.

In the following centuries, the rhetoric shifted gears. Tertullian famously regards Eve as the gateway to the devil, and the destroyer of the divine image in humanity. And this, I think, is the way that the text continues to operate: it creates the figure of the female temptress and reinforces male-female binaries. Paul's position, that sin comes into the world through Adam, is quickly forgotten, and instead of being used to service a theology of salvation, the story demonstrates its capacity to serve a theology of gender hierarchy.

There is nothing to be gained, in my opinion, in searching for a historical Adam, for a historical Eve, a talking snake, or a primeval garden. At all points, the bible is a profoundly theological work, with at best, a tangential interest in matters of history as we might understand it. Recourse to Adam in theological argument, then, seems to me to be a perfectly rational activity and an appropriate use of the scriptures. However, the theological claims made by the text, and the claims that we make regarding the text, need to be set against the context in which they are made. All of this may sound straight forward, even elementary. However, such contextual positioning seems largely absent from any type of discussion that marginalizes women on the basis of Eve's actions in the garden (which Paul overlooks, and lays the blame on Adam, as we have seen), or comments such as "it's Adam and Eve, not Adam and Steve"…a particular favorite of those who stand against same-sex marriage. Sadly, it has been these types of voices that have been sounded loudest in the public use of the bible. I hope that events like this may

be a step forward in the responsible public reading of scripture, both mine and those of my friends.