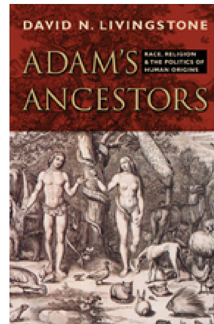
## *Adam's Ancestors: Race, Religion, and the Politics of Human Origins*, by David N. Livingstone

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Some years ago, I discovered that our local university library had a copy of the first edition of Isaac de la Peyrère's book *Praeadamitae* or *Men Before Adam*. When it was published in 1655, this book became something of a *cause célèbre*. A copy was burned by the public hangman in Paris and the author escaped a similar fate only by a hasty recantation. The fact that the book found its way to our library, in a country to whose recent "discovery" (from a European perspective) it alludes, is testimony to its diffusion and influence.

La Peyrère's work is the starting point of David Livingstone's excellent discussion of this once scandalous idea: the idea that there existed human beings before the biblical figure of Adam. The story reaches from the mid-seventeenth century to the early twenty-first. There is much in this history that has remained unchanged. Livingstone shows that modern white supremacists and neo-Nazis recycle ideas about human origins that were common in the late nineteenth century, while modern theologians use the early modern idea of "men before Adam" to reconcile orthodox Christian faith with Darwinian evolutionary theory. But the pre-adamite theme has also evolved, and it is this combination of continuity and change that forms the major theme of Livingstone's work.

What strikes the reader is the diversity of the purposes which the pre-adamite idea has been made to serve. La Peyrère's aim was, broadly speaking, humanitarian. While he considered the biblical Adam and Eve to be the ancestors of only the Jewish people, he did not deny the full humanity of those who came before. But in more recent times, the pre-adamite idea has been enlisted in support of the crudest forms of racism, including anti-Semitism, with Jews being excluded from Adamic descent. Despite La Peyrère's protestations—he claimed to be saving biblical authority—his work came to be associated with infidelity and atheism. But his idea is now used by conservative Christian apologists. After all, only those who still believe that there was a historical figure of Adam are likely to be concerned about precisely whose ancestor he was.

Livingstone also highlights the hermeneutical implications of these varying treatments of the pre-adamite idea. He reminds us—although readers of *Relegere* will need no reminder—of the degree to which biblical interpretation is "shaped by the cultural conditions and political stance of commentators" (184). Using a memorable phrase, he speaks of "geographies of reading" (222). "The seventeenth-century world of the pro-Semitic La Peyrère," for example, "with its millennial hopes for the coming of a Jewish Messiah, represented a markedly different space from that of the American South in the immediate ante- and postbellum years" (222). Even within the one period of history, the pre-adamite idea could be interpreted in quite contradictory ways. It could, for example, be appealed to by *both* defenders *and* opponents of African slavery.

If the book has a weakness (it is not easy to find one), it is that it does not distinguish as clearly as it could the various positions it discusses. There are, in fact, a number of positions in this debate, which should not be confused.

First, we need to distinguish between pre-adamism and polygenism, the latter being the belief that human beings have not one, but a variety of origins. Not all pre-adamites were polygenists. As Livingstone shows, while the two were often associated, the pre-adamite story could be given a monogenist reading. It is true that La Peyrère's view was polygenist: he held that human beings had arisen from a diversity of creative acts. But as late as 1972, the conservative evangelical John Stott could affirm that "several forms of pre-Adamic 'hominid' may have existed for thousands of years" before the appearance of Adam and Eve (213). Stott's view is at least compatible with the idea that all these "hominids" had a common evolutionary origin. In other words, Adam and Eve could be the ancestors of only one group of present-day people, while forming part of the one human family tree, stretching back to a still more distant progenitor.

Secondly, we need to distinguish between Darwinism and monogenism. While Charles Darwin himself was a monogenist—holding that all human beings have a common origin—his theory of evolution by natural selection is also capable of a polygenist interpretation. Remarkably enough, Darwin's monogenism has become the conventional wisdom of our age. Geneticists claim that one can, by way of mitochondrial DNA, trace all living human beings back to a single matrilineal ancestor, who is referred to (appropriately enough) as "Eve." But as Livingstone writes, "Darwin's own writings could be read through polygenetic spectacles" (140). One could accept his theory of evolution by natural selection, while holding that present-day human beings have a diversity of origins. One could even be a Darwinian monogenist, while holding that existing human beings belong to different species; this seems to have been the position of Darwin's great defender, T. H. Huxley (188).

Thirdly, we need to recognize that there are two forms of pre-adamism, distinguished by whether or not they believe that pre-adamic peoples continue to exist. One group denies this, holding that while there were human beings (or beings very similar to human beings) before Adam, they exist no longer. A popular view has been that they were destroyed at the time of the biblical flood, along with (on one reading) those adamites who had illegitimately mixed with them (206). But a second group holds that peoples alive today are surviving descendants of pre-adamite groups. It is among this second group that the pre-adamite idea has come to have racist implications. Europeans, or (more broadly) Caucasian peoples are generally assumed to be descendants of Adam, while Africans and perhaps Asians are descendants of

pre-adamic peoples, who are assumed to be of lesser status. At the extreme end of this spectrum are those racist groups who have denied humanity to African peoples altogether. As one Nashville clergyman wrote in 1867, "the negro entered the ark *only as a beast*" (193).

Finally, despite the frequent association of pre-adamic polygenism with racism, we need to distinguish between monogenism and abolitionism: the movement to emancipate African slaves. This distinction is particularly important in light of recent claims made by two of Darwin's biographers. In *Darwin's Sacred Cause* (2009), Adrian Desmond and James Moore have argued that it was a hatred of slavery that motivated Darwin's monogenetic vision of human evolutionary origins. A casual reader of their book might be left with the impression that in the slavery debate, monogenists were always on the side of the angels. It is to Livingstone's credit that he refuses so simple an equation, noting that there were polygenists who opposed slavery and monogenists who supported it. A belief in common human origins could easily go hand-in-hand with a belief that the European race was superior to others or that the most appropriate relation of African to European was that of slave to master. In any case, supporters of slavery already felt that they had Scripture on their side: "a plain, unadorned reading of the Bible seemed to sanction the slave system, and there was no need to turn to secular science or unorthodox readings of Genesis to support it" (183).

In making these distinctions, however, I am not going beyond the information that Livingstone himself provides. I am merely highlighting what is implicit in his work, which is an invaluable overview of a fascinating chapter in the history of human thought.

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