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Special Essay: Testing the Homiletical Buoyancy of James K. A. Smith's "Narrative Arc" Approach to the Fall

Abstract

Pastors have long been under-resourced when it comes to deciphering how to craft intelligible, persuasive, and preachable sermons on some newly "settled" Christian academic positions, particularly those surrounding the doctrine of the fall in light of contemporary science. The first three chapters of Genesis, along with New Testament allusions to the edenic creation of humanity, need not inspire near the level of fear and trepidation that ministers have long associated with the public proclamation of human origins. We will examine a new resource in this discussion by James K. A. Smith, make a modification, and then test it in the context of the public proclamation of a popular historical Adam passage. We will find in this new resource a model for understanding the Fall that remains faithful to the creedal tradition of the Church, engages current scientific theories of human origins, and, with a few tweaks and further discussion, can help pastors preach better sermons.

Keywords: The Fall, James K. A. Smith, Narrative Arc, homiletics, doctrine

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Introduction

We live in a scientific age that is testing the pliability of once unquestioned Christian theological tenets and this phenomenon is by no means limited to discussions surrounding human origins. Regrettably though, as contemporary scientific investigations continue to lead the collective social conscience towards embracing a gradual rather than static and instantaneous view of human genesis, evangelical pastors seem to be spending more time bailing water out of the sinking boat than inviting people aboard.

A quiet revolution appears to be taking place in Christian academic circles. More and more biblical scholars and theologians have been willing to hold their breath for a minute and dive into uncharted waters to examine potential holes in the hull of historical Christian doctrine, particularly those elements illuminated by genomic evolutionary science. Once quiet minorities of Christian philosophers and scientists have blossomed into vibrant and well-funded parties calling on their evangelical brethren to reexamine some crucial texts and dare we say potentially “reformulate” some foundational Christian doctrines. Highlighted most profoundly by this cultural tide are the Christian doctrines of *human uniqueness* and *the fall*.

Two popular responses follow: 1) a wholesale rejection of contemporary science encroaching on time-tested theological tradition, citing lack of epistemic warrant rooted in the doctrine of God, or 2) a bandwagon embrace of evolutionary theory coupled with a theological reconstructive enterprise aimed, like an axe, directly at the trunk of some cherished evangelical theological sensibilities like a historical Adam (and Eve). Is there no *via media*?

As it turns out, for a number of years prior to its publication, the contributors of the 2017 Eerdmans compendium, *Evolution and the Fall*, had been meeting together trying to allow for time and space in the context of communal worship for the “cultivation of constructive theological imagination [that] begins with liturgical formation,” a noble pursuit to be sure.¹ Supposing the goal of the project was to produce a text immersed in communal ecumenical worship, it is fair to examine the product by a simple standard: will it preach?

So often professional academic attempts at dramatic constructive theology miss the mark in the context of communal worship, especially in the proclamation of the Word of God. Take for example the all too contentious conversation surrounding a ‘historical Adam.’ In discussions I

have had with pastors on this topic, many seem more wary of the homiletical ramifications than potential theological issues involved in embracing a non-historical Adam framework. The question is not, can my theology adapt to an evolutionary account of human origins? It is: can my preaching adapt? Does this new resource, *Evolution and the Fall*, helpfully inspire cogent public proclamation of the Gospel in faithful Christian communities?

To answer this question we will examine James K. A. Smith's essay in the volume, "What Stands on the Fall? A Philosophical Exploration." By my estimation, his essay sets the tone of the text as a whole and also provides a *novum* speculative attempt at understanding the "event-ish" nature of the Fall. Dr. Smith argues that theological ingenuity in light of modern science ought to remain faithful to the "Narrative Arc" of the Christian faith. According to Smith, there is a lot of wiggle room, so to speak, when engaging present-day complications surrounding the traditionalist conception of the doctrine of the fall. That is, so says Smith, as long as we embrace the major plot turns of the time-tested and creedally formulated story of God's interaction with the world. Beyond creedal integrity though, will his admittedly speculative attempt at imagining a temporal yet non-punctiliar fall "event" hold water in the context of week in and week out preaching? We will find his "Narrative Arc" approach to be a helpful tool for faithful Christian proclamation concerning the doctrine of the fall, even in our scientific age.

Narrative Arc Foundations

Smith resists the infectious practice of theological "cherry picking" in order to more fully synthesize historic Christian faith with current scientific understanding. He argues:

Christian theology isn't like a Jenga game, an assemblage of propositional claims of which we try and see which can be removed without affecting the tower. Rather, Christian doctrine is more like the grammar of a story held together by the drama of a plot.²

For Smith, the story is best held together in the current dominating Augustinian portrait of the Fall.³

His Augustinian theology is buttressed by presenting a framework for Christian theological imagination that leads him to affirm the "event-ish" nature of Adam and Eve's fall into sin. In effect, he believes some

level of timefulness to a fall “event” is essential to make sense of the story. Luckily, one need not share his belief in the indispensable coupling of his framework and a “historical” fall to still find his narrative arc approach useful—especially in the practice of preaching.

He amiably suggests that the best methodology for theological exploration and development in pursuit of a synthesis between science and theology is one that works to formulate “faithful extensions” to the core plot or narrative arc of the story of God’s relationship with humans. The principal tenets of his narrative arc, borrowed from J. Richard Middleton, are: “[1] the goodness of creation, [2] a fall into sin, [3] redemption of all things in Christ, and [4] the consummation of all things.”⁴ Ultimately, all Christians should affirm with Smith that adding new twists and turns to the plot that change the fundamental nature of the story of salvation ought to be cautiously avoided. Pastors responsible for the quotidian development of sermons, bible study materials, and the spiritual formation of Christian leaders ought to be able to breathe easy at this sentiment.

Nevertheless, it would be more advantageous to embrace an amended version of Smith’s account of the core turns in the story. A more careful and faithful presentation of the narrative of scriptural and scientific revelation would include the revision of point two to say, “the nonessential entrance of sin into the created order by way of human volition.” As modified, point two retains the Christian commitment that sin is not simply a natural development of creation while also embracing the very real possibility of sin within God’s good created order. Stated this way, God is by no means the author of sin in any primary fashion. Additionally, the origin of sin is allowed an appropriate level of mysteriousness given our current and projected level of scientific understanding of this matter.

Our new elucidation of the major points in the narrative arc of scripture is as follows: 1) the goodness of creation, 2) the nonessential entrance of sin into the created by way of human volition, 3) redemption of all things in Christ, and 4) the consummation of all things. Operating with this amended summary of the vital movements in the narrative arc of salvation history, let us examine the preachability of Smith’s “modest proposal” at taking modern science and theology seriously with regard to the doctrine of the fall.

The Homiletical Viability of Our Amended Narrative Arc

To use Smith's borrowed words from Charles Taylor, Christians are substantially "cross-pressured" when attempting to commit to a *historical* and *perfect* couple as the fountainhead of humanity biologically and hamartologically speaking.⁵ Taking into account all we know about scripture and science, one ought to affirm with Smith that there are in fact scenarios that faithfully maintain commitments to the goodness of creation, human uniqueness, and humanity's rebellion into sin, without necessarily affirming an original human population of two. Below is my outline of Smith's provisional model of the Fall:

God creates a *good* world and produces biological life via an evolutionary process (which includes even the nastier parts like death, predation, and evolutionary dead-ends) → Creatures complex enough to be said to "bear the image of God" arise from this process with an original population of no less than 10,000 individuals → God corporately elects this emergent species as his covenant people to serve as his representation to and for the created order → These original humans are not *perfect*, in the popular sense, but are enabled and empowered to carry out God's *very good* mission for them on earth → They break faith with God by choosing instead to pursue their own perceived good and "fall."⁶ → After this nonessential temporal "fall" humanity is left in a state that requires the restoring grace of God found only in Christ Jesus.

Granted, certain movements in this presentation of the creation narrative feel destabilizing to some cherished evangelical theological sensibilities. One thinks specifically of what Smith calls Augustine's "priority-of-the-good" thesis—the logical, theological, and chronological commitment that the goodness of humanity precedes the Fall.⁷ How can one imagine a *good* humanity arising out of presumed millennia of what is usually described as "natural evil" (pain, death, predation, etc.)? Additionally, how about the corporate election of a minimum population of 10,000 original humans, or the renunciation of "perfection" language? Traditionally the aforementioned issues have dominated the discussion, but much work has been done to provide a path forward on these points. What has not yet been presented, in a way that aids homileticians, is how one can faithfully integrate a corporate "fall" into our homiletical theology.

Christians have historically professed in creedal fashion (whether or not it has been preached this way) the *goodness* rather than *perfection* of God's initial creation. To this point Smith helpfully places the category of perfection, as it relates to the created order and humanity specifically, into its proper eschatological place at the consummation of the age.⁸ Still looming large though is the question: Does the affirmation of universal human sinfulness require a fall "event"? Here is where Smith's thought is particularly helpful to homiletical practitioners hoping to cobble together sermons that are persuasive in our 21st century context that are also faithful to the traditionally accepted narrative of salvation as well as the text of scripture.

For too long most ministers have been presented with, "*either* ahistorical 'theological' claims [not in line with the narrative arc of scripture] *or* literalist 'historical claims' [not tenable by scientific standards]," as the only options for decoding the text of Genesis 1-3, argues Smith.⁹ Out of this vacuum, Smith nobly introduces a nuanced interpretation of the text by postulating a temporal and timeful fall that is not necessarily instantaneous. He opines:

Since we are dealing with a larger population in this 'garden,' so to speak, there is not one discrete event at time T_1 where 'the transgression' occurs. However, there is still a temporal, episodic nature of a Fall. We might imagine a Fall-in-process, a sort of probationary period in which God is watching...So the Fall might take place over time T_1 - T_3 . But there is some significant sense of before and after in this scenario.¹⁰

This will preach. Let me explain.

The Necessity of Event-ish Language

Smith rightfully resists the trend of some prominent theologians and biblical scholars who construct *representative* or *archetypal* models for understanding Adam and Eve, on which the future of humanity's election into immortality or "fall" to perpetual finitude hangs on their individual choices.¹¹ Especially given what we know of humanity at the time in question, it would not be just of God to impute guilt and impart a corrupted sinful nature upon the rest of the human population if only two of these original 10,000 or so, "eat the fruit," metaphorically speaking.

The most popular archetypal options try to portray God as just in his ensuing imputation and impartation of judgment, in the form of a corrupted and mortal nature onto every unsuspecting bystander, by depicting Adam as a *priest* or *king* for/of all original humans. If Adam was corporately responsible for all humanity in his priestly or kingly duties then God could properly hold all humanity responsible for their designated leader's transgression, so some say. Deborah Haarsma, a scientific voice of reason, calls us to remember that the social context of these original 10,000 or so humans was a disjointed jumble of geographically and culturally detached tribal societies, not some collective human cohort isolated in the Ancient Near East under one leader.¹² So far as paleoanthropology can tell us, there is no reasonable way to imagine a kingly or priestly structure over all original humans; especially one needed to make sense of the just spread of guilt and a corrupted human nature by means of divine imputation and impartation.¹³

This is why speaking of a "fall" in time as something more like "an episode-in-process" is valuable. Smith offers a timely illustration:

I think we make room for something like this in other contexts. For instance, when did I "win" the Daytona 500? Only at the checkered flag? What if I was leading for the final twelve laps? Or when did I earn a gold medal for the marathon? Only when I crossed the finish line? The "event" of my "win" does not seem to be simply punctiliar. Every coach knows this when he points out that, while the other team beat us with a score as the clock ran out, we "lost" the game earlier by missing scoring chances, etc. The point is that our folk notion of an "episode" is quite elastic.¹⁴

This non-punctiliar, episode-in-time approach retains a real *before* and *after* sense to sin that helpfully allows the origin of sin to remain mysterious. What we have then instead is an exposition of the Fall that retains both Smith's "priority-of-the-good" thesis and his "necessity-of-grace" thesis—as opposed to Pelagian attempts to locate some inherent human ability with respect to salvation—though he mistakenly claims that holding these two theological points necessarily makes one Augustinian.¹⁵

Preaching Aids

With James K. A. Smith's narrative arc approach to the doctrine of the fall one can faithfully preach the stories in Genesis 1-3 with theological

conviction. One can boldly proclaim that God created and it was very good, that humanity has indeed “fallen” into sin, and that we are completely and totally incapable of reclaiming our *very good* purpose apart from the saving work of Christ Jesus on our behalf. Truthfully though, preaching this story like a story is still the way to go.

There is nothing disingenuous about preaching the rich theological account of Adam and Eve like any other Bible story, especially to children, so long as we are consistent with our language. When referring to Adam and Eve let us regularly include tags like: story of, narrative of, or epic of. In this way, we can mine the depths of these stories for their crucial theological tidbits without communicating to our congregations that one must believe in direct, literalist, renditions of the text in order to retain the heights of God’s revelatory truth about himself and about our pre-and postlapsarian relationship to him.

1 Corinthians 15:21-22

Many ministers will acquiesce to the fact that the narrative of Genesis 1-3 could be interpreted in light of modern science without threat to the narrative arc of scripture, so long as mention of Adam and Eve was isolated to those texts. Yet they aren’t. How do we preach passages like 1 Corinthians 15:21-22 and Romans 5:12-21 where Paul emphasizes the sin of an individual (Adam) to in turn highlight the salvation that comes through one man—Jesus Christ? We will examine the text of 1 Corinthians 15:21-22 through our amended version of James K. A. Smith’s narrative arc criteria to see if we can’t maintain homiletical buoyancy in these choppy waters.

Throughout chapter fifteen of first Corinthians Paul has been waxing eloquently on how resurrection is an indispensable foundation of Christian theology. If Christ is not raised, then we have no hope to be raised. He attempts to further hammer this point home in the Greco-Roman consciousness of this important port city by reminding the Corinthians of the hamartiological foundations of their current problem, “For since death came through a human being, the resurrection of the dead has also come through a human being; for as all die in Adam, so all will be made alive in Christ.”¹⁶ Essentially, Paul boasts that universality of human sinfulness (coming through Adam) requires all to seek Christ as their only hope for resurrection onto eternal life with him, in Pauline language, “to receive what is imperishable.” Does this text demolish our theological Jenga tower?

First, would interpreting this text within a non-historical Adam framework undermine the goodness of God's prelapsarian creation? Certainly not, the entire presentation of resurrection theology in 1 Corinthians 15 is God's eschatological remedy for sin. He is making good, presumably something better, out of what transpired hamartiologically. God does not trash the originally good physical nature of humanity but, making beauty out of ashes, adds to the original goodness a participation not only in the image of God, broadly speaking, but in the "image of the man of heaven"—who is Christ Jesus our Lord.¹⁷

Next, does filtering this Pauline argument through a non-historical Adam framework undercut the Christian commitment to the universality of human sinfulness or blame God for our self-inflicted predicament? No. Rhetorically speaking, one does not strip Paul's words of any measure power or theological coherence by superimposing some twenty-first century categories to describe his argument. Suppose we described it this way:

Since death (the problem) has a human origin, resurrection (the solution) must also have a human origin. Because in our current state all die as a result of sin, all must be made alive through Christ, the God-Man.

In the reconstructive practice of public proclamation we don't lose anything or pull the wool over anyone's eyes by using such language. Even though Paul uses particular language (Adam) and undoubtedly embraces an ancient, pre-scientific understanding of human origins rooted in a historical couple, placing all humanity in Adam as a literary figure accomplishes the same theological acrobatics as Paul's intended resurrection theology. A non-historical Adam framework, even coupled with a non-punctiliar "event-ish" fall, does not threaten the under riding argument of Paul's theological exhibition.

Finally, would replacing "Adam" with an early human population that elects to pursue its own collectively identified "good" instead of God's *elected good*, allow for redemption outside of Christ? Certainly not, even if one is able to envision a speculative, non-instantaneous, collective "fall" into sin, one still requires a historical "second Adam" to supply a way of redemption. By means of divine general and special revelation we find that simply being human at this stage of biological history means we are relationally distant from God because of sin. Additionally, the scriptures unashamedly disclose that our only hope to rectify this problem is the

atonement work of Christ on our behalf and the eventual sharing of his resurrection nature at the consummation of the age.

When encountering passages of scripture that seem to describe a historical Adam and Eve involved in an instantaneous fall in time, pastors don't need to prevaricate or conjure up with some fancy verbal work around to remain theologically, scripturally, and scientifically faithful in their sermons. Instead, with one's head held high one can proclaim, with Paul in 1 Corinthians 15, that just as all humanity is unified in death because of sin all humanity is unified in resurrection because of Christ. The real issue here is that all who share in sin will one day share in Christ's resurrected nature. Will you be resurrected to eternal life with Christ or have to stand before a holy God having not accepted, by faith, his meritorious sacrifice made on your behalf? Interpreting this text in a non-traditionalist way concerning Adam and the Fall does not fundamentally redirect the narrative arc of scripture nor does it make for cop out expository preaching.

Conclusion

Contemporary scientific pressures do not undermine the fabric of the narrative arc of scripture. Historic, Trinitarian, Orthodox Christianity provides enough flexibility to absorb modern scientific revelations about human origins. Not only can one integrate this theologically; one can embrace it homiletically. It is not advisable to get up in front of a congregation and lecture them about the literary as opposed to historical nature of the biblical Adam. Nonetheless, it is crucial to preach sermons that fix Christ as the solid rock and foundation of our faith, not Adam, who is shifting sand in light of genomic evolutionary science.¹⁸

Christ is the second Adam and we can preach with Karl Barth that as we encounter the living Word (who is the eternal Logos) in Genesis 1-3 we participate in his vivifying and recapitulating grace in as much as we see ourselves incomplete in Adam yet completed in Christ Jesus.¹⁹ The Fall narrative of scripture reveals to us our dilemma as a people estranged from God and hopeless apart from his grace. Contrary to populist rhetoric it is, in fact, possible for preachers to formulate and proclaim a doctrine of original sin and the origin of sin that is faithful to all we know of human genomics so far and also doesn't adversely affect the plot of salvation history, or undermine the credibility of our sermons.²⁰

End Notes

¹ William T. Cavanaugh and James K. A. Smith, "Introduction-Beyond Galileo to Chalcedon: Resources for Reimagining Evolution, Human Origins, and the Fall," in *Evolution and the Fall*, eds. William T. Cavanaugh & James K. A. Smith (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2017), xviii.

² James K. A. Smith, "What Stands on the Fall? A Philosophical Exploration," in *Evolution and the Fall*, eds. William T. Cavanaugh & James K. A. Smith (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2017), 50.

³ He continues, "In that sense, the doctrine of original sin and the historical understanding of the Fall is woven into the fabric of a story that is ultimately the drama of God's gracious interaction with humanity." *Ibid.*

⁴ *Ibid.*, 51.

⁵ Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2027) cited in Cavanaugh and Smith, 55.

⁶ I take some stylistic and theological liberties in my summary. You can read the entirety of James K. A. Smith's "imagined scenario" in *Evolution and the Fall*, 61-62.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 59.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 57.

⁹ Author emphasis, *Ibid.*, 60.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 62.

¹¹ For perhaps the most in vogue representative model see, John H. Walton, "A Historical Adam: Archetypal Creation View," in *Four Views on the Historical Adam*, eds. Stanley N. Grundy, Matthew Barrett, and Ardel B. Candy (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2013) 113-115. Walton imagines a scenario where out from among a young and immature race of early humans God selects Adam and Eve and takes them to a holy place. Within this theoretical arena Adam and Eve serve as representatives of an entire already present race (he uses the language of "archetypes"). In this epic, God gives Adam and Eve all that is necessary to live in relationship with him but also provides guidelines, e.g., "Don't eat of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil." The goal of this experiment is to provide an environment for Adam and Eve to be obedient and then by their punctiliar and singular righteousness God would consequently gift immortality to the entire present and future human race, i.e., eating of the tree of life. Instead, humanity's archetypal couple disobeys and punishment for their disobedience is then imputed to the entire race. For a fuller depiction of his model see, John Walton, *The Lost World of Adam and Eve: Genesis 2-3 and the Human Origins Debate* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2015).

¹² Deborah Haarsma spoke this timely corrective as part of panel discussion on the “Historical Adam” at the 2017 Center for Pastoral Theologians Conference in Oak Park, IL. 24 October 2017.

¹³ In all fairness, many scholars arguing for an archetypal Adam and Eve do not necessitate belief in a postlapsarian divine imputation of guilt and impartation of a sinful nature. Many are willing to embrace some sense of a social and/or generational spread of sin throughout the original human population.

¹⁴ Smith, *Evolution and the Fall*, 63 fn 32.

¹⁵ Smith sees this a defense of Augustinian theology because it protects and advances his “priority-of-the-good” thesis and his “necessity-of-grace” thesis. Missing from his critique of traditions he characterizes as “non- or even anti-Augustinian (Orthodox, Wesleyans),” is the realization that Augustinian theology does not have a corner of his two theses (58 fn. 27). Simply because Augustine is not a heretic does not mean he is the standard for orthodox positions on the Fall. For example, while Irenaeus characterizes original humanity as infantile and not fully developed, he in no way ontologizes the Fall making sin’s existence in creation an assault on God’s goodness. Quite the opposite in fact, before “falling” into sin in Irenaeus terms, though infantile, humanity was very good, walking in faith with God and relying on his enabling and developing grace. Tragically, sin arises from human ignorance and leaves humanity estranged from God and their destiny apart from the redemptive work of Christ on their behalf. See Irenaeus, *Against Heresies*, bk. 4, ch, 38, in *The Ante-Nicene Fathers* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1956, Vol. I.), 1-2. To suggest that affirming the “priority-of-the-good” and the “necessity-of-grace” theses necessarily makes one Augustinian instead of simply orthodox is categorically false.

¹⁶ 1 Cor 15:21-22, *NRSV*.

¹⁷ 1 Cor 15:49, “Just as we have borne the image of the man of dust, we will also bear the image of the man of heaven.”

¹⁸ Matthew 7:24-27.

¹⁹ “Adam is not a fate which God has suspended over us. Adam is a truth concerning us as it is known to God and told to us.” Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, vol.4, *The Doctrine of Reconciliation*, part 1, trans. G.W. Bromiley and T.F. Torrance (New York: T&T Clark, 1956), 511.

²⁰ For one such attempt at an evolutionary and evangelical non-Augustinian constructive theology of the Fall see Logan Patriquin, “Towards and Evolutionary Understanding of the Doctrine of Original Sin,” *Theology and Science* (forthcoming).