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Adam's Ancestors: An Interview with David N. Livingstone

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Historically Speaking, Volume 10, Number 3, June 2009, pp. 10-12 (Article)

Published by The Johns Hopkins University Press

DOI: [10.1353/hsp.0.0041](https://doi.org/10.1353/hsp.0.0041)



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again. She died in 1800, having asked for a figure of Justice to stand guard at her tomb in Westminster Abbey.

Although Mary won landmark cases, it was many more years before women enjoyed equal rights within marriage. In 1857 the Matrimonial Causes Act established a divorce court in which both sexes could seek a full divorce. The only grounds were adultery, and women still had to prove further injustice, such as cruelty, desertion, or sodomy. In 1923 women were awarded equal rights in seeking divorce, but only in 1969 was the principle of divorce for incompatibility recognized. It was 1870 before women were allowed to keep income they earned during marriage and 1882 before this was extended to all property. In 1839 the Infant Custody Act gave courts discretion to award custody of children under seven to mothers, but it was not until 1925 that mothers

and fathers were viewed equally in custody battles.

A journalist and freelance writer, Wendy Moore is the author of The Knife Man: The Extraordinary Life and Times of John Hunter, Father of Modern Surgery (Broadway Books, 2005), as well as Wedlock: The True Story of the Disastrous Marriage and Remarkable Divorce of Mary Eleanor Bowes, Countess of Strathmore (Crown, 2009), from which this essay is drawn.

¹ For background information on the history of marriage and divorce see Lawrence Stone, *Broken Lives: Separation and Divorce in England, 1660-1857* (Oxford University Press, 1993); *The Family, Sex and Marriage in England, 1500-1800* (Penguin 1977); and *Road to Divorce: A History of the Making and Breaking of Marriage in England, 1530-1987* (Oxford University Press, 1990). See also Roder-

ick Phillips, *Putting Asunder: A History of Divorce in Western Society* (Cambridge University Press, 1988); and *Untying the Knot: A Short History of Divorce* (Cambridge University Press, 1991).

² George Savile, Marquis of Halifax, *The Ladys New-years Gift: or, advice to a daughter* (London, 1688), 25.

³ Mary Astell, *Some Reflections upon Marriage*, (London, 1700), 12.

⁴ Lady Mary Wortley Montagu to Philippa Mundy, April 1712, in Robert Halsband, ed., *The Complete Letters of Mary Wortley Montagu* (Oxford University Press, 1965), 1: 122.

⁵ Hester Chapone, cited in Bridget Hill, *Eighteenth-Century Women: An Anthology* (Unwin Hyman, 1984), 74.

⁶ Stone, *The Family, Sex and Marriage in England*, 189-190.

⁷ François de la Nothe-Fénelon de Salignac, *Instructions for the Education of a Daughter*, trans. George Hickes (London, 1713), 13.

⁸ Mary Eleanor Bowes, *Confessions of the Countess of Strathmore* (London, 1793), 44.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 65-66.

ADAM'S ANCESTORS: AN INTERVIEW WITH DAVID N. LIVINGSTONE

Conducted by Donald A. Yerxa

DAVID N. LIVINGSTONE IS A PROFESSOR OF GEOGRAPHY and intellectual history at Queen's University Belfast. He is a fellow of the British Academy and the Royal Society of Arts. One of the most talented and perceptive scholars currently working on the history of science and religion, Livingstone is especially interested in exploring the spatial as well as the temporal contexts within which ideas are produced and consumed. Among his many books are *Putting Science in Its Place:*

Geographies of Scientific Knowledge (University of Chicago Press, 2003) and most recently *Adam's Ancestors: Race, Religion, and the Politics of Human Origins (Johns Hopkins University Press, 2008)*. Historically Speaking senior editor Donald A. Yerxa caught up with Livingstone on March 3, 2009, to discuss his latest book as well as his approach to intellectual history.

Donald A. Yerxa: Your most recent book, *Adam's Ancestors*, is a history of pre-Adamite thinking. What is pre-Adamism?

David N. Livingstone: Pre-Adamism is actually a notoriously simple idea, though its consequences are multifaceted. It's the idea that the Adam of the Hebrew Bible and the Old Testament is not the first human being. In some incarnations Adam is simply the father of the Jewish people, whereas in other versions Adam is viewed as the father of Caucasian people. But the material point of pre-Adamism, at least in its early days, is that there were, and perhaps indeed continue to exist, peoples who are descended from a pre-Adamic or at least non-Adamic source. This would mean that there were at least two (and arguably more than two) creations of the human species. In pre-Adamism lie the origins of what anthropologists used to call polygenesis. And, indeed, that has been and continues to be something of an issue right up to contemporary paleoanthropology. Should we look at all humans as

derived from a single source, let's say, a "mitochondrial Eve"? Or did the human species emerge in many different places? So the debate in that sense, without the biblical significance of Adam, continues to be important in thinking about human ori-

gins more generally.

Pre-Adamism was considered heretical because it plainly challenged a literal reading of the Genesis narrative. One has to rethink a sequence of other related theological precepts if one accepts the notion that there were pre-Adamites.

Yerxa: How significant was pre-Adamism in Western intellectual history prior to Darwin?

Livingstone: There are a couple of things to be

said about this. Another historian who worked on this subject some years ago, Richard Popkin, made the arresting suggestion that pre-Adamic theory was much more destabilizing to European intellectuals in the 17th century than the Copernican revolution or indeed the mechanical universe of the Newtonians. Popkin reasoned that pre-Adamism challenged human beings' sense of their own identity, of who they really were. For a very long time, going back to the church fathers, to Augustine, and indeed to much earlier times, descent from Adam came to be a definition of what it was to be human. So I'm inclined to agree with Popkin because while you can scarcely find an advocate for the idea after 1655 when it first began to achieve wider publicity, you find many, many refutations. Although pre-Adamism seems initially to have had few converts, a lot of people felt the need to refute it.

Yerxa: Throughout your book it is clear that this notion is quite versatile and can be

adapted to a number of arguments. Could you speak to that?

Livingstone: Pre-Adamism can be used for many contradictory purposes and is hugely adaptable in different environments. Let me just pick out three or four of these. Initially, when it was first put forward in the 1650s by Isaac La Peyrère, it was rapidly castigated as a heresy. Emissaries from the Vatican picked up La Peyrère when he was traveling in what is now Belgium and took him off to Rome, where he was forced to recant before the pope. Clever devil that La Peyrère was, however, the recantation never really admitted he was wrong. Pre-Adamism was considered heretical because it plainly challenged a literal reading of the Genesis narrative. One has to rethink a sequence of other related theological precepts if one accepts the notion that there were pre-Adamites. For example, did they also fall from grace? How representative is Adam of the human race? How does original sin come into the world? How is it transmitted?

Pre-Adamism has been quite versatile, however. In the 19th century—and indeed on into the 20th century—the idea was promulgated by those who were much more conservative in their theological outlook. It was adopted in a new guise by conservative believers who wanted to hold onto the historic significance of Adam while at the same time take some notion of human evolution seriously. So pre-Adamism, once deemed a massive heresy, was later taken up by conservative, orthodox believers.

Let me provide another instance of its adaptability. In the 1650s La Peyrère thought that Adam was the father of the Jewish race, but he was convinced that we all, whether Jews or not, participate to some degree in the benefits of the Jewish religious tradition and divine action in the world through the children of Israel. So in that sense, pre-Adamism is inclusive, humanitarian, and sweeps all of humanity—whether Jewish, Adamic or non-Jewish, non-Adamic—into a human family that benefits in Israel's redemption. But later, pre-Adamism was used for the grossest forms of racism by depicting certain racial groups as non-Adamic and thus inferior and perhaps even sub-human. So pre-Adamism has been used for both humanitarian and racist purposes.

Yerxa: In what form has pre-Adamism survived into the present era?

Livingstone: In a literal understanding of pre-Adamism, the notion of the pre-Adamite only makes sense if you believe that Adam was a historic individual and continues to have some significance. So pre-Adamism still matters for some

conservative evangelical Protestants and conservative Catholics. For both of these groups, the story of Adam, the inheritance of original sin, and the significance of Adam in a representative capacity



An illustration of Adam and Eve from Thomas Hariot, *A Briefe and True Report of the New Found Land of Virginia* (London, 1590). Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library, Yale University.

comparable to that of Christ are still important. The scientifically literate among these conservative evangelicals and Catholics want to hold on to the notion of Adam and also accept the theory of human evolution. So they are willing to consider that the human body may have undergone evolutionary transformation to a point where by divine action a creature was humanized into the first human form by becoming “en-souled” or receiving the image of God or some such. The hominid predecessors of the first true human would be considered pre-Adamic, almost but not quite human in a fully theological sense.

Pre-Adamism also survives much more scarily among a small group of right-wing racial supremacists, particularly in the United States, known as the Christian Identity Movement. This group has resurrected 18th- and 19th-century pre-Adamic literature to try to make a case that there are two distinct bloodlines existing right up to the present day, one being the Adamic bloodline, mostly considered to be Caucasian, and another pre- or non-Adamic “seedline” going back to some mythical and presumed liaison between Eve and the devil.

Yerxa: Pre-Adamism has been employed, as

you've indicated, as a way of harmonizing systems of science and religion. But you contend that such intellectual devices do not function simply as “bridges between two independent domains.” They are mutually transformative. How is that the case?

Livingstone: Pre-Adamism is one of many schemes that religious believers have elaborated over the years for trying to retain some kind of harmony between a set of theological commitments and the deliverances of empirical science. For example, there is the idea, going back at least to the late 18th and early 19th centuries, that each of the days of creation in Genesis might be interpreted as geological epochs. The so-called Gap Theory, the notion that there may be a vastly long gap of time between the first verse of Genesis and the second verse, is another one of these harmonizing schemes. The argument I am trying to make is that these attempts at harmonization are never a neutral zipping together of two disparate schemes. Adopting one of these harmonizing strategies has implications for how people think both about the science and also about their religion. Let me use the pre-Adamic scheme as a case in point. If you are an orthodox Christian believer in the 17th century, you are confronted with problems. Egyptian chronology turns out to be much longer than the chronology that is available from the biblical narratives. So you look at so-called “pagan chronicles,” and you think one way to resolve the tension is to view the biblical chronology as only the story of Jewish descent from Adam; that

would allow other older chronologies to predate the Genesis account. Or in the wake of Europe's first encounters with the Americas, you wonder how these regions came to be inhabited. Then you think to yourself that maybe human beings were specifically created in the New World, and there was a non- or co-Adamic creation. So you adopt pre-Adamic schemes to resolve problems like these.

Scientifically that commits you, for example, to answering a certain set of questions: Are these separately created human beings? Are they all the same kind of human being? Is a polygenetic account the best way to think about human history? If you're committed to that, then there might be an implication for the way you think about the development of language. Would all languages have come from one source, or would they have been created as separate language groups across the face of the Earth? Adopting pre-Adamism leads to a series of scientific questions, and you then find yourself committed not just to polygenesis with respect to anthropology, but also with respect to culture, linguistics, and philology. It also raises theological questions: Do all human beings partic-

ipate in Adam's fall from grace? Does Adam represent all humanity, or do people have to be physically descended from Adam to inherit original sin? What about the benefits of redemption? Do they only extend to Adam's successors, or do they extend to non-Adamic people? How do we understand the image of God? How should we read the biblical documents? Should we read them metaphorically? My point is that these harmonizing strategies fold out in many directions and raise scientific questions as well as theological ones. They are not simply neutral; they interrogate the two sides that they are actually trying to hold together.

Yerxa: And what are the implications of this for the many efforts currently underway to bring science and religion into closer dialogue?

Livingstone: You would need to ask someone who is involved with the current debates over science and religion to see if this sort of idea pertains there. For instance, certain understandings about the quantum world or contemporary physics have prompted some to turn to Eastern ways of thinking about physics. You have the Tao of physics and things of this sort. I do not know that literature well enough, but my initial suspicion is that any of these reconciling mechanisms will not simply be a glue to hold two things together. They will transform how people think about the two sides that they are trying to tie together.

Yerxa: You were trained as a geographer, and yet much of your recent writing has been in the area of intellectual history and the history of science. Is this an unusual intellectual trajectory? Or is this question premised on a false assumption about what it is that geographers do?

Livingstone: Being trained in geography in my generation encompassed aspects of physical science as well as the humanities and social sciences. Geography integrates nature and culture, or environment and society. Since its institutionalization in the 19th century, geography has always had considerable interest in the history of exploration. If you go back to early examination papers at the University of Oxford, you will find papers dealing with the history of what was then called, in those colonially unconscious days, the Age of Discovery or the Age of Exploration. So there was always interest in the history of growing geographical knowledge about the globe. When I was an undergraduate, I took a two-year-long course on the history of ideas about geography and was entirely captivated by this. It brought in not only the history of culture and the history of civilization, but

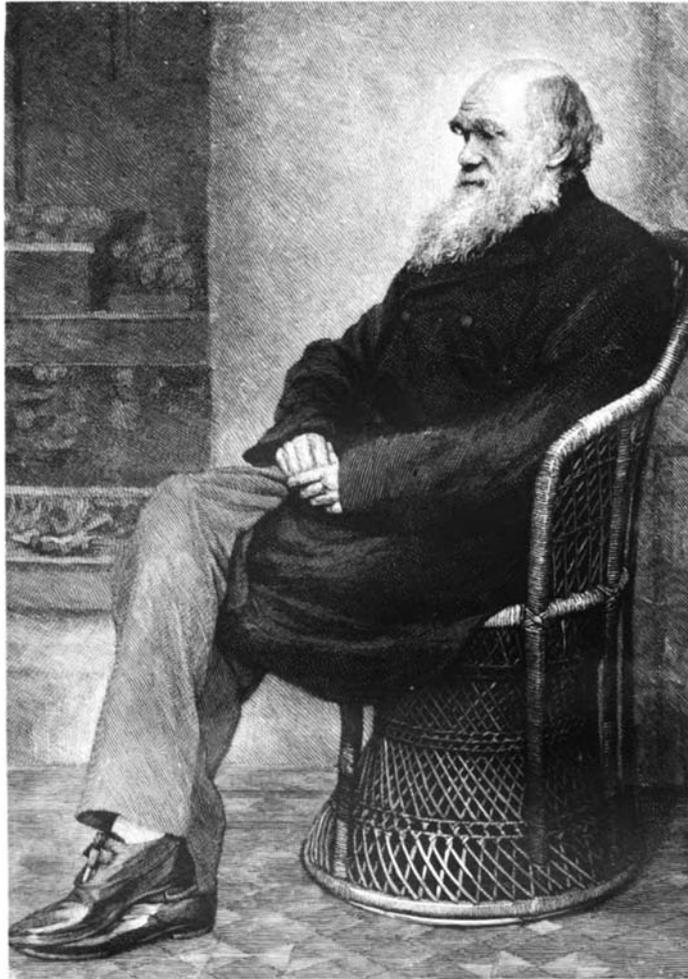
also certain aspects of the history of knowledge. There is still a small but intellectually vibrant group of geographers working on the history of ideas

just temporally about the scientific enterprise.

Yerxa: In what directions are you taking this approach to space in relation to knowledge?

Livingstone: There are two projects that I am sort of teetering with, one a bit more advanced than the other. I claim to be writing what I call a historical geography of Darwinism. I am very interested in seeing what Darwinism was taken to mean in different places across the face of the globe. For example, did Darwinism mean the same thing in Wellington, New Zealand as it did in, say, Toronto, Canada or Edinburgh, Scotland or Columbia, South Carolina? I suspect that it did not. If I am right about this, it will force us to recast our thinking about religious responses to Darwinism. If the responses to Darwinism were very different in the places I just mentioned, all of which shared a Reformed Protestant theology, then we can't speak any longer about *the* relationship between Catholicism and Darwinism or evangelicalism and evolutionism. In each case we have to try to get a bit more local and place these encounters in very particular circumstances. You and I have talked before about this in a different setting. You are concerned that an overemphasis on the local runs the risk of moving so far from generalization that we can't say anything. That would be a mistake. We should still be able to say something general without lapsing into an easy caricature about what, say, evangelicalism or Catholicism must have thought about Darwinism in the 19th century.

The other project I want to do is a history of the idea of climatic determinism. I think underlying many of our anxieties about global warming and climate change is a very ancient idea that in some powerful way climate is going to punish us for not behaving properly. I have a suspicion that some of the rhetoric we have in the contemporary debate is not unlike what we might find if we look back to the 18th, 17th, and 16th centuries. I would like to do an intellectual genealogy of the idea that, to use Montesquieu's phrase, "the empire of the climate is the first, the most powerful of all empires."



Ch. Darwin

[From the Century Magazine.

From Francis Darwin, ed., *The Life and Letters of Charles Darwin*, Vol 1 (London, 1896).

about nature and culture. Two influential 20th-century geographers were Clarence Glacken, whose *Traces on the Rhodian Shore* is fundamentally an intellectual history of nature and culture since ancient times, and John Kirtland Wright, at one time director of the American Geographical Society and the author of *The Geographical Lore of the Time of the Crusades*. This tradition continues with Charles Withers at the University of Edinburgh, who writes on the geographies of the Enlightenment, and Felix Driver at Royal Holloway, who studies the historical geography of exploration. In my work I emphasize the geography of scientific ideas. It is very important to know where scientific ideas were put forward; where they were received; how they were read in a particular space, time, and situation. Location plays a key role in the production, circulation, and consumption of scientific knowledge. When I wrote *Putting Science in Its Place* (2003), I tried to organize the book around specifically geographical notions like space, region, migration, movement, and things of this sort. The point was to encourage us to think spatially, not