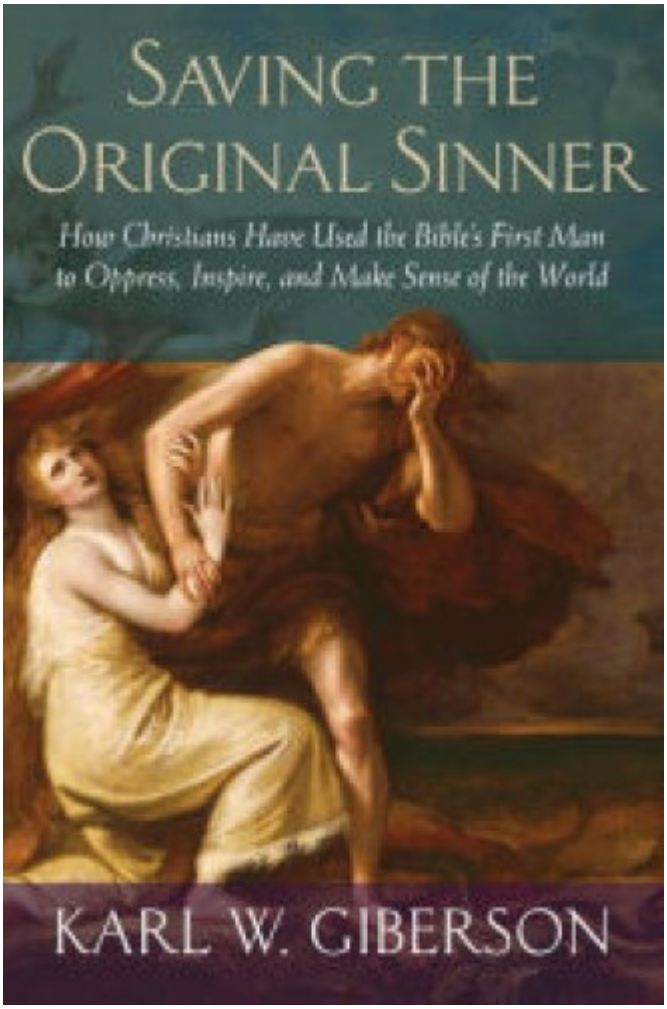
Saving the Original Sinner, by Karl W. Giberson

reviewed by Amy Frykholm in the August 19, 2015 issue

In Review



Saving the Original Sinner

By Karl W. Giberson
Beacon

The other day I overheard two theologians arguing a little playfully over whether, given God's plan of salvation, aliens on another planet would need their own separate savior or whether Christ would do for the whole universe. One theologian

argued that aliens would need a savior of their own flesh. The other said that Christ died once for all, and that would include aliens.

Their argument reminded me of Karl Giberson's book, for it paralleled arguments in the 19th century about race and salvation that hinged on the question of whether more than one Adam was needed to account for the varieties of people on the earth.

The argument followed white supremacist lines. Adam, some people reasoned, was the first ancestor of the white race. But there might be other Adams for other races. A disturbing conclusion was that Christian salvation, which depended on the Adam/Christ dichotomy in Pauline theology, did not extend to all the peoples of the earth. Some even wondered which of the peoples of the earth were actually people.

This is one episode in the intriguing and unsettling cultural history of Adam that is the subject of Giberson's book. Giberson is motivated to tell this story by a trend in evangelical institutions of dismissing professors who engage in robust conversation about the relationship between religion and science.

He himself left Eastern Nazarene University, and he cites similar stories from Wheaton, Calvin, Westminster Theological Seminary, and other schools where the conflict between science and religion seems to be heightening instead of resolving. The question of a historical Adam has often played a key role in these conflicts.

But we shouldn't let this intraevangelical struggle keep us from paying attention to the important history that Giberson tells, a history that nearly all Christians have shared until very recently. Giberson begins with the ancient Hebrew texts and their creation stories. He traces Paul's use of a highly symbolic Adam to extrapolate the meaning of Christ's resurrection, and he shows how Christian theology began to rely on an ever more historical Adam to make its case.

The Adam/Christ dichotomy began to break down during the Enlightenment and the scientific revolution of the 18th century. The rise of geology, historical biblical criticism, and archaeology cast new light on biblical stories such that the plausibility of an actual first man and an actual first woman looked very dim indeed.

What was Christian theology to do? What was usable in its past and what simply had to be discarded? Giberson notes that not every Christian finds the task of faith without Adam impossible. He speaks favorably of a group he calls traditionalists, who keep the ancient theological questions alive while engaging science at its most

rigorous. He writes that “the success or failure of this response determines the long-term future of Christianity in the developing world.” He contends that fundamentalism on the one hand and too easily capitulating liberalism on the other are not likely to maneuver religion and science going forward.

Fortunately, Giberson does not cast science as the hero in his narrative. Yes, science calls into question some of the principles on which Christian theology has rested, and many Christians have reacted badly. But when science as a discourse has told the history of human origins, it too has had troublesome episodes in which racist ideology has overcome inquiry and created a distorted narrative. On the other hand, Giberson does have a strong inclination to think that science, done right, leads to truth. It is not a neutral enterprise, but it is a good and necessary one.

So is theology. While questioning whether an actual first human is necessary for Christian theology, Giberson wants to save a place for original sin. For him, nature is not all good. He doesn’t believe that humankind in its natural state would be innocent and pure. He doesn’t give a fully convincing account of how to attribute human sin, but he certainly wants to keep a concept of sin. However, abandoning the historical Adam does little to help with the problem of evil. Giberson does not go deeply into this theological question: Can we keep a doctrine of original sin without an original sinner?

This entertaining book is at its best when Giberson is deftly telling the story of how the conflict between science and religion arose along Adamic fault lines. The broader cultural history helps us to understand with more depth why creationists find modern science so threatening. The book makes an important point: all Christians have reason to reckon with Adam, but in Giberson’s view, Adam cannot finally be saved.