

# La Peyrère's Polygenism and Human Species Hierarchy

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## ABSTRACT:

In 1655 La Peyrère was the first to substantially argue for and popularize polygenism—the view that God created multiple original human mating pairs in separate acts of creation with numerous created before Adam. Positing or rejecting polygenism has been central to modern theorizing about human types and origins. Prominent recent interpreters have maintained that La Peyrère's polygenism does not imply a hierarchy of human types. This paper reconstructs La Peyrère's account and, in opposition to the dominant view, argues that his polygenism produces a human species hierarchy. The Adamite species is superior to the Pre-Adamite species in virtue of its material composition, mode of creation, and form. The upshot is that La Peyrère's theological system posits a proto-racialist conception of human types.

**Keywords:** La Peyrère, Pre-Adamism, polygenism, human origins, species, race, racialism

## 1. Introduction

Scholarship on concepts related to race and racism in modern philosophy has generally focused on prominent figures such as Hume and Kant.<sup>1</sup> To a lesser extent, it has examined the influence of Aristotle's claims about "natural slaves," for instance, in the debate between Juan Ginés de Sepúlveda and Bartolomé de las Casas over the Spanish subjugation of Native Americans.<sup>2</sup> Others have drawn attention to the notions of "blood purity" in the Iberian world and the role such notions played in early modern conceptions of race and racism.<sup>3</sup> As part of this larger research agenda in early modern philosophy, this paper sheds light on the underexamined but hugely influential theory

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<sup>1</sup> Examples of scholarship on Hume include Eze, "Hume, Race, and Human Nature," and Roberts, "American Indian Inferiority." Examples of scholarship on Kant include Allais, "Kant's Racism;" Bernasconi, "Who Invented the Concept of Race"; Kleingeld, "Kant's Second Thoughts on Race"; and Mills, "Kant and Race, Redux."

<sup>2</sup> E.g. Castilla, "The Debate of Valladolid," Hanke, *Aristotle and the American Indians*, and Pagden, *The Fall of Natural Man*.

<sup>3</sup> E.g. Martinez, *Limpieza de Sangre*, and Nirenberg, "'Jewish' blood in late medieval Spain."

of polygenism—in particular, La Peyrère's polygenism—as an important element at the root of emerging concepts of race and racism in early modern philosophy.<sup>4</sup>

Isaac de La Peyrère was a seventeenth-century French theologian and early anthropologist best known for popularizing the Pre-Adamite thesis—the claim that people existed prior to Adam and Eve—and the related thesis of polygenesis—the claim that multiple human mating pairs were created by God in temporally distinct acts of creation. The dominant account of human origins—monogenesis—held that all people on Earth are descendants of Adam and Eve. The presence of Native Americans and other indigenous peoples in the “New World” challenged the tenability of monogenesis.<sup>5</sup> It was unclear how Native Americans, separated by a vast ocean from the lineage of Adam and Eve in the “Old World,” could be descendants of Adam and Eve. La Peyrère's Pre-Adamite and polygenetic theses attempt to explain the existence of Native Americans by reinterpreting the Biblical account of God's creation. On La Peyrère's account, the first humans, also called the Gentiles and Pre-Adamites, descend from numerous progenitors created throughout the world before Adam. The second humans are “the Jews” or Adamites and they descend from Adam and Eve. La Peyrère posits a difference of *genus* and *species*—as he understands these terms—between Pre-Adamites and Adamites.

La Peyrère's novel theological system was intended to reconcile faith and reason—to reconcile the Biblical account with non-Biblical histories and the discoveries of people who seemingly could not be descendants of Adam and Eve (*MBA* viii, 22).<sup>6</sup> Ironically, La Peyrère's view mostly had the opposite effect. It was largely perceived as a challenge to Biblical authority.

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<sup>4</sup> An important example of this larger project is Smith, *Concept of Race*.

<sup>5</sup> Kidd, *The Forging of Races*, 29.

<sup>6</sup> See Livingstone, *The Pre-Adamite Theory*, 5–8. I primarily reference the 1655 English translation of La Peyrère's works while using the original Latin where appropriate. “*MBA* viii, 22” refers to *Men Before Adam*, chapter viii, page 22. References to “*TS*,” such as “*TS* III.ii, 137” refers to La Peyrère's *Theological Systeme*, book III, chapter ii, page 137. References to the original Latin use the 1655 version that has *Prae Adamitae* and *Systema Theologicum* bound together in one volume. *ST* = *Systema Theologicum*.

Dozens of book-length responses were written in the following decades and century to refute La Peyrère's account.<sup>7</sup> Well into the nineteenth century, defending or refuting polygenism was central to theorizing about human diversity. The most prominent thinkers who developed theories that engage polygenism include Immanuel Kant, Charles Darwin, and the American scientist Samuel G. Morton, whose adoption of polygenism was central to the development of physical anthropology and scientific racism.<sup>8</sup>

A central question in La Peyrère scholarship is whether his polygenism, in fact, implies a hierarchy of human types. The dominant scholarly view has been that La Peyrère's polygenism *does not* create a hierarchy of human kinds. Justin E. H. Smith, for instance, claims that La Peyrère takes no interest in creating a hierarchy of lower and higher racial types: "preoccupation with 'racial difference' is more or less absent."<sup>9</sup> Recent authors have denied a species or racial hierarchy by focusing on La Peyrère's claim that Pre-Adamites and Adamites are of the same blood.<sup>10</sup> On the dominant reading, La Peyrère's polygenism is "benign" even though polygenism was later adopted by others—especially nineteenth-century Americans—to defend racial hierarchies and slavery.<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> Refutations were written by Samuel Desmarets, Matthew Hale, Johann Hilpert, Antonius Hulsius, Hugo Grotius, Phillippe Le Prieur, Edward Stillingfleet, among others. See Popkin, *Isaac La Peyrère*, 80–81, and Smith, *Concept of Race*, 103–4.

<sup>8</sup> Darwin, *Descent of Man*, Ch. 7; Kant, "On the different races of man"; Morton, *Crania Americana*. For more on Morton, see Brace, *Genesis of the Concept*, 76–92; Fabian, *Skull Collectors*; Fredrickson, *Black Image*, 74–5; and Mitchell, "Morton's cranial race science." For more on the importance of polygenism in the history of the concept of race, see Brace, *Genesis of the Concept*, and James and Burgos, "Race." There is disagreement about whether Hume endorses polygenism: see Popkin, *Isaac La Peyrère*, 147–8; Valls, "Reconsidering Hume's Racism," 132; and Zack, *Philosophy of Science and Race*, 15.

<sup>9</sup> Smith, *Concept of Race*, 102.

<sup>10</sup> Almond, *Adam and Eve*, 57–8; Popkin, *Isaac La Peyrère*, 46. See also Livingstone, *Adam's Ancestors*, 50; Pagden, "Peopling of the New World," 309; Smith *Concept of Race*, 102; and Smith, "Pre-Adamite Controversy," 224, 227, 247.

<sup>11</sup> Popkin, *Isaac La Peyrère*, 165. For nineteenth-century defenses of polygenism, see Morton, *Crania Americana*; Nott & Gliddon, *Types of Mankind*; and Payne, *The Negro*.

My goal in this paper is to challenge the dominant reading and to argue that La Peyrère's account creates a hierarchy of human species. On the view I defend, La Peyrère claims that the two human species—Pre-Adamites and Adamites—are made of different materials, by different modes of creation, and have different forms. I argue that these differences give the two human species distinct essences or natures that ground normative properties—as subsequent racialist conceptions of race do. As such, La Peyrère's essentialism about human species creates a hierarchy of human natures that can be called “proto-racialist.” Though La Peyrère's species hierarchy adopts the essentialism of racialism, the biological essence of a person is not expressed in their phenotypic features on his account as it is in later racialist conceptions.<sup>12</sup> He does not have the conception of “race” as understood in the later seventeenth-century sense as categories of humans based on similarity of phenotype.<sup>13</sup> Nevertheless, I ascribe to La Peyrère a proto-racialism that goes beyond Justin E. H. Smith's admission that La Peyrère's Pre-Adamism “provides the theoretical possibility for what would eventually emerge as a straightforwardly racist system of classification.”<sup>14</sup>

Scholarship on La Peyrère often focuses on his Biblical interpretation or only provides brief summaries of his Pre-Adamite and polygenetic theories.<sup>15</sup> My method in this paper is to

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<sup>12</sup> I draw on Appiah, “Racisms,” Hardimon, *Rethinking Race*, and Isaac, *Invention of Racism* to explain how I use the terms ‘racialist’ and ‘proto-racialist’ in section 4.1 below.

<sup>13</sup> François Bernier is often thought to be the first to categorize humans according to phenotypical features. See his 1684 “A New Division of the Earth.” There is not one conception of race today nor was there in the early modern period (see Bernasconi, “Crossed Lines”; Bethencourt, *Racisms*; Hardimon, “Four Ways of Thinking about Race”; Hardimon, *Rethinking Race*; Martinez, *Limpieza de Sangre*, 11; Smith, *Concept of Race*; Smith, “Curious Kinks”; and Smith “Pre-Adamite Controversy”).

<sup>14</sup> Smith, “Pre-Adamite Controversy,” 247. Rubiés similarly says “no racist form of colonialism was intended by La Peyrère” yet “it made racialized polygenism more thinkable” (“Were Early Modern Europeans Racist,” 53).

<sup>15</sup> E.g. Grafton, *Defenders of the Text*; Jorink, “Emergence”; Malcolm, “Hobbes”; Popkin, “Spinoza and La Peyrère”; Popkin, “Biblical Criticism”; Strauss, *Spinoza's Critique*, 64–85; Tombal, “De la critique biblique.” Popkin's *Isaac La Peyrère (1596–1676): His Life, Work, and Influence* is the most detailed scholarly study of La Peyrère and even his account does not reconstruct La Peyrère's cosmology in much detail. Gliozzi offers extended discussion of La Peyrère's theological arguments and the dialectic between La Peyrère and supporters of monogenism (“L'Américain préadamique,” 427–86).

reconstruct La Peyrère's polygenetic account in more detail and with more precision than has been done so far. To stay focused on this reconstruction, I forgo criticism of La Peyrère's Biblical interpretation. Section 2 reconstructs La Peyrère's account of the first and second creations of humans. Section 3 then examines what a species distinction amounts to. Section 4 argues that La Peyrère's polygenism produces a species hierarchy that amounts to proto-racialism. Section 5 surveys and criticizes the secondary literature.

## 2. Two Creations

La Peyrère's interpretation of the Bible relies heavily on Romans 5:12–4 and Genesis 1–2. His account begins with analysis of Romans 5:12–4, which reads:

As by one man sin entered into the world, and by sin, death: so likewise death had power over all men, because in him all men sinned. *For till the time of the law sin was in the world;* but sin was not imputed, when the law was not. But death reigned from Adam unto Moses, even upon those who had not sinned according to the similitude of the transgression of Adam, who is a type of the future. (*MBA* i, 1–2, emphasis added)<sup>16</sup>

For La Peyrère, this passage shows there was sin in the world *before* the law was given to Adam. Interpreters had taken “the time of the law” to be the law given to Moses, who lived after Adam. On La Peyrère's account, God gave the law first to Adam when he gave him rules about not eating from specific trees (*TS* III.ii, 137–8). Romans 5 thus implies there was sin in the world *before* Adam, which implies that there were sinners, i.e. people, who existed and sinned. So, La Peyrère concludes, there must have been people in existence before Adam:

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<sup>16</sup> This is the 1655 English translation of the version of Romans 5:12–14 that La Peyrère uses in the original Latin. I use the translation of the Bible that is given in the 1655 edition of La Peyrère's works when possible, but otherwise I default to the NRSV.

Pre-Adamite: People existed prior to Adam and Eve.

La Peyrère finds further support for the Pre-Adamite thesis in Genesis 1 and 2 where there appears to be not one but *two* creation accounts. In the first creation account given in Genesis 1, humans are created on the same day as all other creatures and animals—on day six:

<sup>24</sup> And God said, 'Let the earth bring forth living creatures of every kind: cattle and creeping things and wild animals of the earth of every kind.' And it was so...

<sup>26</sup> Then God said, 'Let us make humans in our image, according to our likeness, and let them have dominion over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the air and over the cattle and over all the wild animals of the earth and over every creeping thing that creeps upon the earth.'

<sup>27</sup> So God created humans in his image,  
in the image of God he created them;  
male and female he created them. (Genesis 1:24–7 NRSV)

A second creation account in Genesis 2 frames the creation of humans differently:

In the day that the Lord God made the earth and the heavens, <sup>5</sup> when no plant of the field was yet in the earth and no vegetation of the field had yet sprung up—for the Lord God had not caused it to rain upon the earth, and there was no one to till the ground, <sup>6</sup> but a stream would rise from the earth and water the whole face of the ground—<sup>7</sup> then the Lord God formed man from the dust of the ground and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life, and the man became a living being. <sup>8</sup> And the Lord God planted a garden in Eden, in the east, and there he put the man whom he had formed. (Genesis 2:4–8 NRSV)

Genesis 2 represents the creation of Adam, the progenitor of the Adamites, according to La Peyrère. Notice that the timelines of the creation accounts do not match. Genesis 2 says that humans were created “when no plant of the field was yet in the earth.” However, Genesis 1 puts the creation of plants on day 3, *before* the creation of humans on day 6. The distinct ordering of each account, among other things, suggests mutual exclusivity—that the two accounts were formed separately. Scholars today generally interpret the Genesis creation accounts as different accounts formed independently by different traditions.<sup>17</sup> La Peyrère interprets the two narratives not as two accounts of the same event, but as accounts of *two different* creation events separated by a large amount of time that produced distinct original human mating pairs. And here we arrive at a notion of polygenism:

Basic Polygenism: God created multiple original sets of human mating pairs.

Basic Polygenism can be further analyzed into *synchronous* polygenism and *asynchronous* polygenism depending on whether the creation of multiple human progenitors happened at one time or at different times. The combination of the Pre-Adamite thesis with Basic Polygenism gets us Asynchronous Polygenism:

Asynchronous Polygenism: God created multiple original human progenitor pairs in separate acts of creation at different times and one or more pairs were created before Adam and Eve.

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<sup>17</sup> E.g. see Speiser, *Genesis*, and the footnote to 2:4b–25 on pp. 13 [Hebrew Bible] of *The New Oxford Annotated Bible* 3rd Ed. For La Peyrère's reasons why there must be two creation accounts, see *TS* 136, 147–53 and Gliozzi, “L'Américain préadamique,” 441. Before La Peyrère, Giordano Bruno pointed out that Genesis 1 and 2 appear to provide two creation accounts (Parfitt, “Truth of the Origination,” 7).

Asynchronous polygenism emphasizes that at  $T^1$  God created the progenitors of the Pre-Adamites, as depicted in Genesis 1. At a much later time,  $T^2$ , God created Adam. La Peyrère maintains that Eve was created in a third action at  $T^3$ , temporally *after* Adam was created (*TS* III.ii–iii, 139–44). As we'll see, it turns out that La Peyrère also endorses *synchronous* polygenism though in the first creation only:

Synchronous Polygenism: Multiple original progenitor pairs were created in one act of creation at one time.

Adam was the only human created at  $T^2$  and Eve the only human created at  $T^3$ , but at  $T^1$  God created numerous humans simultaneously. Synchronous polygenism holds that God created many human pairs at one time; asynchronous polygenism holds that God created human pairs at different times. When we combine the asynchronous and synchronous elements of polygenism, we get La Peyrère's polygenism, which I will simply call "polygenism."

Polygenism: God created multiple original human progenitor pairs and numerous such pairs were created at one time before Adam and Eve.

Polygenism holds that at time  $T^1$ —the first creation—God created multiple original Pre-Adamite pairs in one act. At  $T^2$  and  $T^3$  God created Adam and Eve, respectively, in acts *distinct* from God's action at  $T^1$ . Polygenism, on its own, does not require that there be a difference in *kind* between the first humans and Adam. It claims only that human pairs were created and existed temporally



before the creation of Adam. La Peyrère does not ever use the word 'polygenism' or its cognates, though later interpreters use it to describe his account. La Peyrère also does not explicitly distinguish between synchronous and asynchronous polygenism, but I think these concepts help clarify what polygenism refers to in La Peyrère's account.

Importantly, the synchronous element of polygenism helps La Peyrère explain the existence of indigenous people in geographical locations of the world that could not have been populated by descendants of Adam and Eve. La Peyrère derives Synchronous Polygenism from Genesis 1 through creative interpretation. His interpretation presumes that all the earth was created *for* humans. Hence, wherever God created vegetation or livestock, that vegetation and livestock was intended for humans and no other purpose (*TS III.i*, 131). Given that God created vegetation all over the earth—which is perhaps derivable from Genesis 1:11–2—humans must have been created all over the earth such that no vegetation was created in vain:

men were made by God Male and Female in one day, with an uninterrupted Creation, and upon the whole earth, and that there was no place in the whole earth wch [sic] brought forth grass, fostered trees & cattel, which before the sixth and last day of the absolute Creation had not its own men and its own Lords. (*TS III.i*, 131)

The first humans were “originally created in all the earth” and “had their stocks and originals, not from one man, but innumerable fathers of the first creation” (*TS II.xi*, 126). Humans thus exist on remote islands and faraway lands (relative to the Adamites) because their original ancestors were created there through synchronous polygenism.

### 3. Species Distinction

La Peyrère's polygenism goes beyond an explanation of the existence of indigenous peoples. He uses his interpretation of the Bible to postulate a distinction in *genus* and *species* between first and second humans. The second creation produced humans who were different in "kind" (*genere*) and "affection to their kind"; they were "begotten of another stock" (*TS* III.v, 153).<sup>18</sup> In the seventeenth century, the Latin word '*genus*' was sometimes used synonymously with the French word '*race*' to denote lineage.<sup>19</sup> La Peyrère appears to also use the word '*genus*' to refer to lineage. Differences in genus explain the diversity within Pre-Adamites. The Pre-Adamite species is differentiated into peoples (*genus*) according to their lineage traceable to their "originals" created at different geographical locations. The genus distinction also describes a difference between Pre-Adamite peoples and Adamites—they have different first progenitors and hence different lineages.

La Peyrère also posits a species (*species*) distinction between Adamites and Pre-Adamites: "But not onely by kindred [*genere*], and exposition of kindred [*genere*] did God distinguish the Jews from the Gentiles but would have them different in the species [*specie*] it self" (*TS* II.xi, 121–2).<sup>20</sup> In the rest of this section, I examine what makes Adamite people different in species from Pre-Adamite people, i.e. what La Peyrère takes a human species distinction to be. I argue that the Adamite species is distinct from the Pre-Adamite species in virtue of its form—and the form of a human is dependent on its material make-up and the mode by which it is formed or "framed."

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<sup>18</sup> At one point La Peyrère frames the genus distinction quite strongly: "So farre were the Gentiles different in relation [*cognationes*] and kindred [*generis*] from the Jews, as those divers species of creatures in unknown Countries are from those which we know [*Tanta vero intercapedine cognationis et generis distabant Iudaei a gentilibus, ut qua ratione plures dantur regionibus incognitis animantium incognitae itidem species*]" (*TS* II.xi, 124; *ST* II.xi, 145).

<sup>19</sup> Smith, *Concept of Race*, 160–61. Kant would later distinguish between race and *genus* such that a *genus* distinction is a difference of the original progenitor from which a people spring. A racial distinction occurs among people who stem from the same original progenitor but who have deviated from the "original stem-formation" and maintain themselves over protracted generations even when transplanted to new geographical locations. See Kant's "On the different races of men."

<sup>20</sup> Latin: "*Sed neque genere tantum, et significatione illa generis distinxit Deus Iudaeos a Gentilibus: sed etiam specie ipsa differre utrosq[ue voluit]*" (*ST* II.xi, 143). Some editions of the Latin do not include what I have put in brackets.

La Peyrère holds that the Pre-Adamites and Adamites are made of different material. He claims to derive this from the Genesis creation accounts:

It is first said, That God created Adam of the clay of the earth: Where observe, that God, who in the first Chapter created man not simply of the earth, but of that first matter of which he made the earth; in this second Chapter fram'd Adam of the dust of the earth. (*TS* III.ii, 136–7)

La Peyrère is taking interpretive liberty here. The Genesis 1 account does not specify what material God used to create first humans. On La Peyrère's view, the first humans were made of primitive matter as all of creation was made (*TS* V.vii, 330). The Gentiles are "the off-spring of that earth which likewise brought forth other creatures" (*TS* II.xi, 122). In contrast, Adam was made of more refined material: the matter that had already been formed into "clay of the earth" was given another layer of refinement in the creation of Adam. The material difference between Pre-Adamites and Adamites is an important point that will come up again in section 5.1 where I discuss interpretations that differ from my own. As will become more explicit in the next section, the humans of the second creation are made of more perfect material, according to La Peyrère.

In addition to their material difference, the two species were made through different modes of creation. The Pre-Adamite humans were created by the "word" of God whereas Adam was made from the dust of the earth by the "hand" of God (*TS* II.x, 113). Genesis 2 does not explicitly mention the hand of God; La Peyrère infers this. Drawing on the prophet Isaiah, La Peyrère offers a vague argument that "the Jews are truly and properly called the work of the hands of the Lord" and "sons of God" (*TS* II.x, 114–5). The Pre-Adamites, in contrast, are less divine because they are created by God's word and not by his hands. The mode of creation distinguishes first and second humans because God created the first humans *and all other creatures* by his word (*TS* II.x,

112; *TS* III.v, 154). La Peyrère writes: “you shall finde the species of the Gentiles promiscuously created with the rest of the creatures in the same day of Creation, which is diligently to be observed, that a day did not distinguish them whom the nature of their Creation did not distinguish” (*TS* II.xi, 122). Adam, on the other hand, was made by a *special* act of creation—he is set apart from all other creatures and God used his hands. This indicates, according to La Peyrère, that the Pre-Adamite creation by God’s word is a less perfect framing than the Adamite framing.<sup>21</sup>

The differences of material and mode of creation are La Peyrère’s evidence that the two species are “framed” or formed differently: “The framing [*formatio*] of Adam was altogether different from the creation of the first men” (*TS* III.ii, 135). Adam was made of more perfect material and through a more perfect mode of creation. However, La Peyrère’s account runs into a problem of consistency here. Genesis 1 says that the first humans are made “in the image of God” and no similar claim is made about the second humans in Genesis 2. This could be interpreted as evidence that the first humans are just as divine (i.e. perfect) or more divine than the second humans. La Peyrère’s solution is to claim that both the Pre-Adamite and Adamite people were created in God’s image. He preserves the greater perfection of the second species by claiming the two species are created in *different* images of God:

the impression of Gods Image in the first creation is different from that in the second creation. God expressed in the first Creation that first Image and copie of his wonderful art [*artis*], by which he made the World, and all that therein is, and by excellent wisdom compos’d and ponder’d them. In his renewing, which is the second creation, God express’d the Image of his own nature, wherein he communicated his love and bounty to the World.

God in his first creation shewed the out-side of his work: but in the second he opened the

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<sup>21</sup> For more on this, see Gliozzi, “L’Américain préadamique,” 441.

bowels of his love. The first creation expressed the Image of God, which we may call the exterior: the second creation presents us with the internal Image of God. (*TS* I.iv, 18–19)

The first creation of humans was a first expression of God's art or craftsmanship—the same art by which God made *all* of creation (*TS* I.iv, 19). Pre-Adamites express the “exterior” image of God and were *not* made in the image of God's nature itself (*TS* I.iv, 19). The second creation expressed the internal image of God, the image of God's own nature. Hence, Adam was “otherways” created by God than the Gentiles—with a different form (*formatione*) (*TS* III.ii, 135; *TS* III.v, 154).<sup>22</sup>

On my reading of La Peyrère, the mode of creation and the quality of God's image impressed upon a creature indicates how “excellent” or perfect a creature is (*TS* I.iv, 19). Additionally, the material composition of a thing determines the maximum perfection capacity it can have, i.e. the upper limit of God's nature it can express. La Peyrère says the framing of Pre-Adamites made them the “most excellent amongst all the frames of the creatures” in the first creation (*TS* I.iv, 19). However, the material and mode of creation determined that the upper bound of God's image they can express is God's “external” image. The superior material and mode of creation used to create Adam allowed for him to contain greater perfection than Pre-Adamites. Hence, Adam was suitable for receiving the “internal” form of God's image, the image of God's nature itself, which was duplicated in Eve.<sup>23</sup> The material composition and form of an original mating pair were then passed down to offspring (*MBA* vi, 15).

In sum, the Adamites, who originate in Adam and Eve, are different in *genus* and *species* from the Pre-Adamites (*TS* II.xi, 121–2). There is a difference of *genus* because the Pre-Adamites

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<sup>22</sup> La Peyrère's view appears to have been influenced by scholastic hylomorphism. Little is known of La Peyrère's education except that he was trained as a lawyer (Popkin, *Isaac La Peyrère*, 5). An education in scholasticism would have been typical in the seventeenth century for Calvinists in Bordeaux, France, where La Peyrère grew up.

<sup>23</sup> Eve is made of the same material as Adam, which was transferred to her through Adam's rib (*TS* III.ii, 139). She was built (*aedificanda*) in a way more excellent than all the women of the first creation (*TS* III.ii, 140). So Eve appears to have been made by God's hands and to have the same form as Adam, though La Peyrère does not specify this.

have different first progenitors than the Adamites. There is a difference of *species* because all the progenitors of the Pre-Adamites are distinct from Adam and Eve in their form, which is determined, in part, by their material composition and mode of creation.

#### **4. Hierarchy Among Human Species**

In this section, I argue explicitly that La Peyrère's species distinction produces a hierarchy of human natures. Further, the essential superiority of the Adamites over the Pre-Adamites has normative implications and is proto-racialist. La Peyrère's comparisons of Pre-Adamites to beasts reinforces the essentialist hierarchy.

##### **4.1 Essential Superiority**

The greater perfection and divinity of Adamite humans makes them superior to the first humans. As La Peyrère puts it, the Jews were "made of the clay of the earth. Wherefore God is said in Deut. 26. To have made the Jews higher than all the Nations he had created" (*TS* II.x, 113). The Adamite humans were made "higher" as sons of God in their "fabrick [*formatione*]," i.e. in their form (*TS* II.x, 112). In the second creation of humans, God sought to "advance their perfection, above the perfection of [first] men" (*TS* I.vi, 28, insert added). Adam "did so much excel all other men who were created before, and begotten till his time" (*TS* III.ii, 140).

The higher status of Adamite people is a natural property with normative implications. In particular, the higher Adamite nature is superior in its disposition to act virtuously:

And David, to deterre the sons of Adam, the Jews, from such deeds of the Gentiles, shows them what the Gentiles were, and what punishment they were to expect for their wickednesse in the same Psalm, and in the next words, They erre, say they, being sinners

from the womb; they are sinners from their nativity;...Sons of wrath by nature; for by nature, is the same as from the womb. (*TS* II.x, 116)

The first humans are sinners “from the womb,” “from nativity,” and “by nature.” However, in an earlier passage, La Peyrère says that first humans were created “excellently good and perfect” (*TS* I.v, 23). He reconciles these two claims by maintaining that the matter or flesh of first humans is faulty yet better expresses the “nature” of first humans:

The perfection of the Creation of Men, flowed from God, and happened to man externally, as a thing different, nay, quite contrary to the flesh and matter of men. On the contrary, the faultiness of the clay and composition, cleaved to them more inwardly, as a thing proper and natural to Men. (*TS* I.v, 26)

The perfection of God's framing is “refused” and overcome by “the nature and flesh of man” (*TS* I.v, 26). So, while the first creation of humans was perfect of its own kind, the “nature” and “flesh” of first humans is especially “wicked,” and this consigned the first humans to a lower grade of perfection than Adamite people (*TS* I.v, 27). Again drawing on the Bible, La Peyrère claims that the first humans are essentially wicked:

they drink sin as fishes drink water. That their devices and thoughts are evil from their youth, Gen. 8. That 'tis by their own nature and disposition. But as the Ethiopian changes not his skin, nor the Leopard his spots, because they are naturally born with him, no more can men do good having learned evil, evil being likewise born in them, that by the help of their nature they are perverse, and by their inbred wickednesse. (*TS* I.viii, 40)

La Peyrère thus adopts an essentialist view of the two species of humans. A human has good-making or bad-making properties that are essential, i.e. built into to their very nature, and arise

from their species as a descendant of the first creation or the second creation. Evil is more present in first humans by “nature” (*TS* I.viii, 40).<sup>24</sup>

The hierarchy does not merely show that the Pre-Adamite people are *less developed than* the Adamite people, it shows that the first humans are “bad”:

And when St. Paul writes in the first of the Romans, That all the creation is subject to vanity: Understand the first creation, which of it self is vain, flying, and like a first dream. Wherefore, Nature her self being bad, made those of the first creation lyers, and wicked. Therefore the Jews who truly speak justice, are the sons of Adam, The sinners the Gentiles, who spake lyes. (*TS* II.x, 117)

The nature of Pre-Adamite people is bad and gives them a disposition for vice. By contrast, the Adamite people have a disposition for virtue (*TS* I.vi, 28; see also *TS* V.vii, 330). Each species has good or bad properties that are unalterable and naturally determined by the material and form of the species.

La Peyrère's polygenism thus posits a hierarchy of human species that is proto-racialist. Following Michael Hardimon, a *racialist* conception of race “maintains that races have intrinsic biological essences, are distinguished by normatively important features such as intelligence and moral character, and can, on the basis of these features, be objectively ranked as superior and inferior.”<sup>25</sup> On Hardimon's account, the racial essence of a group X underlies and explains the “distinctive visible physical features” common and peculiar to members of X that are necessary

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<sup>24</sup> La Peyrère suggests that there is some goodness in first humans (though it is a goodness in all creatures): “for it belongeth to a Gentile, and to humane nature, to do good to such, as doe good to them. Yea, it is common to all other creatures to return a like for a like, which is a natural retaliation” (*TS* II.vii, 95). He also suggests first humans have retained some semblance of perfection: “That there remains yet some foot-steps of this perfection in the hearts of men; yea, that men are struck with a natural and tacit conscience of it, is manifest; because all those who are formed of a better and more perfect mould, are naturally more averse from all sin” (*TS* I.v, 27). La Peyrère appears to be claiming that first and second humans both have some natural aversion to sin, though second humans are more averse.

<sup>25</sup> Hardimon, *Rethinking Race*, 2. In the same work, see also pp. 12–26.



and sufficient for membership in X “and play an explanatory role in accounting for the makeup and behavior of members of X.”<sup>26</sup> Racialism is a form of essentialism.<sup>27</sup> Put succinctly, a racialist conception attributes to a group of people (1) an unchangeable essence (2) that is biological and underlies phenotypic properties and (3) entails normatively important features like goodness or intelligence.

To track racialism among thinkers before the modern era, Benjamin Isaac proposes the concept of “proto-racism” which he defines as attributing to groups of people essential natures without grounding those essential natures in the “biological determinism” that emerged in the modern period.<sup>28</sup> Isaac uses the term ‘racism’ instead of ‘racialism,’ though the same conception is being tracked. Whereas *racism* posits “the superiority of one group over another, based on presumed physiological characteristics,” *proto-racism* posits the same thing but lacks “the biological elements of modern racism.”<sup>29</sup> The biological element includes physiological traits such as “skin color, eye color and eye form, hair color and hair form, shape of the nose, stature and cephalic index.”<sup>30</sup> Further, a mark of proto-racism is that the presumed characteristics of a group are “not based on direct observation or when they are so based, then they are made in denial of reality.”<sup>31</sup> In comparison to racism, a proto-racist (or proto-racialist) view thus (1) attributes unalterable essences to types or classes of people and (3) those essences entail further normative properties. Proto-racism does not include (2), namely, a biological essence that is expressed through phenotypic features.

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<sup>26</sup> Hardimon, *Rethinking Race*, 16.

<sup>27</sup> For more on the notion of racialism, see Appiah, “Racisms,” 4–5, and Isaac, *Invention of Racism*, 163.

<sup>28</sup> Isaac, *Invention of Racism*, 5, 38.

<sup>29</sup> Isaac, *Invention of Racism*, 37.

<sup>30</sup> Isaac, *Invention of Racism*, 29.

<sup>31</sup> Isaac, *Invention of Racism*, 164.

La Peyrère's species hierarchy is proto-racialist and not racialist, on my view, because his system maintains (1) and (3) but does not fully maintain (2). I say "does not fully maintain" because although La Peyrère appears to have a *de re* (and not *de dicto*) biological conception of human essences, the biological essences he posits do not express themselves in patterns of distinctive visible phenotypes. He lacked a phenotypical conception of human types that would emerge with Bernier.<sup>32</sup> As Smith is right to point out, La Peyrère was more concerned with Biblical interpretation and explaining the dispersion of humans across the globe than with categorizing humans according to phenotype.<sup>33</sup>

La Peyrère's account might be considered biological in three respects. First, he differentiates human species in terms of their material composition. La Peyrère presumably lacked the concept of "the biological," but the matter to which La Peyrère refers is matter that belongs to the division of nature we regard as "biological." Second, offspring inherit their species essence, including their material or biological composition, from their ancestors (*MBA* vi, 15). Third, there are two passages that suggest La Peyrère recognizes phenotypic differences between human groups. As we saw above, he quotes the Bible as saying that Ethiopian skin color is natural and unchangeable (*TS* I.viii, 40). He also claims that the Jews and the Canaanites are different in stature by drawing on Numbers chapter 13: The "sons of Anac" were "men of mighty stature, and monsters, in regard of the Jews, who were but little men" (*TS* II.viii, 100).

I do not think these passages imply that species essences are expressed through phenotypes for La Peyrère. He appears to mention Ethiopian skin color only as a Biblical example of something that is natural and unchangeable: "as the Ethiopian changes not his skin, nor the Leopard his spots, because they are naturally born with him, no more can men do good having learned evil,

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<sup>32</sup> See Smith, *Concept of Race*, 111 and Stuurman, "François Bernier."

<sup>33</sup> Smith, *Concept of Race*, 102–13.

evil being likewise born in them..." (TS I.viii, 40). Further, other *genus* of Pre-Adamites besides Ethiopians may have the same skin color as Adamites. And other *genus* of Pre-Adamites besides Canaanites may have had the same stature as Adamites. La Peyrère does not tell us, which suggests that skin color and stature are not expressions of one's species. So La Peyrère's claims about phenotypic differences do not imply that visible physical features play an explanatory role in determining the essential nature and normative traits of a species. Rather, the essential nature of a human is determined by their family lineage, according to La Peyrère, which determines genus and species. Even if there are some phenotypic differences to be found in La Peyrère's account, and such differences correlate with the two species, there is little indication that phenotypic features are an expression of one's species for La Peyrère.

In sum, La Peyrère claims that the two human species are *materially* different, which may amount to a "biological" difference, but he is not explicit that this amounts to phenotypic differences which is a feature of many subsequent modern conceptions of race. He thus does not have a racist view, but he does have a proto-racist view.<sup>34</sup>

## 4.2 Beasts

Commentators have suggested that the lowering of a species or race of humans to the status of animality is an indicator of hierarchy and racism. Fredrickson writes that secular or scientific

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<sup>34</sup> I maintain that La Peyrère's system is proto-racist, but I recognize that if the scope of racism were widened, then La Peyrère's account would be racist. Invoking a broad definition of racism is the strategy Isaac takes to identify ancient forms of racism. Similarly, one could use a broader definition of racism that does not require the expression of a biological essence through phenotypic features. On this definition, La Peyrère's account would be racist. Given that conceptions of race and species were in flux in the seventeenth century and conceptions of race and racism are under dispute today, I'm not opposed to attributing racism to La Peyrère's account if a broader definition of racism is adopted. La Peyrère wrote in Latin and so does not use the French word 'race.' However, the Latin terms *genus* and *species* were sometimes used interchangeably with 'race' in the period (Smith, *Concept of Race*, 148, 160). By labeling La Peyrère's account proto-racist, I do not mean to soften my claim that his system is essentialist and perniciously so. I use the term 'proto-racism,' in part, to be careful about avoiding anachronistic use of our conception of racism.

racism was opened up as a possibility “by considering human beings part of the animal kingdom rather than viewing them in biblical terms as children of God endowed with spiritual capacities denied to other creations.”<sup>35</sup> Smith denies the presence of racial hierarchy in La Peyrère by claiming that “there is, for one thing, no suggestion in La Peyrère that not descending from Adam is tantamount to animality.”<sup>36</sup>

However, a careful reading of La Peyrère shows that he *does* closely connect the first humans to the (non-human) animal kingdom. All the species of animals are made of the same material and through the same mode of creation as first humans, as we saw in section 3. However, the form of first humans is above non-human animals and below the second humans. The first humans were made “above” all other creatures: they “were created according to such an Image of creation, which above all other Images of creation is the most excellent amongst all the frames of the creatures, which more expressly and more highly represented the Creator” (*TS* I.iv, 19). So, the first humans share their material composition and mode of creation with all other creatures, but the first humans express more of God’s image—they were given a higher form—than non-human animals.

Nevertheless, the first humans seemingly resemble non-human animals more than they resemble Adamite humans. The creaturely status of the first humans is reinforced through La Peyrère’s interpretation of how God found a suitable helper for Adam, depicted at Genesis 2:18–9:

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<sup>35</sup> Fredrickson, *Racism*, 57. Fredrickson attributes the opening of the possibility of racism to writers after La Peyrère: “Whatever their intentions, Linnaeus, Blumenbach, and other eighteenth-century ethnologists opened the way to a secular or scientific racism by considering human beings part of the animal kingdom rather than viewing them in biblical terms as children of God endowed with spiritual capacities denied to other creatures. Earlier versions of ‘the great chain of being’ extending from God to the most humble of his creations had posited an unbridgeable gap between the human and the nonhuman that was now being closed” (*Racism*, 57).

<sup>36</sup> Smith, “Pre-Adamite Controversy,” 224. Bernasconi frames this claim differently. He writes that La Peyrère “did not resolve the question of whether Native Americans, Africans, and Europeans, in spite of their different origins were each of them human” (“Who Invented the Concept of Race,” 19).

<sup>18</sup> Then the Lord God said, 'It is not good that the man should be alone; I will make him a helper as his partner.'<sup>19</sup> So out of the ground the Lord God formed every animal of the field and every bird of the air and brought them to the man to see what he would call them, and whatever the man called every living creature, that was its name.<sup>20</sup> The man gave names to all cattle and to the birds of the air and to every animal of the field, but for the man there was not found a helper as his partner.

This passage suggests that God created the non-human animals for the purpose of finding a "helper" for Adam. On La Peyrère's reading, however, God did not search through non-human beasts and fowl of the earth, but God did search through the first humans for an appropriate helper for Adam:

Adam call'd by their names all creatures, and all Fowls, and all Beasts of the earth. But for Adam, sayes Genesis, was not found a helper like to himself. It would be absurd to think, that a helper was sought for Adam amongst the Beasts of the earth, and the Fowls of heaven. For, what similitude or relation has a[n Adamite] man with a four-footed Beast or a Bird? But here you must observe, that the Gentiles, and those men of the first creation, are here numbered amongst the rest of the living creatures, as you shall finde them without distinction called with the rest of the beasts, The People that treads the earth, Isa. 42. Yea, that they were called Beasts by the Jews, and so esteem'd, as is prov'd before. (*TS III.iii*, 144, insert added)

La Peyrère asserts that the correct interpretation of Genesis is that "Adam did not find a helper amongst the Females of those creatures, that is, the Gentiles" (*TS III.iii*, 144).<sup>37</sup> No woman of the first creation was good enough for Adam (*TS III.ii*, 140). La Peyrère's interpretation shows that he

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<sup>37</sup> Interestingly, La Peyrère also thought that there was no distinction between male and female in the first creation of humans. Females were simply called "man" (*TS III.ii*, 139–40).

grouped the first humans with all other created “beasts.” This reinforces the point that the Gentiles were created with the same material and mode of creation as non-human creatures (*TS* II.x, 112; *TS* II.xi, 122–3).

To top things off, La Peyrère refers to the non-Adamic species as “beasts [*bestiae*]” over twenty times in his works.<sup>38</sup> The totality of this evidence suggests that the Pre-Adamites are inferior to the Adamites. In their material composition and mode of creation, the Pre-Adamites are in the same category as non-human animals. In terms of form, the Pre-Adamites are between “beasts” and Adam. According to the criteria of Fredrickson and Smith, this suggests that La Peyrère's species hierarchy embodies a feature of later racial hierarchies.<sup>39</sup>

## 5. Prior Interpretations

The scholarly consensus has been that La Peyrère's polygenism does *not* create a hierarchy of human kinds.<sup>40</sup> Popkin, for instance, maintains that “La Peyrère's polygenetic theory, *through no fault of his own*, soon became the basis of a virulent theory of racism directed against the American Indian and the Negro slaves.”<sup>41</sup> Livingstone claims that La Peyrère's account “was bereft of its later associations with certain forms of racial prejudice.”<sup>42</sup> Smith claims that La Peyrère's account of human diversity “did not have anything to do with ‘race’ in the way this would come to be understood over a century later” as phenotype-based essences with normative implications.<sup>43</sup> On

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<sup>38</sup> For some instances of this, see *TS* II.ix, 107–11.

<sup>39</sup> Fredrickson, *Racism*, 57; Smith, “Pre-Adamite Controversy,” 224.

<sup>40</sup> Almond, *Adam and Eve*; Livingstone, *Adam's Ancestors*; Popkin, *Isaac La Peyrère*; and Smith, *Concept of Race*.

<sup>41</sup> Popkin, “Spinoza and La Peyrère,” 185, emphasis added.

<sup>42</sup> Livingstone, *Adam's Ancestors*, 50.

<sup>43</sup> Smith, “Pre-Adamite Controversy,” 231.

Smith's account, La Peyrère takes no interest in creating a hierarchy of lower and higher racial types.<sup>44</sup> This section examines and criticizes prior interpretations of La Peyrère's polygenism.

### 5.1 Flesh and Blood

Scholars draw on La Peyrère's claims that Pre-Adamite and Adamite peoples have the same flesh and blood (*TS* II.i, 59). The foremost interpreter of La Peyrère, Richard Popkin, writes,

La Peyrère also insisted that the Jews had no racial superiority. Considering how his theory was later to be used by European racists, it is good to remember that he said, 'For they [the Jews] were made up of the same flesh and blood as the Gentiles and were tempered with the same clay of which other men were framed.'<sup>45</sup>

On Popkin's view, La Peyrère "did not at all try to place one group of mankind above another. Despite his philosemitism, La Peyrère still insisted that, biologically, Jews were made of the same stuff as everybody else."<sup>46</sup> La Peyrère's polygenetic theory was "benign" even though it was later adopted by others to defend racial hierarchies and slavery.<sup>47</sup> Philip Almond similarly claims that "La Peyrère himself saw all people as biologically identical."<sup>48</sup>

In addition to the evidence presented in section 3 that the two human species are materially different, a closer look at the context of La Peyrère's claim about flesh and blood suggests that Popkin and Almond have misinterpreted La Peyrère's claim. By saying humans all have the same "flesh and blood," La Peyrère means that *all humans are made of corruptible matter*—to a lesser

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<sup>44</sup> Smith, *Concept of Race*, 102; Smith, "Pre-Adamite Controversy," 227. Gliozzi similarly maintains that there is no hierarchy in La Peyrère's polygenism. However, Gliozzi thinks that in the next decades after La Peyrère's work was published, the theory of polygenism was used to justify commercial chattel slavery ("L'Américain préadamique," 473–86).

<sup>45</sup> Popkin, *Isaac La Peyrère*, 46. Popkin is referring to *TS* II.i, 59 in this passage.

<sup>46</sup> Popkin, *Isaac La Peyrère*, 146.

<sup>47</sup> Popkin, *Isaac La Peyrère*, 46, 165.

<sup>48</sup> Almond, *Adam and Eve*, 57–8.

or greater extent—even while all humans derive from God. Having the same blood does not mean that Adamites are made of the same matter as Pre-Adamites. To show this, I quote at length a difficult section of La Peyrère's *Men Before Adam* entitled, "St. Paul is explained in the 17<sup>th</sup> Chapter of the Acts. Of one blood, not of one Adam." This section is concerned with interpreting Paul's claim at Acts 17:26, which reads, "From one ancestor he [God] made all nations to inhabit the whole earth" (NRSV, insert added).<sup>49</sup> La Peyrère argues that Acts 17:26 is not evidence against polygenism:

That which is brought concerning St. Paul's speaking in the council of the Areopagites, Acts 17. moves me not. 'That God made all mankind of one blood.' For we shall not conclude from hence, as is the common opinion, that all men sprung from Adam. Nay, only this, that God fram'd all men of the same matter [*materia*], of the same earth, of the same dust [*carne*], of the same bloud. Which is a common phrase in the Scripture...Nor is it to be passed by, that the Apostle in this place of the Acts expressly distinguishes matter [*materia*] from bloud [*progenia hominum*]. Matter [*materium*] he made of blood [*sanguine*]: but deriv'd their succession from God, where he says, 'he made all mankind of one blood [*sanguine*];' Then concludes, '*Therefore we are the Off-spring of God.*' He did not say, *Since we are the Off-spring of Adam.* As speaking then not to the Jews, but to Gentiles, the Athenians: and had a regard not to that particular, in which God form'd in Adam the Jews his particular sons: but that general one in which God form'd Nature, and

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<sup>49</sup> Some authoritative ancient texts do not include "ancestor," and some read "from one blood" instead of "from one ancestor" (See the note to Acts 17:26 in *The New Oxford Annotated Bible* pp. NT 187). The King James Version says God "hath made of one blood all nations of men." La Peyrère either does not have a version of Acts that includes "ancestor," or he ignores this variation of the text. In section 25 of the Latin version of *Men before Adam* La Peyrère says in a footnote that the Latin Vulgate translates Acts 17:26 as simply "from one," and he claims the Greek autograph expressly reads "from one blood." La Peyrère's note discussing the textual variations of Acts 17:26 was not included in the English translation of 1655.



all men, according to his own image, and according to which all men are called indistinctly the Off-spring of God. (*MBA* xxv, 59, emphasis added)<sup>50</sup>

On my reading, La Peyrère's discussion of blood here is an attempt to interpret Acts 17:26 as meaning that we are not all descendants of Adam, but we are all descendants of God. Paul is not speaking of the *particularities* of the creation of Adam, but of the *similarity* between the first and second creation: all humans are offspring of God and are created in God's image. La Peyrère's distinction between the external and internal image of God allows him to claim that all humans are made in God's image and hence are "of one blood," so to speak, even while maintaining a species distinction based in part on creation in the external or internal image of God (*TS* I.iv, 18–9). So, having the same blood and flesh, in this passage, does not mean first and second humans are biologically or materially the same, for La Peyrère. Rather, it means that both species are derived from God even though the second humans are more divine.

In the *Theological Systeme* passage that Popkin cites (*TS* II.i, 59), La Peyrère similarly uses equality of "blood" and "flesh" in a way that does not imply material or formal equality. The two species are of the same flesh, blood, and clay, but La Peyrère interprets this as meaning "that the Jews were born unclean, as other men were born unclean" (*TS* II.i, 60).<sup>51</sup> The ground or clay "of which Adam and all other men were made" was "not choice," but "common" and "unclean" (*TS* II.i, 60). Uncleaness is synonymous with unelect: "for common, and not elect, and unclean, are

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<sup>50</sup> The original English translation uses italics to depict La Peyrère's voice and non-italics to depict quotes. I have altered this and use quotation marks to depict quotes and have put La Peyrère's voice in regular font.

<sup>51</sup> The notion of "blood" here is connected to "cleanliness." La Peyrère's emphasis on the equality of Adamic and Gentile "blood" may have been a reaction against the notion of "*limpieza de sangre*," i.e. "blood purity," that was used to track Jewish converts to Christianity (*conversos*) and their descendants to deprive them of institutional resources (see Martinez, *Limpieza de Sangre*). According to this notion of "blood purity," one's blood could be tainted depending on one's religion or biogeographical lineage. La Peyrère's insistence that Jewish blood is the same as non-Jewish blood and his claims that the form and material constitution of Jewish people is superior to non-Jewish people suggest that his account of polygenesis represented an effort to undermine Christian Europe's "sustained intellectual rejection of its Jewish origins" as Keel describes the general trend (*Divine Variations*, 9).

the same" (*TS* II.i, 60).<sup>52</sup> Both species were seemingly made of "vicious matter," though the Pre-Adamites to a greater extent (*TS* I.iv, 18). So, when La Peyrère says the two species are made of the same flesh, blood, and clay, he clarifies that he means this in a non-literal way, i.e. it means that both species of humans are born unclean and unelect even though they both derive from God. It does not mean that the two species are materially or biologically the same nor does it nullify the lesser normative status of Pre-Adamite people.<sup>53</sup>

## 5.2 Mystical Election and Grafting

Commentators have suggested that the election of Gentiles precludes any hierarchy. Being "elect" is a state of being chosen or saved by God for some purpose or otherwise having God's favor. As Popkin puts it, "everyone—pre-Adamite, Adamite, and post-Adamite, would share in the world to come and would be saved *no matter who they were or what they believed*."<sup>54</sup> Livingstone writes that La Peyrère "sought to integrate all peoples within the divine economy and rejected any notion of racial superiority, even of the Jews, through whom the redemption of the world was secured."<sup>55</sup> La Peyrère's polygenism advocated "communalism" and "humanitarianism," according to Livingstone, which were transformed into "elitism" and "bigotry" in later polygenetic accounts.<sup>56</sup> The possibility of the first species of humans becoming elect suggests that their lower status can

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<sup>52</sup> The excellence of Adam is what *caused* his election: "For this man in the second creation did so much excell all other men who were created before, and begotten till his time; for which cause he was to be the first, and the Father of a Nation chosen by God, and by which he was to represent, by Gods decree, all mankind" (*TS* III.ii, 140).

<sup>53</sup> In another passage, La Peyrère appears to claim equality of material composition: "According to that same Communion and mystical society, the sin of Adam was imputed to other men. For although Adam was made by Gods hands, by a peculiar and choice way of framing, beyond other men: yet God had fram'd him, as in other places. I took notice of the same clay, of the same common earth, and of the same matter, subject to corruption, in which all other men were created. And in all things was Adam made like other men, with sin also. Yea even as sin was a natural imperfection, to all inherent, and proper to Adam himself, and so to all men" (*TS* V.ii, 291–2). Yet even in this passage, La Peyrère's claim is that both species are subject to corruption and sin, even though God framed Adam as a higher being.

<sup>54</sup> Popkin, "Philosophical Basis," 252, emphasis in original.

<sup>55</sup> Livingstone, *Adam's Ancestors*, 50.

<sup>56</sup> Livingstone, *Adam's Ancestors*, 221–2.

be nullified, and they can become part of the Adamic species in a material, formal, and normative sense.

Some evidence for this comes from La Peyrère's apparent claims at *TS I.x*, 49–54 that Gentiles can rise to the same status as Jews through the mystical election of the Jews: “It appears likewise by the Scriptures, that mystical rivers of mystical Election flowed from the Jews and Jewish Nation, upon all Nations, and men of all Nations” (*TS I.x*, 51). He goes on to say that God shall fully take in both Jew and Gentile, when he shall return in the Spirit; and because when his time is come, he shall raise both Jews and Gentiles, being regenerate, with his perfect holiness, and crown them with eternal life. God chose the Jews and the Gentiles in his eternal Election, *without making any difference betwixt Jew and Gentile*....Yea, God again chose the Gentiles by a mystical Election whom he had chosen in the Jews before; inasmuch as he adopted strangers<sup>57</sup> into the Family of the Jews; or inasmuch as he grafted a wild Olive in the Olive-stock of the Jews. (*TS I.x*, 51–2, emphasis added)

La Peyrère goes on to suggest that God's future mystical election will eliminate any difference between the two human species:

Jews and the Gentiles in one body shall be joyn'd together in one Election, and by which at last the regeneration of both shall be perfected, that at the end of time God may grant unto them both resurrection, and life eternal, without difference of Jew or Gentile. (*TS I.x*, 54)

Jews and Gentiles will share in one election, and both will be resurrected to eternal life—the humans of the first creation will be elected and grafted into the second creation.

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<sup>57</sup> The 1655 English edition has “straugers.”

Even on their own, these passages do not clearly support Livingstone's interpretation. Although *TS* I.x, 51–4 suggests that resurrection and eternal life will be equally distributed to Jews and Gentiles, there is no indication that this will change the nature of the Gentiles in this lifetime, let alone in a beatific afterlife. La Peyrère says both species will be “perfected,” but this might be read as claiming that both species will be perfected *according to their kind*, which could include resurrection and eternal life for both species. Popkin seems to recognize this when he says, “The only racist aspect of La Peyrère's view is his claim that Adamite (that is, Jewish) bodies will resurrect better than non-Adamite (that is, Gentile) bodies.”<sup>58</sup> To understand this point, we need a fuller explanation of what La Peyrère means by election and “grafting.”

La Peyrère offers some clarification of what he means later in *TS* II.v–x, 83–117. The election or grafting of the Gentiles onto the Jewish people is “mystical” and does not transform the material and form of the Gentiles into the material and form of the Jews. The grafting is a sort of adoption that does not change the Gentiles' essence:

That mystical begetting of the Jews, was a kind of a mystical nature, by which the Jews were acknowledged as natural Sons. For which, God is said to have carried them in his womb, Isa. 46. To which portion or degree of nature, because the Gentiles were neither called nor chosen, *adoption was granted to them, which is an imitation of Nature*; by which being adopted into the family of the Jews, they were esteem'd the Sons of the Jews, *not according to flesh and nature*, but according to that adoption which is perfected by mystical nature. I say, by that same election, by which the Jews are the Sons of God in the first degree of nature, and by which the Gentiles adopted in the Jews, are called the Sons of

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<sup>58</sup> Popkin, “Philosophical Basis,” 252.

God: but *because they come in by a second degree, by adoption, are onely call'd and esteem'd adoptive Sons.* (*TS* II.v, 84, emphasis added)

Jews are “natural sons” whereas the Gentiles are sons by “an imitation of nature” (*TS* II.v, 84). Beginning at *TS* II.v, 83, La Peyrère specifies that the election and grafting of the Gentiles is something that does not change the *nature* of the first human species—it does not change their material composition and form. The election of Gentiles is derivative: it “sprang from the Jews” and allows Gentiles to be elect not by nature but by adoption (*TS* II.v, 83–4).

No mystical election or ingrafting onto the Jews can nullify the essential nature of the first humans. The natural hierarchy of the two human species appears to be permanent:

There is likewise an election in life, and permanency of things...But the Divine Election is not in all these created things. I say, that Election by which God did elect to himself all men, which is not of kin or blood with the first Creation, which surpasses all kinde of things created, and is infinitely above them: and which is the Election of Regeneration, that is of the second Creation, not of the first. Certainly, if there be any thing in the first Creation, either exquisite, precious or choice, delicate, strong, high, or fair, or noble, or fortunate, or abstruse in wisdom, or long in continuance, of permanency and life: That is in the second Creation, much more exquisite beyond exquisiteness, far more precious beyond preciousness, far more choice beyond choiceness, far more delicate beyond delicateness, far more strong beyond strength, far more fair beyond fairness, far more noble beyond nobility, far more fortunate beyond fortune, far more wise beyond wisdom, far more permanent beyond permanency. (*TS* I.ix, 44–5)

The second humans are *by nature* permanently better than the first humans.

In sum, while La Peyrère does sometimes appear to suggest equality of election between the two species, he designates it an equality of election that is not grounded in nature but in “mystical” adoption (*TS* II.v, 83–6). The grafting of the Gentiles onto the Jewish tree—and into God’s greater favor—does not alter the material and formal nature of the Pre-Adamites as lesser beings.<sup>59</sup>

### 5.3 “Nymphs, Satyrs, Pygmies, and Wild Men”

After arguing that La Peyrère’s polygenism is “profoundly humanitarian,” Livingstone goes on to offer some commentary on an earlier interpretation:

It is important to register these sentiments because it is frequently assumed that polygenism was necessarily implicated in a racist ideology. Indeed, one recent set of commentators has egregiously blamed La Peyrère for establishing “the polygenist basis for racism” and that his pre-adamites “were descended from a different ‘Adam’ and hence sundered from ‘true men,’ which means primarily Europeans.” Such accusations are entirely without foundation.<sup>60</sup>

Livingstone is here referring to one of the few accusations in the recent literature that La Peyrère created racist categories of humans, namely, that of Sardar, Nandy, and Davies.<sup>61</sup> Sardar et al. spend one paragraph in their book, *Barbaric Others: A Manifesto on Western Racism*, arguing for their claim. On their view, La Peyrère speculated that,

there were separate origins for different peoples of the world. Thus the polygenist basis for racism was laid. He argued that there were categories of men, including

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<sup>59</sup> For an approach to the future election of the Gentiles in La Peyrère that remains neutral on the disagreement between the dominant view and my view here, see Robinson, “Recall of the Jews,” 121.

<sup>60</sup> Livingstone, *Adam’s Ancestors*, 50. See also Livingstone, *Pre-Adamite Theory*, 13.

<sup>61</sup> Sardar, Nandy, and Davies, *Manifesto*.

intermediate groups of humanoids such as nymphs, satyrs, pygmies and wild men, which included the Amerindians, who were descended from a different 'Adam' and hence sundered completely from 'true men', which means primarily Europeans.<sup>62</sup>

The authors of this quote are claiming not only that La Peyrère laid the "basis for racism," but that La Peyrère's speculations were themselves racist (by claiming non-Europeans are less than fully human).

Livingstone is right to question whether there is a *necessary* connection between polygenism and a racist hierarchy.<sup>63</sup> Yet, it is not clear that Sardar et al. claim there is a necessary connection. Whether polygenism necessarily produces an essentialist hierarchy of races is a different question than whether *La Peyrère's* polygenism produces an essentialist hierarchy of races. Sardar et al. appear to be claiming only the latter. While I agree with Sardar et al. that La Peyrère's polygenism creates a hierarchy of human types, I do not think their arguments support their conclusion, for reasons Livingstone does not mention. First, Sardar et al. assume that La Peyrère's species hierarchy was set up between Europeans and Native Americans. Yet on La Peyrère's account, (non-Jewish) Europeans themselves were descendants of the first creation and therefore of the lesser Pre-Adamite stock. Further, as far as I can tell, La Peyrère nowhere says nymphs, satyrs, and pygmies are intermediate humanoids descended from the first creation, and Sardar et al. do not cite where they find this. They appear to have mixed up La Peyrère with Paracelsus who does classify Native Americans with nymphs, satyrs, and pygmies.<sup>64</sup> So,

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<sup>62</sup> Sardar et al., *Manifesto*, 55.

<sup>63</sup> Livingstone, *Adam's Ancestors*, 50.

<sup>64</sup> Popkin, "Philosophical Basis," 251; Smith, *Concept of Race*, 97. Anthony Pagden also assumes that La Peyrère's classifies first humans with nymphs, satyrs, etc.: "Some later writers, most notably Paracelsus, another doctor, Andrea Cesalpino, and the French Huguenot Isaac de la Peyrère held that such humanoids as nymphs, satyrs, pygmies and wild men (a category which included the Amerindians) might be soulless men descended from another "Adam" or created spontaneously from the earth" (*Fall of Natural Man*, 22). Pagden is perhaps misinterpreting Popkin, "Pre-Adamite theory," which Pagden cites. Popkin lumps Paracelsus, Cesalpino, and La Peyrère together, which might

Livingstone is right to question the evidence that Sardar et al. offer in support of their claim that La Peyrère's system is racist. Yet Sardar et al. are correct that La Peyrère represents Pre-Adamites as inferior to Adamites.

Besides Sardar et al., there are two other claims in the recent literature—made by Parfitt and by Bethencourt—that La Peyrère's account creates a hierarchy of human types. Tudor Parfitt argues that La Peyrère sets up a hierarchy *against* Adamite people, i.e. the Jews.<sup>65</sup> On his view, La Peyrère targeted the Jews to set them up as a species beneath the Pre-Adamite people:

However, there were unintended consequences [of La Peyrère's account]. Jews were not, according to La Peyrère, 'made of the same stuff as everybody else' as Popkin claims. They originated from clay, whereas the rest of humankind was created in a different way, in the image of God...there was one creation of men and women, created in the likeness of God, followed in the second chapter by the creation of Adam of the dust of the ground.<sup>66</sup>

Parfitt gets the hierarchy backwards according to my view. La Peyrère does claim that there is a difference between human species that arises from their creation, but he does so in a way that privileges Adamite people. Additionally, *pace* Parfitt, the formal distinction between the two human species does not arise from one species being made in the image of God *per se*. As we saw, La Peyrère holds that both species are made in God's image but made through different modes of God's image. Parfitt is correct to point out that the two human species are not made of the same material, but he misidentifies what that distinction amounts to.<sup>67</sup>

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suggest La Peyrère adopts Paracelsus's view of first humans being nymphs, satyrs, etc. (Popkin, "Pre-Adamite theory," 58–9).

<sup>65</sup> Parfitt, "Truth of the Origination."

<sup>66</sup> Parfitt, "Truth of the Origination," 10.

<sup>67</sup> In a similar vein, Fredrickson rightly notes the tension between polygenism and the claim that all humans are of one blood: "The theory of polygenesis, or multiple human origins, challenged the orthodox doctrine of a single creation and 'one blood' for all of humanity and could be applied in an extremely racist fashion" (*Racism*, 57). Yet, Fredrickson appears neutral on whether La Peyrère's polygenism itself exhibits features of the racialist conception of race.



Lastly, Francisco Bethencourt also suggests that polygenism leads to a hierarchy among humans, though he focuses on polygenists after La Peyrère. After the one mention of La Peyrère in his 2015 book, *Racisms from the Crusades to the Twentieth Century*, Bethencourt writes that polygenism opened the door for a “natural division of humankind, which carried with it a natural hierarchy of human types.”<sup>68</sup> Later he writes that polygenism “reinforced the idea of inequality inscribed in nature since the beginning of time.”<sup>69</sup> However, Bethencourt does not explicitly claim that *La Peyrère's* polygenism creates a hierarchy nor does he substantiate how exactly La Peyrère's polygenetic division of humankind would entail a natural hierarchy of human types.

In sum, the dominant view holds that La Peyrère's polygenism does not create a species hierarchy and does not set up a basis for a racial hierarchy. Some outliers have argued that La Peyrère's polygenism creates a racial hierarchy<sup>70</sup> and others say his polygenism sets up a basis for a racial hierarchy without claiming it is itself hierarchical.<sup>71</sup> My discussion of these outlier accounts suggests they provide little basis for rejecting the dominant view. Moreover, I have shown that the arguments from blood equality and mystical election do not support the dominant view. La Peyrère's polygenism *did* create a hierarchy of human types; it was not “benign,” as Popkin put it.<sup>72</sup>

## 6. Conclusion

I have argued that on La Peyrère's account there are two human species that are different according to material, mode of creation, and form. These differences undergird a hierarchy between Pre-

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<sup>68</sup> Bethencourt, *Racisms*, 345.

<sup>69</sup> Bethencourt, *Racisms*, 496.

<sup>70</sup> Parfitt, “Truth of the Origination”; Sardar et al., *Manifesto*.

<sup>71</sup> Bethencourt, *Racisms*; Fredrickson, *Racism*.

<sup>72</sup> Popkin, *Isaac La Peyrère*, 165.

Adamites and Adamites. Given their differences, according to La Peyrère, the first men are closer to “beasts” and the Adamite people are more perfect and closer to God. The essence or nature of each species entails normative properties—the Pre-Adamites are more wicked and the Adamites have a greater propensity for virtue. These features lead me to conclude that La Peyrère's species hierarchy is proto-racialist. It attributes fixed essences to human types that entail normative properties just as racialist concepts do. Though La Peyrère's account attributes a material difference to human species—which is a biological difference in some sense—he does not appeal substantially to phenotypes. He therefore does not have a racialist account. La Peyrère does not distinguish humans according to races such as white and black, nor does he distinguish human types based on other phenotypic features, as other early anthropologists and nineteenth-century Americans did.<sup>73</sup> Nevertheless, my account of La Peyrère's polygenism as proto-racialist helps illuminate its role in the history of race and racism in the modern period. Not only could polygenism be applied in a racialist way as previous commentators suggest, but the first major defense of polygenism itself embodies many elements of racialism.<sup>74</sup>

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<sup>73</sup> I have in mind the so-called “American School of Anthropology,” which included Louis Agassiz, George Robins Gliddon, Samuel G. Morton, and Josiah Clark Nott. See Brace, *Genesis of the Concept*; James and Burgos, “Race”; Keel, *Divine Variations*, Ch. 2; and Popkin, *Isaac La Peyrère*, Ch. 10.

<sup>74</sup> I'm grateful to Deborah Boyle, John Carriero, Sam Rickless, Don Rutherford, Justin Smith-Ruiu, two anonymous reviewers, and especially Michael Hardimon for comments on earlier drafts of this paper.

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