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# NECESSARIUM ADAE PECCATUM:

## An Essay on Original Sin

Gary A. Anderson

The story of Adam and Eve's transgression, though surprisingly brief, did not prevent subsequent interpreters from pouring enormous attention upon it. The great English Puritan and poet, John Milton, expanded the several dozen verses of this story into his epic poem, *Paradise Lost*, a work comprised of twelve books, with each book containing nearly a thousand lines. Moderns are frequently wont to characterize such expansions of the biblical original as classic examples of *eisogesis* (reading into the text what one expects to find). The label is not inaccurate, but neither is it particularly apt. To understand even a few lines of a work like *Paradise Lost*, or nearly any other Jewish or Christian elaboration, one must bear in mind another theological and deeply scriptural principle. *The story of human beginnings is only intelligible in light of its end.* In other words, like any good novel, short story, or play, the first scene almost invariably hints, in some way, how the story will unfold. Upon completing a story, a good reader will return to the opening to see how the end illuminates the beginning.

*The story of human beginnings is only intelligible in light of its end.*

Much of Milton's expansion of the story of Adam and Eve is dependent on the exegetical principle that the end will illuminate the beginning. Consider what happens when Adam transgresses the interdiction regarding the tree of knowledge,

Earth Trembled from her entrails as again  
In pangs, and nature gave a second groan,  
Sky loured and muttering thunder, some sad drops  
Wept at completing of the mortal sin.  
Original (Paradise Lost, IX: 1000-1004)

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*Milton's depiction of the cosmic disturbances that attended Adam's sin orients the reader to the larger drama of Christian redemption.*

*Christian and Jewish perceptions of the story of man's beginnings differ widely. This is because each tradition has a very different idea about what the "end" of the biblical story is.*

These remarkable lines surprise. Where in Genesis 3 do we see signs of cosmic disturbance in the wake of Adam's sin? Has Milton used his poetic license to embellish the terse original? Hardly. These depictions of nature's groaning point forward to nature's travail at Golgotha. As Christ, the creator of the world, hangs on the cross, the earth quakes, the skies darken. So shocking is this sight that one anonymous homilist from the fifth century wrote: "Not even the sun was able to endure this sight but completely darkened itself to block the eyes of others. Neither did it take thought of the commandment to give light (Gen 1:16) but from that moment on dared to transgress it, seeing the Lord, the giver of commandment, suffering at the hands of man."<sup>1</sup> But there is no reason to be shamed by this sight, our patristic homilist argues, "for if we see the reason for which the Lord suffered, we no longer blush but stand in awe before his goodness and love for mankind." Milton's depiction of the cosmic disturbances that attended Adam's sin orients the reader to the larger drama of Christian redemption.

And so it was for every Jewish and Christian reader of the Bible. The most important matter for their interpretations of Genesis was an awareness of where the story reached its climax.<sup>2</sup> Though this procedure may sound rather simple, in practice it was not. Christian and Jewish perceptions of the story of man's beginnings differ widely. This is because each tradition has a very different idea about what the "end" of the biblical story is.

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#### THE BEGINNING IN LIGHT OF THE END

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According to the Bible, the sin of Adam and Eve and all that it engendered (banishment from Eden, toiling upon the land, suffering in childbirth and the return to the soil at death) was a first stage in a progression of general human rebellion. After the Fall we read of Cain's slaying of Abel, the strange tale of the intercourse between the "sons of God and the daughters of men," the various evils that led to the flood, and finally the building of the tower of Babel. Humanity was progressively alienating itself from its divine Creator. This escalating fall from grace took a dramatic turn toward restoration when God appeared before Abraham and promised:

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1. "Homily on the Passion of Our Lord," falsely attributed to St. Athanasius, PG 28.204.

2. On the importance of knowing the full narrative horizon of the scriptural story see the essay of Robert Jenson, "How the World Lost its Story," *First Things* 36 (1993): 19-24. His remarks on the poetics of Aristotle are particularly relevant, "[T]he sequential events [of any realistic narrative like the Bible] are understood jointly to make a certain kind of sense — a dramatic kind of sense. Aristotle provided the classic specification of dramatically coherent narrative. In a dramatically good story, he said, each decisive event is unpredictable until it happens, but immediately upon taking place is seen to be exactly what "had" to happen. So, to take the example of Aristotle's own favorite good story, we could not know in advance that Oedipus would blind himself but once he has done it, instantly we see that the whole story must lead to and flow from just this act."

Go from your country and your kindred and your father's house to the land that I will show you. I will make you a great nation and I will bless you, and make your name great, so that you will be a blessing .... Through you all the families of the earth shall bless themselves. (Gen 12:1-3)

Because the land promised to Abraham was thought of in near-Edenic terms ("a land flowing with milk and honey"), the possession of that land by a specially favored nation was thought to constitute a fitting redress to the fall. At first, the selection of Abraham, the progenitor of Israel, appears to be an improbable way to restore mankind. This special address, directed to one man from amid the many nations, could be seen as unmotivated, unnatural, and even unfair. Yet the mystery of this choice seems to be part of the intention of the author. As Gerhard von Rad observed: "The narrator does not explain why God's choice did not fall upon Ham or Japheth, but rather upon Shem, and ... upon Abraham."<sup>3</sup> This act of unmotivated choice is most often labeled the mystery (or even, the scandal) of election; God has chosen to redeem the entirety of creation through the agency of a single nation. The nation that is imagined by this promise is not simply Israel, but the grand kingdom of Israel realized in the days of Kings David and Solomon. For during their reigns, the borders of the biblical kingdom had an enormous reach; they encroached on the greatest nations of the ancient world.

Gerhard von Rad identified the author of this promise to Abraham as the "J" or Yahwistic-source, a writer who lived during the grand days of the Davidic kingdom. In his view, the achievements of this kingdom constituted a fulfillment of the promise made to Abraham and hence a redress of the imbalance wrought by the fall. This hypothetical reconstruction of the narrative history of the Bible has persuaded many, but by no means all biblical scholars. Even if we grant von Rad his hypothesis, it is nevertheless true that for most of the biblical period, specifically the many years that followed the reigns of David and Solomon, the promise given to Abraham was always viewed as unfulfilled and open-ended. Through the course of time, biblical authors assumed a flexible posture toward this promise. No subsequent biblical or later Jewish author felt constrained or hemmed in by the specific intention of the text's author. For the Yahwistic writer had penned this text in a very broad and generic fashion. As a result it possessed an enormous temporal reach; it extended to the most distant of futures, the consummation of human history. In the words of von Rad this text "refused any [singular and detailed] description of its final end."<sup>4</sup>

If we survey the broadest outline of biblical history we will see that the fulfillment of the promise to Abraham reached an initial apogee with the deliverance of Israel from the hand of Pharaoh and the gift of the

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3. G. von Rad, *Genesis* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1961), p. 159.

4. *Genesis*, p. 160.

*As the hope of realizing the promise slipped further and further into the future, the end itself, as Paul Ricoeur notes, changed in meaning.*

Bible or "Torah" to Moses at Mt. Sinai. At that moment in time, Israel was formally adopted as God's firstborn or favored son. This moment of election and law-giving was meant to culminate in the taking of the promised land, the very heart of the promise made to Abraham. The gift of the land, however, was never fully realized. From the very first moment, when Moses commissioned spies to reconnoiter the boundaries of Canaan, the taking of the land was beset with problems. During the reigns of David and Solomon, Israel came the closest to realizing the grandeur of the promise, but her moment of glory was ever so brief. Eventually Israel lost the land they occupied when the Babylonian armies invaded. Ever since, Israel has awaited the final ingathering of those who were dispersed, the rebuilding of the temple, and a renewed commitment by the entire nation to return with repentant hearts to the Torah.

As the hope of realizing the promise slipped further and further into the future, the end itself, as Paul Ricoeur notes, changed in meaning. And as the tale of Israel's "end" changed so did her beginning:

The fulfillment of the Promise [to Abraham] which at first appears to be at hand, is constantly postponed. In the meantime, the revelation at Sinai, the knowledge of the Law, the setting up of a cult, and the experience in the wilderness take place. The wealth of the interval is such that the end itself changes its meaning.... Henceforth the "Promise" will express its tension through the mythical images of the end; those images and the figures in which they will be crystallized will supply the true answer to the images and figures of the beginning.<sup>5</sup>

*Paul, and others like him, felt that the resurrection of Christ had ushered in a new epoch in human history.*

In the time of Jesus, when Rabbinic Judaism was taking root in Palestine, Judaism was slowly transforming itself from a religion whose "end" or central purpose centered around a temple and sacrifice to a religion focused on prayer and Torah study. According to the Rabbis, Moses received two Torahs at Mount Sinai, one written on tablets, the other transmitted orally. It was the duty of all subsequent generations to pass on this legacy of a twofold Torah and to bring the Jewish nation to a position of faithful obedience of its norms. It would be difficult to find a Jewish writer from this time period who did not draw careful comparisons between the creation of man and the gift of the Torah. In the mind of the Rabbis, God himself consulted the Torah in order to create man and the world he was to inhabit. The end of man's existence, obedience to Torah, was correlated to his very origins.

Christian writers do not take a similar interest in Torah. The writings of St. Paul and the results of the first ecclesial council in Jerusalem (Acts 15) show us that at a very early date, the nascent Christian movement decided to part company with their Jewish brethren over certain aspects of Jewish law. This was because Paul, and others like him, felt that the resurrection of Christ had ushered in a new epoch in human history. This

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5. P. Ricoeur, *The Symbolism of Evil* (New York: Harper and Row, 1967), p. 263.

new epoch had no need for the ceremonial details of the Jewish law code, namely, those that dealt with sacrifice, bodily purity, and food laws. The goal of human creation was no longer thought to be the giving of the Torah to Israel but the birth, life, and death of Jesus Christ.

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It has frequently been noted that Jesus himself made no mention of the story of Adam and Eve in any of the four canonical Gospels. Though he dealt with topics of human sin, the need for repentance, and the promise of salvation for the entire created order, he never once elucidated the story of Eden in the course of his teaching. This should not be overly surprising. For it is a basic feature of each Gospel that Jesus' true identity, and hence the purpose of the incarnation itself, was not known until after his death. The Gospel of Mark is perhaps the most radical on this point; only the Roman centurion standing at the foot of the cross would figure out who Jesus was when he exclaimed, "*Truly this man was God's son!*" (15:39). To be sure, the other disciples, especially Peter, would on occasion identify Jesus as the Christ. But the disciples believed that this Messianic office precluded any tinge of ignominy. Jesus, they thought, was to fill this office in a glorious manner. The moment Jesus alluded to the necessity of his suffering, the disciples rebuked him severely. Only at the resurrection did the disciples finally come to understand the nature of Jesus' identity. In other words, the particular goal or "end" toward which Jesus moved was not made clear until after he had died. Only after his death could the purpose or "end" of Christ's life be joined to the narrative of human beginnings.

The very first Christian document to make this connection was St. Paul's first letter to the Corinthians. This letter can be dated to within a couple of decades after the death of Christ (56 or 57 A.D.), not too long after Paul's own conversion to the movement. In the fifteenth chapter he takes up the problem of certain members of the community who lack a clear conviction about the bodily resurrection of Christ. Paul begins his argument by acknowledging that his own teaching is simply a handing on of what he had received. Christ, Paul declares, was buried and "rose on the third day in accordance with the scriptures. He appeared to Cephas then to the twelve. Then he appeared to more than five hundred brothers and sisters at one time.... Then he appeared to James, then to all the apostles, last of all, as to one untimely born, he appeared also to me (I Cor 15:4-8)." From this brief resumé we can see that Paul has established the facticity of Christ's resurrection on evidence greater than his own personal authority. The teaching is founded on a tradition for which Paul is merely a conduit and, more importantly, Jesus' appearance is an event whose witnesses number in the hundreds.

*Paul has established the facticity of Christ's resurrection on evidence greater than his own personal authority.*

Paul's interest is not to establish merely the truth of the resurrection. Taken on its own, the event of Jesus' bodily resurrection would seem a wondrous miracle that befell one particular person. For Paul the event

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was epoch-making and had cosmic significance. In order to underscore the universal dimensions of this event, Paul introduced the figure of Adam (I Cor 15:20-23):

But in fact Christ has been raised from the dead, the first fruits of those who have died. But since death came through a human being, the resurrection of the dead has come through a human being; for as all die in Adam, so all will be made alive in Christ. But each in his own order: Christ the first fruits, then at his coming those who belong to Christ.

Paul was aware, as would any Jewish reader of the Bible, that Adam was both the personal name of a literary figure in Genesis but also a noun designating mankind more generally. What happened to Adam in Genesis 2-3 was not limited to him alone; by virtue of his name ("mankind") it had ramifications for all persons. If the first (*protos*) Adam died, Paul reasoned, then all must die through him. Since Christ was the second or final (*eschatos*) Adam, his death and resurrection must have had universal dimensions. The resurrection was not an isolated or singular event in world history for it did not involve one man alone but all mankind.

Paul brings this argument home by considering the character of the resurrection body (I Cor 15:42-49):

So it is with the resurrection of the dead. What is sown is perishable, what is raised is imperishable. It is sown in dishonor, it is raised in glory. It is sown in weakness, it is raised in power. It is sown a physical body, it is raised a spiritual body. If there is a physical body there is also a spiritual body. Thus it is written, "the first [*protos*] man, Adam, became a living being" (Gen 2:7); the last [*eschatos*] Adam became a life-giving spirit. But it is not the spiritual that is first, but the physical, and then the spiritual. The first man was from the earth, a man of dust; the second man is from heaven. As was the man of dust, so are those who are of the dust; and as is the man of heaven, so are those who are of heaven. Just as we have borne the image [*eikon*] of the man of dust, so we will also bear the image of the man of heaven.

*Paul believes that two epochs characterize the growth of human history, the age of the first and the second Adam.*

What is striking about this argument is that Paul believes that two epochs characterize the growth of human history, the age of the first and the second Adam. From the first Adam, a being created from the dust, came a frail and corruptible body, from the second Adam, a life-giving spirit. Those who have faith in the second Adam "bear the image of the man of heaven." It should be carefully noted that Paul begins his argument about the significance of Adam with the fact of Christ's resurrection. It is the last Adam who sets the stage for an understanding of the first.

Lest one think that only Christians understood the beginning in terms of the end, it is worth attending to a Jewish text written in an era roughly contemporary to that of Paul. The book of *IV Ezra* is a document written shortly after the destruction of Jerusalem in 70 A.D. Although this

book was written by a Jew for a Jewish audience, it was not included within the Rabbinic Bible. We owe the happy fact of the book's preservation to the early church. But this should not obscure the fact that this book is an important witness to Jewish thinking in the first century about the problem of theodicy, that is, why God inflicts such unmerited suffering on his chosen people. Many have seen in this book a striking parallel to Paul's notion of original sin. In his most despairing moment, the author of *IV Ezra* complains that human life is simply not worth enduring given the painful legacy of sin and death that Adam has bequeathed to us (7:116-117):

This is my first and last comment: it would have been better if the earth had not produced Adam, or else, when it had produced him, had restrained him from sinning. For what good is it to all that they live in sorrow now and expect punishment after death? O Adam, what have you done? For though it was you who sinned, the fall was not yours alone, but ours also who are your descendants.

One is tempted to interpret these lines as bearing on a *general* proclivity of the human race toward sinfulness. The earth produced Adam, and Adam in turn produced sin and death. These basic features are common to all human life. But to understand the text this broadly would not fit the context of the book. The writer wants to know why *the elected nation of Israel* has suffered so grievously for her sins. Why has she, of all nations, lost her Temple and national capital?

As pessimistic as this description of Adam's legacy may sound, it must not be isolated from the larger picture of what the Jewish Bible is all about. In an earlier portion of *IV Ezra*, the author retells the story of the six days of creation. When he arrives on the sixth day, the day of man's creation, he writes (6:53-43):

On the sixth day you commanded the earth to bring forth before you cattle, wild animals, and creeping things; and over these you placed Adam, as ruler over all the works that you had made; and from him we have all come, the people whom you have chosen.

It is striking that Adam's creation is wed to the notion of Israel's special status in God's eyes. *In Ezra's view, the creation of Adam in the image of God points forward to the election of Israel.*

The problem can be brought into bolder relief. The issue is not simply that of why do the good suffer, but why does Israel in particular — that nation which represents the very pinnacle of human creation — suffer worse than all the rest of humanity (6:55-59):

All this I have spoken before you, O Lord, because you have said that it was for us that you created this world. As for the other nations that have descended from Adam, you have said that they are nothing, and that they are like spittle and you have compared their abundance to a

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drop from a bucket. And now, O Lord, these nations which are reputed to be as nothing, dominate over us and devour us. But we are your people, whom you have called your firstborn, only begotten, zealous for you, and most dear, have been given into their hands. If the world has indeed been created for us, why do we not possess our world as an inheritance? How long will this be so?

*For IV Ezra, the story of Adam's creation and its bearing on world history cannot be understood apart from the act of God's decision to give Israel the Torah at Mt. Sinai.*

The imagery used to depict Israel is striking. The elected nation is understood as God's "firstborn" and "only begotten"; these are precisely the same titles used by Paul and other New Testament writers to describe Christ.<sup>6</sup> This similar choice of words allows us to draw a close parallel between Paul and *IV Ezra*. As Paul saw creation culminate in the figure of the second Adam and drew his picture of the first Adam as an antitype to him, so *IV Ezra* saw the figure of Adam culminate in the choosing of the people Israel. The nub of Ezra's problem is the fact that the nations have risen up and usurped the rightful position of glory that should belong to the nation Israel. Why have those who have descended from Adam overtaken those who claim their origins at Sinai? For *IV Ezra*, the story of Adam's creation and its bearing on world history cannot be understood apart from the act of God's decision to give Israel the Torah at Mt. Sinai. The Bible's beginning must be correlated with its end. Strikingly, very few modern biblical scholars consider this history of religions' concept a necessary part of Genesis 1-3. As a result, it should occasion no surprise if the doctrine of original sin has fallen upon hard times.

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#### THE PROBLEM OF ORIGINAL SIN

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*For many today the most pressing problem created by an emphasis on Adam's sin is that it implies a low estimation of the human person.*

For many today the most pressing problem created by an emphasis on Adam's sin is that it implies a low estimation of the human person. How can human nature improve and flower if it is defined from the very start as wayward, recalcitrant, and worthy of death? In our modern secular age, an age in which the continued existence of religion itself is questioned, it is difficult to advance an argument for the inherent sinfulness of each and every human being. Why would any modern man or woman define their essential humanity in terms of a transgression committed by a primal couple whose very historical existence they do not believe? If the fossil record has made the historical existence of Adam and Eve improbable, why should we accept the conclusion that their sin continues to hound and even damn us? It is little wonder that the doctrine of original sin has fallen on such hard times. As one astute observer, Edward Oakes, has observed,

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6. On the terms "first-born" and "only begotten" and their relationship to the theme of election, see the comments of Michael Stone, *Fourth Ezra* (Hermeneia; Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1990), pp. 188-189.

No doctrine inside the precincts of the Christian Church is received with greater reserve and hesitation, even to the point of outright denial, than the doctrine of original sin. Of course in a secular culture like ours, any number of Christian doctrines will be disputed by outsiders, from the existence of God to the resurrection of Jesus. But even in those denominations that pride themselves on their adherence to the orthodox dogmas of the once-universal Church, the doctrine of original sin is met with either embarrassed silence, outright denial, or at a minimum a kind of halfhearted lip service that does not exactly deny the doctrine but has no idea how to place it inside the devout life.<sup>7</sup>

The doctrine of original sin appears woefully ill-matched to modern existence. This teaching outlines our common human condition in such stark and grim terms that it no longer inspires. Indeed, the effect is far worse. Its pervasive pessimistic outlook is crowded out by competing views of the human person that are more affirming and joyful. Little room is left for contemplating our vast potential for grandeur. In the eyes of many, the task of successfully navigating the turbulent seas of the late twentieth century demands that we jettison this burdensome cargo.

The writings of the former Dominican priest, Matthew Fox, provide a good barometer of how strong this cultural suspicion is. Angered by the recalcitrance of current religious thinkers to reconsider past truisms about the fall of man, he outlined his own proposal in a book titled, *Original Blessing*.<sup>8</sup> Fox argues that the concept of original sin is rooted in an incorrigible attitude of self-loathing. When the church demands that we ponder deeply our own wretched state, we not only make ourselves miserable, but we undermine our sense of connection and integration with the larger created order. For it is from this very sense of connection and integration, Fox argues, that our civic responsibilities grow. Absent these delicate roots that bind us to each other and to our planet, there is no telling what evils will surface in their place.

Fox's solution seems a sensible one. Replace the difficult and irreformable notion of human depravity with a different story of our origins. The Bible itself, Fox argues, presents its own competing view of the created order, a view of a more optimistic tenor. In the so-called wisdom traditions of the Old Testament, we are beckoned to become disciples of Lady Wisdom and give heed to her kind teaching. Lady Wisdom appears in the book of Proverbs as the very artisan of creation. "When God marked out the foundations of the earth," Lady Wisdom reveals (Prov 8:29b-31), "I was there beside him, like a master worker. I was daily his delight, rejoicing before him always, rejoicing in his inhabited world and delighting in the human race." Lady wisdom gives no thought to

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*The Bible itself, Fox argues, presents its own competing view of the created order, a view of a more optimistic tenor.*

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7. E. Oakes, "Original Sin: A Disputation," *First Things* 87 (1998), p. 16. Much of this section of my essay has been inspired by this excellent article.

8. M. Fox, *Original Blessing: A Primer in Creation Spirituality in Four Paths, Twenty-six Themes, and Two Questions* (Santa Fe: Bear Press, 1983).

human depravity; her expectations for human life are of a different order. No preacher of fire and damnation, her pedagogy assumes a kinder, gentler air. She built her home, set her table, prepared a feast, and then sought students (9:5): *"Come, eat of my bread, and drink of the wine I have mixed. Lay aside immature thoughts and truly live, walk in the way of insight."*

*Unfortunately, much of Fox's argument depends on a very narrow slice of biblical teaching about Lady Wisdom.*

For Fox, the way of wisdom is the way of mother earth. Wisdom affirms our world as good and blessed and seeks to establish us as responsible stewards over this created order. Reflection on this order through the tutelage of Lady Wisdom will result in human wholeness. Human proclivities to destroy our planet will be checked; the potential for intercultural dialogue and understanding will be realized. An affirming, feminine God who reveals to us our most profound potential replaces the menacing patriarchal God who laid the notion of depravity at the doorstep of all.

*Even if we reject Fox's overly buoyant hopes for a creation-centered spirituality, we still have not countered his stinging criticism of original sin.*

Unfortunately, much of Fox's argument depends on a very narrow slice of biblical teaching about Lady Wisdom. His euphoria over those points of overlap between this ancient biblical theme and his very modern, New Age spiritual predilections, blinds him to some of the darker aspects of wisdom in the Bible. The book of Job, for example, certainly the Bible's most profound exploration of the nature and consequence of evil, is not at all optimistic about Wisdom's capacity to lay bare the fundamentals of our created world. Has God ordered his creation so that those who act rightly will be rewarded? Job's friends present the expected answer — yes! — and are subsequently rebuked. For Job the matter is far from clear. Innocence need not be rewarded; evil is frequently left unpunished. *"Where can Wisdom be found,"* Job cries (Job 28). The answer is not one of reassurance: *"It is hidden from the eyes of all living, and concealed from the birds of the air."* Not even the dead have a privileged point of access. *"We have heard,"* Death and Hell confess, *"only a rumor of it with our ears."* Wisdom, in any full sense of the term, is in God's hands alone. Don't be too hasty in your desire to define Wisdom's scope, another Wisdom writer warns: *"God is in heaven and you are on earth; therefore let your words be few."*

Even if we reject Fox's overly buoyant hopes for a creation-centered spirituality, we still have not countered his stinging criticism of original sin. Even more challenging is the seconding of Fox's criticisms by other scholars whose intellectual preferences do not rest on the moral platitudes of New Age spirituality. Consider the Requiems written by Fauré and Duruflé in our own time. Both of these composers left out the haunting words of God's harsh judgment on the unjust, the *Dies Irae*. Both composers had a strong distaste for the punitive words of God at the moment of death; far better in their eyes was a funeral mass that laid sole emphasis on the merciful hand of God. Or consider the

noted and notable Presbyterian biblical scholar, Sibley Towner.<sup>9</sup> He begins his essay with the formulation of original sin that appears in the *Scots Confession of 1560*. This was not an insignificant document; indeed, it was publicly read line by line in the Scottish Parliament. This confession of faith declares that by Adam's "transgression, generally known as original sin, ... he and his children became by nature hostile to God, slaves of Satan and servants to sin." However powerful such a declaration might have been in its own day, Towner claims that it has also "wrought incalculable mischief in the hearts of believers."<sup>10</sup> The failure of the doctrine of original sin does not simply rest in depressive ambiance about human nature that it has produced. Its very claim as historical fact is simply preposterous. "Modern believers and unbelievers alike tend to hold as patent nonsense the notion that all human sin and all death are generically descended from a single act by a single pair of human beings who lived at a single moment in time, or that the cause of their original transgression was Satan in the guise of a snake."<sup>11</sup>

What are we to make of such a doctrine? Towner's answer is simple and forthright. We must act with the courage of our convictions and seek to move beyond it. "The concept of a Fall-less history," he argues, "requires some further maturation in me away from the religion of my Sunday School and my dogmatics textbooks." This rewriting of Christian tradition will be difficult, Towner concedes, but it will also be a bracing tonic for twentieth century man, whose self-esteem has suffered the outrageous slings and arrows of narrow dogmatism for too long. "Perhaps I can at last see us," he concludes, "not as creatures helplessly mired in sin, helpless to extricate ourselves in any way, but rather as people and peoples who can hope to make significant strides toward emancipation from the evils of hatred and greed."<sup>12</sup> It would take a real curmudgeon to fault Towner for these laudable desires for emancipation. And I should also add that Towner has adequately described the problems of adhering to Genesis 1-3 as a literal account of human beginnings. Modern theologians and biblical scholars are agreed that we must move beyond *historical* literalism. But is Towner accurate regarding what the church confesses *theologically* about *peccatum originale*?

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### O NECESSARY SIN ... O HAPPY FAULT!

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A good place to test this notion is the figure of John Milton. Raised on the theological writings of St. Augustine and deeply committed to the

9. S. Towner, "Interpretations and Reinterpretations of the Fall," in F. Eigo, *Modern Biblical Scholarship: Its Impact on Theology and Proclamation* (Villanova, PA: Villanova University 1984), pp. 53-85.

10. Cited in Towner, "Interpretations," pp. 56-57.

11. "Interpretations," pp. 57-58.

12. "Interpretations," p. 82.

*If the tradition of original sin is as gloomy as Towner and Fox believe, we would expect Milton's grand epic, Paradise Lost, to end on a somber note.* rigorous Puritan tradition, Milton is deeply aware of how weak and prone to sin and error the human creature is. The Puritanism of Milton was not far removed from the strain that produced the *Scots Confession of 1560*, a document much abhorred by Sibley Towner and numerous other moderns. If the tradition of original sin is as gloomy as Towner and Fox believe, we would expect Milton's grand epic, *Paradise Lost*, to end on a somber note. Adam's loss of grace and eviction from Eden would be a matter of profound tragic loss and deepest despair. Satan's triumph, on the other hand, should have been a moment of ecstatic delight in the kingdom of darkness. After all, Adam and Eve had proved sufficiently gullible for the most simple of temptations to take fertile root.

*As Paradise Lost draws to a close, Adam is exultant as he makes his way out of Eden.*

In fact, we find nothing of the kind. True, Satan achieved his desire; Adam and Eve fell. Yet Satan's last appearance in *Paradise Lost* is not a happy one. His return to hell is greeted with lamentation, not celebration. His is a pyrrhic victory. Adam and Eve on the other hand have lost all that they held dear. Condemned to permanent exile, we would expect their mood to be morose as they leave the Garden. Such is not the case. As *Paradise Lost* draws to a close, Adam is exultant as he makes his way out of Eden.

The poem had begun with Satan in the bowels of hell, gathering his compatriots in crime and rebellion to embark on the task of alienating God from his beloved creatures, Adam and Eve. Through some nine books, each nearly a thousand verses, we follow his peregrinations from hell to earth and then back to hell. On the surface, Satan has the best of it. His power to tempt Eve proves insurmountable. Despite all God's precautions — and there were many — the creatures he loved so dearly rebel against his rule. The reader has every right to expect that as Satan rejoins his comrades in Pandemonium, Milton's name for hell, all will rejoice. Milton subverts this expectation. As Satan enters Pandemonium, he recounts the circumstances of his mighty triumph and closes with these words (PL X:501-503):

Ye have the account  
Of my performance: what remains, ye gods,  
But up and enter now into full bliss.

But his cohorts see no cause for celebration. Instead of cries of joy Satan hears,

A dismal universal hiss, the sound  
Of public scorn.

The mood turns even more mordant as these unlikely celebrants consider their present state. In hopes of alleviating their aching pains the demonic host turns to consider the fair fruits of hell. These fruits appear enticing; perhaps they would be a balm for their ills. As the demons reach for this "fruitage fair" an unexpected result ensues (X:564-566),

Thinking to allay  
Their appetite with gust, instead of fruit  
Chewed bitter ashes.

In a surprising parallel to the fall of Adam and Eve, the fruits of Hades prove deceptive. When the demons chew its bitter ashes they undergo the first stage of that ancient curse pronounced on the serpent, "*you shall eat the dust of the earth.*" This is our last glimpse of Satan in *Paradise Lost*. The fall, which should have been his moment of glory, has confirmed his eternal condemnation.

Our last glimpse of Milton's Adam is also quite striking. The archangel Michael stands with Adam and Eve at the edge of Eden. Just prior to driving them out he briefs Adam on what life outside will be like. Michael outlines the entire biblical story beginning with their own children, Cain and Abel. When Michael finishes describing the life of Christ, he pauses to catch his breath. Adam cannot endure the pause, however brief. His loses his composure as he hears these mysteries. He exclaims (XII:469-471):

"O Goodness infinite, goodness immense!  
That all this good of evil shall produce,  
And evil turn to good."

But Adam doesn't stop here. Not only will his evil deed be turned to good, but it shall also become the necessary prelude for the appearance of a far greater good.

Milton's brilliant and surprising ending is not solely the work of his own poetic genius. His narrative is dependent upon a theological tradition that viewed Adam's sin as a true boon for mankind. This notion of the *felix culpa*, or "happy fault," has a long pedigree in Christian thought. The ancient liturgy of Easter opens with a hymn reciting God's mighty deeds in history, the *Exultet*. This hymn compares the Israelite's exodus from Egypt to the resurrection of Christ. On that first paschal night, the slaying of the Passover lamb proved instrumental in overturning the tyranny of Pharaoh; on this second paschal occasion, the sacrifice of the Lamb of God will destroy a second Pharaoh, Satan and his kingdom. In consideration of the great redemption that Christ has wrought, the cantor sings of Adam's sin. In the wake of the long period of Lenten penance that had preceded Easter, a time in which all Christians must ponder their sinful ways, the memory of Adam's transgression should stir up thoughts of condemnation. But the text of the *Exultet* knows no such thought. In words that delight as much as they shock, the cantor sings,

"O necessary sin of Adam, that Christ has blotted out by his death;  
O happy fault [*felix culpa*] which has earned for us such a great redeemer."

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How unexpected are these words. But their strangeness reveals the central mystery of Easter: the human capacity for rebellion has not led to eternal condemnation but to the miracle of God's loving and steadfast mercy.

Milton understood well the theology of "the happy fault" and makes it the basis of Adam's own self-reflection after the fall. To the surprise of many readers, Adam cannot decide whether he should repent of his sin or rejoice all the more. His sin has provided the necessary condition for making God's boundless mercy manifest. Adam declares (XII:473-478),

*Our present day "cultured despisers" of original sin do not lack good reason when they criticize this doctrine in its raw and naked form.*

Full of doubt I stand,  
Whether I should repent me now of sin  
By me done and occasioned, or rejoice  
Much more good thereof shall spring  
to God more glory, more good will to men  
From God, and over wrath grace shall abound.

Our present day "cultured despisers" of original sin do not lack good reason when they criticize this doctrine in its raw and naked form. I sincerely doubt whether Milton or the composer of the *Exultet* would have warmed to the assertion that our nature is corrupt to the core and that we merit nothing less than unending punishment and damnation. Such a view advanced too stridently would veer toward the blasphemous. When these writers condemn Adam, and through Adam all humanity, they do so in the context of a larger narrative that exalts him. Adam's humiliation leads ineluctably to his exaltation. This is the paradox of original sin, a paradox that has been little noticed in our day.

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#### ORIGINAL SIN AND REDEMPTION

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*Original sin is not a self-contained philosophical doctrine, but depends on the religious experience of redemption. Karl Barth, devoted considerable energy toward recovering what Christian thought meant by the doctrine of original sin.*

Original sin is not a self-contained philosophical doctrine, but depends on the religious experience of redemption. The moment we isolate the sin of Adam from this broader framework we lose its larger meaning. One of the most profound thinkers of the twentieth century, Karl Barth, devoted considerable energy toward recovering what Christian thought meant by the doctrine of original sin. Barth was raised on the liberal theology standard in German theological education at the close of the 19th century and the beginning of the twentieth. The optimism regarding the human condition that had been a formative part of that tradition was brutally undercut, Barth thought, by the tragedy of the first World War. His turn to the Bible as a source of inspiration for theological work was born, in part, from a deep distrust of what he felt was an overly optimistic assessment of what philosophical knowledge could and would yield. One might have expected Barth to begin his work by returning to the classic Protestant teachings on original sin.

But this was not what he did. Instead, when Barth sat down to write his greatest theological work, *Church Dogmatics*, he did not take up the topic of original sin until the end of the work. And this was not accidental. As he wrote:

But the question immediately poses itself: Why is it only now that we have come to speak of this matter? Why have we not followed the example of the dogmatics of all ages, Churches and movements and begun with a doctrine of sin, first stating the problem, then giving the decisive answer to it in the doctrine of the incarnation and atoning death of Jesus Christ?<sup>13</sup>

Traditional Protestant teaching had attempted to erect the edifice of Christian belief on an objective portrayal of human depravity. Deep reflection on one's depravity was thought to be one short step from perceiving one's need for a redeemer. For Barth, this argument was foolish on two grounds. First, if all human beings were so depraved, one could just as easily rationalize one's own evil in a self-serving way: "My actions may be despicable, but they are no worse than anyone else's." My sinful state is simply a part of the general human condition. Far from impelling the individual into the arms of a merciful redeemer, such a doctrine could just as easily serve to comfort sinful persons in their wrong doing.

Barth had another, more biblical manner of getting at this question. He argued that no one could understand his status as "a lowly sinner" apart from the miracle of redemption. "We can never have the negative knowledge [of sin]," Barth declared, "except in [light of] this positive faith."<sup>14</sup> Barth fervently denied the capacity of any person to understand his fallen condition by contemplating his wayward ways. We may become aware of our limited and deficient nature by doing so. We may even incline toward despair and hopelessness. But this is not what the Bible means by sin. The fathomless depth of sin can only be glimpsed under the tutelage of the Redeemer. The experience of redemption, in Barth's eyes, was always that of an unmerited *bonum*, or gift, to the believer. Not asked for and not deserved, redemption always comes as an unexpected act of Grace. *The notion of human sin and fallenness is nothing other than a considered reflection on the unmerited and unfathomable moment of salvation.*

Barth's claim about the love of God can be paralleled in our own deepest attachments. Nearly any romantic tale worth its salt will accent the profound power of love by showing its ability to transform both the lover and the beloved. Yet the power and the strength of that love nearly always is established on the fragile and frail foundation of human nature. The attitude of the beloved is never one of merit or

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13. Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics* (Edinburgh: T & T Clark) IV:359.

14. *Church Dogmatics*, IV:413

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one shown mercy.*

entitledness: "I had this coming," but precisely the opposite: "I don't deserve this." As the poets are well aware, the beloved never feels worthy of the advances of the lover. When Jewish or Christian mystics appeal to their divine lover to "*draw me after you, let us make haste [to your bed-chamber]*" (Song of Songs 1:4) they utter these words in awe. True love is unmerited love.

In a profound way, the same process informs the teaching of original sin. In the religious life, human sinfulness can only be grasped as a reflection on the unmerited advances of the divine lover toward his beloved. When the church prays, "*Let him kiss me with the kisses of his mouth,*" (Song of Songs 1:2) she is directing her erotic desire toward the advances of her divine lover. Yet the erotic appeal of the church to her divine lover is born from the consciousness of her own unworthiness of that love.

In a similar fashion, consider the Gospel reading that introduces the period of Lenten penance in both the Eastern and Western liturgies. It is, quite ironically, the story of the prodigal son (Luke 15:11-32). The prodigal son is a young man who received an inheritance which he subsequently squandered through a life of luxury and abandon in a foreign land. Coming to his senses, he sets out for home in order to redress his ways. Arriving at home, he begs for mercy and his father is overcome with joy. His expectations, born of his penitential demeanor, are minimal. "*I will get up and go to my father,*" the son exclaims, "*and I will say to him, 'Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you; I am no longer worthy to be called your son; treat me like one of your hired hands'*" (Luke 15:18-19). The other son, who never exhibited such rebellious behavior, is angered by the festivities that attend his brother's homecoming. "*Listen!*" he says to his father, "*For all these years I have been working like a slave for you, and I have never disobeyed your command; yet you have never given me even a young goat so that I might celebrate with my friends.*" No doubt, this upright brother had every right to be jealous. But the Gospel reading requires this motif of unfairness to make a point: nowhere is there more joy and thanksgiving than when a wayward person rights his course. The Gospel narrative brings home, in a powerful way, that the depth of human sin is seen most clearly from the vantage point of one shown mercy. The prodigal son felt himself unworthy of being treated as a son, but his merciful and loving father saw the matter differently. His father did not see a rebellious, wayward son; he saw a son who had once been dead come to life, a son who had been lost but now was found. The unfair reception of the prodigal son serves a profound theological point: the lower one falls, the greater the joy at one's return. Or to reverse the matter, the more powerful one's sense of redemption the more profound is one's sense of sinfulness. As the church enters the Lenten period, the context against which Adam's sin is considered is that of the prodigal son. We are all, in some sense, wayward

sons making our way back to a merciful father. The promise of Easter is that the power of sin and redemption are inversely related.

Elsewhere in the Bible we find a similar tendency to correlate human unworthiness with divine grace and mercy. In the Old Testament, the crowning achievement of God's created order is the election of the people Israel at Mt. Sinai and the pronouncement of the Ten Commandments. These Ten Commandments, the first of the six hundred and thirteen to be revealed at Sinai according to Jewish tradition, are heard directly by the people Israel. So awed are they by this encounter that the people become afraid and tremble. Standing at a distance, they beg Moses to intercede on their behalf. For mere mortals to witness the stark purity and overpowering holiness of the Deity was a reckless venture. Who could behold the living God and not die? Aware of their waywardness, they appealed to Moses to approach God on their behalf.

So now why should we (Israel) die? For this great fire will consume us; if we hear the voice of the Lord our God any longer, we shall die. For who is there of all flesh that has heard the voice of the living God speaking out of fire, as we have, and remained alive? Go near, you yourself (Moses), and hear all that the Lord our God will say. Then tell us everything that the Lord our God tells you, and we will listen and do it. (Deut 5:25-27)

Everywhere in the Bible when God appears before his people in order to save them, he strikes fear in the hearts of those so blessed. The experience of the divine calls one to reflect on one's frailty. Isaiah begged leave when he entered the presence of God, "*Woe is me! I am lost, for I am a man of unclean lips* (Isa 6)." Other prophets begged similar exemptions when God called them by name. *Those graced by the very presence of God are the very persons who reflect most poignantly on their sinful human condition.*

One of Barth's favorite illustrations of this dilemma is the story of Peter's denial of Christ as told in Luke's Gospel (22:31-34; 54-62). Luke, like the rest of the Gospel writers, presents the messianic office of Jesus of Nazareth as a mystery. This vocation was publicly announced at his baptism. Yet throughout his entire earthly life Jesus was rejected for claiming this identity. Those he was sent to redeem sought to destroy him. Even the eleven faithful disciples deserted him during his last hours and he was left to suffer alone. Christ had predicted the denial of one of his most beloved disciples, Simon also known as Peter. "*Simon, Simon!*" Christ said, "*Satan has sought to test you as one winnows grain. I have prayed on your behalf that your faith not fail. But you, when you have turned back, strengthen your brothers.*" Then Peter, acting with a sincerity that is as touching as it is human, counters this prediction with a foolhardy vow, "*Lord I am ready to go with you to prison and to death!*" Jesus replies, "*I tell you Peter, the cock will not crow this day until you have denied me three times.*" Later that evening Jesus is betrayed, arrested, and taken by force to the High Priest's home

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for interrogation. Peter, following at a distance, enters and takes a seat near an open fire, warming himself outside as Christ is interrogated within. Once, twice, finally a third time, Peter denies ever having known this man from Galilee. As in the other Gospel accounts, the cock crows. Luke's story has not ended. As the cock crows, Jesus looks away from the High Priest and his court which sits ready to condemn him and catches his precious disciple's eye. "Peter remembered the word of the Lord," Luke records, "and he went out and wept bitterly."

Peter's earlier words, although they border on bragging, are hardly contemptible. We err badly if we begrudge him his feeling of confidence. Peter's confidence, whatever its source, runs aground on the shoals of his own fears and self-interest. But his awareness of his failure is contextualized by Luke in the face-to-face encounter with his Lord. As Raymond Brown has remarked: "Jesus had [earlier] prayed for Peter that his faith might not fail, now Jesus is leading his disciple to repentance so that having turned around, he may strengthen others."<sup>15</sup> Peter learns of his sinful predisposition, not as a sterile dogma, nor solely as a moment of hatred and loathing turned inward. His sinful inclination becomes clear only through the loving glance of his Lord, a glance that forgives even as it renders judgment.

*It is from precisely this nexus — the merciful approach of God to an unexpectant person — that the notion of original sin takes life.*

Peter's failure is revealed in a face-to-face glance by his redeemer who hastened to forgive even as he issued judgment. And so our paradox: Peter's profound knowledge of this forgiving love, like the knowledge of the prodigal son, springs from a moment of abject failure. The greatness of Peter, which will come to light in the wake of Easter, originated in the weakness he reveals during Jesus' trial.

In the experience of unmerited redemption, the advances of the divine lover seem too grand for words. In the attempt to characterize their awe at this act of God's condescension to humanity, biblical writers give voice to their own sense of inadequacy for such an encounter. It is from precisely this nexus — the merciful approach of God to an unexpectant person — that the notion of original sin takes life. And so Barth's profound insight: original sin is not a reasoned, philosophical consideration of human waywardness and evil, however true these concepts might be on their own terms. The doctrine of original sin is a theological attempt to sketch how profound this mystery and *experience* of redemption truly is.

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#### ADAM AS MICROCOSM

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To Karl Barth we owe the modern articulation that the depth of human sin can only be known by the redeemed. As the story of Peter's denial

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15. R. Brown, *Death of the Messiah* (New York: Doubleday, 1994) I:622.

of Christ and the parable of the prodigal son illustrate, the locus of human sin is precisely the spot where God's capacity for mercy shines most brilliantly.

Yet one may wonder whether the mercy shown to Peter or the prodigal son are isolated examples or representative of a larger pattern. Would it be more honest to say that the occurrences of love and mercy are distributed randomly across the face of human history? Would the world be better defined as an arbitrary and unjust place?

Christians answer this question with a resounding *No!* For Christians, the affirmation that God's mercy defines the very ground of human existence is founded on the basis of Adam's sin and redemption. Just as we could not understand the prodigal son's confession of sin apart from the loving father anxious to forgive and restore him to his place in the family, so we cannot understand Adam's sin without setting it against the backdrop of his redemption. And not by accident, both readings are Lenten texts.

In individual stories of repentance we see the effects of divine mercy in *microcosm*; in the history of Adam this work of redemption is writ large across the *macrocosm*. Any particular moment of tearful confession and redemption is not a random act; it is a participation in the most fundamental structure of the created order. All have died in the first Adam; all will rise through the second. And this is precisely the reason why the Christian tradition has ascribed the fall of man to the sin of just one man. The defeat of that first man is swallowed up by the victory of the last man — Jesus Christ. This is no exercise in literary artistry, as though the writers of the Bible had merely aesthetic interests at stake when they closed this story as it had opened. The purpose was theological. The story ends as it began in order to bring home the point that God's forgiveness of Adam through Christ defines *all* human creation. Individual acts of mercy are not random and episodic; they participate in that grand act of mercy that defines the poles of creation.

Many have claimed that since we can no longer accept the historical existence of Adam and Eve, the story of their sin and redemption can no longer have any meaning. But such a narrow view of how the Bible discloses its meaning misses the entire point. Adam and Eve are significant as individuals not because they represent the very first persons on planet earth, but because they serve the narrative purpose of affirming that all human existence stands under the broad canopy of a merciful God. Forgiveness and grace are not arbitrary moments in the lives of random specimens of the species *homo sapiens*. They are the very center point around which all creation turns — and flourishes. This is the teaching of original sin. □

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