

# Original Sin: a reflection on Genesis 2-3

- human beings die. They lose the divine spirit and go back to dust.
- there is a struggle between the animal and human world.
- there is a struggle in caring for the soil and gaining a living from it.
- we do not directly experience God and our relationship with God is ambivalent.

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- all is not right between the sexes.
- we do not live our life in a garden of delight.

The Yahwist affirms that the root cause of this is disobedience: human failure to listen to and follow God's word.

The Genesis story, however, is not a description of two different historical conditions. It is a theological narrative. It is viewing reality from an inspired perspective: as we would say ‘once upon a time’. It is meta-historical, affirming the way things should be and would be without disobedience.

- For this reason the Genesis story has no tradition in the Old Testament.
- in fact we all do sin, and so things are the way they are.
- The idea of the ‘Fall’ stems from late Jewish speculation

- ‘Do not court death by the errors of your ways, nor invite destruction through your own actions. Death was not God’s doing, he takes no pleasure in the extinction of the living. To be – for this he created all; the world’s created things have health in them, in them no fatal poison can be found, and Hades holds no power on earth; for virtue is undying’(Wisdom 1:12-15)
- ‘It was the devil’s envy that brought death into the world’(Wisdom 2:24).

- [Eve declares]: ‘All sin has come into creation through me’(Apocalypse of Moses, 32).
- ‘Adam is not the cause, except for himself. Each of us has become our own Adam.’(2 Apocalypse of Baruch 54:19 – early second century)
- ‘Adam brought death into the world’(Deut R. 9. 206a).

‘As in Adam all die, so also in Christ shall all be made alive.’(1 Corinthians 15:22).

‘As sin came into the world through one person, and death through sin, and so death spread to all because all sinned ... much more have the grace of God and the free gift in the grace of that one person Jesus Christ overflowed beyond measure for the many’(Romans 5:12, 15).

## Man-woman experience two forces in tension

- The pull of the divine inviting them into Dialogue, into possibility, freedom, responsibility, community and transcendence.
- The pull of the 'adâmah, which they share with other living creatures (including the serpent). It is experienced as an attraction to a world without discretion, without choice, without freedom, without dialogue, without community.

# Man-woman experience two forces in tension

- ‘All is clouded by desire: as fire by smoke, as a mirror by dust, as an unborn babe by its covering. Wisdom is clouded by desire, the ever-present enemy of the wise, desire in its innumerable forms which like a fire cannot find satisfaction’ (The Bhagavad Gita 3.38-39)
- ‘Those who belong to Christ Jesus have crucified the flesh with its passions and desires.’  
• (Galatians 5:24).

The dogma of ‘Original Sin’ is one of the most complex teachings of our faith. Without excusing personal sin, it is essentially a reminder of the limits placed on human freedom by what we inherit and by the environment within which we happen to live.

I offer eleven propositions for further reflection. They attempt to tease out the key implications of this teaching.

1. We experience a lack of harmony in our feelings, impulses, desires and actions. Some of this is because of the sins we ourselves have committed. Some is because of our 'origins'. Our human experience has been enriched by what we have inherited from our forebears and from the environment within which we live our lives. We have also been harmed by the sins of our forebears, as has the environment within which we have to live our lives.

2. As part of the animal world we have inherited the instincts that are for the survival and defence of our species and our person. It is these instincts that account for much of the fear, the fight and flight responses, and the violence that continue to characterise human behaviour, behaviour that we speak of as 'sin'. In evolutionary terms it is not this instinctual behaviour that needs explaining. Rather, it is the human capacity for altruism, for caring for others when there is no obvious advantage for oneself, for empathy, sympathy and compassion.

3. God is drawing everyone to experience the fullness of life that consists in communion in love with God and so with the whole of creation.

4. We experience a tension between what we might call the 'gravity of grace' drawing us into divine communion and the self-centredness, even self-absorption that inclines us to sin.

5. I can affect the environment, but the 'I' that can affect it is affected by it. We are dependent on our environment. It can enrich us, but it can also impoverish us. So-called 'Original Sin' varies in kind and degree from one person to another.

6. The whole weight of personal sin, therefore, cannot be attributed to the person who sins. Circumstances can diminish freedom and therefore responsibility.

7. Healing ('salvation') requires grace from God. We are involved in a drama, not only of discovery, but of redemption. Redemption comes from within, brought about by God's grace enabling and perfecting our faith, hope and love. Everything is gift: my being, my freedom, and redemption which lifts me to communion with God, a communion which is the perfection of finite being (including the forgiveness of sin). We are made for love, for divine love. It is offered as a gift, and we must embrace it.

8. Obviously, this saving grace does not remove us from our environment, but it does open us to the possibility of healing and growing into innocence – not ‘naturally’ by our own efforts, but because of the love of Jesus who gives us his Spirit.

9. It is our graced nature that can achieve concord, but not without a struggle. Saint Augustine likens us to the wounded man in the parable of the Good Samaritan. The baptised are convalescing in the inn of the Church.

10. Freedom, therefore, does not mean independence. Rather, it means the graced ability to open ourselves with our whole mind and heart to God's healing love, upon which we are utterly dependent, and which, thanks to Jesus, we know is surely being offered.

11. We must accept real, though limited, responsibility for the way we have chosen to respond to the opportunities offered to us, and we must welcome our dependence on the Spirit of God that is sustaining us in existence and drawing us into ever more intimate communion with God and so with creation.