THE ETHICS OF EDEN

A Thesis submitted to the Faculty of The School of Continuing Studies and of The Graduate School of Arts and Sciences in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts in Liberal Studies

By

Christopher D. Schenk, B.S.

Georgetown University
Washington, D.C.
October 30, 2013
THE ETHICS OF EDEN

Christopher D. Schenk, B.S.

Mentor: William J. O'Brien, Ph.D.

ABSTRACT

A man, a woman, a serpent, and the forbidden fruit: the story of the Garden of Eden, chronicled in Genesis 2:4b – 3:20 in the Christian Old Testament or Hebrew Bible, is one of the most enduring and recognizable narratives in or out of scripture. The Catechism of the Catholic Church dubs the events of this narrative “The Fall” and points to this text in its explanation of the doctrine of original sin. This study examines the interpretation of the Edenic narrative in its present form in the catechism in terms of its internal coherence, its coherence with the text of Genesis, and the value of the ethical system which it implies. Using the catechism as a baseline, this study considers alternative readings of the Garden narrative; early Jewish and Christian theological writers, religious phenomenologist scholars who read Eden symbolically as myth, and modern reappraisals of the Edenic story; probing in each case for the implied messages about human nature and ethical conduct which arise. Relying on close, textual analysis of selected works, this study examines the arguments made in the writings of a variety of authors as a sampling of the various readings of the Garden of Eden narrative present throughout history, and then evaluates those arguments in an effort to arrive at a meaningful, internally consistent set of ethics that remains true to the text of Genesis.
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

It is with heartfelt and sincere gratitude that I thank my friends Beckie Supiano, Bill Huff, and Siegmund Fuchs for keeping me afloat over the length of this project. I owe its completion to your steadfast friendship and encouragement.

My sincerest thanks also belong to my mentor, Professor William J. O’Brien, without whom I never could have completed this work. Your support has meant the world to me.
## CONTENTS

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Section</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>ABSTRACT</td>
<td>iii</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ACKNOWLEDGMENTS</td>
<td>iv</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>INTRODUCTION</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CHAPTER 1. ORIGINAL SIN AND THE CATECHISM OF THE CATHOLIC CHURCH</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CHAPTER 2. EARLY JEWISH AND CHRISTIAN ALTERNATIVES</td>
<td>29</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CHAPTER 3. EDEN AS MYTH</td>
<td>54</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CHAPTER 4. MODERN REAPPRAISALS</td>
<td>74</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CHAPTER 5. CONCLUSION</td>
<td>97</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>BIBLIOGRAPHY</td>
<td>100</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
INTRODUCTION

The narrative of the Garden of Eden in Genesis 2-3 is a well-known story and is one of the earliest texts to appear in the Old Testament of the Christian faith. In the Catholic tradition, the story in Genesis 2-3 has been dubbed “The Fall” and has surfaced in the Catechism of the Catholic Church as the source of the Church's doctrine of original sin. By using the text of Genesis 2-3 in such a way, the Catholic Church has privileged one specific reading of the text and codified its ethical implications into the doctrine of the faith. Through the centuries, however, this reading of the narrative has been subject to scholarly criticism, literary reappropriation, and religious dissension which call into question the preeminence of the Church's official reading. Moreover, any text is open to a number of different readings and the narrative of Adam, Eve, and the serpent in particular has engendered a number of different interpretations, each interpretation with a different set of resulting ethical implications. Beginning with an examination of the Catechism of the Catholic Church and the doctrine of original sin, this thesis will examine other interpretations of the text of Genesis 2-3 and the ethical systems which arise from those interpretations as critiques or alternatives to the Catholic doctrine. The focus will be on what each interpretation suggests about human nature, touching such aspects of human existence as guilt, interpersonal relationships, social hierarchies, theology, and hope.

A project of this kind could fill many volumes and thus I have had to make certain choices to limit its scope. I have selected specific texts and excerpts relevant to
the study of Eden representing multiple time periods and analytical frameworks, analyzing each for the ethics arising out of the viewpoint argued for by that text. Aside from the Catechism of the Catholic Church, the alternate interpretations fall into three broad categories: early theological interpretations of the text, both Jewish and Christian; scholarly treatments which engage the Eden narrative as a myth; and modern reappraisals of the story. Admittedly, this project is far from comprehensive. There is a staggering number of other works which could have merited inclusion, and the texts chosen represent only a small sampling of the available corpus. Moreover, each of the pieces selected warrants further study and has, out of necessity, been isolated from the vast interplay of social and discursive context which accompanies its writing. Still, this thesis represents the starting point of an investigation of the various ways in which the Eden narrative has shaped understandings of human nature and the ethical systems arising from those understandings.

I feel obliged to make some notes regarding format. As I proceed through a textual analysis of each selected author, I try to maintain the choices of terminology and capitalization employed by the authors themselves. For instance, many writers use the proper names Adam and Eve in their entire treatment of the narrative, while Phyllis Trible is very careful to distinguish the original earth creature from the man and the woman who will emerge from it, and only uses the name Eve once the character has received it in Genesis 3:20. In each case, I follow that particular author’s lead in addressing the characters of the narrative. When citing biblical text, I follow the standard convention of using an abbreviation of the book name, followed by chapter and
verse separated with a colon. For instance, the first verse of the third chapter of Genesis is noted as Gen. 3:1. Also, I have used “Genesis” as a shorthand term for the Edenic narrative which constitutes Genesis 2:4b to Genesis 3:21. Unless otherwise specified, “Genesis” refers to this specific section of text and not the entire book of Genesis.

Unless noted, any italicization present inside a quotation is maintained from the original text and not my own emphasis. When using the full title, I capitalize the Catechism of the Catholic Church, but I do not capitalize when referring to it as the catechism.

Similarly, the word garden is only capitalized when used to name the Garden of Eden with the complete phrase. Additionally, all my quotations from scripture come from the New Revised Standard Edition unless another is identified. References made by other authors may rely upon other translations, including their own.
CHAPTER 1
ORIGINAL SIN AND THE CATECHISM OF THE CATHOLIC CHURCH

The Catechism of the Catholic Church, written under the auspices of Pope John Paul II and promulgated in 1992 is concerned with the expression of fundamental teachings of the Catholic faith. Though it is not designed to be an authoritative text in every matter of faith, it does carry the weight of authority, and the content and language of the catechism, specifically as it engages the Edenic narrative, leads to a constellation of implications about human nature and ethical conduct. In pursuit of an examination of the catechism’s teachings regarding the suggestions of the garden narrative and the doctrine of original sin, this chapter will inspect the text of the catechism itself, relying at times on supplemental writings of Augustine and Paul which inform the viewpoints which have come to be encoded into the present day catechism. Though the catechism does not represent a singular author’s interpretation in quite the same way as other texts, the ethical implications arising from the catechism remain open to discussion and evaluation.

Rather than working with the text of the Eden narrative directly, the language of the catechism asserts a dependence upon “the New Testament and Tradition”\(^1\) in arriving at an understanding of the story of “our first parents, Adam and Eve.”\(^2\) Though theological and exegetical interpretations of scripture can help to illuminate meaning,


\(^2\) Ibid.
any interpretation which strays too far from the text itself does a disservice to the spirit of that text. Accordingly, the perception of Genesis set down into the catechism will be evaluated in terms of their coherence to the original text.

Before addressing what it calls the fall and original sin, the text of the catechism reveals a struggle to address the problem of evil. “If God the Father almighty, the Creator of the ordered and good world, cares for all his creatures,” the text questions, “why does evil exist?” The stated answer involves every “single aspect of the Christian message” as well as the nature of the world as being in a “state of journeying’ toward its ultimate perfection.” It is the incomplete, ongoing nature of the world which allows for the continued presence of evil. Though men and angels are guided toward “their ultimate destinies,” the existence of free choice allows for the possibility of going astray and choosing evil or at least imperfect, choices. Without offering an interpretation of the Eden narrative, the catechism provides at this point a plausible explanation for the evil in the world, an explanation that corresponds with the felt experience of human life. Our own ability to choose allows for the possibility of imperfect and even evil choices. The presence of evil can thus exist in the catholic conception without a reliance on a first sin attributed to an original couple and passed through all successive generations.

---

3 Ibid., 309.
4 Ibid.
5 Ibid., 310.
6 Ibid.
The catechism moreover asserts that the presence of evil, though caused by human choice and not divine decree, is frequently used by God for the sake of good. By way of example the catechism presents the crucifixion of Jesus, “the greatest moral evil ever committed”7 as an evil choice which led to “the glorification of Christ and our redemption.”8 Again, without reference to the text of Genesis or subsequent interpretations of the Eden narrative, the catechism presents instruction, growth, and ultimately redemption as reasons why the presence of evil could be found to be divinely permissible. In this way, the Church provides explanations for the origin of evil and the function of evil in the world that do not depend upon a particular interpretation of the Eden narrative; in fact, the Eden narrative is entirely absent in the initial explanation of these concepts. Instead, the lived experience of free will seems to be the starting point in the examination of evil. Moreover, the crucifixion of Jesus is referenced in particular as an example of good that can come even in the presence of evil, all without an invocation of original sin or the Eden narrative. The atonement of the cross is possible, and its importance to the Catholic faith is not lessened, even without a putative fall from original grace. However, the Eden narrative comes into the picture when the catechism turns its attention to mankind and its relationship to God.

The catechism presents Adam and Eve in a state of original justice, free from concupiscence, reflecting “the inner harmony of the human person, the harmony between

---

7 Ibid., 312.
8 Ibid.
man and woman, and finally the harmony between the first couple and all creation.”

This harmony is forever lost in the events described as the fall.

There does seem to be textual evidence to support some of the conclusions of the catechism at this point. In the dictum that Adam “may freely eat of every tree of the garden” and his role as keeper and tiller of Eden there is a suggestion of harmony between humanity and creation. One could also read the creation of the animals and Adam’s subsequent naming of them in Genesis 2:18-20 as an indication of a kind of original harmony between humanity and nature. Additionally, the plentiful and easily available food of Eden is lost after the disobedience when God curses the ground. “In toil you shall eat of it all the days of your life,” God tells Adam. “Thorns and thistles it shall bring forth for you; and you shall eat the plants of the field. By the sweat of your faces you shall eat bread until you return to the ground.” Creation has just become a much harsher place for the original couple, lending credence to the idea that an initial harmony between humanity and creation has been damaged.

The claim that there is a marked difference between the harmony of Adam’s soul before the fall and after is a more difficult notion to support. The result of eating the fruit of the tree is that Adam’s and Eve’s eyes are opened and they are aware of their nakedness. An awareness of nakedness, seen through centuries of social conditioning, might be viewed as shameful, but that is not quite the same thing as “the inner harmony

---

9 Ibid., 376.
10 Gen. 2:16.
of the human person.” Adam and Eve were naked before eating the fruit, in the time of supposed harmony. If that’s the case, nakedness is not objectively negative, and neither their nakedness nor their clothing themselves is deemed evil in the text itself. What seems to be the most negative outcome of the eating of the fruit and the sewing of skins is the disruption of the relationship between the couple and Yahweh, from whom they hide. There is a resultant disharmony between humanity and God, but not a disruption of the inner harmony of humankind.

Of the resultant disharmonies posited to the fall, the disunity between man and woman is the most readily seen. When asked if he has eaten from the forbidden tree, the man shifts blame to the woman before admitting that he did in fact eat. When punishments are doled out, God tells the woman that her “desire shall be for [her] husband, and he shall rule over” her.12 Created initially as a helper for Adam, the language of desire, rule, and dominion seems indeed to be a disruption to an initial harmony.

In describing the fall, the catechism states that “the revelation of divine love in Christ manifested at the same time the extent of evil and the superabundance of grace. We must therefore approach the question of the origin of evil by fixing the eyes of our faith on him who alone is its conqueror.”13 This assertion places the implications of the Eden narrative into a context which requires a New Testament perspective and a particular Christology as a starting point. Augustine, a major influence on the

---

12 Gen. 3:16.

13 Catechism of the Catholic Church, 385.
subsequent doctrine of original sin reflected in the catechism, traces his interpretation through the epistolary writings of Paul which begins with Christ and looks backward. A brief aside is warranted here to trace the journey of this understanding of the garden narrative.

Augustine’s suppositions regarding the nature and origin of evil both resemble and differ from the conclusions found in the catechism centuries later. While contemplating evil in his *Confessions*, Augustine begins with a vision of God’s creation which is perfectly good, blossoming from the will of an infinite and infinitely good creator. With an omnipotent and benevolent God as his starting point, Augustine wonders “[w]here, then is evil; where does it come from and how did it creep in? What is its root, its seed?”14 To resolve this problem, Augustine first surmises that destruction of a thing means a loss of good in that thing. Thus, anything which is prone to destruction – that is, all substance – is good. If all things of substance are good, then evil cannot be a substance. It is by this progression that Augustine arrives at the conclusion that evil is not a substance, but is a loss or a lack of good. “Everything that exists is good,” he writes, “and so evil … cannot be a substance, because if it were it would be good.”15 Similarly, villainy is “no substance, only the perversity of a will twisted away from … God.”16

---


15 Ibid., 128.

16 Ibid., 130.
These assertions about evil depend on a gradient of goodness that is evidenced in human existence. Though Augustine’s argument in the *Confessions* begins with a perfect creation that descends into imperfection, while the catechism implies a reverse process that begins with a disordered world moving toward the ideal, both texts share the idea that evil arises from differing portions of creation being in different states of perfection. Like the catechism itself, Augustine presents both this view of the origin of evil as a facet of the nature of the universe as well as the view that sin arises in human nature through the fault of Adam and Eve, “for by them so great a sin was committed that by it the human nature was altered for the worse, and was transmitted also to their posterity.”

In assessing the enormity of the sin in the garden as well as the association of all humanity in that sin, Augustine takes his lead from the New Testament writings of Paul, particularly his epistle to the Romans.

One central tenet in Paul’s Christology is the availability of justification through Christ for all people, Jews and gentiles. Through Christ’s crucifixion and resurrection, all people have access to life and justification. It seems essential to Paul that the power of Christ’s sacrifice is effectual enough to be sufficient for all humankind. A lesser interpretation of the Passion will not do for Paul and his soteriology; for him, this one action sufficiently accounts for and balances the sins of the world. It is in seeking an example of “the efficacious role of one man on behalf of all” that Paul looks to the narrative of Adam and Eve. In this story he finds an example of one action that is

---


effectual, for all subsequent people and concludes “that the act of one man can influence the fate of the multitude.” From this conclusion, Paul not only finds a precursor for the scope of Christ’s salvific actions, he finds the stakes. If Christ’s death and resurrection provide salvation, then in Genesis Paul finds a description of the situation from which people are saved. The Eden narrative becomes in Paul’s reading more than an explanation for mortality and human awareness; it becomes a treatise on a state of existential death and disharmony. Indeed, if part of Paul’s rhetorical purpose in his letter to the Romans is to magnify the importance of Christ’s Passion, it is logical to raise the level of danger in faithlessness, to deepen the depths from which Christ raises us. Paul suggests that justification through Christ does not improve a neutral position; it redeems a deeply negative, pernicious condition.

The sin of Eden, read from Paul’s position, necessitates the actions of Christ and marks the importance of faith for all people. If Adam is the common ancestor of all of humanity, then the loss of original justice and the inclination to sin is the common heritage of all people as well. It follows, then, that all people are in need of Christ’s salvation. Paul’s comparison has become encoded in the catechism, which calls the doctrine of original sin “the ‘reverse side’ of the Good News … that all men need salvation, and that salvation is offered to all through Christ.” Moreover, “we cannot tamper with the revelation of original sin without undermining the mystery of Christ.”

---

19 Ibid.

20 *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, 389.

21 Ibid.
Labeling the heading “Original Sin – an essential truth of the faith,” the catechism follows Paul’s thinking in suggesting that the establishment of a state of disgrace caused by the disobedience of Adam and Eve is absolutely necessary to understanding Christ’s death and resurrection.

Beginning with the importance of justification through faith in Christ, Paul’s backward glance allows him to connect the Eden narrative into a pre-existing construct, one which verifies his initial premise regarding the power and efficacy of Christ’s salvation. This backward gaze highlights a hazard of scriptural interpretation. Rather than engaging the text itself on its own terms, Paul mines the narrative in order to find confirmation of a premise he already believes to be true. An approach such as this is self-serving and misleading; any text read with an agenda in mind is open to abuse.

The catechism more or less acknowledges this hermeneutical problem when it declares that “the People of God in the Old Testament had tried to understand” the Eden narrative, but “they could not grasp this story’s ultimate meaning, which is revealed only in the light of the death and Resurrection of Jesus Christ.”

The catechism continues with points of interpretation which do not find their origin in Paul. First, the text declares the “the account of the fall in Genesis 3 uses figurative language, but affirms a primeval event, a deed that took place at the beginning of the history of man.”

---

22 Ibid., 388.

23 Ibid., 390.
Eden is fictional or symbolic in nature, this assertion attempts to have it both ways. It affirms the figurative nature of the story, but by calling it an event, a deed, and something which takes place in history, the catechism strips away the meaning of symbolism and posits the story with the facticity of an actual, historical event. It is an understandable position. The literalism of the event is contradicted by several branches of science as well as by the conflicting account of creation which occurs in Genesis 1-2. However, calling the narrative symbolic or merely suggestive of our origins weakens the power of its claims and the dire consequences of original sin which necessitate justification by Christ. By straddling the fence between literalism and symbolism, the catechism appears to attempt to satisfy both sets of demands, but runs the risk of satisfying neither.

Again, as if anticipating arguments to its claims, the catechism ventures into a discussion of Satan and the fall of the angels from heaven. References are made to “scripture and the Church’s Tradition” as sources pointing to the fall of the angels and the association of the serpent in Genesis as Satan. Though phrased less explicitly, the defense of this interpretation has the same spirit as the assertion that Jewish readers of the Hebrew Bible could not fully grasp the truth underlying Genesis because they lacked the context of the New Testament. The implication is once again that the text itself does not support the conclusions embedded in the catechism, and it is only when combined with other writings and a history of interpretation that the doctrine can emerge as is.

Even in attempting to justify that very process of gradual formation, the catechism points to its own weakness in taking the terms and implications of the narrative for what they are.

The text itself makes it difficult to support the case that the serpent of Genesis 3 is to be associated with the Christian conception of the devil. The previous chapter of Genesis details the creation of “every animal of the field and every bird of the air,” followed by their naming. It seems a natural link, narratively, that the serpent is one of these newly formed and named creatures, not an angel which has fallen from heaven in some unspecified back story. Though the serpent speaks and is called “more crafter than any other wild animal,” it is still described as a wild animal. In calling attention to the snake’s craftiness, the narrator gives an explanation for its role in the events to follow. Had the narrative intention been to show the serpent’s wickedness or to indicate the satanic presence lurking beneath the illusion of the snake, this would have been the place to do it. However, the narrator does not point to a desire to doom mankind or a previous fall from grace as the reason the serpent questions the couple; rather, the narrator states that the serpent was unusually crafty for an animal. The curse laid upon the snake likewise does not point a secret satanic identity. It is said to be cursed “among all animals and among all wild creatures,” but this pronouncement again treats it as simply that, an animal. Moreover, the punishment is to give snakes the shape and movement we know snakes to have. “Upon your belly you shall go,” God says, “and dust you shall eat

25 Gen. 2:18.

26 Gen. 3:1.
all the days of your life.”27 This is not a punishment for God’s spiritual adversary; this is an explanation for how snakes came to crawl on their bellies. God does not rail upon the damage wrought by his great enemy; he does not even recognize him as such, and if he were to recognize this serpent as Satan, punishing snakes for the actions of the devil seems more than a little unjustified.

Despite the interpretive violence to the text required to see Satan in the serpent, the catechism asserts this claim with certainty. Positing that Satan “may act in the world out of hatred for God and his kingdom,”28 the catechism reverses its own previous assertion about the presence and function of evil by lamenting that “it is a great mystery that providence should permit diabolical activity.”29 The previous understanding of evil as a more abstract and generalized facet of creation is lost when evil is concentrated in the form of a singular being. This forgetfulness may be the result of a single document trying to harmonize centuries of entrenched and differing interpretations of a multitude of ancient texts which comprise a patchwork canon, but the shifting understanding of evil suggested by the text does not lend harmony to the teachings regarding original sin laid out in this portion of the catechism.

After asserting the a priori existence of fallen angels and the devil specifically, the catechism returns to the drama of the garden and the eating of fruit from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. This tree “symbolically evokes the insurmountable

27 Gen. 3:14.
28 Catechism of the Catholic Church, 395.
29 Ibid.
limits that man, being a creature, must freely recognize and respect with trust.”

Because the catechism looks upon the Eden narrative as sometimes literal and sometimes symbolic, it is unclear the particular sense in which this tree is meant to be understood. Was it symbolic to a literal Adam and Eve, suggesting there was no actual tree but there was some kind of turning from God? Or was the tree literal to a literal Adam and Eve, but is now symbolic to those of the modern era of the capacity to disobey? It cannot be the case that the catechism treats the entire narrative as symbolic, since the real state of gracelessness supposedly comes from the real consequences of this event.

The catechism then addresses the actual nature of the sin of Adam and Eve and describes it this way: “Man, tempted by the devil, let his trust in his Creator die in his heart and, abusing his freedom, disobeyed God’s command.” The state of harmony described as original justice is lost and in its place, “the control of the spiritual faculties over the body is shattered; the union of man and woman becomes subject to tensions, their relations henceforth marked by lust and domination. Harmony with creation is broken: visible creation has become alien and hostile to man.” Lastly, it is because of this event that death first enters the world and human history. The loss of various kinds of harmony has already been discussed; it is this last consequence, the emergence of death, which requires special attention here.

---

30 Ibid., 396.

31 Ibid., 397.

32 Ibid., 400.
Death is the punishment promised to Adam when he is forbidden from eating of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. Though there is no elaboration of its meaning here, the threat seems to be one of death, not one of mortality. There is nothing in the text up to this point to indicate that the first man is immortal. It is hard to imagine that a detail as important as human immortality would go unmentioned or merely implied in a text which purportedly details its loss, especially since it involves a state so different from that experienced by humanity today. There is a tree called the tree of life which is in the middle of the garden, but the implications of this name are left largely unexplored until after the fall. After Adam and Eve have disobeyed God’s commandment, he fears that “he might reach out his hand and take also from the tree of life, and eat, and live forever.”33 The fear that Adam or Eve might eat of the tree of life at this point suggests that it is something which has not yet occurred. Rather than losing an original state of immortality through the fall, the implication is that humanity had a chance to achieve immortality, but lost that opportunity because of the disobedience of the original couple. The distinction between losing immortality and losing the possibility of immortality is an important one, especially when one examines God’s indication that eating from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil will result in death. Had humanity started out immortal, then the promise of death -meaning mortality- as punishment for eating the forbidden fruit is an honest one. However, since

33 Gen. 3:22.
it seems that humanity never enjoyed a state of immortality, the threat that “in the day that you eat of it you shall die”\textsuperscript{34} looks to be merely bluster or even outright deception.

The Christian linkage of sin with death comes mainly from Paul’s reading of the Eden narrative and his claim that “sin came into the world through one man, and death came through sin.”\textsuperscript{35} If Paul’s connection of death and sin comes through the punishment promised to Adam for eating from the forbidden tree, then the connection is faulty; Adam eats of the tree and does not die on that day. He also does not lose a pre-existing immortality. A possible connection could be seen in the post-disobedience punishments given to Adam, Eve, and the serpent, though this is likewise faulty. God alludes to Adam’s death when he curses the ground to produce sustenance for humanity only through labor, “until you return to the ground, for out of it you were taken; you are dust, and to dust you shall return.”\textsuperscript{36} Though this prediction of death occurs in the section in which Adam, Eve, and the serpent receive punishment for disobedience, it is itself an observation of a preexisting certainty, not a new punishment meted out upon Adam or his descendents. The language is that of a given situation as background to the punishment of labor, not a change from a state of deathlessness to one of mortality. If this speech act constituted a change to human nature in and of itself, God would not subsequently fear humanity’s eating from the tree of life. Again, the narrator of the story assumes that Adam and Eve are mortals who, having never experienced immortality.

\textsuperscript{34} Gen. 2:17.

\textsuperscript{35} Rom. 5:12.

\textsuperscript{36} Gen. 3:19.
may have lost the chance at it because of the act of eating from the tree of knowledge of good and evil.

In following and attempting to validate Paul, Augustine’s interpretive maneuvers take him even further from the text. He addresses the failure of God’s threat of death to come true in a literal sense. While he acknowledges that “this manifest death, which consists in the separation of soul and body, was also signified by god when He said, ‘In the day thou eatest thereof thou shalt surely die,’ it ought not on that account to seem absurd that they were not dismissed from the body on that very day on which they took the forbidden and death-bringing fruit” because “on that very day their nature was altered for the worse and vitiated.” 37 In speaking of a changed human nature, he relies upon the faulty notion that humanity was immortal before the fall and lost that status through disobedience. He also distinguishes between a first death, death of the body, and a second death, death of the soul. In an odd combination of the two, Augustine claims that “God by the words ‘Adam, where art thou?’ pointed to the death of the soul,” but it is the death of the body, “this first death, which is common to all, was the result of that sin which in one man became common to all.” 38 Put another way, God in Genesis and Paul in Romans are both validated if Adam’s death is of the soul, but through him all men suffer a bodily death. Such a complex set of interpretive maneuvers and classifications quickly becomes unwieldy and distant from the text of Genesis itself.

37 Augustine, The City of God, 327.

38 Ibid.
Claiming that “[a]fter that first sin, the world is virtually inundated by sin,”\textsuperscript{39} the catechism references the murder of Abel by his brother Cain and other, unspecified sins in the history of Israel and the Church even after Christ’s atonement. Implicit is the connection between those sins and the first sin in the garden. A causality is implied which again traces its origins to the epistles of Paul rather than Genesis. No reference is made in the subsequent narratives in Genesis to the fault of Adam and Eve; no blame is laid at their feet for the first murder or the wickedness that precedes the flood of Noah’s day, for instance. Rather, each account of individual or communal sinfulness seems to stand on its own, proper to its specific perpetrator(s). In fact, the word sin is never used in the Eden narrative; its first appearance coincides with God’s disapproval for Cain’s offering of fruit. However, the link between the disobedience in the garden and the sinfulness of humanity suggested in the catechism traces a path through Paul’s epistle to the Romans and Augustine’s subsequent analysis. Paul writes that “one man’s trespass led to condemnation for all” and “by one man’s disobedience the many were made sinners.”\textsuperscript{40} Again, Paul’s interest is in establishing the universal dominion of sin and gracelessness which necessitates and magnifies the atonement achieved by Christ on the cross. Forgetting the roles of Eve, the serpent, and Yahweh, Paul sets up Adam alone as the precursor to Christ and sole actor who dooms mankind. Though it creates a neat symmetry with the abundance of Christ’s redemption, both in singularity and magnitude,

\textsuperscript{39} Catechism of the Catholic Church, 401.

\textsuperscript{40} Rom 5:18-19.
it doesn’t fit with a narrative that attributes wrongdoing to three characters instead of one
and credits Yahweh with words that can be interpreted as dishonest.

The catechism quotes Paul’s epistle to the Romans explicitly as it shifts focus to
the consequences of the fall for humanity at large. It then claims the Church is
“[f]ollowing St. Paul,” when it teaches that “the overwhelming misery which oppresses
men and the inclination toward evil and death cannot be understood apart from their
connection with Adam’s sin and the fact that he as transmitted to us a sin with which we
are all born afflicted, a sin which is the ‘death of the soul.’”41 This combination of sin,
bodily death, and soul’s death is also quite reminiscent of Augustine’s interpretations of
Genesis and Romans. Though the catechism does attempt an explanation of the means
through which the sin in the garden became a state of fallenness for all humanity, it does
admit that, “the transmission of original sin is a mystery that we cannot fully
understand.”42 It does suggest that the original justice and holiness employed by the
primeval couple was intended to be granted to all of humanity, but was lost before any
other humans are mentioned in creation. Obliquely, it seems that the catechism suggests
that original holiness would have been the birthright of all humans since that should have
been the state within which Adam and Eve bore children. However, because the fall
changes the state of grace enjoyed by the two original parents, it is the state of depravity
which becomes propagated to the rest of humans. A number of interpretive problems
crop up at this point. If sexual reproduction is the means of transmitting original sin,

41 Catechism of the Catholic Church, 403.
42 Ibid., 404.
could original justice have existed for subsequent generations had Adam and Eve avoided the tree? Did God envision the entirety of human existence, generation after generation, and intend for all those countless lives to have been granted the same kind of original justice as Adam and Eve, the same simple existence in the garden? What would happen if sin were introduced in a subsequent generation? Would one lineage be marked by gracelessness and another marked by inherited grace?

On the other hand, taking Paul’s premise that the first sin allowed death to exist, one could argue that Adam and Eve were intended to be the only humans in existence, living in simple bliss in God’s garden until they lost this condition through the fall. The emergence of death through sin, taking Paul’s interpretation of Genesis, and the subsequent death of Adam and Eve would create a very short human history unless more humans appeared on the scene, whether created by Yahweh or through human reproduction. This explanation has its own weaknesses. For one, the text of Genesis speaks of marriage, fathers, and mothers before the act of human childbirth has occurred. When God punishes the woman in the garden for her role in the disobedience, he says that her pain in childbirth will be increased, not that childbirth will now be necessary. The idea of sexual reproduction seems preexisting; God’s pronouncement constitutes a modification of the process, not an inception, pointing to reproduction as an existing facet of creation and part of God’s plan for the world.

After clarifying that original sin as it applies to subsequent humanity is a state and not an act, the catechism goes on to declare that original sin injures, but does not
totally destroy or corrupt, human nature. The nature of humanity “is wounded in the nature powers proper to it; subject to ignorance, suffering, and the dominion of death; and inclined to sin – an inclination to evil that is called ‘concupiscence.’” The issue of concupiscence presents an additional conundrum. Paul’s epistle to the Romans reveals a struggle to understand this will to sin. He writes, “I do not understand my own actions. For I do not do what I want, but I do the very thing I hate,” and “I do not do the good I want, but the evil I do not want is what I do.” Augustine, too, writes of the conflict between thought and action. “The mind commands itself to will something: it would not be giving the order if it did not want this thing,” he writes, “yet it does not do what it commands.”

The language of the catechism suggests that this conflict experienced by humans and contemplated explicitly by Paul and Augustine is the result of original sin, the result of Adam’s sin in Eden. However, it does not specify clearly the moment of its inception. Is concupiscence the result of eating the fruit, a consequence somehow mechanistically unfolded at the moment of disobedience? Or is it instead the punishment for that sin, a consequence meted out by God to castigate the human race? The catechism does not clearly indicate the origin of that concupiscence and the text of Genesis does not support either one. The stated effect of eating the fruit of the tree was opened eyes, not an evil

41 Ibid., 405.

42 Rom. 5:15.

43 Rom. 5:19.

44 Augustine, The Confessions, 151.
will. Similarly, an inclination to evil is absent from the punishments given by God after the disobedience. Concupiscence arises neither as a natural consequence of the act of eating from the tree nor as punishment from God for disobedience. The implied causation of concupiscence by a first sin is also problematic. Augustine asserts that through the fault of Adam, the soul “deserted Him, and so was deserted by Him. For its own will was the originator of its evil, as God was the originator of its motions toward good.”47 Though the catechism suggests that the emergence of concupiscence is the just result of Adam’s sin in the garden, Augustine’s assertions indicate an inclination toward evil or disobedience which comes before the eating of the fruit. Indeed, a willful disobedience seems necessary for the eating of the fruit to be considered sinful, suggesting that an evil thought must have preceded the putatively evil action. “[T]he evil act had never been done had not an evil will preceded it,”48 writes Augustine. However, if this is the case, concupiscence does not arise as a result of Adam’s fault, it precedes it. If an inclination toward evil exists already in the garden before the fall, it can hardly be attributed to the fault of the first couple.

Without touching upon these finer points, the catechism next explains that the doctrine of original sin received greater articulation in contrast to Pelagianism in the fifth century and the Protestant Reformation in the sixteenth, both of which will be explored in greater detail in subsequent chapters. Finally, the catechism closes its discussion of original sin by placing it in the context of a cosmic battle between good and evil.


48 Ibid., 346.
Quoting the Council of Trent, the catechism details that original sin entails “captivity under the power of him who thenceforth had the power of death, that is, the devil.” As a result of the fall, humanity is in an ambivalent state wherein “the devil has acquired a certain domination over man, even though man remains free.”

The section of the catechism which deals with original sin closes by briefly touching upon the protoevangelium seen in Genesis 3:15, the prediction of Christ as a new Adam and Mary as a New Eve. Having already discussed the improbability of the serpent’s identification with Satan, the issue is compounded here by imprecise readings of the original text. The catechism predicts “a battle between the serpent and the Woman, and of the final victory of a descendent of hers.” The text of Genesis does indicate future enmity between the serpent and the woman and between its offspring and hers. The parallels, even allowing a liberal reading infused with New Testament theology, do not quite add up to the protoevangelium expressed by the catechism. The enmity cited by the text is between the woman and the serpent and then between their offspring. If the serpent is identified with Satan and the woman is symbolic of Mary, the battle is enmity is between Satan and Mary, not Satan and Christ. If the offspring of the woman is meant to be Jesus, then who is the offspring of Satan? At any rate, enmity does not equal a grand, spiritual battle. The text does go on to indicate that the offspring

---

49 *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, 407.

50 Ibid.

51 *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, 410.
of the woman will strike the head of the serpent while the serpent “will strike his heel,” it is still a bit of an interpretive stretch to liken these characters to Satan and Christ, and to read “the final victory” of the woman’s descendent as the catechism does. Doing so ignores a far simpler conclusion: the text is an explanation of humankind’s distaste for snakes and snakes’ inclination for violence toward humans.

A final concluding paragraph in the catechism’s explication of original sin asks the question “But why did God not prevent the first man from sinning?” In response to this question, the catechism returns to the idea that a greater good can be produced from a finite and temporary evil and points once again to the overwhelming benefit of justification through Christ.

Though the section of the catechism dealing directly with original sin ends at this point, it leaves out a number of significant elements of the text of Genesis. One facet of the Eden narrative which receives little attention in the catechism is the naming and nature of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. Such a name indicates the preexistence of evil. Even without resorting to an interpretation which posits the fall of the angels as a precursor to Eden, the existence of evil prior to the disobedient act of eating certainly impacts the story. Is the sin of eating the fruit truly so grave as to burden all humanity with the stain of original sin if, in fact, evil had already existed in God’s creation?

52 Gen. 3:15.
Additionally, the theology of the catechism presupposes an omnibenevolent God and a satanic serpent willing to do evil, but the text itself presents readers with a serpent who tells the truth and a God who lies. God promises death on the day that Adam eats from the tree of knowledge of good and evil. The serpent articulates to Eve that she “will not die; for God knows that when you eat of it your eyes will be opened, and you will be like God, knowing good and evil.”\textsuperscript{53} What happens when the fruit is eaten? Not death, as God promised. Instead, the text reveals that “the eyes of both were opened and they knew that they were naked.”\textsuperscript{54} The awareness of nakedness is not quite the same as the knowledge of good and evil, and seems to be a non sequitur, but God later confirms that “the man has become like one of us, knowing good and evil.”\textsuperscript{55} God’s own words, along with the narrator’s, confirm that the serpent spoke the truth where God had lied. What is to be made of this situation, wherein a God who has the awesome power of creation lacks the moral perfection so often ascribed to him? What justice is there when a serpent is punished for revealing the truth, when humanity is punished for catching God in a lie?

The doctrine of original sin presented in the catechism privileges and relies upon a history of interpretation that is self-validating, but which wanders further and further from the spirit and letter of the original text. In attempting to confirm preexisting theological points of interpretation, it strains and abuses the text as it is, ignoring and

\textsuperscript{53} Gen. 3:4-5.
\textsuperscript{54} Gen. 3:7.
\textsuperscript{55} Gen. 3:22.
decrying far simpler explanations in favor of outlandish and recherché conclusions. Though the section begins with an explanation of evil which coincides with the felt and lived experiences of human existence, the doctrine of original sin serves as the starting point for the remainder of the pertinent section of catechism, rather than the conclusion. Rather than letting the features of the narrative dictate the resulting interpretation, the catechism’s insistence on proving the verity of original sin controls the text, devolving what seems like textual analysis into complicated, self-serving hermeneutical gymnastics. The doctrine of original sin as expressed in the Catechism of the Catholic Church fails as a satisfying, coherent expression of the ethical implications of the Eden narrative.
CHAPTER 2
EARLY JEWISH AND CHRISTIAN ALTERNATIVES

The Catechism of the Catholic Church remarks more than once upon the necessity of a New Testament understanding of scripture in order to grasp the full meaning of the text of Genesis.\(^1\) However, members of Jewish faith traditions hold the text of Genesis to be scripture, yet do not incorporate Christian theology or the doctrine of original sin into their understanding of the Edenic narrative. In searching for an alternative to the ethics implied by the catechism’s reading of Genesis, early Judaic readings which also hold the text to be sacred seem a logical place to start. This chapter will examine the writings of a selected group of Jewish writers in two different time periods: early postbiblical and medieval. Far from being an exhaustive study of changing Judaic interpretations over time, this approach merely selects these writers as representations of the kinds of interpretation of the Eden narrative present in Jewish discourses in discrete time periods.

Philo, a postbiblical Jewish writer living in the first century of the Common Era, probes the text of Genesis for ethical and theological interpretations in a question and answer format in a text entitled *Questions and Answers on Genesis*. His study of the text is characterized by a decidedly negative view of the actions of Eve which lead in many cases to strikingly misogynistic conclusions about the implications of the Eden narrative. While many other writers contemporary with Philo “support hierarchical readings” of

\(^1\) *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, 385 and 388, for instance.
Genesis “that subordinate Eve to Adam . . ., the most pejorative presentation of Eve in this period is found in the writings of Philo.”

Though he is capable of seeing the union of man and woman as harmonious, such as in his declaration that “everything which is without a woman is imperfect and homeless,” he more often than not finds fault and weakness in the nature of all women, which he then attributes to the character of Eve. He finds, for instance, that “woman is more accustomed to be deceived than man. For his judgment, like his body, is masculine and is capable of dissolving or destroying the designs of deception; but the judgment of woman is more feminine, and because of softness she easily gives way and is taken in by plausible falsehoods which resemble the truth.”

This assertion comes in response to the questions “Why does the serpent speak to the woman and not to the man?” There are several faulty assumptions implicit in this question and response.

First, Philo asserts that the serpent has an evil agenda in speaking to Eve about the fruit of the tree in the garden. His words are characterized by Philo as deception and falsehood, though he is in fact the character who tells the truth about the nature of the fruit. The snake is described as crafty in most translations, but the word need not imply a malicious intent, only a sapience beyond other animals. Moreover, it is likely that the

---


4 Ibid., 1.33.

5 Ibid.
word in Hebrew was chosen to create a verbal pun with the word naked, which is to achieve significance in the story at the end of the scene involving the fruit. Philo’s assumptions about the serpent’s ill will do not have strong textual support.

Philo’s second faulty assumption likewise posits traits to a character that do not have support from the text. Working backwards, Philo begins with his impression of women as weak-minded and susceptible to influence and then colors his understanding of Eve with that impression. There is no indication from the text that the serpent chooses to speak to Eve because she is more gullible, nor that Adam is more resistant to trickery or temptation. While the serpent addresses Eve, it is clear from her use of plural pronouns and her subsequent sharing of the fruit that Adam is present with her, standing silently by her side. If the act of the serpent is to be considered trickery, then Adam is just as guilty of falling for the trick, and in terms of literary character, Adam is the weaker agent in the scene. Had he truly been more resistant to guile, temptation, or deceit, he might have spoken up in opposition to the serpent. His silence indicates that he cannot boast a superior will or greater discernment. However, the act of the serpent need not be considered trickery. The serpent points out that God has lied about the consequences of eating the fruit and reveals the truth to the first couple. Eve sees “that the tree is good for food,”⁶ and shares it with her mate. Another reading of the text might contend that, far from being naïve and easily tricked, Eve’s thoughts are the most expansive; she thinks of more than herself in that she thinks of sharing with and

---

providing for Adam. Philo’s reading of Genesis devalues the possible generosity of Eve’s actions and the neutrality of the serpent’s.

Moreover, Philo reads Eve’s sharing of the fruit quite negatively as well. In answer the question, “Why does the woman first touch the tree and eat of its fruit, and afterwards the man also take of it?” Philo divides his response into a “literal meaning” and an “allegorical sense.” The literal meaning of the text relies upon “the priority (of the woman) [being] mentioned with emphasis.” It makes sense for the woman to be the first to take and eat the fruit, an implicitly wicked or disobedient action, because “it is fitting that man should rule over immortality and everything good, but woman over death and everything vile.” The way in which it is fitting is left unsupported and unexplored. Aside from the lack of explanation or support, Philo’s association of man with immortality and good and woman with death and viliness suffers from other problems. The text of Genesis does not readily support the interpretation that humankind would have been immortal save for the eating of the fruit. Additionally, Adam and Eve share in eating the fruit, hiding from God, and being exiled. They share in both the crime and the punishment; what part of these events calls for so great a division between man and woman that man can be called the ruler of everything good and woman the ruler of everything vile? Whether Adam or Eve takes that first bite seems too

---

7 Philo Questions and Answers on Genesis 1.37.
8 Ibid.
9 Ibid.
10 Ibid.
inconsequential a detail of the text to lead to such massive, decisive, and divisive categorization. Philo’s connection of Eve to death, meanwhile, ignores the meaning of her name, her designation as “the mother of all living,” and women’s essential roles in life-giving reproduction. Calling Eve the ruler of death strains honest textual analysis to an unnatural degree.

Philo also traces an allegorical interpretation of the text in order to explain why Eve is the first to eat. Likely because of the expository note in the Eden narrative that that Eve “saw that the tree was good for food and a delight to the eyes,” Philo intuits that “woman is a symbol of sense and man, mind.” Providing some empirical evidence, Philo writes, “out of necessity sense comes into contact with the sense-perceptible; and by the participation of sense, things pass into the mind; for sense is moved by objects while the mind is moved by sense.” Philo’s elucidation of the path from object to sense to mind is sound enough, and he gives further evidence for his allegorical reading. Philo notes that after Adam and Eve eat of the fruit and learn that they are naked, prompting them to hide from God, God asks only Adam, “Where art thou?” Eve’s conspicuous presence in the act of eating and her equally conspicuous absence from God’s attention strikes Philo as further evidence that Adam represents the higher functions of humanity. “For the sovereign and ruling element in man, having

11 Gen. 3:20.
12 Gen. 3:6.
13 Philo Questions and Answers on Genesis 1.37.
14 Ibid.
reason,” he writes, “when it listens to anyone, introduces the vice of the female part also, that is, perception.” If God seeks to admonish his disobedient creations, it follows that he would address human reason, represented by Adam, rather than the perception of the senses, symbolized by Eve. In this limited way, Philo could be credited with a plausible figurative reading of the text. However, this reading fails to satisfy when it is asked to cover a scope that is too large.

Even if one agrees with Philo that the path from fruit to Eve to Adam mirrors the process of object to sense to mind, the allegory does not suggest that all women are therefore sensory-centered while men are mind-centered. In reading this section of the text as allegory, Philo goes too far in suggesting that the actions of one man and one woman, even the first man and first woman, are suggestive of the qualities of all men and all women. Philo’s allegorical reading, which begins as a plausible exploration of the interaction of object, sensory perception, and mind, eventually falls flat when it is utilized to justify a position suggesting an inherent and universal inferiority of women.

Women’s susceptibility to deception, their association with death, and their connection to sense but not mind, are not the only misogynistic assumptions that Philo makes. His reading of Genesis also leads him to posit that women are meant to be subordinate to men. As evidence, Philo often relies again upon his own assumptions about women. For instance, when answering the question, “Why was not woman, like

---

16 Philo Questions and Answers on Genesis 1.45.
other animals and man, also formed from the earth, instead of the side of man?” 17 His answers, and their order, are quite revealing. “First,” he writes, “because woman is not equal in honor to man.” 18 He then moves on to a second reason suggesting that Eve’s comparative youth implies that all brides should be younger than their grooms. Philo’s perception of a gender gap when it comes to honor has no back up, no evidentiary support. It is self evident to him that women have less honor. Again, Philo works backwards from his own misogynistic views and lays them on top of the text of Genesis, reading more into the narrative than the text can bear. His conclusion regarding relative ages in a marriage rests upon equally appalling sexist assumptions. Since Eve is younger than Adam in terms of creation, “those who take wives who have passed their prime are to be criticized for destroying the laws of nature.” 19 Philo takes one facet of the Eden narrative and stretches its implications too far. Though the woman who will be called Eve appears after the earth creature who is called Adam, it is a far stretch to assume that this narrative sequence is meant to impose strict rules for all subsequent marriages in history. A more natural reading of the text implies a unity and mutuality between man and woman, not a necessity for wives to be younger than their husbands. Aside from doing violence to the intention of the text, Philo’s interpretation does violence to the dignity of human individuals engaged in relationships.

17 Philo Questions and Answers on Genesis 1.27.

18 Ibid.

19 Ibid.
In creating a system of ethical interpretations arising from the Eden narrative, Philo does not find evidence of an original sin which taints the soul of all subsequent people. The closest he comes to resembling the fall explicated in the Catechism of the Catholic Church is the assumption that the actions of Adam resulted in the loss of humanity’s immortality. However, Philo’s conclusions are just as unsatisfactory as a basis for an ethical code as are the catechism’s. His interpretation suffers from two main weaknesses. The first is a propensity to start with his own faulty, sexist assumptions about men and women and then impose them on the text of Genesis. He sees weakness, frailty, and inferiority where there is none. Secondly, his reading of the particular details of Adam and Eve may work as allegory on a small scale, but become strained when Philo posits their applicability on the scale of the human species. Just as the catechism suffers from crafting the disobedience of Adam into a yoke worn by the entirety of humanity, Philo’s interpretation breaks down in imposing Eve’s supposed crimes onto the totality of women.

Writing roughly half a century after Philo, the Jewish military leader, historian, and Roman citizen, Josephus has a much gentler view of Eve than his forbear Philo. For instance, Josephus emphasizes Adam’s recognition, upon first seeing the woman, “that she was made from himself.”\textsuperscript{20} This recognition has a much more positive implication than Philo’s insistence that women are secondary and lacking in honor. Rather, Adam sees a mutuality with the woman, and Josephus goes on to highlight her name’s meaning

as “mother of all living.” A far cry from Philo’s accusation that Eve is the ruler of death, Josephus accords her the distinction of being the generative, life-giving mother of all.

Perhaps because of her formation out of the living material of Adam, Josephus asserts that “God bade [both] Adam and his wife partake of the rest of the plants, but to abstain from the tree of wisdom, forewarning them that, if they touched it, it would prove their destruction.”21 Again, Josephus does not elaborate on the implications of his authorial choices himself, but there is a commonality and a togetherness implied in this shared reception of God’s pronouncement which is lacking in Philo’s reading. Even in the threat of their destruction, the use of plural pronouns speaks to a union, not a hierarchy. Moreover, while a marriage is perhaps implied by the narrative aside in Genesis 2:24, none is explicitly recounted. For Josephus to employ the term “wife” rather than Eve or the woman highlights the unity of the couple.

As if to continue the theme of original unity, Josephus asserts that in “that epoch all the creatures spoke a common tongue, and the serpent, living in the company of Adam and his wife, grew jealous of the blessings which he supposed were destined for them if they obeyed God’s behests.”22 Echoing in some ways the original justice described in the Catechism of the Catholic Church, the state of harmony between Adam and Eve is shared to some degree by all the creatures until the events set in motion by the serpent. Though Josephus attributes a wicked motive to the actions of the serpent, an interpretation whose problematic nature has already been discussed, Josephus does not

21 Ibid.
22 Ibid.
lay blame for the disobedience upon Eve in the same manner as does Philo. In a style more reminiscent of a historian than a theologian, Josephus matter-of-factually describes how “he misled the woman to scorn the commandment of God: she tasted of the tree, was pleased with the food, and persuaded Adam also to partake of it.” 23 He does not attribute to Eve any desire to spread her damnation to Adam; she does not seduce him to induce a fall. Rather, Adam’s partaking of the fruit is linked syntactically with Eve’s pleasure with the food. Josephus does not even communicate a shared sin or disobedience; what is shared in his account is a pleasing bit of food.

Josephus again differs from Philo in his rendering of Adam and Eve in their next shared action: hiding in the garden from God. Whereas God’s speaking only to Adam suggests to Philo a hierarchical preference of man over woman and an allegorical association of men with reason and women with senses, Josephus simply narrates how “Adam then began to make excuse for his sin and besought God not to be wroth with him, laying the blame for the deed upon the woman.” 24 Eve, subsequently, “in her turn, accused the serpent.” 25 The unity exhibited by the couple up to this point is broken in this moment, not in the eating of the fruit or the subsequent punishments meted out by God. Narratively, God’s individual address to Adam provides the opportunity for this disunity to present itself. God treats them as separate individuals, not as a unit; in return, they respond as individuals, one at a time, in the reverse of the order in which they ate.

23 Ibid.
24 Ibid., 68.
25 Ibid.
Rather than an implication that society is meant to enforce a rigid hierarchy of power, Josephus’ telling of the story of Eden points to the balanced, chiastic structure of the narrative and the dissolution of a couple’s unity in a time of conflict.

In contrast to his otherwise gentler construals of Eve, her actions, and her relationship to Adam, Josephus does assert that Adam’s punishment comes “for yielding to a woman’s counsel.” 26 He does not write that Adam’s fault was forgetting God’s word or preferring himself to God, or even that it is in listening to his wife’s directions over those of God. Instead, he writes that the fault is in “yielding to a woman’s counsel,” seemingly any woman. This misogynist phrasing stands out in an account that is otherwise fairly generous in describing Eve relative to other early Christian and Jewish writers. In the absence of Philo’s egregiously sexist inferences, a rather different set of ethical interpretations emerge from the writing of Josephus. What emerges out of Josephus’ stripped down retelling of the Eden narrative is the juxtaposition of harmony and disharmony. The language and detail describing the life and actions of Adam and Eve prior to eating of the tree connote togetherness and unity, traits which also characterize the couple’s relationship to God and to their surroundings in Eden. Having eaten from the tree itself does not seem to break this unity in and of itself, but it does “quicken their intelligence,” 27 allowing them to understand their nakedness, hide from God, and attempt to shift blame to others. Perhaps the implication is that intelligence carries with it a kind of protective self-interest, especially in moments of discomfort,

26 Ibid.

27 Ibid., 67.
conflict, or punishment. The man who recognized the woman as part of himself and the woman who shared food with her man cease to act as a team when approached by an angry superior. Disharmony – between two people and between those people and God – seems to be the real tragedy in Josephus’ reading of the Eden narrative. The catechism points to this disharmony, but loses sight of it in supporting the traditional doctrine of original sin. In eschewing an interpretation that imposes guilt on all people for the actions in the garden, in treating Eve fairly based upon the text itself, and in focusing on imbalance and disunity as the real wrongs encountered in the garden, the writing of Josephus presents a satisfying, coherent set of ethical implications which arise out of the story of Eden.

Writing a thousand years later than Josephus, the medieval Jewish philosopher Maimonides mines the text of the Eden narrative mainly to explicate the nature of wisdom and the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. In his section on Genesis in The Guide for the Perplexed, Maimonides concentrates on the serpent’s assertion to Eve that eating of the fruit of the forbidden tree will make the first couple like Elohim, a term often rendered as gods. Maimonides softens the idolatrous tone by claiming that the word is a homonym, and the proper rendering is princes. Blunting the potentially idolatrous potential of serpent’s words, this translation allows Maimonides to ponder the conundrum of the forbidden fruit, whose eating is described elsewhere as a sin, granting the first couple wisdom and discernment. Ostensibly quoting an intelligent man he had
encountered in the past, Maimonides writes that it would seem as follows:

…that man was originally intended to be perfectly equal to the rest of the animal creation, which is not endowed with intellect, reason, or power of distinguishing between good and evil: but that Adam’s disobedience to the command of God procured him that great perfection which is the peculiarity of man, viz. the power of distinguishing between good and evil – the noblest of all the faculties of our nature.28

Maimonides solves this apparent enigma by claiming that the “intellect which was granted to man as the highest endowment, was bestowed on him before his disobedience.”29 He suggests that this gift of intellect which characterizes humanity is the sign of having been created in the form and likeness of God and exists before the eating of the fruit. Furthermore, it is only Adam who is given commandments in Eden, “for no commandments are given to the brute creation or to those who are devoid of understanding.”30

It is by means of this preexisting gift of intellect, according to Maimonides, that prelapsarian Adam is able to distinguish between true and false when evaluating what he calls “necessary truths.”31 He describes necessary truths as facts, statements which can be true or false, but for which the terms right or wrong do not apply. In defining his terms thus, Maimonides draws a


29 Ibid., 217.

30 Ibid.

31 Ibid.
distinction between intelligence and morality, implying that Adam exhibits intelligence before eating of the forbidden tree, but does not act or think in moral terms. It is for this reason that Adam and Eve could exist in a state of nudity before eating of the tree; their state of nudity could be described as true, but there did not yet exist in either of them a capacity to think of it as wrong.

Maimonides alleges that this state of innocent amorality is lost in the act of disobedience. He posits that “[a]fter man’s disobedience … he began to give way to desires which had their source in his imagination and to the gratification of his bodily appetites.” Adam and Eve, who ostensibly had been free of said bodily appetites and desires, become plagued by them following their disobedience. At the same time, they were “punished by the loss of part of that intellectual faculty which he had previously possessed,” presumably the perfect discernment of truth and falsehood. In eating from the tree, Adam and Eve exchange the ability to know truth for the ability to judge life’s moral dimensions. The sign of man’s new moral compass is the awareness of the impropriety of being naked, “for what the man had seen previously and what he saw after this circumstance was precisely the same; there had been no blindness

\[32\text{ Ibid.}\]
\[33\text{ Ibid.}\]
which was now removed, but he received a new faculty whereby he found things wrong which previously he had not regarded as wrong.”

Finally, Maimonides asserts that it is concomitant growth of desires in the first couple which compels God to drive them from the garden. Since their nature has changed as a result of the eating of the fruit, they no longer have a place in Paradise. As just punishment for disobedience and the craving to fulfill bodily desires, mankind is sent out of the garden and must labor in order to eat and survive.

In terms of a reading of the text of Genesis which implies a set of coherent, satisfying ethics, Maimonides’ writing exhibits both strengths and weaknesses. His elucidation of the tradeoff between perfect knowledge and morality is a fascinating one. Would it be worth it to lose moral judgment to regain a perfect knowledge of the universe? Would a life of fact, but amorality be fulfilling? It’s hard to know. At any rate, using the measure of lived human experience, there seems to be some truth to his interpretation. His assertion that human life simultaneously entails a moral dimension coupled with imperfect knowledge of truth appears accurate. In addition, it helps to provide an answer as to how an expanded awareness of good and evil could be construed as a negative, a problem in the text which many writers leave untouched. However, his reading of the text is not free from problems of interpretation. For instance, he writes that humanity’s new yearning to satisfy bodily desires as a result of the disobedience

---

34 Ibid.
is shown in the narrative assertion in Genesis that the woman in Eden “saw that the tree was good for food and delightful to the eyes.”35 However, this piece of exposition happens before the eating of the fruit. Maimonides places a great deal of emphasis on the change that occurs from eating from the tree, not from an Augustinian kind of concupiscence or an internal failure that leads to a physical disobedience. His agent of change is the fruit, but he describes a change that occurs before the fruit is eaten. Maimonides’ reading is an imperfect, but important addition to the discursive evaluation of the ethics implied by Genesis 2 and 3.

The early Christian writers of the Patristic era also engaged in much discourse surrounding the ethical implications of the Eden narrative in Genesis. Like the early Jewish writers, much of the conversation centers on two main areas of discussion: the role of gender and its implications for contemporary people, and the nature of the disobedience in the garden and its consequences. Like Jewish scholars of the text, patristic writers who explore the role and ramifications of gender in the garden fall on two opposites ends of a spectrum that runs from critical and condemning of Eve (and through her all women) to sympathetic to Eve. Tertullian and Anastasius Sinaita represent these two opposing viewpoints.

Tertullian begins his treatise “On the Apparel of Women” connecting the ideas of having great faith to dressing in “humble garb … walking about as Eve

---

mourning and repentant, in order that by every garb of penitence she might the more expiate that which she derives from Eve, --the ignominy, I mean, of the first sin, and the odium (attaching to her as the cause) of human perdition." In this single assertion, Tertullian assumes and concludes much about the story of Eden. First, Tertullian connects the image of a clothed Eve with a sense of repentance and contrition. Eve’s use of clothing is mentioned in Genesis 3:7 when she and Adam cover themselves with leaves upon realizing their nakedness and again in 3:21 when God makes for the couple a covering of skin. In his invocation of the image of a clothed Eve, Tertullian does not specify which kind of garb he means; however, in connecting the clothing with a sense of repentance for wrongdoing, it is likely that he means the leafy covering that follows the eating of the fruit, though the text of Genesis does not quite support Tertullian’s reading. The text of Genesis connects the knowledge of nakedness to the subsequent creation of leafy clothing, but does not specify the couple’s emotional state. Eve and Adam create their clothing before they are confronted by god in verse 9. This timing places Eve’s decision to clothe herself before her trial before God and before any subsequent punishment. It is therefore difficult to attribute to her decision to clothe herself to a sense of repentance for her crime. It is possible to say that her actions were motivated by an internal guilt, not a legal one, but the text still seems to suggest a different reading. Speaking to God, Adam later says that he

---

“was afraid, because [he] was naked,” suggesting that nakedness connotes for the couple a sense of vulnerability and defenselessness more than a sense of shame. The narrative does not easily lend itself to supporting the idea that Eve’s clothing is meant as penance. At any rate, Adam joins Eve in sewing leaves together to hide his nakedness, so an attempt to separate Eve’s decision to wear clothing from Adam’s seems motivated by a preexisting assumption about gender more than an honest reading of Genesis.

Tertullian’s opening assertion also echoes other Christian writers’ interpretation of original sin. Tertullian attributes the first sin to Eve and then posits that sin to be the cause of human perdition. He references God’s pronouncement of increased pain in childbirth and Eve’s desire for her husband who shall rule over her in claiming that “[t]he sentence of God on this sex of yours lives in this age: the guilt must of necessity live too.” He sees a connection between each individual woman to Eve, calling each woman “the devil’s gateway,” “the unsealer of that (forbidden) tree,” “the first deserter of the divine law,” and the one who “destroyed so easily God’s image, man.” His assertion is reminiscent of other explications of original sin. In some sense, all women share the guilt for the disobedience of Eve in Eden. For Tertullian, it seems that shared gender is enough for the association to be clear. Though he

37 Gen. 3:10.
38 Tertullian “On the Apparel of Women” 14.
39 Ibid.
does not follow this line of thought, the implication of this manner of thinking is that men inherit the sin of Adam just as women inherit the sin of Eve. The conspicuous absence of the male side of this form of original sin is quite glaring, betraying again a sexist approach embedded in Tertullian’s text. Imposing a presupposition about Eve onto the text, Tertullian follows his claim that Eve destroyed man, thereby doing violence to God’s image, by imagining that Eve would have coveted a lengthy catalogue of fabrics and jewelry. Again, Tertullian does not specify where in the text he sees the covetousness of Eve, but two possibilities present themselves, neither one free of interpretive errors. First, if Tertullian sees in Eve an association with the greed or materialism because she “saw that the fruit of the tree was good for food and pleasing to the eye,” he errs in conflating an appreciation for something edible and sustaining with the frivolity of luxurious clothing. Moreover, her sharing of the fruit with her partner argues against an interpretation of greed or covetousness. The second possible source of Tertullian’s impression that Eve is covetous enough to desire jewelry and luxurious clothing is Genesis 3:10, wherein Adam and Eve construct rudimentary coverings of leaves. If this is the case, Tertullian again conflates wildly different circumstances: a simply loincloth of leaves is a far cry from the dyes, embroidery, opals, and onyx-stones he claims she would have desired.

Moreover, an impression of Eve’s greed, which Tertullian accredits to all women,

---

40 Gen. 3:6.

41 Tertullian “On the Apparel of Women” 14.
ignores that Adam participated in the exact same sartorial act at the exact same
time. Tertullian falls into the same interpretive trap as so many other early
Christian and Jewish scholars and theologians: he begins with a sexist impression
of women and then imposes that impression onto Eve and the text of Genesis.

A short passage examining the role of gender in the Eden account
originally attributed to Irenaeus, a patristic writer roughly contemporary with
Tertullian, presents a starkly different set of interpretations. Though the
authorship of the passage is not definitively known, an examination of its
assertions is still relevant to an assessment of the ethics implied by the garden
narrative. The passage begins with the question, “Why did the serpent not attack
the man, rather than the woman?” Refuting the more common assessment that
it is due to a weakness or vulnerability in the woman, an assessment shared by
Philo, for instance, the author of this passage asserts the opposite, that “in the
transgression of the commandment, she showed herself to be the stronger.” As
evidence, the writer points to how, “she alone stood up to the serpent,” repeating God’s commandment even though she, strictly speaking, was not there
to hear it. Adam, by contrast, “took of the fruit given by the woman, without
even beginning to make a fight, without a word of contradiction – a perfect

---

43 Ibid.
44 Ibid.
45 Ibid.
demonstration of consummate weakness and a cowardly soul.”46 Such a condemnation of Adam coupled with praise for Eve, quite rare in the writing of the early postbiblical Jewish and Christian writers, nevertheless stays closer to the text of Genesis than interpretations which support a more negative view of Eve and a subsequent justification for gender based hierarchy and subordination.

The final patristic writer to be considered in this chapter is Pelagius, who was branded a heretic and became “one of the most maligned figures in the history of Christianity.”47 His theological interpretations of the Eden narrative contrast sharply with those of Augustine, specifically on the topics of grace and original sin. Few of Pelagius’ writings survive to this day, but the sharp rebuttals to them written by Augustine, often quoting the contested text, have allowed modern scholars to reconstruct some of his work.48

One of the fundamental points that Pelagius asserts early in his treatise “On Nature” is a definitional understanding of sin. Initially agreeing with Augustine that sin is not a substance or thing, he contends that it is rather understood as an act. He dismisses the idea that something lacking substance could “have possibly weakened or changed human nature.”49 To his mind, sin is not a material or a state of being which can be passed or transferred. Since it is

46 Ibid.


49 Ibid.
an action, sin belongs or is proper only to the agent or perpetrator of that sin. Thought of in this way, the doctrine of original sin which holds that a kind of taint is passed from Adam and Eve to all future humans is not only impossible, it would be divinely unjust, the equivalent of punishing one person for the actions of another. The sin in the garden does not itself spread to other people, he posits. Rather, the first sin inspires others by way of example. There is not, according to this line of reasoning, a tremendous shift in human nature after the expulsion from Eden. Rather, Adam and Eve are the first in a long line of humans who have the chance for a sinless life, but do not achieve it, not through a fundamental defect in human nature, but through their own choices.

In explaining the prevalence of sin within a worldview which does not posit original sin, Pelagius points to human agency. By way of analogy, he asserts that “a man ought to avoid ignorance; and that ignorance is blame-worthy for this reason, because it is through his own neglect that a man is ignorant of that which he certainly must have known if he had only applied diligence.”

Pelagius suggests that if one begins with the premise that ignorance ought to be avoided, one must also assume that the reduction of ignorance is within the realm of human possibility and capability; if it ought to be avoided it can be avoided. Moreover, it is incumbent upon each individual to actively correct that ignorance. Ignorance functions here as an analog for sin. If sin is to be avoided, a position with which any of his Christian opponents would be likely to agree, then it must

---

50 Ibid.
be possible for humans to avoid sin, and the onus for such an avoidance of sin rests with the individual himself or herself. It is Pelagius’ defense of this possibility of a life without sin, and sinlessness through choice rather than grace, which earned him Augustine’s ire.

For Augustine, it is only by grace that any person is able to avoid sin, a premise which eventually leads to a doctrine of predestination. For Pelagius, the avoidance of sin is a human choice, but redemption following sin is still requires divine action. Comparing God to a physician who is ready to cure but does not desire a person to be injured, Pelagius writes that “God, no doubt, applies His mercy even to this office, whenever it is necessary because man after sin requires help in this way, not because God wished there should be a cause for such a necessity.” The criticism leveled at Pelagius that his theology does away with reliance upon God therefore seems unfounded. He explicitly establishes the necessity for God’s grace in response to sin when he writes, “[s]ins which have been committed do notwithstanding require to be divinely expiated … because that which has been done cannot be undone by the power of nature and the will of man.”

God and his forgiveness have a definite place in Pelagius’ theology. While Augustine’s position holds that Pelagius’ concentration on the human agency and free will eliminates the role of grace in salvation, Pelagius sees grace itself as the source of this human agency. Employing another analogy, Pelagius

---

51 Ibid.
52 Ibid.
explains that the ability to speak is his by nature, but the act of speaking is his choice. Likewise, the ability to choose is one of God’s gifts to the human race, but each choice is proper to every individual person. Pelagius’ theology does not, in fact, eliminate God from the process of salvation; it affirms God’s role in the inception and very possibility of holiness and redemption.

However, this theology presents the possibility, troubling to his critics, of a person choosing, unaided by grace, to lead a sinless life. Is this possibility blasphemous, as his opponents suggest? Pelagius contends that it is not. First, he posits that a sinless life should be the exact goal of every Christian. Second, he points to biblical examples of those said to live holy or righteous lives, such as Abel, Elijah, and the Virgin Mary. The sinlessness attributed to these and other biblical figures is to be admired and emulated, he suggests, not condemned as arrogance or disregarded as impossible. Adam and Eve were the first to be offered this chance for a sinless life; according to Pelagius, they were far from the last. If Adam and Eve impart any part of their garden experience to their progeny, it is this possibility of a life free from sin in accordance with God’s commandments and not the universal guilt of original sin.

An overreliance on the notion of grace carries the danger of abstracting the obligation of making good choices and redirecting that responsibility to God. On the other end of the spectrum, the doctrine of original sin and the fallen state it implies could be seen to provide an excuse for personal sins. In this way, the
theology of Augustine can be said to remove responsibility for human activity from its rightful place as it deflects culpability toward heaven. Pelagius’ theology attaches the consequences of human activity to the choices those humans make. Without removing God from the picture of grace, mercy, or salvation, Pelagius’ reading of the Eden narrative points to a sound and satisfying ethical framework, a framework in which one is neither burdened with the guilt of a primordial sin nor excused from the obligation to avoid one’s own.
CHAPTER 3
EDEN AS MYTH

The interpretations of the Catholic catechism as well as early Christian and Jewish theologians and writers make evident the difficulty in approaching a text with a fresh, open mind when that text comes bundled with a history of theological interpretations and uses. Augustine, for instance, relies heavily upon Paul’s understanding of Genesis to form his own, since Paul’s words have the authority of scripture. The writers of the catechism are further removed from an unbiased engagement with Genesis since their reading is impacted by the writings of centuries’ worth of scholars, theologians, and practitioners, all of whom have a great deal at stake when discussing a text considered holy and scriptural. This is not to demonize tradition, orthodoxy, or a respect for historical thought, of course. However, the momentum of tradition has a way of limiting the expansiveness of one’s view, and there is great benefit in considering alternative frameworks and gleaning from those vistas new understandings of even the oldest of stories. To that end, this chapter centers upon the work of Mircea Eliade, a phenomenologist of religion concerned with myth, and Paul Ricoeur, who explicitly reads Genesis as a myth in his examination of the human experience. Myth, while not an “a-religious” word, connotes a different means of approaching this important narrative than is available to members of faith communities who consider the text scripture and whose work develops in the discursive matrix of tradition and belief. This is not to suggest that other writers do not read the Edenic narrative figuratively. The Catechism of the Catholic Church itself declares the
figurative nature of the text, and a whole host of Christian and Jewish writers have employed various levels of abstraction in their approaches to the story. However, as discussed early, there is still a pull within the catechism to treat the story as literal history, a predilection shared by a host of religious writers. Moreover, theologians working within the bounds of faith communities are obliged to work within the precincts of orthodoxy. To examine the story of the garden as myth in the frames suggested by Eliade and Ricoeur opens the door a bit to a fresher, more authentic look at the narrative of Eden and the ethics it implies.

Eliade finds the most helpful definition of myth to be the one which is most inclusive. As a starting point, he posits that “[m]yth narrates sacred history; it relates an event that took place in primordial Time, the fabled time of the ‘beginnings.’” Since it involves the creation of man, woman, and animals, the Eden narrative seems to fall quite comfortably within this definition; Eliade’s definition is even reminiscent of the language that the Catechism of the Catholic Church uses in calling the fall “a primeval event, a deed that took place at the beginning of the history of man.” In Eliade’s conception, “myth tells how, through the deeds of Supernatural Beings, a reality came into existence.” Though the Eden narrative itself is a separate episode from the creation of the universe described in Genesis 1-2, the story of Paradise does contain what seem to be explanations for the origins of other, more specific elements. Water, vegetation,

---

2 *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, 390.
maleness, femaleness, consciousness, labor, and mortality could all be seen as elements of the human experience whose origins are explored in the text of the Eden narrative, and whose existence arise as the result of the dramatic “breakthroughs of the sacred … into the World.”4 As Eliade puts it, “[i]t is this sudden breakthrough of the sacred that really establishes the World and makes it what it is today,”5 and moreover, myths “narrate not only the origin of the World, of animals, of plants, and of man, but also all the primordial events in consequence of which man became what he is today – mortal, sexed, organized in a society, obliged to work in order to live, and working with certain rules.”6 As such, Eliade’s definition seems perfectly suited as a means of evaluating the narrative of the garden. The assertions made by the Catechism of the Catholic Church become shakier as they stray from the lived human experience and move in the direction of manipulating and misreading the original text in order to support doctrine that is decidedly more complicated and abstract. The framework of mythical structure suggested by Eliade avoids this hermeneutical trap, since it “always deals with realities.”7 Put another way, myths are true because they explain the world as it is; the starting point is human existence as it is known and understood. High-flown interpretations which have little grounding in human experience cease to appear in the text when it is viewed through the mythological lens. Paul Ricœur’s treatment of the Eden narrative echoes this line of thought; he attributes the composition of the narrative

---

4 Ibid., 6.
5 Ibid.
6 Ibid., 11.
7 Ibid., 6.
to the early Jewish consciousness, one formed by a cultural memory of exodus and the
promised land, an awareness of fault, and a desire for repentance.

In *The Symbolism of Evil*, Paul Ricœur sets out to imaginatively reenact the
experience of evil as it must have been encountered by early humanity. He does this
initially through an examination of what he terms the primary symbols of defilement,
sin, and guilt, ways of encoding and speaking about the experience of fault. Following
this laying of groundwork, he investigates a secondary level of symbolism which makes
use of the primary symbols, the level of myth. In this investigation, Ricœur probes four
different myths of the origin of evil, one of which is the Adamic myth arising from
Genesis 2 and 3.8

Paul Ricœur begins his dissection of the Adamic myth by clarifying his choice of
terms. He consciously avoids terming the narrative of Adam and Eve in the Garden of
Eden “the fall” because “the very word, ‘fall,’ which is foreign to the Biblical
vocabulary, is contemporaneous with the elevation of the “Adamic” condition above the
present human condition; only what has first been elevated falls.”9 Ricœur views the
Eden narrative as the prime example of an anthropological myth, a myth about the
genesis of humanity, which necessitates that it concentrate on “an ancestor of the human

---

8 Ricœur traces the Adamic myth as one that fits the needs of a particular community and context, the nascent Jewish nation of Israel after the exodus. However, he also uses that particular myth as an example of one type of myth, the anthropological myth, in which the origin of evil is posited to man rather than to the nature of the universe, a wicked or ambivalent god, or to the sullied nature of the physical human body.

race as it is now whose condition is homogeneous with ours.”\textsuperscript{10} The speculations about Adam’s nature before eating the tree strike Ricœur as later attachments to the original “which profoundly alter the original”\textsuperscript{11} meaning of the text. He lays this blame most squarely at the feet of Paul. Prior to Paul, the myth of Eden was “so far from being the cornerstone of the Judeo-Christian conception of sin that the figure of Adam, placed by the myth at the origin of the history of human evil, remained a mute figure for practically all of the writers of the Old Testament.”\textsuperscript{12} Noah, Abraham, and Moses – all of whose narratives center around covenants, righteousness, and the search for a kind of promised land – seem more fundamental to the early Jewish consciousness of both sin and cultural identity than Adam, and their stories are alluded to more often in Jewish scripture. Paul’s Christology provides the link to Adam that reaches past the other patriarchs. However, Ricouer sees in the Edenic narrative’s exposition of evil the shadow of historical events central to Jewish thought and identity, such as captivity and exile. Rather than positing that the Eden narrative prefigures these events in a prescient way, he asserts that the presence of these concepts within the Eden narrative “presupposes that experience and marks its maturity.”\textsuperscript{13} In other words, the encounter with deviation, failure, and exile in the garden which would become so central to later Christian theology as etiology, are in fact dependent upon a truer starting point, the historical Jewish experience felt by the authors of Genesis. This is why the Edenic narrative bears

\textsuperscript{10} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{11} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{12} Ibid., 6.
\textsuperscript{13} Ibid., 237.
such resemblance in theme to the later narratives of the patriarchs. Ricœur further remarks upon the power imbued to the text through Paul’s parallelism by noting that “the historicity of the second Adam, by reflection, conferred upon the first Adam a comparable historicity and an individuality corresponding to the Christ’s.”14 The interpretations made by Paul, as noted elsewhere, stretch and alter the meaning of the original text in order to support a systematic Christology. Through Paul’s juxtaposition of Christ and Adam, the historical Jesus lends specificity and historicity to Adam, who previously could have been considered symbolic of the human race rather than it first member. Moreover, the redemptive act of Christ within Paul’s framework requires a fall to be redeemed, which itself necessitates a high position for Adam from which he can tumble. Ricœur stresses that this elliptical path back to the garden unduly alters the meaning of the original and makes Adam “a stranger to our condition, and at the same time [it reduces] the Adamic myth to a genesis of man from a primordial superhumanity.”15 For Ricœur, the importance of the Adamic myth arises only when we treat Adam as an analog and example for the human experience as it is now known.

What most distinguishes the Adamic myth from other myths concerning the origin of evil is the “intention … to set up a radical origin of evil distinct from the more primordial origin of the goodness of things.”16 The need for this careful and decisive separation comes from Jewish monotheism. Yahweh, characterized with both

---

14 Ibid., 6-7.

15 Ibid., 233.

16 Ibid.
benevolence and omnipotence, is credited with all of creation and with infinite goodness. Evil, then, must have a source outside of Yahweh. One function of the Adamic myth, according to Ricœur, is the explanation of how a perfectly good creation made by a perfectly good creator could come to contain evil. Ricœur recounts how Plato, engaged in a similar investigation, concludes that God is not the source of all things; however, the Jewish thinker maintains the role of God in the creation of all good things, removing only that which is negative.17 Rather than seeing both good and evil as the result of the nature of creation or the result of the actions of God, the Adamic myth separates the goodness of God’s creation from the evil that comes from humanity.

Arriving at the conclusion that humanity must be responsible for evil, since its origin cannot be posited to a benevolent and omnipotent God, must result in a personal acceptance of culpability for anyone who reaches this conclusion. To absolve God is to blame oneself. As a result of this acceptance of blame for the origin of evil, the early Jewish thinker, according to Ricœur, came to internalize the guilt and will toward repentance which comes with the experience of sin. He sees in Eden the tense concentration of this experience. By positing human failure as the origin of evil into a perfectly good Creation, the Adamic myth highlights “the twofold confession of the Jewish believer, who acknowledges, on the one hand, the absolute perfection of God and, on the other hand, the radical wickedness of man.”18 Moreover, the individual process of experiencing guilt and desiring repentance came to be universalized; if one person can

17 Ibid., 240.
18 Ibid., 243.
feel sinful, so can others. Just as one person can reach out for forgiveness, so can all people. The experience of sin has, seemingly, “an evil root that is both individual and collective.” The universality of guilt and the desire for reconciliation in the early Jewish consciousness came to find its form in the myth of Adam, whose name means man.

Ricœur sees an intentional play of time in the narrative structure of the Adamic myth. On the one hand, the momentous shift between the prelapsarian and postlapsarian worlds is concentrated into the form of one man taking one action. However, the story unfolds “in a ‘drama,’ which takes time, introduces a succession of incidents, and brings several characters into the action.” It is through the combination of these two frameworks of time that the myth is able to speak so broadly as to provide “a focal point at the beginning of history for man’s unity-in-multiplicity.”

Ricœur observes a similarly purposeful, or at least instructive, juxtaposition of opposites in the presence of discrepancies within the text of Genesis 2-3. For instance, in Genesis 2:15, “God took the man and put him in the Garden of Eden to till it and keep it.” The purpose the text assigns to Adam’s geographic placement is vocational. He is not created in the garden; he is placed there with intention. Moreover, he is put in the garden to till and to keep it, two active verbs denoting work. However, the specter of labor resurfaces in the text, as if for the first time, as Adam’s punishment for breaking

19 Ibid., 241.
20 Ibid., 243.
21 Ibid., 244.
God’s commandment. Similarly, pre-disobedience Adam recognizes Eve as a woman immediately upon her creation, suggesting his capacity for intelligence and, perhaps, sexual awareness, yet intelligence and sexual awareness are qualities ascribed to the fallen world. Labor, intelligence, and sex seem connected both with creation, perfectly good and made by God, but also with exile, caused by wickedness and the fault of humanity. Ricœur perceives within these discrepancies, intentional or not, a recognition of the ambiguous duality of human nature, that is, “every dimension of man – language, work, institutions, sexuality – is stamped with the twofold mark of being destined for the good and inclined toward evil.”  

Seizing upon aspects of contemporary life with antecedents in Genesis, Ricœur notes this duality in the power of language, which is both creative and divisive, and in clothing, which is a kind of dissimulation, but one that makes social life possible. This mingling of “the greatness and the guilt of man” in all aspects of human existence is evident in “the hardship of being a man which, in the striking brevity of the myth, makes manifest his fallen state.” All facets of the human experience reflect this dual nature: their possibility is thanks to God, their difficulty thanks to Adam and his disobedience.

In turning his attention to the nature of the disobedience, Ricœur downplays the actual, specific occasion of noncompliance, focusing instead on the rupture resulting from any kind of waywardness, a rupture which alters “the relation of trust between man

---

22 Ibid., 246.

23 Ibid., 247.

24 Ibid.
What is forbidden is not so much an object as a state; it is not the fruit of knowledge of good and evil which is denied to humanity, it is the state of being the arbiter between those two which is denied. Notably, the serpent is punished even though it does not eat of the tree. The fruit is but a cipher; autonomy separate from the dictates of God becomes the true forbidden fruit. The reaction of the first couple to the serpent’s blandishments makes clear the ruptured relationship between them and God. Induced by the serpent, Eve looks to her senses for confirmation, not God’s proclamation. Likewise, Adam takes his cue from Eve, not from his memory of God’s command. The God which had been their Orientation becomes in this scene their Other.26

Ricœur observes another turning point in this conversation. Because the desire to eat of the forbidden tree had not yet arisen in Adam or Eve, the proscription from eating it was not truly a significant or hostile injunction. Prior to this conversation God’s decree had been a minor footnote to the wide expanse of Adam’s freedom; in reaction to the serpent’s question it becomes Prohibition. The serpent’s line of questioning need not stem from devilish trickery for this to be the case. Read most simply, the serpent innocently wonders why Adam and Eve believe something that is untrue. In place of satanic malfeasance, a more innocent curiosity might suffice as the serpent’s motivation in this reading. At any rate, Ricœur posits that the serpent’s question itself is enough to engender “the infinity of desire itself; it is the desire of desire, taking possession of

25 Ibid., 249.

26 Ibid., 253.
Desire is infinite because it is always, by its nature, a yearning for more. Adam and Eve have become aware, for the first time, of finitude and – by extension – its opposite. Eve’s reach for the fruit does not constitute a desire to overthrow God per se, but it does suggest a yearning, a willingness to take and to have, that to that point had not existed in the story, and that willingness is both the emblem of a ruptured relationship with God and the moment of the rupture. As Adam takes the fruit, he does not succumb to a sexual seduction or a lust for worship, but rather the desire to possess and to know for himself, an autonomy that supplants God’s primacy. It moreover represents a rejection of life as-it-is and a desire for something more, something infinite in essence. This longing for something, for more, is not alien to the contemporary person, and “[i]n a way, the promise of the serpent marks the birth of a human history drawn by its idols toward the infinite.”  

Ricœur joins other writers in seeing in the disobedience of the garden a kind of auto-idolatry, an inversion of the natural relationship of human and God. Upon seeing limitation and experiencing desire, Adam subverts the role of God as creator and deity and “seeks his freedom in the unlimitedness of the Principle of existence and forms the wish to posit himself in being as a creator of himself by himself.”

In reaction against other writers and traditions, Ricœur asserts that “[t]he cause of man’s fall is not the human libido,” or sexual seduction by Eve, “but the structure of a

---

27 Ibid.

28 Ibid., 254.

29 Ibid.
finite freedom.”30 He also speaks ill of writers whose interpretations exhibit “very masculine resentment, which serves to justify the state of dependence in which all, or almost all, societies have kept women.”31 Rather than saddling Eve for the blame of the disobedience, Ricœur searches for a narrative explanation for the role she plays in the garden.

Having earlier established the perceived universality of guilt and the desire for repentance in the early Jewish consciousness, Ricœur draws upon this background to attribute a particular purpose to the form of the narrative; evil, whose origin must be man and not God, has a dimension that feels both personal, coming from within, and communal, coming from the surrounding society. As a story of the origin of humanity and of evil, the narrative could really be told with only Adam and God as characters; but since the narrative involves the felt experience of sin, which is both individual and communal, additional characters are added when the plot of the narrative reaches the moment of disobedience. To this end, according to Ricœur, the author of Genesis adds secondary characters: Eve and the serpent.

Adam’s choice to eat of the forbidden fruit reflects the human capacity to choose and to sin; however, this disobedience is not instantaneous, nor is it his alone. By incorporating the characters of the serpent and Eve, the author of Genesis manages to reflect the seeming external quality of evil and the capacity for humans to bend to outside influences. Since Eve is swayed first by the serpent, Ricœur sees her as

30 Ibid.

31 Ibid.
suggestive of the weaker, frailer aspect of human nature and the human psyche. Far from condemning women for the qualities and actions of this single character, Ricœur sees both Adam and Eve as suggestive of the whole human person; rather than exemplars of all men and all women respectively, Adam and Eve are better read as two different symbols for human nature. The sexes of the two characters, while significant earlier in the text as it narrates the inception of sexual differentiation, are largely insignificant at this point in the text; they are carried over from the previous scene only because the characters remain the same. To his mind, “every woman and every man are Adam; every man and every woman are Eve.”

While Ricœur’s reading treats Eve as a weaker character, the one who falls for a kind of deception and is the first to bend, his interpretation breaks from earlier Christian and Jewish scholars because it forms this interpretation of Eve as a character, primarily, and as a human, not as the symbol and progenitor of womanhood. Her failure is the failure of a character and one that highlights the capacity of any person, male or female, to succumb. Ricœur does not evaluate the conundrum of God’s lies and the serpent’s truths; his assumption is that the writer of the narrative intended Eve’s eating of the fruit to be a failure, a giving in, which has some textual background, though by no means is a certainty. However, the value of Ricœur’s reading of Eve is in treating both Adam and Eve as representatives of humanity, not of their respective sexes. This coupled symbolism suggests the duality of the experience of sin, an evil which can be chosen individually, but seems also to be

---

32 Ibid., 255.
external. As Ricœur puts it, “every woman sins ‘in’ Adam, every man is seduced ‘in’ Eve.” As a pair, the characters suggest both the interiority and the exteriority of sin.

What is the purpose of the adding the character of the serpent, then? If the exteriority of sin can be expressed narratively by Eve, who functions as a kind of tempter once removed from Adam, why does the writer include a second tempter, an animal, twice removed? Ricœur, whose method involves an explicit treatment of the snake as symbol, sees several interpretations. First, the reading of Eve as a complementary symbol of human nature still limits the scope of her symbolic reach to that humanity. If Adam’s choice suggests the part of the experience of sin which is internal and Eve’s actions represent the part which comes from the exterior, that exterior is still human in nature. From the standpoint of Adam, the quasi-temptation by Eve is still a temptation which comes from society, from a relationship with a human – a human Other, but still a human. The addition of the serpent serves the story by adding an additional level of externality, one which reaches beyond society and culture to touch the wider world of creation. Joining Adam’s representation of sin’s interior presence and Eve’s representation of the evil influence from others, the serpent comes to represent a third position of evil relative to an individual, a position wholly outside, belonging to the non-human realm. Taken together, the three characters correspond to three perceptions of sin: “chaos in me, among us, and outside.”

Taking Adam as the everyman, rather than the first man, he posits that Adam’s encounter of a wicked figure outside himself and his

33 Ibid.

34 Ibid., 258.
partner represents the experience of evil which is inherited. Evil is “a tradition, and not only something that happens.” The serpent is already there because “every individual finds evil already there; nobody begins it absolutely.” In contrast to the passing of original sin as construed by Augustine, Ricœur sees the seeming ubiquity of evil mainly as a consequence of social and temporal continuity. Each person is born into a world with history and preexisting conditions. Though each person is culpable for his or her own individual sins, there seems a sense in which evil is outside the self and outside the community. The narrative choice of diffusing the disobedience among three characters represents those three separate “locations” from which sin can arise.

The three positions of sin –within, among, and outside –are seen in reverse form when the three characters are confronted with their crimes. In response to God’s accusatory questioning, Adam shifts blame to Eve. Eve in turn shifts blame to the serpent, which does not speak and therefore does not, or is unable to, defend itself. Each half of the first couple pushes the guilt for the disobedience to the outside, echoing the felt exteriority of sin. If the story is to be read didactically, the context for disobedience does not seem to be a major factor in assaying guilt or punishment. Eve listens to the serpent and Adam listens to his partner, but both are punished. The punishments are different in kind, but it does not appear to be the intention of the author to assert a difference in degree; a dissection of which punishment is “worse” seems beside the point. What is clear is that Adam, Eve, and the serpent are all punished, regardless of

---

35 Ibid.

36 Ibid., 257.
their place in the chain of events. It does not appear to matter to the writer of Genesis the context in which one sins. A fault is a fault, even if one falls under the influence of others.

In fact, the concept of influence, of yielding, seems essential to the picture of sin painted in the Adamic myth. Though Ricœur attributes to the author of Genesis a desire to show that the origin of evil is a catastrophe of human agency, “man is not the absolute evil one, but the evil one of second rank. … He makes himself wicked by a sort of counter-participation, counter imitation, by consenting to a source of evil.”\(^{37}\) Again, evil and sin are experienced, in part, as being preexistent. This suggestion of a dimension of evil that is outside of humanity and already there is as close as the writer of Genesis will come to suggesting an evil aspect inherent to Creation itself. It is perhaps this very tension that drives Christian writers to expand the serpent into the disguised Satan discussed in the catechism, and to link the figure to a chronicle of an angelic rebellion quite removed from the text at hand. However, Ricœur rails against the kind of interpretation of the Adamic myth which leads to the catechistic doctrine of original sin. Nevertheless, Ricœur asserts that this perceived exteriority is the authentic experience of contemporary humanity. It also balances “the movement toward the concentration of evil in man by a second movement which attributed its origin to a prehuman, demonic reality.”\(^{38}\)

---

\(^{37}\) Ibid., 259.

\(^{38}\) Ibid.
Ricœur ascribes to the writer of Genesis the purposeful composition of the Adamic myth in order to separate the origin of evil from the origin of good, yet Ricœur also points out humanity’s incomplete ownership of that evil. Even as the myth points to human culpability for sin, it simultaneously undercuts that explanation with a serpent who influences Eve and, through Eve, Adam. Stopping short of placing any blame on God, the writer of the Eden narrative exhibits how fault can be both personal and communal, both internal and external in origin. Similarly, Ricœur asserts that the result of this fault is the blending of the best and most productive and generative qualities of humanity with evidence of finitude, limitation, and the capacity to sin. Ricœur’s reading implies a balance of extremes, a middle ground between perfect good and irredeemable evil. Though the Adamic myth tells of the felt experiences of a broken relationship with God and a life of harshness, it also speaks to the joy of human interaction and society, the bounty which is available, albeit with some labor, through nature, and the ability to adapt, survive, innovate, and thrive. Ricouer’s reading of the Adamic myth does not convey a drastic fall so much as a lateral movement, a change from one set of conditions to another set which is currently known and experienced, a set of conditions which, though distinguished by hardship and finitude, is nonetheless resonant of the goodness of creation. Ricouer reminds his reader that “I do not cease to be a created being until I cease to be; therefore I do not cease to be good,” even though the original state of innocence has been lost. In the aftermath of a failure to obey there is a changed relationship with God, but a relationship remains possible.

39 Ibid., 251.
The particular ending of the Eden narrative bears further speculation in line with this mode of thought. An essential element of the story is its irreversibility. The garden is lost to the first couple and the way back is guarded to prevent a return. There is a sense of permanency to the exile and the corresponding mortality and harshness that characterizes human life, but the human situation is not one without hope. Mircea Eliade finds in his study of myth that “[t]he apodictic value of myth is periodically reconfirmed by the rituals” associated with that myth and celebrated by a community of believers. Communities of believers participate in ritual action partly because it “abolishes profane, chronological Time and recovers the sacred Time of myth.”\textsuperscript{40} This return to the sacred time of myth and the recapitulation of mythic actions is central to Eliade’s study of myth in society. However, while there are many rituals within Jewish and Christian traditions, there is not a strong ritual practice concerning Adam, Eve, or the garden. Is this lack of ritual reenactment precisely because of the decisive irreversibility and non-reproducibility of the narrative? For Ricœur, the expulsion from Eden is as much a consequence of disobedience as it is a natural extension of the consciousness of the Jewish people, who trace cultural identity back to the figure of Abraham. Abraham is called away from his home and directed toward a Promised Land in a kind of reversal of the Edenic expulsion; rather than a past even narrating the loss of paradise, the calling of Abraham narrates the future attainment of it. The fulfillment of the promise to Abraham, “which at first appears to be at hand” to the early Jewish community, “is constantly

\textsuperscript{40} Eliade, \textit{Myth and Reality}, 140.
postponed."⁴¹ Even upon settlement in Canaan and the establishment of a nation, the religious and cultural significance of the promise does not quite match the facticity of history, pushing the sense of fulfillment through a “series of transpositions, step by step,”⁴² away from the present and into the future. Consequently, the paradisiacal counterpoint to Eden comes to be thought of eschatologically, a reward to come at the end of history. As already seen, the Christian tradition follows quite the same path, looking to the coming Kingdom of God and justification through Christ as the spiritual counterpoints to Eden and to humanity’s broken relationship with God, respectively. Somewhat ironically, Ricœur condemns the elevation of Adam which he sees as the result of Paul’s Christology, but traces without judgment a similar process in the collective mind of early Israel. Since the expulsion from Eden concludes the Adamic myth with such finality, the ritual reenactment which Eliade’s framework would expect to see in other religious communities instead takes the form of eschatology. Even the current human condition exposed by the Eden narrative, which mingles the greatness and guilt of humanity, which narrates a changed world with innocence lost, is not the final word. Adam and Eve seem divided after eating the fruit, but they leave the garden together to begin a new life and start a family. Human life, though characterized by hardship and finitude, is also characterized by beauty, joy, and relationships, and beyond this there is a hope for the future which, like Eden’s sin, can be felt individually, collectively, and universally. Ricœur’s treatment of the Adamic myth does more than

⁴¹ Ricœur, The Symbolism of Evil, 263.
⁴² Ibid.
provide a satisfyingly logical and egalitarian treatment of Adam and Eve, more than
remind us that the world that is often considered fallen is still full of beauty and
happiness. Ricœur’s attention to the eschatological implications of the Adamic myth
suggest that beyond the good which can be experienced in lifetime of the known human
condition, there is still value in hoping for greater things to come.
Published in 1978 as a chapter within *God and the Rhetoric of Sexuality*, Phyllis Trible’s “A Love Story Gone Awry” employs a close linguistic reading of Genesis to arrive at conclusions quite different from those of the Catholic catechism and the earliest Jewish and Christian interpreters. Though she does touch upon the concepts of guilt and punishment, she does not see a damming fall or a transmission of guilt, concentrating instead on the relationships that develop between man, woman, God, and nature.

In the beginning of the chapter, Trible spells out a list of traditional interpretations or assumptions about the text or the meaning of the Eden narrative that she will then proceed to examine and debunk, including the notion that “male superiority and female inferiority” are “the will of God” and that it “portrays woman as ‘temptress’ and troublemaker who is dependent upon and dominated by her husband.”\(^1\) Though largely absent from the catechism itself, this list of interpretations is evident in the writings of a long tradition of Jewish and Christian writers. While Trible’s chapter begins with a list of such views to dismantle, suggesting perhaps a scope too narrow to be helpful or a bias in her reading, her process involves a fresh engagement with the text itself and the “interlocking structure of words and motifs with its own intrinsic value and meaning,”\(^2\) leading to new perspectives on the ethics discernible from the ancient

---


\(^2\) Ibid.
narrative. Just as viewing the narrative as myth allows Ricouer to recognize a different constellation of interpretations than Jewish and Christian theological writers, Trible’s interpretive stance provides the lens for a new and renewed reading of the Edenic story.

Trible begins her engagement with an overview of the narrative’s structure. After a brief introduction reducing the scale from cosmic to earthly, she sees three distinct scenes: development of Eros (linked, in her treatment, more to the concept of life than that of love) and entrance into the garden, the act of disobedience, and the disintegration of Eros and expulsion from the garden. Each of these three scenes is broken into smaller units, but a briefer and more concise rendering will suffice here. The beginning of the first scene occasions the creation of Eden and the creation of the earth creature (a being that is neither man nor woman as neither differentiation yet exists) which God places into the garden. It is significant that the Hebrew word that Trible renders as “earth creature” is not the gendered term for man that will arise later, an indication that this being is not meant to be seen as a male. Moreover, the earth creature at this point is characterized by passivity and inactivity; the creature is grammatically and semantically the object of this creation while Yahweh is the active creator. However, the narrator goes on to assert that Yahweh places the creature “in the garden of Eden to till it and to keep it.” The earth creature, while still an object, gains responsibility and activity through labor. This endowment of responsibility continues as God announces that the creature may eat from all trees of the garden but one, the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. In this coupled pronouncement, God grants both freedom and limitation, “permission

---

3 Ibid., 84.
and prohibition … designed to preserve life.”⁴ Next, God decrees that the earth creature should have a companion. Trible pursues a brief aside here to note that the word that she translates as “companion” is often rendered as “helper,” or “assistant,” but does not, in the original Hebrew, connote subservience or inferiority. In fact, the term is used elsewhere in scripture to call Yahweh the “helper” to Israel, a point Trible stresses to refute the implication of inferiority assigned to women due to issues of translation.

After animals fail to pass muster as the earth creature’s companion, God forms the first woman out of the rib of the earth creature, earning the title “woman” because “out of Man was this taken.”⁵ It is at this point, after the term “woman” is used, that the writer of Genesis switches from the term Trible renders as “earth creature” to the term “man.” The linguistic shift is of great importance in Trible’s reading of the narrative. Rather than a woman being created from a pre-existing man, an interpretation which has been used to support the supposed inferiority of women to men, “their creation is simultaneous, not sequential.”⁶ Trible sees a singular, sexless earth creature split into two sexes. This moment is not so much the creation of woman alone as it is the division of the earth creature to create human sexuality as a whole. The following statement of the text seems to support this understanding. “Therefore,” as a result of the existence of differentiated sexes, “a man leaves his father and his mother and clings to his woman,

---

⁴ Ibid., 87.

⁵ Gen. 2:23.

⁶ Trible, “A Love Story Gone Awry,” 98.
and they become one flesh,”

returning, in a sense to the unity of the original earth creature. Trible stresses that “one is not the opposite of the other. In the very act of distinguishing female from male, the earth creature describes her as ‘bone of my bones and flesh of my flesh. … These words speak unity, solidarity, mutuality, and equality.”

Using the physical material of the earth creature as the substance of formation, this act of creation is unique up to this point in the store. The earth creature, the trees of the garden, and the animals have all been fashioned out of the earth itself. The separation of woman and man using the rib of the earth creature is the first act of creation that does not spring from the ground. The uniqueness of the woman is compounded in that the text does not assert a subservient role. The earth creature is placed in the garden to keep it and to till it, to be its caretaker and owner. Likewise, the animals created by God are brought to the earth creature to be named. Trible suggests that “the earth creature was specifically given dominion over the animals through naming.”

Though the newly male creature identifies the woman as such, she is not given a proper name. Moreover, the pattern of verbiage that denotes human dominion animals is missing in the man’s recognition of the woman. In previous encounters, “the verb call is joined to the noun name … and this complete activity of calling the name becomes the way in which the earth creature establishes power over the animals.”

---

7 Gen. 2:24.
9 Ibid., 97.
10 Ibid., 99.
woman is called precisely that, but she is not named by the man in the manner that the animals had been named by the earth creature. Rather than a labeling which involves a kind of discernment, an active decision about the object, the man’s speech is reactive, a recognition of a being that had been a part of himself. Again, a sense of harmony and unity pervades this unique moment, not a hierarchy of power. The exceptionality of this latest act of creation is highlighted additionally with the first appearance of human speech. The man recognizes the woman in poetic form, highlighting the likeness of their being. Moreover, the differentiation of man and woman is God’s last creative act before the disobedience and the expulsion of the couple from Eden. The fullness of human sexuality is, in this sense, the pinnacle of creation.

Following the man’s poetic appreciation for the woman, a brief narrative aside looks proleptically to the consummation of marriage as the natural counterpoint to the division of one flesh. The convention of a man leaving his mother and father in order to join with his wife, becoming once again one flesh, points to the appropriateness of the union between man and woman. Notably the aim of this union is not reproduction; children are not mentioned, nor the act of beginning a new family. Rather, the coupling of man and woman is its own end, for in that coupling there is a figurative return to the wholeness of the undifferentiated earth creature. Trible highlights the lack of hierarchy in this section of text as well, for even though she is “called ‘this woman,’ she is not his possession but rather the one in whom [the man] finds fulfillment. She is gift – God’s
gift of life.” The woman is not in thrall to the man; rather, he moves toward her for the sake of union.

Trible’s reading of Genesis thus far has stressed an egalitarian view of the man and woman and the mutuality of their relationship. However, the culmination of God’s creative activity, the sexual differentiation of the earth creation into man and woman, also occasions the height of humanity’s increasing activity and autonomy at the same moment when God retreats from the narrative. These two narrative movements – the rising prominence of humanity and the withdrawal of God – set the stage for, and forecast, the disrupted and disordered human-divine relationship that is to come.

Trible embarks upon her discussion of the disobedience in the center of the garden by noticing the “paradox of created helplessness and created responsibility” that characterizes the man and the woman. Though there is no extended discussion of an original relationship between humanity and God, it can at least be observed that God is responsible for the creation of both man and woman, responsible for their placement in the garden, and responsible for the combination of freedom and limitation that marks human existence, summed up in the their access to all trees of the garden but one. He then withdraws from the narrative, leaving them to face the vicissitudes of creation on their own. Trible highlights four worlds within that creation: divine, human, plant, and animal. Eschewing an interpretive reach outside of what the text has already provided, Trible sees the serpent as an agent of the animal world, not a disguised satanic influence.

---

11 Ibid., 104.
12 Ibid., 107.
The relationship between the divine and human worlds is threatened by individual representatives of the plant and animal worlds: the forbidden tree and the wily serpent. Trible contends that the serpent displays his craftiness in his careful phrasing when asking about the freedom of humanity and its limit. He asks the woman, “Did God really say, you shall not eat from every tree of the garden?” Trible points out that the question, phrased in this manner, “cannot be answered by a simple yes or no, since God prohibited eating from one tree but not from every tree. The question, then, requires explanation and clarification.” The slyness of this enticement to further dialogue seems a kind of entrapment, an invitation to engagement with an agent of doubt and temptation.

The woman, for her part, corrects the serpent and “states the case even more strongly than did God.” To the prohibition against eating from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, the woman adds a sanction against touching it. Trible sees this embellishment as devotion to the spirit of the interdict and a further layer of protectiveness; if the tree is not touched, then the commandment to refrain from eating from it cannot be broken. Meanwhile, according to Trible, the linguistic construction of the conversation makes it clear that the serpent addresses both the man and the woman, and the woman answers on behalf of both. It is not the case, as other have assumed, that the serpent addresses only the woman due to an inborn frailty or womanly predisposition.

---


15 Ibid.
to yielding to temptation. Rather, the mutuality of the relationship established in the previous episode remains in the collective address by the serpent. The woman’s ability to answer “with clarity and authority” does not suggest a deficiency or weakness, but “reveals her as intelligent, informed, and perceptive.” In response to the serpent’s questioning, the woman considers the tree and notices, “[i]t is good for food; it is a delight to the eyes, and it is desired because it makes one wise.” These observations reveal three levels of attraction: the tree is “physically appealing, aesthetically pleasing, and, above all, sapientially transforming.” Operating in response to these three motivations, the woman acts with an agency of her own, “seeking neither [the man’s] permission nor his advice. At the same time, she is not secretive, deceptive, or withdrawn. In the presence of the man she thinks and decides for herself.”

Knowing quite well the history of interpretation which reads seduction into the giving of the fruit by the woman to the man, Trible pauses to debunk these interpretations with clear, decisive language.

Throughout this scene the man has remained silent; he does not speak for obedience. His presence is passive and bland. The contrast that he offers to the woman is not strength or resolve but weakness. No patriarchal figure making decisions for his family, he follows his woman without question or comment. She gives fruit to him, “and-he-ate.” The story does not say that she tempted him; nor does its silence allow for this inference, even though many interpreters have made it. It does not present him as reluctant or hesitating. He does not theologize; he does

---

16 Ibid., 110.
17 Ibid., 112.
18 Ibid.
19 Ibid., 113.
not contemplate; and he does not envision the full possibilities of the occasion. Instead, his one act is belly-oriented, and it is an act of acquiescence, not of initiative. If the woman is intelligent, sensitive, and ingenious, the man is passive, brutish and inept.’’

To call the man brutish and inept is a reach too far. If the woman is to be dubbed ingenious for deciding to consume the fruit, the man cannot be called brutish for doing the same. However, Trible does effectively dispel the notion that the woman relies upon seduction to convince an unwilling man to join her nefarious rebellion. Though she need not demonize the man in order to exonerate the woman, Trible makes clear the absurdity and probable misogyny inherent in interpretations which paint the woman as a seductress. Moreover, her activity allows for her to exhibit care for the man; she finds that the fruit is good for eating and gives it to her partner. Trible further asserts a narrative purpose in the man’s described passivity in the shadow of the woman’s assertive activity. While each member of the couple is depicted differently in the scene, they are both guilty of disobeying God’s command. Together, they represent “the wide range of human responses that participate in transgression. Both activity and passivity, initiative and acquiescence, are equal modes of lawlessness.’’

The result of this lawlessness is the opening of their eyes and the knowledge of their nakedness. Trible contends that the serpent’s blandishments suggested a divine knowledge, something to make them more than human and closer to being God. Though the text narrates that their eyes were opened, Trible

---

20 Ibid.

21 Ibid., 114.
indicates that “ironically they know the opposite of what the serpent promised. They know their helplessness, insecurity, and defenselessness.”\(^{22}\) As a result, they sew leaves together to make rudimentary clothes for themselves. Just as the act of disobedience depicts a movement of priority away from God and toward self, the knowledge of nakedness seems to require a human solution. Whereas the man and woman had previously depended upon God for everything, they now see nakedness as a problem to be solved, one they must solve of their own volition and labor. In place a kind of unknowing, blissful dependence on God, they now experience life as a set of challenges to face and dangers to overcome. Even before expulsion from the garden or God’s punishing decrees, “existence has become a burden.”\(^{23}\)

Trible notes that the final scene of the narrative, including the ersatz trial before God and the resulting eviction from Eden, carefully undoes the narrative movement of the first scene. Whereas the beginning of the narrative highlighted the bounty of creation, the third will expose its harshness. Where the first scene suggested unity, mutuality, and harmony between the man and the woman; between human and God; and between human and nature, the third scene will proceed to establish disharmony in each of those relationships. The depiction of the man and the woman hiding from the sound of God’s approach is an obvious sign of a changed and broken relationship with their creator god. The

\(^{22}\) Ibid.  
\(^{23}\) Ibid., 115.
conversation between God and the man provides further evidence of this disorder. Though both the man and the woman hear the sound of God’s voice in the beginning of the scene, God addresses only the man. In response, Adam answers only for himself and does not speak for or of the woman. According to Trible, “such individual treatment increases tension within the unity of the couple.”

Moreover, when God asks if the man has eaten from the forbidden tree, “[f]irst, he betrays the woman; second, he blames God” for giving him the woman in the first place, “and only third does he confess.” In contrast to the unity highlighted when he recognized the woman as part of himself, the man now points to the emergence of the woman as an oblique cause for his own disobedience. This answer diminished and impugns not only the woman, but also the God who created her. Though his choice of language reveals a defensiveness and a guilty conscious wishing to push blame onto others, the man does not lie or attempt to deceive God. He accurately retells the action of receiving the fruit from the woman and eating it. Had a kind of seduction or persuasion taken place, the man certainly would have brought up in his own defense in order to clear his good name. The lack of such a defense is further evidence that an interpretation which points to a seductive temptress in the woman is off the mark.

When God questions the woman about her role in the proceedings, she undertakes a strategy similar to the man’s: she accepts responsibility after first

\[24 \text{Ibid., 117.}\]

\[25 \text{Ibid., 119.}\]
blaming the serpent. Trible points out some differences between her confession and the man’s that are meant, presumably, to exonerate her from some of the damning readings of this part of the passage. First, Trible notes that the woman does not blame God for creating the serpent, as the man had blamed him for creating the woman, nor does she blame or implicate the man in any way. Implicit in Trible’s observation is the intimation that there is something nobler or more honorable in this individual acceptance. Additionally, Trible notes that she is quicker in accepting responsibility.

Without giving the serpent a chance to speak for itself, God pronounces sentence upon the three wrongdoers. Trible suggests that “[t]he divine speeches to the serpent, the woman, and the man are not commands for structuring life,” but rather “they show the how intolerable existence has become as it stands between creation and redemption.”26 Beginning with the consequences for the serpent, explicitly described as a curse, God declares, “I will put enmity between you and the woman, and between your offspring and hers.”27 The proper and original relationship of the human and animal worlds, which was threatened by this wily serpent entrapping rather than serving the man and the woman, is now broken and characterized by distance and strife.

The woman is the second to receive judgment, though Trible points out that she is not cursed directly as the serpent had been, nor indirectly as the man

26 Ibid., 123.

27 Gen. 3:15.
will be when he receives his judgment from God. God’s speech to her likewise lacks the formula of accusation which begins God’s speech to both the serpent and the man. The serpent is cursed “because you have done this”\(^{28}\) and the earth is cursed “because you [the man] have listened to the voice of your woman”\(^{29}\) God’s speech to the woman lacks both this accusatory formula and the notion of a curse, “[t]hus, any claim that Yahweh’s judgment upon her is the most severe of the three falters at this very point.”\(^{30}\) God declares that he will increase the pain of childbearing, which had yet to occur in existence in the first place, and then indicates that the woman’s desire will be for her man, but that instead of returning that desire, the man will rule over her. Trible sees the woman’s projected desire for her husband to be a continuation of the yearning for the unity experienced prior to the disobedience. However, “[w]here once there was mutuality, now there is a hierarchy of division. The man dominates the woman to perfect sexuality. Hence, the woman is corrupted in becoming a slave and the man is corrupted in becoming a master.”\(^{31}\) In Trible’s reading, a hierarchical, and therefore disordered, relationship between partners is the sign of a fallen world and a broken relationship, not the commandment for how relationships must be or should be. Contrary to the interpretation of other writers, the rule of man over woman is not a divine right; it is the emblem of brokenness.

---

\(^{28}\) Gen. 3:14.  
\(^{29}\) Gen. 3:17.  
\(^{30}\) Trible, “A Love Story Gone Awry,” 126.  
\(^{31}\) Ibid., 128.
The man is last to receive his punishment, which is a curse only obliquely. The man is not cursed, but the earth is cursed because of him. The man who, as earth creature, was intended to keep and till the garden with putative ease, must now work with difficulty to procure sustenance. The use of labor in this pronouncement links the man’s consequence with the woman’s, and the “verbal parallelism indicates equal, though not identical, consequences for the two sexes. However work is culturally conceived, be it childrearing or farming, its execution comes in pain and toil for both the woman and for the man.”

Additionally, just as the damage done to the relationship between the human world and the animal is revealed in God’s speech to the woman, the consequence spoken to the man indicates a disordered relationship between the human and plant worlds.

In the aftermath of this three part judgment, the man names the woman Eve, echoing the language of domination used in the naming of the animals. The placement of this naming is crucial to Trible. It is only after the original unity and harmony of the relationship is broken that the hierarchy associated with one being naming another touches the woman. The man calls her Eve, a word derived from the word for life, mingling for Eve the honor of being the mother all and the disgrace of being objectified by the man and treated as an animal. This is the state of humanity as they leave the garden, forbidden from returning lest they find the tree of life which might grant immortality. Trible’s reading of these events in Genesis takes great pains to stick closely to the text, letting the content

---

32 Ibid., 130.
and structure point to interpretation. Through her analysis, the more traditional image of Eve as weak and frail, or alternatively malevolent and seductive, is impossible to support. Though the weightiest part of her analysis concerns this reassessment of the woman in Eden, she also highlights the prelapsarian harmony that the catechism likewise describes. The union between sexes, between humans and God, and between humans and nature are all lost as a result of the disobedience of the garden, reflecting the sometimes antagonistic relationships felt in all those dimensions by contemporary humans. Trible’s reading implies, however, that the chaos of these relationships, especially interpersonal relationships, is not a divine decree or an unalterable law. Hierarchy and division is a human inclination to be contended with, but it is not intransigent absolute.

The narrative aside which posits that a man leaves his family to join with a woman is not an observation about the man and the woman of the garden; the man had no parents to leave. Rather, it is an observation for later human society. If that is the case, then the narrator’s observation of the desire to return to original unity, specifically between two people but all relationships by extension, is meant for current readers. A man and a woman stand separately before God to receive judgment, but they leave the garden together to embark upon the human life as it is now known, a life that holds the potential for a kind of reunification. Trible’s reading highlights this unity and mutuality, once lost, but reclaimable.

Richard Pogue Harrison subtitles his work Gardens as “An Essay on the Human Condition,” and though he examines many different types of gardens, he treats the
Garden of Eden early in his work as a kind of prototype for more tangible, human gardens. Harrison’s major contention is that one of the most fundamental qualities of human life is the investment of care, and that the lack of care present in Eden constituted an environment and life alien to the human existence we now know. “In an immortal Eden” he writes, “there is no need to cultivate, since all is pregiven there spontaneously.” Without care, without cultivation, there is no investment and no connection. Harrison declares that “[f]or millennia and throughout world cultures, our predecessors conceived of human happiness in its perfected state as a garden existence.” However, even though the simple joy which may be observed in contemporary gardens may seem to approach that original paradise, “the fact that we must create, maintain, and care for them is the mark of their postlapsarian provenance.”

Harrison relates a parable of Cura, also called Care, as clue to the foundational qualities of human existence. Within this parable, Cura shapes a creature out of clay and asks Jupiter to endow it with life. Earth, Cura, and Jupiter argue over whose name the creature should take, since Jupiter provided life, Cura provided the shaping, and Earth provided the raw material. Saturn decides the case for them: upon death, Jupiter receives back the spirit that he conferred and Earth similarly receives back the body, “[b]ut since

---


34 Ibid., 1.

35 Ibid., x.
Care first shaped this creature, she shall possess it as long as it lives.” For Harrison, this parable speaks to the seminal quality characterizing human life: it is a life of care.

By contrast, Harrison looks to non-human, divine gardens considered paradisiacal. Drawing upon gardens in the work of Homer, the ancient Sumerian epic of Gilgamesh, and Genesis, Harrison sees both an incredible boon and an immense cost. These divine gardens, discrete from heaven or an afterlife, allow humans to enjoy the gift of their bodily life “without being touched by the death and disease that afflicts all things earthly.” The danger and uncertainty inherent in a mortal life is mitigated in such a place, but the cost to the otherwise sublime life in the garden is “absolute isolation from the world of mortals – isolation from friends, family, city, and the ongoing story of human action and endeavor.” To close off the negatives of mortal living is also to close off the benefits. Harrison suggests that the most human reaction to this kind of choice is to choose mortality – death, disease, and all – because a life marked by human cares is a life imbued with meaning.

Harrison sees the principles underlying the parable of Cura at work in the Eden narrative as well. Though the text asserts that Adam is placed in the garden in order to keep it, Adam is never seen doing anything of the sort. Harrison finds a more compelling explanation for this placement in the garden in God’s desire to shield the innocent creature from the world outside the garden, likening God to a protective parent.

36 Ibid., 6.
37 Ibid., 3.
38 Ibid.
Adam and Eve do not seem obliged to work in order to tend the garden. Rather, they are “beneficiaries, deprived of the commitment that drives a gardener to keep his or her garden.”\textsuperscript{39} The bounty of the garden comes across as a gift of effortless ease, not the result of cultivation. Harrison contends that this lack of caretaking indicates a lack of care, and he highlights “with what insouciance Adam and Eve performed the momentous act that gets them expelled from Eden!”\textsuperscript{40} He decries interpretation which attribute the act to feelings of overweening pride, open rebellion against God, the thrill of lawbreaking, and even simple curiosity. To his mind, “[i]t was out of sheer carelessness that they did it.”\textsuperscript{41} For Harrison, this is foreseeable. Designed as they were and placed in a paradise, Adam and Eve were incapable of devotion, incapable of predicting consequences, or at least incapable of caring about them. He points to the unlikeliness of a creature given no responsibility upholding a strictly moral law. Their disobedience is that of a child who doesn’t know any better.

The transition from inside the garden to outside is shocking. Within Eden, “[e]verything was there for him (including his wife). After his exile, he was there for all things, for it was only by dedicating himself that he could render humanly inhabitable an environment that did not exist for his pleasure and that extracted from him his daily labor.”\textsuperscript{42} It is only outside of Eden that Adam and Eve encounter a world that is

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{39} Ibid., 8.
\item \textsuperscript{40} Ibid.
\item \textsuperscript{41} Ibid.
\item \textsuperscript{42} Ibid.
\end{itemize}
analogous to our own, one that seems at time inhospitable and pernicious. However, it is also only in this condition that Cura could truly take hold. As the couple step out of Eden and begin a new kind of life, there “was born the love of something other than oneself,” a love engendered by the care it takes to produce. Now, for the first time, life matters. Harrison paints the options in the garden as “impossible alternatives: live in moral oblivion within its limits or gain a sense of reality at the cost of being thrown out.” For Harrison, Eden was a gift wasted on the type of humanity represented by Adam and Eve inside of the garden. The type of humanity without a care in the world can also not care about the beauty of the life they had. Harrison puts it this way: “Through Adam and Eve we lost a gift but earned a heart.” It is only a person who knows work, who has invested time and labor into an endeavor, who can appreciate, by contrast, the gifts of leisure, luxury, and abundance. Our type of humans could never have developed had we stayed in the garden, and Adam and Eve could not have survived in our world had they not adapted to become the type of people we are now. Harrison suggests that “it is clear that a life of action, pervaded through and through by care, is what has always rendered human life meaningful. Only in the context of such meaningfulness could the experience of life acquire a depth and density denied to our primal ancestors in the garden.” Simple biological survival, he reminds us, is not quite the same as living, and mere existence in the Garden of Eden is not quite the same thing

---

41 Ibid., 9.
42 Ibid.
43 Ibid.
44 Ibid., 10.
as happiness. A garden which supports itself was the wrong context to incubate nascent human beings who experience meaningful happiness in the role of cultivators, because those humans could only know how to consume the abundance already there. It is only upon adapting to an existence outside of Eden “that they could realize their potential to become cultivators and givers, instead of mere consumers and receivers.”\textsuperscript{47} And only by becoming cultivators and givers can people find fulfillment.

Harrison points to the creation of humanity out of the earth as an especially appropriate authorial choice. If the fullness of human life is experienced in gardening, used by Harrison as metonymy for human labor, then the too abundant earth of Eden was infertile for the needs of humanity. It was the imperfect soil outside Eden which provided the occasion for cultivation which would ultimately help humanity to grow, to self-cultivate. Harrison compares the human spirit to a garden ripe for cultivation, “not an Edenic garden handed over to us for our delectation but one that owes its fruits to the provisions of human care and solicitation.”\textsuperscript{48} Eden was never the right kind of home for the kind of person interested in soul cultivation, and “Adam’s sojourn in Eden was at bottom a form of exile and … the expulsion was a form of repatriation.”\textsuperscript{49} Expulsion from Eden constitutes a loss, but it was never home.

Harrison’s positive, humanistic reading of the implications of the Edenic narrative does not ignore the hardships of human existence, however. He admits that

\begin{footnotes}
\item[Ibid.]
\item[Ibid., 11.]
\item[Ibid., 10.]
\end{footnotes}
“there is an element of curse in the human condition” and that “Care burdens us with many indignities.”\textsuperscript{50} The human condition characterized by cultivation and relationship building is also open to chaos, violence, hatred, and discord. “Yet if the human race is cursed,” writes Harrison, “it is not so much because we have been thrown into suffering and mortality, nor because we have a deeper capacity for suffering than other creatures, but rather because we take suffering and mortality to be confirmations of the curse rather than the preconditions of human self-realization.”\textsuperscript{51} We often feel a curse the hardships of life, but forget the blessing of awareness and agency. In our relationship with the earth, “we have a tendency … to see the earth as the matrix of pain, death, corruption, and tragedy rather than the matrix of life, growth, appearance, and form.”\textsuperscript{52}

Turning his attention to Eve specifically, Harrison credits her with being the progenitor of the human race. He imagines in her a kind of appreciation for the fecundity of human procreation that seems to have a place only in a post-Edenic world. Allowing himself to speculate, Harrison suggests that “[i]f one may attribute a deeper motive to Eve’s tasting of the fruit, it was no doubt a burning desire to become an ‘earthly mother,’ [to] make the fruit real.\textsuperscript{53} Harrison indicates that this fruits suggests fruitfulness, generativity. In this view, Eve becomes the mother of humanity not by the happenstance of being the woman cast out of the garden, but rather through a deliberate

\textsuperscript{50} Ibid., 12.
\textsuperscript{51} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{52} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{53} Ibid., 19.
The desire for familial generation. The counterpoint to the loss of the timelessness or immortality of Eden is the adjunct immortality of human procreation and family legacy. Counterintuitively, that which is “not finite cannot give birth, nor be filled with a promise of the future.”\textsuperscript{54} The timelessness and abundance of Eden itself is stifling to a humanity who thrives within the bounds of mortality and Cura. Harrison redeems Eve, as it were, but giving her credit for the positive aspects of human life in the post-Edenic world.

Both Trible and Harrison treat the Edenic narrative as a whole, but focus most intently upon the role played by Eve. If any aspect of the narrative has been subject to wild misinterpretations it is the conclusions reached about the female half of the first couple and the resulting implications for society. These two reading constitute a refreshing rescue of Eve’s character from the gutter of historical interpretation, though they go about this re-viewing in quite different ways, each with their own strengths and weaknesses.

Trible proceeds through the text of Genesis with laser-like precision and a penetrating gaze. Narrative structure, poetic or prose form, syntactical construction, and word endings all fall within her purview in an effort to understand anew the implications of the text. As a result, her view of the woman in Eden is of a figure who is celebrated as the crowning achievement of creation, one who shows strength and independence, and one who accepts her punishment for wrongdoing and still yearns for unity with her mate. If she begins to diminish the character of the man in order to lionize the woman, it is a

\textsuperscript{54} Ibid., 17.
momentary lapse in an otherwise relentlessly careful treatment of the text, and one which is certainly balanced by centuries of interpretations which skew to the opposite direction. Her fleeting slight to the man aside, Trible’s reading celebrates the human drive toward intimacy and mutuality and decries the fault-driven effort to divide and subjugate within socially constructed hierarchies.

Harrison, falls on the opposite side of the spectrum from Trible, paying scant attention to the construction of the text itself and taking liberties to examine the implications of the received impression of the story on a macroscopic level. He envisions the narrative of Eden to be, ultimately, an uplifting story about the human capacity and need to invest care into human endeavors. In stark contrast to the Catechism of the Catholic Church, there is almost no mention of guilt or culpability in Harrison’s reading of Eden. He provides a slight nod to the sense of loss implicit in the story, but decides that the world as-it-is surpasses in value the seemingly perfect world as-it-was. Likewise, he takes quite a few liberties with the details of the text in order to support his beautified and beatified view of Eve, allowing supposition to take the place of careful reading of the text. Harrison’s view, which celebrated human industry and relationship, is satisfying in a humanistic way, but probably strays too far from the text to be helpful to a member of a faith community looking to interpret scripture or a person concerned with careful exegesis. To a scholar of the text, Harrison’s interpretation falls short. To a scholar of the story, Harrison’s view is a refreshing and heartening way to see afresh the implications of the postlapsarian human condition.
CHAPTER 5

CONCLUSION

At a TEDx conference in September of 2010, speaker Drew Dudley suggested that there is no world, only billions of ways to see it.¹ Much the same can be said of the story of Eden. The works discussed in the preceding chapters vary wildly in context, analytical stance, methodology, and ultimately interpretation. The work of scholarly analysis of any particular text can never truly be termed complete; far less is the possibility of one’s personal engagement with human ethics coming to pat conclusion. The study of the Edenic narrative bears, and deserves, the multitudinous evaluations and appraisals afforded to it throughout history, as well as those which inevitably are yet to come. No reading is final, and each one builds a deeper, richer discourse for readers to join.

Older interpretations which intuit a justification for sexism and rigid social hierarchies have not aged well and ring false; unsurprising, they also tend to stray farthest from the text itself and rely upon biased assumptions. Richard Pogue Harrison’s reading redeems the image of Eve, damaged by so many early Jewish and Christian writers, and even celebrates her role in the loss of Eden as an event necessary to the development of human potential, but it similarly draws conclusions which strain the language of Genesis. Stronger and more satisfying interpretations are those that stick closely to the text, treating the narrative more as cosmogony in the frame Mircea Eliade

suggests than as allegorical moral didactism. Evaluating the Edenic story as a myth of origin allows for more authentic engagement with the text which helps to avoid the interpretive pitfall of biased readings. Implicitly, Phyllis Trible reads the story in this way, while also penetrating the text in an extremely close reading of both form and content. Like that of the Catechism of the Catholic Church, Trible’s take on the narrative highlights a magnificent primordial harmony which is lost through the course of the story. However, the catechism stretches thin at the points which draw upon tradition rather than the text itself, leading to a forced buttressing of preexistent doctrine. Trible’s reading, not without flaws, is the best representative of an examination which allows the features of the text to guide interpretation. The ethics implied by her reading – focusing on interpersonal relationships and desire for harmony at various levels and intersections – is not unique to her reading alone, but present in the best of them. However, the two modern reappraisals which most highlight this kind of positive, humanistic view all but ignore some concepts traditionally associated with the story: human guilt and culpability. While the doctrine of original sin as conceived by Augustine and as expressed in the catechism suffers from an abstraction and complexity which no religious doctrine is ever free of, it at least reflects a felt human experience that is authentic. In this sense, the catechism’s interpretation is cosmogonic; it seeks a possible origin of evil in a perfectly good creation, and in this effort the catechism does not pull its punches. Harrison’s reading (and, to a lesser extent, Trible’s), while reassuring and inspiring, ignores the darker parts of human nature which the catechism more bravely faces: human fallibility and the inclination toward evil. Having departed from the catechism in search of a
superior understanding of Eden’s implication, we must now head partway back to it. The ambiguity and immense complexity of human existence begs for an engagement with the narrative which is multi-dimensional in a way no single reading has provided, nor likely could provide. The sheer endurance of the story and the variety of readings it engenders speak to the richness of the layered meanings of the text, and part of the value of multiple studies of any text is the expansion of points with which a person may resonate. The desire for a singular explanation runs the risk of oversimplification. The best set of ethical conclusions comes, therefore, from a blending of multiple readings and a synthesis among them. This is the task before any reader of the text of Genesis, to engage with the multiplicity of meanings and evaluate personally the significance and value of each. It is not a task that has an end within one person’s lifetime nor across the life of human generations. After millennia of study, the Edenic narrative is still bearing fruit.


