The Reality of Sin and the Need for Grace: A Survey of a Perennial Question

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Let me introduce this topic by referring to wise words of Monica Hellwig about the human situation, before delving into the light and inspiration given in the pre-historical Genesis accounts of the sinfulness of human beings, their inclination to evil, and their need for divine deliverance, and especially in its third chapter. Says Hellwig:

The reason that grace is absolutely necessary for a good life and for the salvation of each human person is clear. The world in which we live is not one that helps everyone to lead a good life. The world is quite seriously disrupted with wars, class struggles, crimes of violence, crimes of fraud and deceit, racial injustices, and a pervading distrust. Many people in our world feel unwanted and unnoticed, perhaps even rejected by the society that gave them their existence. There are times for even the most fortunate among us when we feel that our whole being is set at cross purposes with the universe.

[People] cannot redeem themselves from this sense of frustration or from the destructive and self-defeating situations that cause the frustration. They cannot redeem themselves from it because their own human resources are shaped and limited by what society has given them and done for them, and the point is precisely that this falls short of what is needed. Salvation, or redemption, must come from God because it must come from a greater source of being and of healing power.

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This is why all the religions of the world speak of redemption, in one vocabulary or another. They all indicate the need and the promise of a liberation in which people are set free from a general frustration of purpose in the human condition. Christian tradition teaches that Jesus Christ offers to all [people] that redemption and reconciliation with God their Father, and with one another, which they so desperately need. Christian teaching has usually worked backward from the redemption offered in Jesus to the need for that redemption. We have labelled that need for redemption ‘original sin’.1

A. The Genesis Presentation of Sin

The early picture given in Genesis of the great harmony which God desires in creation is followed by a series of stories about sin—where it comes from, the damage it does, and God’s response to it (Genesis 3:1-6:4 especially). Once again these are not descriptions of historical facts and of actual persons in history. As the Dutch Catechism puts it: ‘The narratives are symbols, in which the kernel of all human history is described, including that which is still to come. Adam is Man. Cain is to be found in the newspapers and may be seen in our own heart. Noah and the builders of Babel—they are ourselves.’2 Scripture Scholar, Dianne Bergant, is in agreement about the Adam and Eve mytho-poetic story of Genesis 3:

Adam and Eve, though portrayed as the first created man and woman from whom all humankind descended, really represent every man and woman. Their story is both particular and universal. It unfolds in a land beyond this world and at a time outside of history.3

Chapter Three is the most significant of the Genesis stories of sin. Its Yahwist author (labelled ‘J’ from the German for ‘Yahwist’) is the same one who gave us the previous story about the creation of Man and Woman and their placement in the Garden of Delight. His topic this time is sin. The author knows, as we know, that sin is basically disobedience to God, and with it ‘the rejection of grace and the rejection of God’.4 But he sees it as more involved than that. He sets out to delve more deeply into the dark mystery of sin. Not sin in general, but the sin of those who know God and have experienced God, and still disobey

1. Monica Hellwig, What are the Theologians Saying? (Cincinnati, OH: Pflaum/Standard Publishing, 1970), 62-63. In the chapter called ‘Have We Forgotten Original Sin?’ she draws on the seminal scholarship of Andre-Marie Dubarle and Piet Schoonenberg. Her analysis seems as true, up-to-date, and relevant as ever.
him. What makes such people sin? What lies at the root of their rebellion against God? What happens to them when they turn from God?

So he is seeking to probe the psychology of sin. John McKenzie has described ‘the paradise story of Gen 3’ as ‘a splendid psychological study of the sinful act, unparalleled elsewhere in the OT’:

In a brief, simple dialogue the writer traces with masterful art the self-deception of the sinner, the rationalization of the action in one’s own mind, the desire to be greater than one really is, and the sinful choice made under the personal pressure of another. Almost every Hebrew word for sin is illustrated in the steps by which the man and the woman rebel against the restraint of the will of Yahweh.5

In telling his story he starts with the men and women of his own day. He concludes that what he observes as true of people in his own time has been true of people from the beginning. In short, he writes of sin as a universal experience. As the Dutch Catechism puts it: ‘The sin of Adam and Eve is closer than we imagine. It is in our own selves.’6 Moreover, ‘the sin which stains others was not only committed by an Adam at the beginning of man’s story, but by “Adam”, man, every man’.7

J’s story of sin unfolds in four parts, as follows: 1. The Serpent; 2. The Origin of Sin; 3. The Effects of Sin; and 4. God’s Reaction to Sin.

1. The Serpent

The temptation is portrayed as a dialogue between the serpent and the woman, the serpent’s faculty of speech being further evidence of the mythic character of the story.8 By his references to ‘the serpent’ the author implies that there are evil forces within the human environment hostile to God which tend to seduce people into committing sin. The aptness of this symbol is inferred from the following facts. Generally speaking, people have a similar reaction to serpents and snakes. We notice how they move, how they slither and slide. Their smooth gliding conveys the impression that they are sly, cunning, and ‘sneaky’. Jesus himself refers to this popular belief that snakes are ‘cunning’ (Mt 10:16 NJB trans.).

Traditionally, the serpent of the story has been seen as a symbol of Satan. We must be careful not to read into the text our own idea of Satan, something which developed later. ‘The snake is simply a mischievous creature made by God, dramatically necessary to awaken in the woman a desire to eat of the

6. A New Catechism, 263.
7. A New Catechism, 266.
forbidden fruit; he recedes into the background when his narrative function is accomplished.\textsuperscript{9} He should be regarded as a general symbol of whatever forces there are in the world which might tempt people to disobey God. In short, the ‘serpent’ means the tempter, the seducer, however understood.

2. The Origin of Sin

The serpent, trickster that he is, suggests that maybe God has placed them among thousands of fruit trees and yet has forbidden them to eat any fruit at all (v.1). He is deliberately distorting the picture, deliberately misrepresenting the situation. He is picturing God as demanding unreasonable things, and acting therefore as an uncaring despotic ruler forcing humans to comply with his harsh orders. The woman enters into dialogue with the tempter (v.2). She would have done better to ignore him, to drive him away, or to assert her faith in the Lord’s goodness.

She begins to fall for the serpent’s twisted line of argument. While quoting God’s command (v.3), she makes the command more severe than God intended by adding ‘nor shall you touch it’ (v.3). By exaggerating the matter, the command begins to appear unreasonable, and to break it, justifiable.

Seeing the woman’s weakness, the serpent confronts her openly (vv.4-5). He portrays God as selfish, conceited, greedy for power, wanting to keep humans down, stopping them from attaining greatness (being ‘like God’, v.5). The portrayal is ‘an implied criticism “you want to be like gods and you should be like gods, but you’re not”. The Accuser is getting under the skin of Adam and Eve, taunting them with their finitude—“There is something wrong with you, something wrong with just being human”.’\textsuperscript{10}

Ignoring God’s lavish generosity, symbolized by the trees of the garden generally, the woman concentrates on the one thing forbidden (v.6). The forbidden fruit becomes progressively more attractive—tasty to eat, beautiful to look at, and beneficial for knowledge (v.6). By this time the sin has become almost inevitable (v.6). Claus Westermann comments: ‘The woman moves outside her relationship of trust to God so as to become wise, she no longer hears in the command him who commands, who up to that very moment has carried and preserved her in existence.’\textsuperscript{11}

She is not alone in her sin. Her husband is with her, and he too eats of the fruit (v.6). The command they have disobeyed is broader than not eating from a particular tree. Their behaviour means that they have refused to be what God has meant them to be, that is creatures, which is to say not knowing everything and living in dependence upon God, the Master-Planner. They have become too big for their boots. By attempting to be more than creatures, they have refused to

accept themselves as they are, and have refused to accept their rightful relationship with their Creator, a refusal that lies at the root of all sin.

3. The effects of sin

In the story the effects of their sin are immediate. They notice their mutual nakedness (v.7). No longer content to be creatures and to accept the limitations of their human condition, they have lost their innocent, trusting relationship with God. They are now ashamed of their bodies, ‘ashamed in the presence of each other’,\(^{12}\) and cover themselves.

Sin causes a sense of fear and shame and guilt. Despite God being said to take a stroll among them in the gentleness of a cool breeze after a long hot day, the man and the woman skulk away and hide themselves in the trees (v.8). The man first attempts to blame God for it all by pointing to God as having given the woman as his partner (v.12), and the woman protests that the serpent tricked her into it (v.13). Clearly, ‘a psychology of self-justification’\(^{13}\) is at work here.

By complaining about his wife the man also shows that sin separates him from fellow human beings as well, alienates them one from another and tends to destroy interpersonal relationships. So, by refusing to accept his responsibility for a proper relationship with God—that of a creature—the man is also destroying right order in his relationship with fellow-creatures. Gone is his delight at the creation of woman (2:23). He will now seek to dominate her (v.16).

Sin also causes the relationship of humans to the earth to also become disordered (vv.17-19). The land is God’s gift to the human race, and God has given humans the task as good gardeners of working and conserving the land. But the disorder caused by sin makes this task one of toil and bitter struggle. Sin has damaged the harmony between God, human beings and the earth.

4. God’s Reaction to Sin

In the midst of the disorders of sin, the Lord God remains full of loving mercy. He does not strike the sinners dead. Far from threatening fire and brimstone he peacefully strolls among the trees in the garden (v.8). He gives the man and the woman a chance to defend themselves (vv.11-13). (This opportunity is denied the serpent). As an act of mercy the Lord makes leather clothes for them (v.21) and promises that the offspring of the woman will crush the head of the serpent (v.15). Even the expulsion from the Garden of Eden is motivated not by anger but by care and concern. God does not want to leave them in their misery forever. Lest they eat of the tree of life and thus face an eternity of suffering (v.22) the merciful Lord takes them away from the Garden and from temptation there. The ‘trial’ scene that is Chapter Three thus ends with God taking pity on his sinful creatures. Westermann makes the positive comment:

\(^{12}\) Westermann, *Creation*, 95.

‘Guilt and death belong inseparably to [human] existence, but [the human being] alienated from God always remains [one] whom God cares for, protects, and blesses; [the human being] remains God’s creature.’


B. Some conclusions

1. On the literary form of Genesis 3, Neil Ormerod provides valuable background:

   From a purely literary perspective, the purpose of Genesis 3 is to provide an etiological explanation for the origins of evil and suffering. All cultures are confronted with the problem of trying to explain why there is suffering, why there is evil. In cultures which have not developed a reflective philosophy or theology, for example those of Old Testament times, such a question will be answered by telling a story—this is how it all happened, this is the beginning of the problem. Typically suffering and evil are seen as the result of some ancient calamity, either a war between the gods or through some human agency. The literary genre of such narratives is myth. In Genesis 3 we do not have an historical narrative relating to the events of the first man and woman. We have an etiological myth which seeks to give meaning to a present experience of suffering and evil by reference to a mythical originating event, lost in the long gone past. To speak of it as myth does not mean that it is a lie, or wrong. It simply identifies the literary form used by the author to convey a divinely revealed truth.

2. Genesis 3 ‘seeks to locate the origins of evil...in the concrete actions of human agents. Evil does not come from God or from some evil source. No, it arises from humankind’s departure from God’s will, from a misuse of human freedom’, and this ‘from the very beginning of human existence’, for ‘as soon as there are people there is sin’. So true is this, that ‘there is no time in human history when we have not suffered from the problem of evil’. So ‘the origin of sin lies not in God or in some cosmic struggle between good and evil, but in human actions and decision. Seeking to shift the blame onto someone or something else is in fact part of the problem of sin itself’.

16. Ibid.
17. Ibid., Creation, Grace, and Redemption, 77.
18. Ibid.
3. The story of sin and loss of Genesis 3 is a story of the damaged harmony, a story of the human predicament, the introduction of ‘disharmony into the social and natural order’. Ormerod illustrates this by drawing attention to these details of the story:

In the first place, birth will become a trial for the woman … Secondly, woman becomes subservient to man, who will dominate her life...Thirdly, the man finds his relationship to the land disrupted, only able to produce enough food by plain old hard work...Further, the author sees the sin of Adam and Eve as the start of a ‘snowballing’ effect of sin in the world...The placing of all these stories in the one mythic context creates an overall impression of an explosion of evil.

4. Genesis 3 is also a story of hope, a story of the possibility of paradise being regained, of new life emerging from disorder and chaos. The message that it teaches is that the harmony of people with their God, with their fellow men and women, and with the earth, has indeed been damaged, but is not completely annihilated. God wants to free and heal us. There will be a constant struggle, but through the power and grace of God, good order will ultimately prevail. Ormerod expresses this aspect this way: ‘Despite the fact of human sinfulness, God has not abandoned human beings to their fate. Rather, God continues to care for them and work for their good (Gen 3:21).’

5. The Church has taught and continues to teach that human beings are born into a sinful world and into a sinful race and that from both of these they stand in need of redemption. This, basically, is the doctrine of original sin, which is taught quite plainly in both the First (Old) Testament and the New Testament. There can be no quarrel about this. Hellwig claims:

The basic scriptural idea is that of the ‘sin of the world’, the general entanglement of mankind in sin, which makes a wall of resistance to the entry of God’s light and grace among [people]. Scripture does not suggest that the sin of the world is passed on to each person by generation, that is, by the procreative acts that lead to [their] coming into being. It seems to suggest, rather, that it is passed on by society, culture, upbringing, and the experience of human relationships.

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20. Ibid. Cf. his insight in *Creation, Grace, and Redemption*: ‘Once sin enters into the human story its effects spread and grow leaving no one untouched by its consequences. ‘From the beginning’ no one can claim exemption or claim to be untouched by sin’ (77).
Denis Edwards sheds further light on the sinful situation of human beings and their need for grace, when he writes:

But the Christian tradition maintains that if human history is a history of grace, it is also a history of sin, of a rejection of God that enters into the place of human freedom. We tend to be curved in upon ourselves in destructive ways. We dominate and exploit one another and abuse other creatures, regardless of the consequences. We make war on one another and destroy the life systems of the planet. We live in alienated and damaging ways. All of this constitutes a need for wholeness and healing, for liberation and forgiveness that the Christian community finds in Christ.24

Edwards adds these comments on the human condition:

Human existence is always a story of grace—at least in the sense that grace is always offered. Alongside this story of grace, of the Spirit ever-present to human beings in self-offering love, there is a story of wilful rejection of grace, a long history of sin that enters into the place of human freedom and inclines to sin. Human beings are born into a world of grace, but are also drawn towards lovelessness, ruthlessness, and violence.25

6. On the other hand, it is a mistake and a misuse of Scripture to claim that Genesis has recorded the actual history of how this has happened.26 Bruce Vawter insists: ‘The man and the woman of Genesis 2-3 are intended to represent everyman, but an everyman no different from that of the Yahwist’s time and our own.’27 Hellwig sounds a warning about misunderstanding the nature and purpose of the story, when she writes:

If we read the story of Adam and Eve as though it were a chronicle of what happened at the beginning of human history, we are reading into it something that the original narrators never intended at all. They wrote it in a style and pattern which tells us their purpose was to light up the meaning of the human situation, not in the past but in the present. They tell a classic type of story that relates not how things were at the beginning, but the meaning and explanation of how things are now. Adam, or man, and Eve, the mother of the living, are brought into being by God in his image. Their being is whole, complete, integrated; it

25. Ibid., 32.
27. Ibid.
makes sense; it “adds up”. But they sin, and one sin leads to another, and we have the recital of the sins of one generation after another of their descendants, all becoming tangled in the situation of the race.28

7. What is particularly important is ‘to make sure we realize the need of redemption by God’s grace for everyone’.29 Edwards draws attention to some striking manifestations of this shared need for redemption when he writes: ‘There are a host of primal emotions within (aggression, jealousy, possessive love, fear) that can destroy us and our relationships if we do not name them and come to terms with them. These are what the classical doctrine of original sin has called the “tinder of sin” (fomes peccati).’30

8. J insists that the dark and evil dimensions of life do not come from God, for God made all things good, but holds flawed and imperfect human beings responsible for what has gone wrong. But questions remain. Is evil only moral evil? There is the tragedy of children and other innocent ones suffering horribly from what is inflicted upon them by others. There is the unruliness of nature, ‘red in tooth and claw’,31 which can and does result in ruined lives.32 And how, for example, may we account for the horrendous experiences of the victims of tidal waves, earthquakes, mud slides, cyclones, tornadoes, and volcanoes?

28. Hellwig, What Are the Theologians Saying?, 63-64.
29. Ibid., 70.
31. From a poem by Alfred Lord Tennyson.