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**Biblical Interpretation: Dr. Bray**  
**A Study of Historical Interpretation of**  
**Genesis 3:1-19**  
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## Introduction

When the story of humanity begins in Genesis, Scripture unfolds a wondrous story of creation, beginning with the universe and culminating with the placing of Adam in the garden. It is in the garden that Adam experiences the joy of an intimate, personal relationship with God; it is in the garden that God blesses Adam with Eve, the first woman.

Unfortunately, it is in the garden that creation goes seriously awry, beginning with the temptation of Eve and degenerating into the sin of disobedience that resulted in Adam and Eve's expulsion from the garden. Genesis 3 records that sin entered the world through events that occurred in the garden, bringing death with it.

Of all the events recorded in Scripture, the Fall of humanity in Genesis 3 ranks as one of the most profound in its effect on human history. Other than the Flood of Genesis 6 and the lingual confusion of Genesis 11, the Fall of humanity incurred the most universal consequences of all history until the coming of Christ recorded in the Gospels.

For most of history, the story of the Fall as recorded by Moses was accepted as a truthful account of the reason for sin and evil in the world. Abraham believed the story as it was told to him. Hebrews believed Moses for nearly 1,500 years before Christ. Christians inherited the story with the rest of the Jewish Scriptures and, like the Jews, accepted it as accurate. Interpreters in the Church may have interpreted the story differently through the ages, but they all did so in the belief that Moses had accurately described the incident.

With the advent of scientific theories in biology, geology, and cosmology, Moses' description of the Fall suffered numerous attacks on its credibility. The theories attacking the Creation story of Genesis 1 and 2 directly contributed to the questioning of the Fall in Genesis 3. Therefore, the study of the biblical interpretation of the Fall is intricately connected to the interpretation of the Creation in the period of time beginning in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century. No one questions that something is seriously wrong with humanity, but questions continue to arise regarding the scope of human depravity and the nature of its cause. Contemporary Bible scholars continue to struggle with the ramifications of scientific intrusions into areas once reserved for theologians.

This study will focus on the history of biblical interpretation of Genesis 3:1-19. Discussions regarding the interpretation of Genesis 1-2 will be addressed only as they intersect with the debate regarding Genesis 3.

### **Genesis 3:1-19**

Now the serpent was more crafty than any other beast of the field that the LORD God had made. He said to the woman, "Did God actually say, 'You shall not eat of any tree in the garden'?" And the woman said to the serpent, "We may eat of the fruit of the trees in the garden, but God said, 'You shall not eat of the fruit of the tree that is in the midst of the garden, neither shall you touch it, lest you die.' " But the serpent said to the woman, "You will not surely 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." So when the woman saw that the tree was good for food, and that it was a delight to the eyes, and that the tree was to be desired to make one wise, she took of its fruit and ate, and she also gave some to her husband who was with her, and he ate. Then the eyes of both were opened, and they knew that they were naked. And they sewed fig leaves together and made themselves loincloths. And they heard the sound of the LORD God walking in the garden in the cool of the day, and the man and his wife hid themselves from the presence of the LORD God among the trees of the garden. But the LORD God called to the man and said

to him, “Where are you?” And he said, “I heard the sound of you in the garden, and I was afraid, because I was naked, and I hid myself.” He said, “Who told you that you were naked? Have you eaten of the tree of which I commanded you not to eat?” The man said, “The woman whom you gave to be with me, she gave me fruit of the tree, and I ate.” Then the LORD God said to the woman, “What is this that you have done?” The woman said, “The serpent deceived me, and I ate.” The LORD God said to the serpent, “Because you have done this, cursed are you above all livestock and above all beasts of the field; on your belly you shall go, and dust you shall eat all the days of your life. I will put enmity between you and the woman, and between your offspring and her offspring; he shall bruise your head, and you shall bruise his heel.” To the woman he said, “I will surely multiply your pain in childbearing; in pain you shall bring forth children. Your desire shall be for your husband, and he shall rule over you.” And to Adam he said, “Because you have listened to the voice of your wife and have eaten of the tree of which I commanded you, ‘You shall not eat of it,’ cursed is the ground because of you; in pain you shall eat of it all the days of your life; thorns and thistles it shall bring forth for you; and you shall eat the plants of the field. By the sweat of your face you shall eat bread, till you return to the ground, for out of it you were taken; for you are dust, and to dust you shall return.”<sup>1</sup>

### **Genesis 3 in the Scriptures**

Interestingly, the Fall is rarely mentioned in the rest of the Old Testament, even though accounts bearing its effects permeate the Jewish Scriptures. Adam is mentioned by name only once in conjunction with the Fall outside the book of Genesis (in Hosea 6:7), and the garden is mentioned only 7 times outside the Genesis 3 passage (Genesis 13:10; Isaiah 51:3; Ezekiel 28:13, 31:8-9, and 36:35, and Joel 2:3).

Of the New Testament writers, Paul drew more from Genesis 3 than all the other authors combined. Paul stood firmly in the Pharisaic tradition of biblical interpretation and therefore serves as an example of Jewish interpretation in Apostolic times. Paul drew a comparison

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1. Genesis 3:1-19, *English Standard Version* (Wheaton, IL: Good News Publishers, 2001).

between Adam and Jesus Christ in 2 passages (Romans 5:14 and 1 Corinthians 15). In these passages, two observations can be made regarding Paul's interpretation of the Fall.

First, Paul believed the Genesis 3 story actually occurred. In the passages where Paul compared Christ to Adam, the comparisons work only if Adam literally lived and literally sinned against God. Otherwise, the comparisons fall apart, for Jesus could not be called the "second Adam" if the first Adam were merely a myth.

Secondly, Paul clearly faults Adam with sin's consequences in the world. In 1 Timothy 2, Paul wrote that "...Adam was not deceived, but the woman was deceived and became a transgressor."<sup>2</sup> However, in Romans 5, Paul had written that "sin came into the world through one man,"<sup>3</sup> referring to Adam. While Eve may have transgressed as a result of her deception by the serpent, Adam's role brought sin to all humanity.

Once Paul finished the book of 1 Timothy, the Fall is not mentioned again in the canon. The Church Fathers would build on Paul's interpretation of the event and contribute their own unique interpretations in the process.

### **The Church Fathers (c. A.D. 100 - A.D. 500)**

The Church Fathers spent a great deal of time on the Fall, both explaining it and defending its implications against pagans and heretics alike. Some of the implications drawn by the Church Fathers would fail to gain popular opinion in contemporary times.

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2. 1 Timothy 2:13-14.

3. Romans 5:12.

Tertullian (160-212), for example, addressed the Fall in several works. In one work, *On the Apparel of Women*, Tertullian reminded his female audience of their culpability in the Fall, writing that “The sentence of God on this sex of yours lives in this age: the guilt must of necessity live too. You are the devil's gateway: you are the unsealer of that (forbidden) tree: you are the first deserter of the divine law: you are she who persuaded him whom the devil was not valiant enough to attack. You destroyed so easily God's image, man. On account of your desert--that is, death----even the Son of God had to die.”<sup>4</sup>

Fortunately, Tertullian saw more in the Fall than merely a chance to remind women of their predecessor. Marcion (c. 110 - c. 200-210), a bishop of the Church, denounced the Old Testament as Jewish Scripture unfit for Christianity to study or uphold. Marcion so vehemently denied the Old Testament that he actually attributed its inspiration to a God who was not the father of Christ. Tertullian vigorously defended the Old Testament against Marcion and his followers. Tertullian wrote *Five Books against Marcion*, in which he attacked Marcion's heresy by drawing on numerous passages from the Old Testament — including Genesis 3.

Tertullian accused Marcion of believing in a God who failed to aid humanity when needed most: at the Fall. If a good God were ever needed, it was when man first sinned; yet, Tertullian stated that Marcion's god “failed in the beginning” by not delivering Adam and Eve.<sup>5</sup>

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4. Tertullian, *On the Apparel of Women*. Available online: <http://tertullian.org/anf/anf04/anf04-06.htm>, last accessed 1 December 2004.
  5. Tertullian, *Five Books Against Marcion*, I.XX. Available online: <http://www.ccel.org/fathers2/ANF-03/anf03-29.htm>, last accessed 1 December 2004.

The true God, instead, first blessed Adam with free will, gave him “dominion over all things,”<sup>6</sup> and provided the woman to help him with his duties and to add to his pleasure. Adam chose to sin. God had known the possibility for sin existed, or else “He would not have proclaimed a caution against it under the penalty of death.”<sup>7</sup> God’s admonition in the garden — and the subsequent punishment — were the instigation of God’s discipline of humanity, for “in the Creator’s subsequent laws also you will find, when He sets before man good and evil, life and death, that the entire course of discipline is arranged in precepts by God’s calling men from sin, and threatening and exhorting them; and this on no other ground than that man is free, with a will either for obedience or resistance.”<sup>8</sup>

Augustine (354-430) wrote extensively on Genesis, including a commentary on the book. Augustine believed the serpent signified the devil in his cleverness, but that the serpent “was not said to be in paradise.”<sup>9</sup> The serpent, however, was not the cause of the original sin per se. Rather, Adam had already fallen in his soul by seeking what he could not attain. Adam had “already begun to seek satisfaction in himself”<sup>10</sup> or the temptation would not have succeeded. Adam failed by succumbing to the serpent’s ploy that “you shall be as gods.” Augustine wrote that “[t]he promise of these words, however, would much more truly have come to pass if, by

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6. Ibid., II.IV.

7. Ibid., II.V.

8. Ibid.

9. Gerald Bray, Ed., *Ancient Christian Commentary on Scripture: Genesis 1-11* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2001), 76.

10. Ibid., 77.

obedience, Adam and Eve had kept close to the ultimate and true source of their being....”<sup>11</sup>

Adam and Eve already had immortality, as God Himself possessed, this godlike trait was theirs to lose. As it was, their “flesh was made sinful flesh” that was beyond redemption from their own efforts.<sup>12</sup>

Augustine also sought to answer a nagging question regarding the Fall: Why did God allow Adam and Eve to be tempted in the first place? Augustine frankly admitted that no one could know the ultimate answer, writing that “[t]here may be a hidden reason, made known only to those better than I, not because of their merits but simply by the grace of God.”<sup>13</sup> However, Augustine saw that God had to give Adam the choice to serve Him freely. Had Adam not first fallen to pride, he would not have fallen to temptation.

Augustine saw a deeper answer as well. Pride would eventually have caused humanity to fall; such was the nature of God’s ultimate creation. Eventually, someone would have “done the deed by his own free will and thus incur guilt”<sup>14</sup> and need redemption. Furthermore, Adam would never have grown closer to God had he never faced the opportunity to resist temptation.

According to Augustine, “I do not think that a man would deserve great praise if he had been able to live a good life for the simple reason that nobody tempted him to live a bad one.”<sup>15</sup>

When the Fall occurred, the Bible records that “their eyes were opened.” Augustine

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11. Ibid., 77.

12. Ibid., 77.

13. Ibid., 80.

14. Ibid., 80

15. Ibid., 80.

believed that the opening of the couple's eyes was to see the difference between "the good they had lost and the evil in to which they had fallen."<sup>16</sup> Unfortunately, "it takes the experience of the pains of sickness to open our eyes to the pleasantness of health."<sup>17</sup>

Once sin entered Adam and Eve, they lost more than their innocence and immortality: they lost the ability to control their flesh as they had before. Augustine wrote that "the soul, which had taken perverse delight in its own liberty and disdained the service of God, was now deprived of its original mastery over the body. Because it had deliberately deserted the Lord who was over it, it no longer bent to its will the servant below it..."<sup>18</sup> In this observation, Augustine saw the origin of the "lust" between the flesh and the spirit. Every human since has been born into the war between the two.

While Augustine was writing in Carthage in Africa, John Chrysostom was preaching a series of homilies on Genesis in Antioch and later in Constantinople. Chrysostom saw a subtle strategy to the serpent's tempting of Eve, asking the question, "Do you see how the devil led her captive, handicapped her reasoning and caused her to set her thoughts on goals beyond her real capabilities?"<sup>19</sup> Chrysostom like Augustine, saw that Eve had every advantage already, but lost it all.

In the tragedy of the entire episode, Chrysostom saw mercy in God's dealings with Adam

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16. Ibid., 81.

17. Ibid., 81.

18. Ibid., 81.

19. Ibid., 77.

and Eve. God had promised death to the one who disobeyed, and God never makes empty promises. Adam and Eve probably expected immediate death after their sin, but Chrysostom saw “the Lord’s loving kindness and ... long-suffering”<sup>20</sup> in His postponement of their deaths.

As Christianity moved toward the Great Schism, Augustine and Chrysostom represented two of the greatest thinkers of the Fall. In Western Christendom, Augustine’s teachings would continue to wield great influence in the centuries to come.

### **The Middle Ages**

Anselm of Canterbury (1033-1109) believed that the original sin was imputed more to Adam than to Eve. In *Virginal Conception and Original Sin*, Anselm wrote that Adam’s sin was in the nature of humanity. Adam and Eve were created with no sin, but Adam’s disobedience corrupted the entire race. On the question of Eve, Anselm wrote that “...if Eve alone and not Adam had sinned, it would not have been the fate of the whole human race to die, but Eve’s alone.”<sup>21</sup> According to Anselm, God could have created another woman from Adam when Eve died from her sin; Eve could not produce another Adam.

Thomas Aquinas (1225-1274) addressed the Fall in his masterpiece work, *Summa Theologica*. Aquinas began writing the *Summa Theologica* in 1265 and stopped writing in 1273 after an ecstatic experience in Mass. Aquinas, in the mold of Augustine, argued that Adam and Eve had sinned through pride even before they touched the fruit of the tree. According to

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20. Ibid., 82.

21. Anselm of Canterbury, “Virginal Conception and Original Sin,” *Anselm of Canterbury: The Major Works* (Oxford: University Press, 1998), p. 369.

Aquinas, Adam and Eve could have no conflict between the flesh and the spirit because “man was so appointed in the state of innocence, that there was no rebellion of the flesh against the spirit.”<sup>22</sup> However, when Eve heard the serpent, “her mind was puffed up,”<sup>23</sup> leading her to covet the fruit. Adam coveted “some spiritual good... above his measure”<sup>24</sup> that he lacked. By coveting something that was, by Divine decree, above him, pride entered Adam’s life. Since Adam and Eve were created “as principles of the whole human nature,”<sup>25</sup> the deprivation of immortality affected their posterity as well.

### **The Reformation: John Calvin**

The demise of the Middle Ages coincided with the beginning of the Reformation. As the Church descended into civil war, many of the assumptions of the medieval period were abandoned or re-interpreted to reflect new understandings of the Scriptures. The Reformers inherited a rich tradition regarding the Fall and built upon this inheritance in their own interpretations. John Calvin (1509-1564) wrote a Commentary on Genesis that represents the consensus of early Reformed thought.

Calvin began his interpretation of the Fall by asking an important question: Why did Moses never mention Satan specifically in the passage? Moses attributed the temptation solely to the serpent and never mentioned the true instigator of the episode. However, the Scriptures

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22. Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologica* (Benziger Brothers edition, 1947), II.II.163.1. Available online: <http://www.ccel.org/a/aquinas/summa/home.html>

23. Ibid.

24. Ibid.

25. Ibid., II.II.164.1.

clearly teach that Satan engineered the Fall. Calvin believed Moses omitted Satan because “the Holy Spirit... purposely used obscure figures, because it was fitting that full and clear light should be reserved for the kingdom of Christ.”<sup>26</sup> Once Christ had “shone forth,” Satan could be revealed for who he was.

Calvin also addressed the nagging question of the ages: Did God allow Adam to Fall, or did He ordain it? Calvin admitted that no one would ever adequately answer this question, but he could not concede that God may have prevented the temptation in the first place had He so desired. Calvin believed that God had a reason for the Fall, that “as it became the Creator, he had before determined with himself what should be man’s future condition.”<sup>27</sup>

Regarding Satan’s initial query, Calvin pointed out that Satan sought to “malignantly amplify the prohibition” and led Eve to accept his interpretation of God’s command.<sup>28</sup> Unlike Tertullian, Calvin saw Eve as defending God’s commandment at first, writing that “she intimates that they would be most ungrateful if, instead of being content with such affluence [given all the trees but one], they should desire more than was lawful.”<sup>29</sup> However, Calvin also said that Eve clearly didn’t fear death as much as she should, or else she would never have allowed the conversation to proceed.

Calvin’s writings demonstrate Augustine’s continuing influence upon the Reformers.

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26. John Calvin, *Commentaries on the First Book of Moses called Genesis* (Grand Rapids, MI: Reprinted by Baker Books, 2003), 141.

27. *Ibid.*, 144-45. Calvin referred his readers to his *Institutes* for further elaboration on this point.

28. *Ibid.*, 148.

29. *Ibid.*, 149.

Calvin agrees with Augustine that pride was “the beginning of all evils”<sup>30</sup> and that Adam fell by coveting more than God had ordained him to have. Calvin elaborated by saying that “they had been made in the *likeness* of God; but this seems a small thing unless *equality* could be added.”<sup>31</sup> Ambition proved the parent of rebellion, according to Calvin.

Adam’s rebellion revealed itself in more than a fig leaf garment. Calvin elaborated on Adam’s response to God’s questioning by focusing on Adam’s boldness in answering God, writing that “He had before been tacitly expostulating with God; now he beings *openly* to contend with him, and triumphs as one who has broken through all barriers.”<sup>32</sup> Adam was not content merely to blame Eve for giving him the fruit; he also had the audacity to blame God for giving Eve to him in the first place. Eve, of course, firmly placed blame on the serpent.

All was not lost. According to Calvin, humanity had learned a valuable lesson: Satan was not to be trusted. While Satan would “proudly triumph over them and trample on their heads,” humanity would also “contend against him with the assured confidence of victory” in the coming of Christ.<sup>33</sup> Before the victory, however, man would recognize himself again as a product of dust. When God had made Adam in His image, Adam had been raise to the point that “the terrestrial origin of his body was almost obliterated.”<sup>34</sup> Adam’s fall entailed far more than moral corruption, for Adam lost the essence of his ascent over creation. Humanity would, from Adam’s time

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30. Ibid., 152.

31. Ibid., 153.

32. Ibid., 164.

33. Ibid., 169.

34. Ibid., 180.

forward, “dread death, because dissolution, which is contrary to nature, cannot naturally be desired.”<sup>35</sup>

### **Puritan Thought: Jonathan Edwards**

Jonathan Edwards, one of the greatest Puritan theologians of the 18<sup>th</sup> century, saw the Fall as merely a facet of a larger plan of redemption. In *A History of the Work of Redemption*, Edwards added a new wrinkle to the Fall by introducing a new character to the events: Jesus Christ Himself.

According to Edwards, Christ began his “mediatorial work” at the moment of the Fall. Edwards pointed out that in subsequent periods of Israel’s history, God’s judgment on the sin of the Israelites led to death and chaos. Why were Adam and Eve spared, given the severity of their sin? Edwards believed that God spared Adam and Eve only because of Christ. Edwards wrote that “As soon as man ever fell, Christ the eternal Son of God clothed himself with the mediatorial character, and therein presented himself before the Father. He immediately stepped in between an holy, infinite, offended Majesty, and offending mankind; and was accepted in his interposition; and so wrath was prevented from going forth in the full execution of that amazing curse that man had brought on himself.”<sup>36</sup>

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35. Ibid., 180.

36. Jonathan Edwards, *A History of the Work of Redemption* (Evansville, IN: The Sovereign Grace Book Club, 1959), 29.

Edwards believed that upon the Fall of Adam and Eve, “God the Father would have no more to do with man immediately.”<sup>37</sup> God is holy and therefore could not tolerate sin. Christ assumed the role of “Captain of their salvation.” In this role, Christ fulfilled God’s promise to Eve in verse 15 as the One who would “bruise” Satan’s head. Edwards saw, in this promise, the “first revelation of the covenant of grace.”<sup>38</sup> More importantly, the mediation of Christ occurred before God pronounced the sentence of death on humanity. Otherwise, humanity would have been exterminated on the spot. Adam and Eve, therefore, were the first recipients of the mediation of Christ.

Edwards also saw, in God’s provision of clothing for the sinners, the initiation of the sacrificial system. God Himself provided the clothing for the naked, vulnerable couple; God Himself would provide for their salvation. Edwards recognized that Adam and Eve were clothed “at the expense of life.” According to Edwards, Jesus’ death on the cross provided “clothing to our naked souls.”<sup>39</sup>

Edwards and his Puritan contemporaries not only saw the Fall as part of the Creation story, but as part of the covenant story. Adam and Eve broke the covenant relationship God had established at their creation; Christ immediately mediated on their behalf, making them the first participants in the covenant of grace. The mediating work of Christ far preceded the cross; it began in the garden, with man’s first sin.

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37. Ibid., 30.

38. Ibid., 31.

39. Ibid., 35.

### **The Enlightenment: Did the Fall Really Happen?**

The rise of the Enlightenment introduced new and troubling questions into biblical interpretation. The Enlightenment's focus on reason, science, and skepticism opened new questions on the interpretation of the Fall.

The Church had never doubted Moses' account of the Fall in her entire history. Clearly humanity was sinful, degenerate, and in need of salvation; Moses had explained the reason in Genesis 3. Enlightenment thinkers, however, argued that knowledge, rather than being the reason for humanity's fall, would lead the race to its ultimate victory.

The questioning began with W.M.L. De Wette (1780-1849), who examined numerous folk tales from the Near East and compared them to Scripture. After De Wette saw uncanny parallels between the passages, he faced with a choice: Did other cultures inherit and modify the biblical account, or did some writer (note that he didn't say "Moses") record the pagan accounts with subtle changes? De Wette accepted the latter interpretation. According to De Wette, much of the Old Testament never really happened; the accounts recorded in Scripture were merely "myths" that explained the realities of the world to a primitive, agrarian society.<sup>40</sup>

De Wette's theories were not immediately accepted, but they gained widespread notoriety. After De Wette's publication of his theories, no biblical scholar could write anything on the Old Testament without at least addressing De Wette.

Julius Wellhausen (1844-1918) published his *Prolegomena to the History of Israel* in

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40. Gerald Bray, *Biblical Interpretation: Past and Present* (Downers Grove, IL: Inter Varsity Press, 1996), 276-77.

1878. Wellhausen did not originate the theories of Old Testament criticism, but his *Prolegomena* brought them into widespread acceptance. According to Wellhausen, the author of the Pentateuch used numerous sources in composing the document. Two of these sources, the J source (Jehovist) and P (Priestly) source contained the narrative of the Creation, with the J source containing the story of the Fall. Wellhausen saw the story of the Fall as one of the “legends about pre-historic times” contained in the Pentateuch.<sup>41</sup>

Wellhausen saw a “peculiar sombre earnestness... almost bordering on pessimism” in the J document.<sup>42</sup> The J document, nonetheless, is more primitive than P and contains materials that have a “universal ethnic origin.”<sup>43</sup> According to Wellhausen, the J source contains a thread of alienation from God. In contrast, the P code portrays humanity not “under a secret curse, but allied to God and free, as lord of nature.”<sup>44</sup> Sin still exists in P, as any examination of the sacrificial system will demonstrate. The sacrificial system of P, however, shows sin as “the root of ruin” that can be “got rid of” by the proper sacrifices.<sup>45</sup>

Wellhausen believed that Genesis 3 was not “very old with the Israelites.”<sup>46</sup> Since the true seat of the Hebrew God in later accounts was Mount Sinai, and not Eden, the story of the Fall had to be a later addition to the Hebrew narrative. Wellhausen wrote that the story of the Fall did

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41. Julius Wellhausen, *Prolegomena to the History of Israel* (Atlanta, GA: reprint of the 1885 edition; Scholar's Press, 1994), 296.

42. *Ibid.*, 314.

43. *Ibid.*, 314.

44. *Ibid.*, 315.

45. *Ibid.*, 315.

46. *Ibid.*, 308.

not enter Hebrew lore until the time of Solomon. According to Wellhausen, the story of Genesis 3 probably originated with the Canaanites or the Phoenicians.<sup>47</sup>

Wellhausen proved to be as influential — and as controversial — as De Wette. As with De Wette, no one could ignore Wellhausen in subsequent Old Testament studies and publications. Karl Friedrich Keil (1807-1888) and Franz Delitzsch (1813-1890) wrote a series of commentaries on the Old Testament in which they argued for Mosaic authorship of the Pentateuch and the historicity of the Fall. Keil and Delitzsch also recognized one of the primary reasons for liberal dismissal of the Genesis 3 account: the suspicion of the supernatural endemic in Enlightenment thought. Keil and Delitzsch wrote that “Acknowledgment of the historical credibility of the facts recorded in the books of Moses requires a previous admission of the reality of a supernatural revelation from God.”<sup>48</sup>

The commentaries of Keil and Delitzsch stood firmly in the historical tradition of the Church against De Wette, Wellhausen, and other liberal scholars of the 19<sup>th</sup> century.

### **Scientific Intrusions on Interpreting the Fall**

In the 19<sup>th</sup> century, a controversy that exceeded even the Reformation engulfed the Church regarding not only the traditional interpretation of the Fall, but that of Creation itself. Science, long the tool of the Church, began to examine natural phenomena and propose theories to explain them. Unfortunately, these theories seemed to contradict the Creation account, leading

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47. Ibid., 309.

48. Karl Friedrich Keil and Franz Delitzsch, *Commentaries on the Old Testament: Pentateuch, Volume I* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company), 28.

to fierce warfare between science and theology.

In 1830, Charles Lyell published *Principles of Geology*, in which he argued that forces observed in the world had been active far longer than first believed on the basis of the genealogies in Genesis. Lyell's thesis, termed "uniformitarianism," brought into question the age of the earth and the universe.<sup>49</sup>

Then, before the Church could react to Lyell, Charles Darwin (1809-1892) published his theory in two works, *The Origin of Species* (1859) and *The Descent of Man* (1871). In these works, Darwin proposed that all species on earth — including humanity — had evolved from basic organisms into their present forms over a long period of time. Although Darwin himself pointed out several holes in his theory, his ideas were quickly adopted by those eager to disprove Genesis.<sup>50</sup> Regardless of Darwin's own hesitancy in promoting his theories of evolution, the theories were considered firmly established by the early 20<sup>th</sup> century.

The implications of Darwin's theory were immediately seen. If humanity evolved from a lower life form, then there was never an "Adam" or an "Eve." If there were no Adam or Eve, there could have been no sin in the garden. The entire episode of Genesis 3 would be erased from human history.

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49. Alister McGrath, *Science and Religion: An Introduction* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishers Ltd., 1999), 29.

50. *Ibid.*, 24.

In some ways, biblical interpretation has never recovered from the attacks based on Darwin's work. Science and theology were seen by most to be pitted in constant warfare that continues to the present day.

### **The Twentieth Century: C.S. Lewis**

While most Bible scholars have refused to address the Fall in terms that could accommodate modern science, C.S. Lewis produced a uniquely modern interpretation of Genesis 3 in his work, *The Problem of Pain*. Lewis never claimed to be a theologian; he once wrote that his beliefs "are written in the Common-Prayer Book."<sup>51</sup> Although Lewis' beliefs regarding Christianity may be written in the "Common-Prayer Book," his version of the Fall is grounded firmly in the theories of Darwin, Hubble, and other modern scientists.

Lewis did not discount the traditional view of the Fall; instead, he believed the "Holy Spirit would not have allowed the [traditional view] to grow up in the Church and win the assent of the great doctors unless it also was true and useful as far as it went."<sup>52</sup> Therefore, even in modern times, there is a place reserved for the traditional interpretation of Adam's downfall. Lewis offered what he called "a 'myth' in the Socratic sense, a not unlikely tale"<sup>53</sup> to explain events in the garden that fateful day.

Lewis accepted the possibility that humans may have descended from animals. God started with something imperfect and over the centuries perfected it into something closely

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51. C.S. Lewis, *Mere Christianity* (New York: HarperCollins Publishers, 2001), x.

52. C.S. Lewis, *The Problem of Pain* (New York: HarperCollins Publishers, 2001), 66.

53. *Ibid.*, 71.

resembling modern man. This beast was still animal and may have remained animalistic for some time prior to the granting of a new consciousness; a consciousness that could “say ‘I’ and ‘me’, which could look upon itself as an object, which knew God, which could make judgements of truth, beauty, and goodness, and which was so far above time that it could perceive time flowing past.”<sup>54</sup> In language reminiscent of Augustine, Lewis wrote that this first man could control his body down to the cellular level. Decay did not occur unless he willed it, and he determined the length of his life.

The first man maintained an intimate relationship with God based on the consciousness God gave him. It never occurred to the man *not* to surrender his self-will to God. The man existed to please God, and God was pleased with him. According to Lewis, “in perfect cyclic movement, being, power and joy descended from God to man in the form of gift and returned from man to God in the form of obedient love and ecstatic adoration.”<sup>55</sup>

Lewis believed there may have been more than one of these creatures, and that we cannot know how long they remained in the garden God created for them — “but sooner or later they fell.”<sup>56</sup> Something happened that made them wish to be on their own; they wanted something that belonged solely to them and for which they were not responsible to God. According to Lewis, “they wanted some corner in the universe of which they could say to God, ‘this is our business,

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54. Ibid., 72.

55. Ibid., 74.

56. Ibid., 75.

not yours.’ But there is no such corner.”<sup>57</sup> Furthermore, the withdrawal of surrender to God betrayed the natural tendency to surrender to God, leading to intense pain and psychological damage.

The effects went far beyond the psychological into the physical. The man’s self-control of his organic body was a “delegated” authority; once he rebelled against God, God withdrew the authority the man had enjoyed over his own body. Natural laws regarding decay, sickness, and death immediately began to corrupt the individuals. Lewis said that “the total organism which had been taken up into his spiritual life was allowed to fall back into the merely natural condition from which, at his making, it had been raised.”<sup>58</sup> This condition, according to Lewis, “was transmitted by heredity to all later generations, for ... it was the emergence of a new kind of man — a new species, never made by God, had sinned itself into existence.”<sup>59</sup>

Lewis’ interpretation would never pass muster in traditional circles, conceding as it does to evolutionary theory. Most biblical scholars would rightfully reject it. However, Lewis’ interpretation may well appeal to Christians who find themselves unable to reconcile the biblical account of the Fall with modern scientific thought. Lewis may be unorthodox in his interpretation of the Fall, but he at least attempts to accommodate the realities of humanity’s sinful nature with the discoveries of modern science.

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57. Ibid., 75.

58. Ibid., 78.

59. Ibid., 79.

### The Twentieth Century: Traditional Interpreters

Lewis wrote completely outside the world of modern biblical interpretation and scholarship. Within this world, biblical interpretation tended to proceed as if the scientific conflict regarding evolution were nonexistent.

In his work on Old Testament interpretation, Gerhard von Rad (1901-1971) continued Wellhausen's tradition of attributing the Pentateuch to multiple sources and Genesis 3 primarily to the J source ("Yahwist" in von Rad's terminology). Furthermore, building on the work of Herman Gunkel (1862-1932), von Rad recognized many of the Old Testament stories as "sagas" rather than as actual accounts. However, there was an actual story behind the "saga" accounts.<sup>60</sup>

According to von Rad, the "Yahwist" did not follow a "received tradition" in including stories of primeval history, including those of the Fall.<sup>61</sup> von Rad wrote that "The primeval history... proclaims first of all with impressive one-sidedness that all corruption, all confusion in the world, comes from sin; but it also testifies that the continually widening cleft between God and man is matched by a secret increasing power of grace."<sup>62</sup>

Of the more conservative writings on Genesis, Allen Ross represents the contemporary Evangelical stream of scholarship. In his commentary *Creation and Blessing: A Guide to the Study and Exposition of Genesis*, Ross begins by stating, "As God's revelation, Genesis is authoritative. Consequently, in studying it, one must go beyond academic inquiry to discover its

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60. Gerhard von Rad, *Genesis: a Commentary* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1972), 33.

61. *Ibid.*, 23.

62. *Ibid.*, 24.

theologically applicable truths.”<sup>63</sup>

Ross recognizes the various streams of interpretation but introduces the “rhetorical criticism” approach as the most helpful to modern students of Old Testament. This approach emphasizes the literary structure of the text. According to Ross, the story of the Fall includes poetry (in God’s pronouncement of judgment) and dialogue (between the serpent and Eve and between God and the couple).<sup>64</sup>

Ross sees an interesting question in Genesis 3 that ties the chapter to the previous stories in the book: an emphasis on the Word of God. In Genesis 1, God spoke, and the Creation occurred; in Genesis 2, God spoke and gave humanity its first commandment; but in Genesis 3, God’s word is questioned for the first time — and as Ross observes, “It cannot be fortuitous that Eve lacks precision in the wording, whereas the serpent does not.”<sup>65</sup> Furthermore, the questioning of God’s word directly challenges His integrity. Will God *really* bring death to the capstone of His creation? The answer, as Adam and Eve learned, was that God will always honor His word.

### **Conclusion**

In spite of the ongoing discussions between science and theology, few modern biblical scholars have attempted to breach the chasm between the disciplines. Aside from theologians

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63. Allen Ross, *Creation and Blessing: A Guide to the Study and Exposition of Genesis* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 1998), 23.

64. *Ibid.*, 140.

65. *Ibid.*, 131.

such as John Polkinghorne — whose interpretation of the Creation would more resemble C.S. Lewis than Allen Ross — there are few scholars competent enough in both science and theology to address all the issues involved.

Nonetheless, the biblical account of the Fall continues to stand the test of time. Human experience testifies to the results of the Fall; no rational observer of human societies can deny that sin is systemic in the world. Those who once believed that humanity would overcome the effects of sin through “enlightenment” have found themselves sorely disappointed. No age approached the 20<sup>th</sup> century in knowledge; no age approached the 20<sup>th</sup> century in the brutality and savagery humans wrought on one another.

Modern science continues to seek the origins of the universe and humanity; new theories constantly challenge Moses’ account of the Fall. However, as the saying goes, “the man who weds the latest theory will always find himself a widower.” In spite of all the attacks on the tale, Moses’ account of a serpent, two people, and a forbidden taste continues to offer the best explanation of the origin of sin and death in the universe.

Ross’ emphasis on the Word of God demonstrates the importance of Christians to treat the story seriously. God still speaks to His people through His Word; those who obey are blessed, but those who disobey face punishment. Through the Word made flesh, the universe affected by the Fall will one day transform into a new Creation — a creation promised in the Word of God.

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