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# From Death to Depravity: How "Missing the Mark" Became "Original Sin"

Grace A. Rivenbark

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From Death To Depravity:  
How 'Missing the Mark' Became 'Original Sin'

By

Grace Anna Rivenbark

Under the Direction of Louis A. Ruprecht Jr.

ABSTRACT

This reception history of “original sin” displays how the theological conception developed as an idea throughout Western Christianity. This paper performs a critical and in-depth reading of the creation story from Genesis 3 and provides six thematic questions that are discussed through the various interpretations of four major thinkers: Augustine of Hippo, Thomas Aquinas, Martin Luther, and Friedrich Nietzsche. These four thinkers show how “original sin” has never been as established or canonical within Western Christianity as many have characterized it.

INDEX WORDS: Original sin, Western Christianity, Augustine, Thomas Aquinas, Martin Luther, Friedrich Nietzsche, Sin, the Will, Sexuality, Hamartia, Biblical translation

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An Honors Thesis Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree of

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Date



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## INTRODUCTION

In the Modern Western world, there is a loose but popular conception of “original sin.” Found in Roman Catholicism as well as Protestantism<sup>1</sup>, this Christian belief generally relies on the belief that human sin and all of its components – death, materiality, and finitude – first occurred during the ‘Fall’ when the first man and woman disobeyed God and ate from the forbidden Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil. As a result of their disobedience, Adam and Eve are believed in Western Christianity, from that moment on, to have been doomed to a state of sinfulness. As the descendants of Adam and Eve, humans were then doomed to inherit that sinful nature, and atone for the crime that Adam and the woman had committed. Although humans' sinful nature would remain, Christ's death and resurrection were believed to be the solution to this problem.

This is a familiar story and one that most Western peoples, Christian or not, have heard in some form. Within North American Christianity, it is one of, if not the, most important tenets or beliefs that drives evangelism and missionary efforts. Yet the popular conception of “original sin” is grounded in an interpretation of the Genesis creation story that not all Christians have shared. In fact, it is only one of several. However, because the story has become so engrained in Modern Western culture, we are not encouraged to investigate the history of the development of this particular interpretation. This thesis will aim to dispel this problem in order to illustrate how the popular “original sin” story is not as simple as many of us have been led to believe.

The word ‘sin’ itself presents an interesting challenge. I began this project after learning that the Greek word which is often translated as “sin” in the New Testament, *hamartia*, has

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<sup>1</sup>This conception is rather muted in Eastern Orthodoxy where Orthodox tradition has focused on *theosis* and its possibility for human perfectibility. Though that fact deserves attention and investigation, this paper will focus on the Western conception. The Eastern position has often been summarized in Athanasius' famous quote that often says to some effect, “God became man in order that men could become gods.”

mostly been translated in Aristotle's *Poetics* as a "missing of the mark." This investigation into the older Greek philosophical understanding of *hamartia* – as seen in Aristotle's *Poetics* - and its theological implications ultimately led to the realization that many of sin's linguistic counterparts also presented similar challenges. 'Sin' does not have the same semantic range in Hebrew (*chet*), Greek (*hamartia*), or Latin (*peccatum*) as it does in Modern English, and since every translation is also an interpretation, these differences may have led to different interpretations of the Genesis creation story. Although the most famous and influential early Christian theologian, Augustine, receives credit for developing the interpretation of the Fall as most Western Christians conceive of it, he was not the only thinker who attempted to make sense of the Genesis story at the time. As the translational differences and discrepancies among these four languages suggest, there may be many ways to read the story of Adam and the woman in the garden and thus, the very idea of "original sin." For the purposes of this paper, I will examine the Genesis creation story in chapters 3-6 and trace the origins of the idea that "original sin" appeared in Chapter 3, through a reception history involving four major thinkers who have contributed to the current popular understanding, or aimed to dismantle and change it: Augustine of Hippo (354-430), Thomas Aquinas (1225- 1274), Martin Luther (1483-1546), and Friedrich Nietzsche (1844-1900). Through this examination of the biblical text and these four important thinkers, I will illustrate how "original sin" as an idea developed through Western Christian theological controversy, and hope to display how the current understanding of "original sin" is one that has changed and may continue to change, over time.

## Chapter One: Beginning in Genesis

For almost two millennia Western Christianity has associated the doctrine of “original sin” with the book of Genesis. From early church fathers such as Irenaeus, Origen, and Augustine, to medieval and Reformation theologians such as Thomas Aquinas and Martin Luther, Christianity has utilized the first four chapters of the first book of the Hebrew Bible in order to search for the inception and explanation of humanity's “fallen” nature. Yet Western scholars and laypeople alike have taken for granted this seemingly obvious connection, failing to take note of the important subtleties and intricacies within the Genesis story. Despite the presence of two Genesis accounts of creation, for the sake of this project I will focus primarily on the account in Genesis 3, to which the majority of Christians have looked as the point of the inception of “original sin.”<sup>2</sup> Genesis 3 is pertinent to this inquiry because it details God's command to Adam and Eve as well as the infamous exchange between the serpent and the woman and its cataclysmic aftermath.

Though Genesis 3 pertains to the Fall of Adam and the woman, it begins with important information about another one of God's creatures: the serpent. The serpent is the first character whom readers encounter when the chapter begins and the text quickly makes it clear that “the serpent was more crafty than any other beast of the field that the Lord God had made” (Gen 3:1). This abruptly becomes evident when the serpent asks the woman if God actually told her not to eat from any of the trees in the garden. She responds that, though God told them to eat from any of the trees in the garden “God [also] 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’” (Gen 3:3). It is interesting that God suggests death as a consequence of eating from the tree that is in the middle of the garden in light of how God later deals with Adam and the woman since they do not die at first. Yet it is also a

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<sup>2</sup> This paper is fully aware of the effects translations can have on interpretations, and for that reason, I have consulted numerous texts. Though I have primarily relied on the English Standard Version Bible for continuity, I have also consulted the Latin Vulgate and two versions of the Torah, which are listed in the bibliography.

significant aspect of the passage that there is no mention of “sin.” Though it is unclear whether Adam and the woman are immortal at this stage, death seems to be the main concern of the text. It is this concern that the serpent latches onto when he assures the woman that “You will not surely die” (Gen 3:4), a clever half-truth that the reader can spot later when Adam's death is recounted in Genesis 5:5. Instead of promising the woman that she will live forever if she eats from the tree, the serpent explains to her that “God knows that when you eat of it your eyes will be opened, and you will be like God, knowing good and evil” (Gen 3:5).

The fact that the serpent emphasizes this last point is the most telling and troublesome for the “original sin” interpretation of the story. By promising the woman that she will know the difference between good and evil, the serpent insinuates that she and Adam lack any ability to judge the difference at the time. Therefore, it is hard to argue that Adam and the woman knew that it was evil to eat from the tree when it appears that they did not have the concept of such knowledge, which is in addition to the fact that the serpent was a fellow creature in the garden whom they had no reason to distrust. There is no mention of Satan in Genesis 3, and it would be many centuries before later Christians would hold “Satan” responsible for tempting Adam and the woman. Some rabbinical commentary before Christianity would also theorize that the devil had played a part in the garden, but Satan would play a tantamount role for Christian interpretation. Thus this scene merely illustrates that Adam and the woman do not possess the knowledge of good and evil, but may desire the knowledge, as well as the greater promise that this knowledge would imply: being like God. Here once again the story is complicated, since the serpent does not mention the attraction of disobedience or rebellion. Instead he approaches Adam and the woman as two children who wish to be adults like their father. This scheme makes the serpent's proposition look good and reasonable, but also displays how innocent and childish

Adam and the woman appear to be, and that perhaps their intentions could be good, even though they are disobedient. When the woman picks the fruit, she gets confirmation of what the serpent told her: that the fruit was “good for food” (Gen. 3:6), and “a delight to the eyes” (Gen. 3:6), and that “it was desired to make one wise” (Gen. 3:6). The child-like trust the woman displays in the serpent also appears between her and Adam “who was with her... and ate” (Gen. 3:6). There is no trace of suspicion, doubt, or even much deliberation before they eat. They listen to the serpent, see what he tells them, and they both eat. Then the scene climatically informs the reader that “the eyes of both were opened” (Gen. 3:7). Nowhere does the text suggest that this implies an onset of “sin.”

The ramifications of Adam's and the woman's decision is initially unclear, but its importance is underlined. The phrase “the eyes of both were opened” implies a change in seeing that is both psychological and physical since they quickly realize that they are naked. But it also lends support to the evidence that neither possessed the sort of rational or perfect intelligence such as later theologians would assign to them. In fact, their reaction to eating from the tree and having their eyes opened indicates that they are suddenly embarrassed by their nudity for “they sewed fig leaves together and made themselves loincloths” (Gen 3:7) as soon as they realized that they were naked. Whether they are embarrassed because the fruit made them aware of how little they knew or because they are actually naked is not clear, but it is interesting that they appear to be more bothered by their nakedness than by what they have done. When God appears in the garden and calls out to them, Adam replies that “I heard the sound of you in the garden, and I was afraid, because I was naked, and I hid myself” (Gen 3:10). Adam does not say that he was afraid because he ate from the tree that was forbidden; he was afraid because he was naked. Curiously enough, God also focuses on their nakedness, but asks a strange question: “Who told

you that you were naked? Have you eaten of the tree of which I commanded you not to eat?” (Gen. 3: 11). God immediately connects the knowledge of their nakedness with eating from the tree, but does not draw the conclusion that they have eaten. Instead, he asks who told them of their nudity. By asking this, the text seems to imply that God was aware of something or someone possessing the ability to educate Adam and the woman about their condition, and that he places more blame on that creature than on them. It also implies that God possessed the same type of hope as a parent who knows his or her child has done something wrong but still hopes that the child did not. When God asks the woman what she did and she confesses that “the serpent deceived me, and I ate” (Gen. 3:13), God begins doling out punishment. But he does not begin with Adam or the woman.

The doctrine of “original sin” in the West has often focused on the consequences of Adam's and the woman's decision to eat from the forbidden tree, but has often ignored the structure of those consequences. God does not punish Adam and the woman as soon as he learns that they disobeyed Him. Instead, He punishes the serpent, stating that “[b]ecause 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” (Gen. 3:14). Not only does this suggest that God physically transformed the serpent as punishment, but he also uses the word “cursed.” He does not use this form with the woman when He turns to her and assigns her painful childbirth and subordination to her husband, creating a hierarchy between the two human beings. Neither does God curse Adam. God proclaims “[b]ecause you have listened to the voice of your woman and have eaten of the tree of which I commanded you, 'You shall not eat of it', cursed is the ground because of you” (Gen. 3:17). God curses the earth and assigns Adam to its maintenance - “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” (Gen 3: 17-19) – but God does not explicitly “curse” Adam or the woman. However, God does suggest that death will be a consequence of their actions, reminding Adam that “out of it [the ground] you were taken; for you are dust, and to dust you shall return” (Gen. 3: 19). It is only now that the woman finally receives her name: *Hava*, the Hebrew word which connotes “breath” or “life.” In the Septuagint, this would translate as *Zoe*. After God punishes them, Adam “called his woman’s name Eve, because she was the mother of all living. And the Lord God made for Adam and for his wife garments of skins and clothed them” (Gen. 3:20-21).<sup>3</sup> When God expels Adam and the woman from the garden, He curiously adds the observation, “Behold, the man has become like one of us in knowing good and evil. Now, lest he reach out his hand and take also of the tree of life and eat, and live forever-” (Gen. 3:22), implying that without the tree of life Adam and the woman will eventually die. Because of their decision, God seems to doom them to mortal lives full of suffering and hardship but again, nowhere does He mention sin.

The language of sin eventually does appear in Genesis, but not until Chapter 4. Here the narrative introduces the term and also echoes language from Chapter 3, although in much different circumstances. Sin comes into the conversation when God speaks to Cain, warning him, “And if you do not do well, sin is crouching at the door. Its desire is for you, but you must rule over it” (Gen. 4:7-8). This passage is striking for two reasons. First, it repeats the words that God used when he punished Eve and declared that Adam “shall rule over you” (Gen. 3: 16), indicating a hierarchical aspect between Cain and sin that proceeds the relationship between Adam and Eve. Second and more importantly, God mentions sin as a personified notion. Not

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<sup>3</sup> The implications in this simple sentence are quite interesting since one must wonder where God procured animal skins. This could very possibly be the first instance of death in the story, since God must have killed some of his animals in order to use their skins.

only does this present a problem for the “original sin” doctrine that emphasized the presence of sin in Genesis 3, but it also contrasts directly with the idea of sin as a state of being. If Cain had inherited sin from Adam, it is hard to understand why God would describe sin as a lurking presence that could be ignored. Instead, the Genesis narrative seems much more concerned with death and pain, as Abel's murder sets off a violent chain of subsequent events.

Chapters 4, 5, and 6 of Genesis complicate the emerging concept of sin because of the questions they present as the violence on earth escalates exponentially. Was sin unnamed in Chapter 3 because Adam's and the woman's mistake was the first? Was this why God was then able to warn Cain about it in Chapter 4? What is the connection between sin, death, and mortality? These are the questions with which the Genesis story leaves us, and that would later obsess Christian theologians, as the scripture tells a story of increasing corruption and violence. Though it is unclear whether Adam and Eve brought sin into the world, the text seems to imply that their decision, and then their son Cain's crime, produce a cumulative effect in which sin, death, and mortality increase exponentially. After Cain murders his brother, God punishes him much more harshly than he did Cain's parents. God admonishes Cain “[t]hat the voice of your brother's blood is crying to me from the ground. And now you are cursed from the ground, which has opened its mouth to receive your brother's blood from your hand” (Gen. 4:10-11). Echoing Chapter 3, God uses the word “curse” again, but now directs it at Cain instead of the ground, as he had done with Adam. This shift in orientation of God's curses towards humanity becomes more explicit as God's anger seems to grow. Two chapters later, God declares “My spirit shall not abide in man forever, for he is flesh: his days shall be 120 years” (Gen. 6:3). After shortening man's lifespan, the text then describes that God saw “that the wickedness of man was great on earth, and that every intention of the thoughts of his [man's] heart was only evil continually. And the Lord



regretted that he had made man on the earth, and it grieved him to his heart” (Gen. 6:5-6). This regret at his creation is so totalizing that God only spares Noah, his immediate family, and two of every animal when he decides to wipe out the rest of creation with the flood.

The flood that God uses to destroy mankind in Genesis 7 returns to the questions with which Genesis had left us in chapters 4, 5, and 6. The text could have been implying a narrative of decadence, that the emergence of sin had not only brought mortality and death into the world which only increased as man sinned more and more, but also tainted the material world and material beings. This would certainly become a popular interpretation with many later Christian theologians such as Martin Luther, but it would also become a significant interpretation for early Gnostic Christians, many of whom would argue that this Genesis narrative supported their belief that the material world was corrupt and evil. Thus one needed to escape his or her decadent and corrupt material body as well as the world in order to return to a more divine or spiritual state. This certainly makes some sense logically, but ironically, this would not become the dominant interpretation of what would become “orthodoxy.” The relationship between sin, materiality, and death that puzzle us would also puzzle early Christians and would actually fuel the theological conflicts of the early church that would eventually lead to the dominant Augustinian interpretation of “original sin.” In my reading, the text leaves us with six questions that Augustine and subsequent thinkers would attempt to answer: 1) why is the woman unnamed?; 2) How is the serpent convincing?; 3) When does death enter the scene?; 4) Why is nudity a marker?; 5) Why do things degenerate so rapidly?; and 6) When precisely does sin enter the story?

## Chapter Two: Sin, the Battle over Materiality, and Augustine's Solution

As Christians sought to make sense of Christ's place in human history and his connection to the Hebrew God, the Genesis narrative within the Septuagint drove many theologians' attempt

to understand the relationship between Christ and the combination of sin, materiality, and death. Yet early Christians were not unanimous in their interpretations and it was out of their debates that 'orthodox' theology eventually emerged. Irenaeus (130-202), the 2<sup>nd</sup> century CE bishop of Lyons, was one of the first early Christians to summarize the implications of this debate. Primarily concerned with refuting Gnostic interpretations of Christ's purpose and incarnation, especially those which denied "the whole dispensation of God, and den[ied] the salvation of the flesh and reject[ed] its rebirth, saying that it [was] not capable of incorruption,"<sup>4</sup> Irenaeus saw Genesis as the beginning of the story of God's plan for the redemption of the entire material world, especially human beings.

Emphasizing Adam's and the woman's child-like understanding, Irenaeus argued that God utilized the sin that they had committed as the impetus for redemption and human deification. Believing that "the human creature was not made from the beginning in its final perfection but were rather 'like children,'"<sup>5</sup> Irenaeus took into account Adam's and the woman's ignorance and did not fault them for being evil or willfully disobedient. Irenaeus instead argued that the woman "had been wickedly seduced... by the word of an angel to flee from God,"<sup>6</sup> therefore, placing more blame on Satan than on Eve for the emergence of sin.

Irenaeus further argued that despite the bleak consequences of Adam's and the woman's decision, God used their mistake to conquer death once and for all through Christ. Painting Genesis 3 as an opportunity for ultimate communion rather than as the end of paradise, Irenaeus believed that:

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<sup>4</sup>Irenaeus. "Selections from the Work Against Heresies by Irenaeus, Bishop of Lyons: 'The Refutation and Overthrow of the Knowledge Falsely So Called.'" *Early Christian Fathers*. Cyril C. Richardson, ed. New York: Touchstone, 1996. 387.

<sup>5</sup>Justo L. Gonzalez. *The Story of Christianity: Volume 1: The Early Church to the Dawn of the Reformation*. San Francisco: Harper, 1984. 69.

<sup>6</sup>Irenaeus. "Selections from the Work Against Heresies by Irenaeus, Bishop of Lyons: 'The Refutation and Overthrow of the Knowledge Falsely So Called.'" *Early Christian Fathers*. Cyril C. Richardson, ed. New York: Touchstone, 1996. 389.

The enemy [Satan] would not have been justly conquered unless it had been a man [made] of woman who conquered him. For it was by a woman that he had power over man from the beginning, setting himself up in opposition to man. Because of this the Lord also declares himself to be the Son of Man, so renewing in himself that primal man from whom the formation [of man] by woman began, that as our race went down to death by a man who was conquered we might ascend again to life by a man who overcame; and as death won the palm of victory over us by a man, so we might by a man receive the palm of victory over death.<sup>7</sup>

Irenaeus explicitly rejected not only the Gnostic beliefs that Christ had come in order to save humans from materiality, but also the teachings of men such as Marcion and Cerdon who taught that the God of the Old Testament was either evil or at least not the father of Christ. Understandably, many were attracted to these views because it seemed to make sense. How could the God who had destroyed mankind and displayed so much anger towards his creation be connected to Christ? However, Irenaeus took great pains to refute this argument by drawing a holistic picture of God's plan for humanity that started in Genesis and culminated in Christ. Significantly devoted to God's plans for reconciliation with his human creation, Irenaeus' interpretation was not only in favor of recovering the material world but would also remain the more prevalent interpretation within Eastern Orthodoxy.<sup>8</sup>

However, despite Irenaeus' assurance of the validity of his interpretation of Genesis, he was not the only early Christian thinker to wrestle with the creation story. Origen of Alexandria

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<sup>7</sup>Ibid, 391.

<sup>8</sup>See Timothy Ware's *The Orthodox Church*. London: Penguin Books, 1997. 219-224. Ware's illustration of the Eastern Orthodox interpretation of "original sin" makes it clear that the Eastern and Western churches seriously departed in some of their views of Genesis and the definition of sin, particularly pertaining to its legal and/or genetic nature. The Orthodox Church not only retains more of the Irenaeus interpretation but also relies more closely on the original Greek word *hamartia* "missing the mark" in order to understand the purpose of the Christian life which is *theosis*.

(184/5-253/4), a major (albeit controversial) Christian theologian who wrote in the 3<sup>rd</sup> century CE, interpreted Genesis through a much more dualistic lens. Utilizing Platonic themes most noticeably found in the *Phaedrus*, Origen believed that the two Genesis accounts of creation actually described two creations. Genesis 1 recalled God's creation of spiritual beings who had sinned and then fallen to earth, embodied as material beings in a sort of solid creation. These material beings were those in Genesis 2 and Genesis 3 who retained their immortal souls but were trapped in material bodies. Origen emphasized “that the life of the soul did not begin when the soul was joined to the body' but that the soul had preexisted and had fallen in that earlier state [Genesis 1].”<sup>9</sup> Christ, on the other hand, was the only soul that had not fallen and therefore, it was that much more significant that he had voluntarily taken on a material body. Origen did not necessarily see materiality as evil but he did see it as inferior to the spiritual and rational essence of the soul. Whereas Irenaeus had stressed the redemption of the material body, Origen believed that the eventual physical resurrection of humans was simply “an allegory for the teaching that 'in the body there lies a certain principle which is not corrupted from which the body is raised in corruption' – not the same body that died, but a body appropriate to the new and immortal life.”<sup>10</sup> Though some praised Origen for noticing the differences between Genesis 1 and Genesis 2-3, many criticized these beliefs as too Platonic and dualistic by placing too much emphasis on an immortal soul in contrast to the soul in relation to the body. Once again, the issues over the creation account in Genesis and its relation to the spiritual value of the material world caused serious conflict. Though Origen was a skillful reader of the Bible, they were interpretations such as these that would continue fueling the theological battle over what constituted “orthodox” Christianity.

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<sup>9</sup>Jaroslav Pelikan. *The Christian Tradition: A History of the Development of Doctrine – 1: The Emergence of the Catholic Tradition (100-600)*. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1971. 48.

<sup>10</sup>Ibid.

While some Christians debated what sin, redemption, and materiality meant through Genesis, others battled over this concern in relation to Christ's birth and baptism. In his survey of Christian anthropology, scholar Jaroslav Pelikan highlights the problems of Christ's birth and infant baptism for early Christians. If sin, death, and materiality affected all human beings, then how did sin spread and why had it not infected Christ? Church fathers such as Cyprian (200-258), the 3<sup>rd</sup> century bishop of Carthage, argued that the baptism of infants proved that even children had to atone for some inherited sin if they were baptized, implying that sin somehow passed from generation to generation and thus, affected even babies. Later, Ambrose (340-397), the 4<sup>th</sup> century bishop of Milan, emphasized that Christ had to be born to a virgin in order to remain free from sin because it passed through sexual relations.<sup>11</sup> These connections between birth, sex, and sin tipped the scales against materiality and led some to embrace Neo-Platonism, arguing that man was made in God's image not in regard to his body but to his rational mind which was immaterial, or Manichaeism, which “taught that the begetting of men took place in the 'madness and intemperance' of sexual lust and that therefore it was blasphemous to suppose that 'God form[ed] us according to his own image' through the madness and lust of our parents.”<sup>12</sup> Yet these debates caused concerns not only for the understanding of Christ's incarnation but also the church itself. These theological conflicts had been going on long before Augustine converted and indubitably had an effect on him as he began writing and preaching. Yet although these debates had affected Augustine and he himself had been seriously involved in both Neo-Platonist and Manichaean groups, his solution to these questions would produce a creative explanation of Genesis that would inspire the “original sin” doctrine so distinct from that of his predecessors.

Amid his own experiences as a young man, later a bishop in the midst of constant

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<sup>11</sup>Jaroslav Pelikan. *The Christian Tradition: A History of the Development of Doctrine – 1: The Emergence of the Catholic Tradition (100-600)*. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1971. 289-291.

<sup>12</sup>Ibid, 300.

theological conflict, and an unstable political environment in 5<sup>th</sup> century Carthage, Augustine developed his “original sin” formulation. All of these aspects – his life, the contemporary theological debates, and the environment in North Africa - had a tremendous effect on how Augustine would conceive of sin and its origins, and we must investigate each to understand how he came to his conclusions, as well as what his conclusions actually were. By now it is no secret, partially because of his own *Confessions*, that Augustine had been a typical upwardly aspiring Roman man prior to becoming a Christian. His previous relationships as a young man, particularly with his long-time mistress and highly educated male friends, colored some of his attitudes towards women and sex. Like many of his mentors, conversion was problematic when it meant that Augustine could no longer live as he once had. As a bishop, “[h]e imposed strict codes of sexual avoidance on himself and his own clergy... [and he] would never visit a woman unchaperoned, and did not allow even his own female relatives to enter the bishop's palace.”<sup>13</sup> Like the debate over materiality, sexuality was a source of confusion, given its relationship to women. The question of sexuality and its place or purpose for Christians, complicated these debates, and Augustine was certainly not immune. His own participation in the Manichean and Neo-Platonist groups prior to becoming a more “orthodox” Christian certainly attest to the fact that Augustine had complex feelings concerning human sexuality. But the part sex would play in his doctrine of “original sin” and the long-standing debate over materiality was not as simple as the issue has often been characterized.

Augustine's doctrine of “original sin” relied on what he perceived to be the essential human deficiency: the corruption of the human will. In his exhaustive analysis of sexuality and early Christians, Peter Brown's book, *The Body and Society: Men, Women, and Sexual*

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<sup>13</sup>Peter Brown. *The Body and Society: Men, Women, and Sexual Renunciation in Early Christianity*. New York: Columbia University Press, 1988. 396.

*Renunciation in Early Christianity*, illuminates how Augustine saw nothing inherently wrong with sex or reproduction but rather saw the sexual instinct as corrupt because it clashed with the will of God. For Augustine, “[t]he uncontrollable elements in sexual desire revealed the working in the human person of a *concupiscentia carnis*, of a permanent flaw in the soul that tilted it irrevocably towards *the flesh*.”<sup>14</sup> Yet concupiscence was “such a peculiarly tragic affliction to Augustine precisely because it had so little to do with the body... [and more to do] with a lasting distortion of the soul itself.”<sup>15</sup> Shockingly, unlike many of his contemporaries, Augustine's doctrine was not anti-materialist or anti-sexual. Instead, by making a psychological connection between sex and the soul, in which sex was merely a symptom and not the problem, Augustine placed the responsibility for man's ills on the will and not in the body. Sex merely symbolized the consequences of “original sin” as the evidence of how far the will had departed from following God. The sexual drive no longer followed the divine will but “spoke, with terrible precision, of one single, decisive event within the soul. It echoed in the body the unalterable consequence of mankind's first sin.”<sup>16</sup> Augustine saw Adam's and the woman's decisions to eat from the tree in the garden as the moment when the human will had become corrupt because they had abused their free will. Augustine argued:

Human nature was certainly originally created blameless and without any fault (*vitium*); but the human nature by which each one of us is now born of Adam requires a physician, because it is not healthy. All the good things, which it has by its conception, life, senses, and mind, it has from God, its creator and maker. But the weakness which darkens and disables these good natural qualities, as a result of which that nature needs enlightenment and healing, did not come from the blameless maker but from from original sin (*ex*

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<sup>14</sup>Ibid, 418.

<sup>15</sup>Ibid.

<sup>16</sup>Ibid, 422.



*originali peccato*), which was committed by free will (*liberum arbitrium*).<sup>17</sup>

What was so mournful about sexuality for Augustine, was that it was a constant reminder of man's departure from God, of the Fall. The body and sex were not evil but they were also not what they had originally been when man's will had acted in accord with God's. In this regard, however, though Augustine emphasized that the Fall twisted the human will and not sex, marriage, or the body, his wariness towards human sexuality in the fallen state “opened the sluice-gates of Latin Christian literature, quite as drastically as had Jerome... [letting] in the hard male puritanism that Romans relished in their ancestors and in their favorite authors.”<sup>18</sup> Augustine's emphasis on the human will echoed the arguments of Stoic thinkers who had elevated the human will as the center of moral decision-making and rationality. And though the Stoics did not believe that the will was deficient, nor in “original sin,” their belief in the capabilities of the human will made many of them suspicious of passionate emotions such as violent anger or overwhelming sexual desire. This partnership with Stoicism in some ways negated what Augustine had done for the discussion of materiality and sexuality since it “created a darkened humanism that linked the pre-Christian past to the Christian present in a common distrust of sexual pleasure,”<sup>19</sup> and influenced much of the later Western Church's views toward women and sexuality. But this application of Stoicism to Christianity by emphasizing the human will highlighted the emerging culture in which Augustine developed his ideas about “original sin.”

Augustine's insistence that “original sin” had corrupted the will spoke of an uneasy social climate in which Christians like Augustine were beginning to form a Christian culture that would not merely live within the Roman Empire but adopt it. Augustine saw that the consequences of

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<sup>17</sup>Augustine. “Augustine on Fallen Human Nature.” *The Christian Theology Reader*. Ed. Alister McGrath. Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, 1995. 219.

<sup>18</sup>Peter Brown. *The Body and Society: Men, Women, and Sexual Renunciation in Early Christianity*. New York: Columbia University Press, 1988. 423.

<sup>19</sup>Ibid, 426.

the Fall were in full evidence as he witnessed the theological dissension and growing threat of barbarian invasions disrupt the North African churches. He was so upset by the inner conflict within the church and its inability to reach cohesion that he increasingly saw merit in bringing the order and force of the Roman government to the church. Believing “that the structures of authority that gave cohesion to profane society might be called upon to support the Catholic church... [and could] bring them [the people] into the unity of the Catholic Church,”<sup>20</sup> Augustine displayed a political and social component to his thought. Before “original sin” had contaminated the will man would have lived in a perfect society, but because of sin men and women “were all by birth citizens of Babylon.”<sup>21</sup> And just as the corrupted human will necessitated the Church, the Church needed the strength and authority of the empire. “Original sin” and its corruption of the human will required this marriage between the Church and the power structures of the Roman Empire. As Brown summarizes:

Only by baptism and by incorporation into the Catholic Church, a church whose basilicas were now plainly visible in every city of the Roman world, and whose hierarchy embraced and disciplined all forms of Christian life, would human beings be enabled to join the one city of which *Glorious things* might be spoken: the Heavenly Jerusalem, the City of God.<sup>22</sup>

In this “City of God,” the corrupt human will divorced from its reliance on God could be repaired and “the freedom of that city [would] be one single will present in everyone free from all evil and filled with every good.”<sup>23</sup> But in order to get to this heavenly kingdom, the people would need the Church and the Empire working in tandem. This emphasis on the corrupted

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<sup>20</sup>Ibid, 398.

<sup>21</sup>Ibid, 427.

<sup>22</sup>Ibid.

<sup>23</sup>Augustine. “Augustine on Human Freedom.” *The Christian Theology Reader*. Ed. Alister McGrath. Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, 1995. 220.

human will, its full representation in human sexuality, and the necessity of a politically empowered church to guide it, would drive the dominant interpretation of “original sin,” and thus of Genesis 3, in the Western church for many centuries.

Though it has been widely discussed in previous scholarship, we should not underestimate other key aspects of Augustine's doctrine that would become integral to the Western Church's understanding of sin. Just as Augustine's “original sin” doctrine was a response to the debate over materiality, it was also a response to the debate over grace and free will. Arguing extensively against Pelagius (354-420), an ascetic monk from 4<sup>th</sup> century Britain, Augustine's emphasis on the corruption of the human will intended to combat Pelagius' ideas that one could be fully autonomous in one's salvation, meaning that God had created human beings with the ability to choose good or evil. Augustine adamantly refuted this. Not only were humans “in possession of a will that was corrupted and tainted by sin, and which biased them toward evil and away from God,”<sup>24</sup> but they were also “now contaminated by sin from the moment of their birth.”<sup>25</sup> Augustine underlined the inevitability of a corrupt will with the emphasis that humans inherited “original sin” from Adam and the woman, a reasoning he gained from a Latin translation of Romans 5:12 that his opponents argued was an incorrect translation of the original Greek, which he did not know. Like Ambrosiaster (d. 397) before him, Augustine believed that “a reference to 'in that all have sinned' [meant] 'in whom (that is, Adam) all have sinned.’”<sup>26</sup> By utilizing this interpretation of Paul's Greek in the letter to the Romans, Augustine persuasively argued that humans could not claim responsibility for their salvation because they had not only inherited death but sin as well, and thus a corrupt will, from Adam. This is significant not only

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<sup>24</sup>Alister McGrath. *Historical Theology: An Introduction to the History of Christian Thought*. Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, 1998. 35.

<sup>25</sup>Ibid.

<sup>26</sup>Ambrosiaster. “Ambrosiaster on Original Sin.” *The Christian Theology Reader*. Ed. Alister McGrath. Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, 1995. 216.

because it reveals how important translations are to theology and the emerging conception of “original sin,” as I mentioned in the Introduction, but also because Augustine's assurance that the corrupted human will was inherited, and therefore impossible to overcome without divine assistance, would dominate the Western Church's stance toward sin as well as continue to drive theological debate long after Augustine's death.

For the sake of this paper, it is important that I summarize how Augustine attempted to answer some of the questions with which we were left after reading Genesis 3. Although he did not answer all of them, Augustine's writings do provide enough insight to answer some questions. Though he never seems to address the fact that the woman is unnamed in Genesis 3 until after the Fall, Augustine's wariness towards sexuality and women was evident in that he regarded “how necessary woman was for the tempter.”<sup>27</sup> The fact that the woman was unnamed was irrelevant; what was relevant was that she was female and had tempted Adam into eating from the tree and thus helped gender “original sin.” This would only make it more significant and imperative that Mary had to be a virgin in order to give birth to Christ. If Christ was the new Adam then Mary was the new Eve, a theological belief that would be important later on for Martin Luther. As to when sin entered the scene in Genesis, Augustine felt confident that sin was already present in Genesis 3, when Adam and the woman abused their free will and disobeyed God. From that moment on, the human will had been corrupted and humans had no choice but to sin. For Augustine, this could also perhaps explain why the world in Genesis degenerated so quickly; human beings' inability to avoid sin led them to make decisions that were completely opposed to God's will, and thus bad for the world overall. However, Augustine's attempts to answer these questions did not end the theological debates about Genesis 3 concerning the

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<sup>27</sup>Augustine. “Patience.” *The Fathers of the Church: Saint Augustine - Treatises on Various Subjects (Vol. 14)*. Ed. Roy J. Deferrari. Washington, D.C.: Catholic University of America Press, 1952. 246. Online.

meaning of sin, materiality, and death. Though the Western Church would adopt much of Augustinian thought, thinkers like Thomas Aquinas would provide new insight and new interpretations.

### Chapter Three: After Augustine: The Western Middle Ages and Thomistic Aristotelianism

Though Augustinian theology became predominant in the Western Church during the early Middle Ages, there were always opponents to Augustine's interpretation of original sin."<sup>28</sup> Still, as ecumenical councils sought to defeat perceived heresies in Christianity such as Arianism, and as decisions on what constituted Christian "orthodoxy" crystallized, Christianity aimed to provide a Christian culture in Late Antiquity and the early Middle Ages even if that was not always the reality. Some theological positions certainly gained widespread acceptance. Augustine's doctrine of "original sin," though it had faced opposition, enjoyed general acceptance in the Western Church of the early Middle Ages where the Church saw it as a central responsibility to teach peoples about their sinful nature and lead them to salvation in Christ. Yet dissension had not disappeared, and as the Great Schism between East and West made

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<sup>28</sup>“But it is clear from some fragments that have survived of a treatise *Against the Defenders of Original Sin* by Theodore of Mopsuestia [bishop of Mopsuestia from 392 to 428 CE] that he 'reiterates in effect that it is only nature which can be inherited, not sin, which is the disobedience of the free and unconstrained will...' Theodore often attributed sin to the fact of man's mortality.” Jaroslav Pelikan. *The Christian Tradition: A History of the Development of Doctrine – 1: The Emergence of the Catholic Tradition (100-600)*. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1971. 285-286.

abundantly clear, theological debate had not ended. Even in the West, where Augustinian conceptions of “original sin” had taken root, new understandings of “original sin” and what it truly entailed emerged. But instead of focusing on materiality or the will, this time the arguments were concerned with the legal status of sin.

In the tenth to twelfth centuries of the Common Era of the Western churches, sin became not only a psychological or biological problem, but also a legal one. The Western Church emphasized that human nature was inherently handicapped because of sin. Reiterating Augustine's thought, the church taught that human nature “continued to be the nature that God himself had created and that he did not despise; but on account of the 'stains of marriage... 'the unclean seed' that gave him [man] his existence also imposed on him the inevitability of sin.”<sup>29</sup> Because Adam had passed his sin down to his descendants, all of humanity had inherited his nature and would continue to do so through sexual reproduction. And unfortunately, no one was immune. Stressing the sexually inherited nature of sin, “original sin was the sin that was 'present in the infant as soon as it [had] a rational soul,' the term 'original' referring not to the origin of the human race, which was pure, but to the origin of each individual person.”<sup>30</sup> Yet where the Western Church took this doctrine even farther was into the belief that sin was not merely an inheritance that kept humans from holiness or perfectibility; rather it signified that human beings were in the middle of the world's greatest battle between good and evil in which their souls were at stake.

In the Western Middle Ages, “original sin” became such a significant and necessary component of church dogma because of the story it told concerning humanity, God, and the devil. This cosmic interpretation of human creation has appeared in other sects outside of Western

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<sup>29</sup>Jaroslav Pelikan. *The Christian Tradition: A History of the Development of Doctrine – 3: The Growth of Medieval Theology (600-1300)*. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1978. 112.

<sup>30</sup>Ibid.

Christianity, such as Russian Orthodoxy, but this interpretation's importance for medieval theology cannot be underestimated. Like Origen, several medieval theologians theorized that before the Fall, the devil and other angels had fallen also, disrupting the order and balance of God's universe which required God to fix this disorder by creating a good race in mankind. This idea had appeared already among patristic writers during Late Antiquity, especially under Gregory the Great (540-604), the Roman Pope from 590 to 604 CE, who developed the idea that, after Adam and the woman had sinned in the Garden of Eden, "[t]he devil had acquired rights over fallen humanity, which God was obliged to respect... [and the] only means by which humanity could be released from this satanic domination and oppression was through the devil exceeding the limits of his authority, and thus being obliged to forfeit his rights."<sup>31</sup> The devil had to give up his rights to humanity when Christ defeated him by taking the form of a perfect physical man, dying, coming back to life, and then entering the very gates of Hell to save humanity. It was an act of divine deception that depicted Jesus as "Christ the victor" who "after dying upon the cross... descended to hell, and broke down its gates in order that the imprisoned souls might go free."<sup>32</sup> Yet despite the fact that this depiction of Christ became popular in the Middle Ages, some medieval theologians objected to the idea that God had used deception or that the devil held dominion over humanity. Whereas Gregory the Great had emphasized that Christ's death had acted as a ransom, the medieval theologian Anselm's theology of atonement aimed to argue a different understanding.

An 11<sup>th</sup> century Benedictine monk and the eventual Archbishop of Canterbury, Anselm (1033-1109) was fundamental in connecting "original sin" with the idea of atonement. Rejecting Gregory the Great's belief that God would ever use deception to do good, Anselm instead argued

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<sup>31</sup>Alister McGrath. *Historical Theology: An Introduction to the History of Christian Thought*. Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, 1998. 133.

<sup>32</sup>Ibid, 134.

that God had created humanity in a state of original righteousness in order to provide eternal blessedness, which was contingent upon obeying God. When “original sin” made humans unable to obey, because of their corrupted will, God's just purposes had been frustrated, for which there had to be a remedy. Humans' sinfulness had disrupted God's justice and therefore, there had to be legal satisfaction. To fully illustrate this understanding, Anselm defined sin as a legal transgression, and satisfaction as a legal satisfaction that atoned for the debt of payment that the transgression had incurred:

To sin is to fail to render to God what God is entitled to. What is God entitled to?

Righteousness, or rectitude of will. Anyone who fails to render this honour to God, robs God of that which belongs to God, and thus dishonours God. And what is satisfaction? It is not enough simply to restore what has been taken away; but in consideration of the insult offered, more than what was taken away must be rendered back.<sup>33</sup>

Although Anselm had aimed to diminish the emphasis on God's wrath, his emphasis on the “satisfaction” of sin due to the legal infraction suggested an analogy that made it appear as if man was on trial with God as the judge, Satan as the accuser, and Christ as the defender. God was not wrathful, but a righteous judge and mankind had committed an “offense” against him for which reparations had to be made and God's justice demanded a paid ransom.

The transformation of “original sin” into what arguably looked like “original offense,” was the result of many social and political changes in Western Europe and the Western Church. Though this is still debated, some scholars believe that the explicitly legal language of God's satisfaction and Christ's sacrifice had origins in Germanic customs of the *wergild*, “whereby a

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<sup>33</sup>Anselm. “Anselm of Canterbury on the Atonement.” *The Christian Theology Reader*. Ed. Alister McGrath. Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, 1995. 182.



crime against a person [had to] be atoned for in accordance with the station of that person.”<sup>34</sup> Not only does the *wergild* imply a payment or ransom, but it was also always a payment for murder. Another possible source of influence could have been the penitential system which was developing in the Western Church. In this system, if a sinner sought forgiveness, he “was required to confess every sin. [And in] pronouncing forgiveness, the priest would require that the penitent should do something (such as go on a pilgrimage or undertake some charitable work) as a 'satisfaction.’”<sup>35</sup> This attitude towards satisfaction and justice was also found in feudal society where vassalage had determined strict structures of loyalty and duty to one's vassal, and perhaps also explained why Anselm depicted God as “the lord of the manor”<sup>36</sup> to whom everything was due. The Western Church had undergone significant transition through Western Europe's own political and social transformation. The combination of Roman law, Germanic village culture, feudalism, and warring principalities had created a society in which Christians had to develop new understandings of what it meant to be Christian. Much like the way the philosophical, cultural, and political climate had influenced the theology of Augustine and his predecessors, the evolving culture of Western Europe affected Western Christianity. Thomas Aquinas would attempt to provide new understandings by marrying the new legal analogy of sin and satisfaction with the Aristotelian conception of the soul and the Augustinian notion of “original sin.”

An Italian Dominican priest born in the 13<sup>th</sup> century, Thomas Aquinas (1225-1274) significantly affected Western Christian theology when he combined Aristotelian ideas of the soul and the body, natural law, and Augustinian theology. Having lost of some its influence during the Post-Augustinian Middle Ages, Aristotelian thought became crucial to Aquinas'

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<sup>34</sup>Jaroslav Pelikan. *The Christian Tradition: A History of the Development of Doctrine – 3: The Growth of Medieval Theology (600-1300)*. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1978. 143.

<sup>35</sup>Alister McGrath. *Historical Theology: An Introduction to the History of Christian Thought*. Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, 1998. 136.

<sup>36</sup>Ibid.

understanding of the soul in relation to God and to physical creation. Aquinas argued that man was defined by the intellectual principle of rationality, or his rational soul, “[f]or the soul [was] the primary principle of [mankind's] nourishment, sensation, and local movement; and likewise of [man's] understanding.”<sup>37</sup> Adopting Aristotle's theory that humans understood because the intellectual principle was their nature, Aquinas theorized that the “proper operation of man as man [was] to understand.”<sup>38</sup> Aquinas' emphasized that man was man because of his unique soul, and that although the body was not inherently bad or evil, “[t]he nobler a form [was], the more it [rose] above corporeal matter, the less it [was] subject to matter, and the more it [excelled] matter by its power and its operation.”<sup>39</sup> The body and the soul were unified for the soul was “the act of a body, etc., because it [was] by the soul that the body [was] a body, and [was] organic, and [had] life potentiality.”<sup>40</sup> Through this understanding ofhylomorphism Aquinas relied on Aristotle's emphasis that a man's individual soul was fundamental in order to understand ethical actions and decision-making, which would become important for understanding why man sinned. Aquinas believed that God had bestowed humankind with a rational soul in order to know God and to know the natural law, which encouraged man to act according to reason. This understanding of natural law and reason would inform Aquinas' understanding of “original sin,” suggesting that the human will was not completely corrupted or deficient in its decision-making.

Though Aquinas emphasized that God had created man with a rational soul that directed him to act according to reason and the natural law, man had damaged himself when he had chosen a bad *praxis*, to use Aristotle's language. Man was the pinnacle of God's creation because he was intended to act according to reason, unlike other animals. When man “departed from the

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<sup>37</sup>Thomas Aquinas. *Summa Theologica* I, Q. 76, Art. 1. *Introduction to St. Thomas Aquinas: The Summa Theologica and the Summa Contra Gentiles*. Ed. Anton C. Pegis. New York: The Modern Library, 1948. 293.

<sup>38</sup>*Sum* I, Q.76, Art. 1.

<sup>39</sup>*Sum* I, Q. 76, Art. 1.

<sup>40</sup>*Sum* I, Q. 76, Art. 4.

path of reason... he [was] likened to the beasts who are led by the impulses of sensuality,”<sup>41</sup> a belief that had concerned the Stoics and Augustine. Adam and the woman had followed these sensual impulses in the Garden by picking the fruit from the forbidden tree. Calling this *lex peccati* (the law of sin), Aquinas argued that Adam had deviated from reason by following the impulse to eat from the forbidden tree instead of listening to the law of reason which stipulated obedience to God. This law of reason had been in effect:

And so the law of man, which, by the divine ordinance, [was] allotted to him according to his proper natural condition, [was] that he should act in accordance with reason; and this law was so effective in man's first state, that nothing either outside or against reason could take man unawares. But when man turned his back on God he fell under the influence of his sensual impulses.<sup>42</sup>

Utilizing Aristotelian philosophy once again, Aquinas seemed to imply that Adam's deliberation or pre-choice (*phronesis*) was more important than his actual taking of the fruit (*praxis*). Adam's deliberation in considering to disobey God appeared to be the true first sin. However, though related to Augustine's argument that sexual desire was in some ways a deviation from reason and evidence of divine punishment, Aquinas did not see this law of sin as resulting in a completely corrupted will. The “[n]atural good [had been] corrupted inasmuch as man's nature [was] disordered because man's will [was] not subject to God's,”<sup>43</sup> but sin had created other problems more important for Aquinas. Humankind was deficient not merely because the will had been corrupted but because “man [incurred] a triple loss by sinning... stain, corruption of the natural good, and debt of punishment.”<sup>44</sup> Like Augustine, Aquinas did believe that humankind had been

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<sup>41</sup>*Sum* I-II, Q. 91, Art. 6.

<sup>42</sup>*Sum* I-II, Q. 91, Art. 6.

<sup>43</sup>*Sum* I-II, Q. 109, Art. 7.

<sup>44</sup>*Sum* I-II, Q. 109, Art. 7.

infected with a “stain” that was irrevocable and which denied humankind the ability to avoid sin. Before Adam and the woman had eaten from the tree they had been able to avoid sinning because “to sin [was] nothing else than to stray from what [was] according to [their] nature,”<sup>45</sup> but after the Fall their nature had become corrupted. As the stain on the soul's rational character, “original sin” resulted in a corrupted human nature that was deficient in its understanding of God, deficient in its ability to follow natural law, and in need of grace and Christ's satisfaction for the “debt of punishment.” The human soul was stained, the will had become corrupt, and the body had incurred a debt, but as the stainless, sinless, and holy physical son of God, Christ could grant satisfaction and repair this loss.

This medieval conception of “original sin,” Aristotelian in part and legal in part, carried on the tradition of the Augustinian emphasis on an inherited corrupted will in human nature. However, though Aquinas acknowledged a debt to Augustine's influence, his reliance on Aristotelian thought led him to argue that human nature was not *completely* corrupted by sin. Humankind could do bad and good because it was like a sick person who could sometimes move despite its illness and could be cured through medicine. A sinful nature did not equate to utter depravity, instead it required healing. Moreover, though Aquinas infused some of the medieval legal understandings of sin into his work, he argued that “[t]o sin [was] nothing else than to fail in the good which belongs to any being according to its nature,”<sup>46</sup> which was actually “more corrupted by sin in regard to the desire for good, than in regard to the knowledge of truth.”<sup>47</sup> Humankind was still capable of knowing God, even if imperfectly, which would enable it to do some good. This reasoning resulted in what is arguably a more hopeful and compassionate view towards human beings than some of Aquinas' peers and predecessors had. And though Aquinas

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<sup>45</sup>*Sum* I-II, Q. 109, Art. 8.

<sup>46</sup>*Sum* I-II, Q. 109, Art. 1.

<sup>47</sup>*Sum* I-II, Q. 109, Art. 1.

agreed that “[a]ll men alike, both guilty and innocent, die[d] the death of nature... because of original sin,”<sup>48</sup> Aquinas did not dwell on the death and corruption that had resulted from “original sin.” Nor did he see “original sin” as the sort of offense that depicted man simply as a spiritual criminal who needed Christ's satisfaction in order to make up for his crime. Instead, Aquinas saw the same just God who had given man an intellectual and rational soul as the one who had died in order to heal that soul:

I reply that a proper satisfaction comes about when someone offers to the person offended something which gives him a delight greater than his hatred of the offense. Now Christ by suffering as a result of love and obedience offered to God something greater than what might be exacted in compensation for the whole offense of humanity; firstly, because of the greatness of the love, as a result of which he suffered; secondly; because of the worth of the life which he laid down for a satisfaction, which was the life of God and of a human being; thirdly, because of the comprehensiveness of his passion and the greatness of the sorrow which he took upon himself... And therefore the passion of Christ was not only sufficient but a superabundant satisfaction for the sins of the human race.<sup>49</sup>

Aquinas' depiction of God was that of judge and redeemer who desired restorative justice rather than simply legal justice. Aquinas had carried on the legal understanding of atonement theology and Christ's sacrifice, but his reliance on Aristotle and his reworking of the Augustinian image of corrupt human nature enabled him to paint a much more compassionate and magnanimous picture of God's intent for mankind than what some of his medieval peers had developed.

Like Augustine, Aquinas' interpretation of Genesis 3 and the Fall was not able to sufficiently answer all of the questions that I posed after my own reading. The questions

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<sup>48</sup>*Sum I-II*, Q. 94, Art. 5.

<sup>49</sup>Alister McGrath. *Historical Theology: An Introduction to the History of Christian Thought*. Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, 1998. 137.

remained: 1) why is the woman unnamed? 2) How is the serpent convincing?; 3) When does death enter the scene?; 4) Why is nudity a marker?; 5) Why do things degenerate so rapidly?; and 6) When does sin exactly enter the story? Aquinas certainly attempted to tackle some of these questions, particularly by constructing the *Summa Theologica* as an explanatory review of Genesis, from the beginning of creation to the Fall. This construction seemed to lead him to Augustine's belief that the emergence of sin appeared in Genesis 3 when Adam and the woman ate from the forbidden Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil. From this reading he argued that Genesis 3 was the beginning of a corrupted human nature and rational soul that could not completely follow natural law. But Aquinas' reading did not seem to imply a story of degeneration in which man became worse after leaving Eden. Aquinas saw death as a result of "original sin" but did not seem to read the Genesis narrative as an increasingly horrific tale of escalating sin. Nor did he seem very preoccupied with the fact that Eve remained unnamed for most of Genesis 3 and was the first to speak to the serpent. In fact, she did not play much of a character at all in his reading and for that reason, I chose to imitate Aquinas' use of the term "man" instead of "human" in order to highlight this emphasis. Perhaps Aquinas' broad review of Genesis and his decision to overlook some of these aspects speaks to the possibility that he was far more concerned with portraying a holistic picture of God, mankind, and Christ's role than performing a careful exegesis of Genesis the way Luther would later do. Hoping to utilize the non-Christian Aristotle, the Christian Augustine, and the medieval views of atonement theology, Aquinas seemed much more inclined to provide an overall depiction of God's work in the world and how "original sin" fit into that scheme. This would change significantly with the Protestant Reformation.

#### Chapter Four: The Protestant Reformation, Martin Luther, and Individual Sin

In the three centuries after Aquinas' death, much had changed in Western Europe and was continuing to do so. The Late Middle Ages was a time of severe turmoil as historic famine (1315-1317) and the Black Death (1348-1350) led to dramatic depopulation. By 1453, Constantinople, the capitol of the surviving Byzantine Empire, fell to the increasingly powerful Ottoman Empire, and new trade routes and exploration had begun to expand Europeans into “new worlds” ripe with land and profit, as well as alternatives to Christianity. With the fall of Constantinople, displaced Byzantine citizens immigrated to provinces of Italy, bringing with them the texts that would help inspire the Renaissance. With the Renaissance began the emerging precepts of humanism and scientific inquiry that started to become part of intellectual discourse alongside theology, sometimes causing real tension. Change, both bad and good depending on one's perspective, was enveloping Europe, and Christians were filled with both fear and hope.

A product of this upheaval, Martin Luther encapsulated the unease of this chaotic time period. Anti-Eastern, anti-Islam, anti-Judaism, and death-obsessed, Luther reacted strongly to the changes that were sweeping Europe. Having lived “amid recurring onslaughts of the disease later to be called the Black Death,”<sup>50</sup> and writing after his predecessors, John Wycliffe and Jan Hus,<sup>51</sup>

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<sup>50</sup>Richard Marius. *Martin Luther: The Christian Between God and Death*. Cambridge, Massachusetts: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1999. 9.

<sup>51</sup>John Wycliffe was a 14<sup>th</sup> century English professor at Oxford and one of the first pre-Reformation thinkers to challenge the Catholic Church. He was responsible for initiating the first English translation of the Bible and was strongly opposed to monasticism and transubstantiation. His followers were the Lollards. Jan Hus, a Czech priest born in the later 14<sup>th</sup> century, was deeply influenced by Wycliffe and was burned as a heretic in 1415 for his teachings against the abuses of the Catholic Church. His followers the Hussites fought against Roman Catholics

Luther lived in a time of serious evolution. Not only had feudalism begun to crumble with early forms of capitalism and mercantilism taking its place, but papal conflicts and corruption had also sullied some of the Catholic Church's reputation and unity. The advent of the printing press proliferated new knowledge, and systems and institutions that had once been ingrained in medieval society showed signs of dissolution, cultivating a new sense of uncertainty, as well as a new sense of individuality. Grappling with this uncertainty, Luther's concerns became those of faith, personal salvation, and individual autonomy apart from the Catholic Church. Devoting himself to Augustinian theology, the original Greek and Hebrew biblical texts, especially the Pauline epistles, Luther portrayed a portrait of the completely sinful and helpless human being who could only rely on his or her own faith and the grace of God to be merciful in an uncertain and “fallen” world. This existential concern with sinfulness and damnation had begun with “original sin.”

Although Luther's conception of “original sin” would differ somewhat from Augustine's, Augustinian theology had a tremendous effect on the German monk at a time when Augustinianism was facilitating serious theological debate.<sup>52</sup> The emergence of humanism had cast serious doubt on Augustinian views of humanity and the Fall, prompting some scholars like Erasmus (1466-1536) to return to earlier theologians such as Origen, to whom Erasmus attributed a more sympathetic and peaceful version of humanity. Like Luther, Erasmus was also a biblical scholar. But in contrast to Augustine's and Luther's reliance on predestination, “Origen had even suggested that, in the end, God envisaged that everyone, including the Devil himself,

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in a series of wars for 11 years.

<sup>52</sup>“One reason why Augustine's influence has varied so much in the history of western Christianity is that there is much more to Augustine than his soteriology; he is at the heart of western thinking about the nature of the Church and its sacraments, and in some eras, it was this aspect of his thought that mattered more than what he said about salvation.” Diarmaid MacCulloch. *The Reformation: A History*. New York: Penguin Books, 2003. 111.



would be saved and return to paradise.”<sup>53</sup> This was the view in which Erasmus and some other humanist scholars were in favor. But other theologians such as Jacques Lefevre d'Etapes (1455-1536) and Cardinal Gasparo Contarini (1483-1542), both of whom wrote shortly before Luther, “stressed the total irrelevance of human works in God's salvation of humanity,”<sup>54</sup> stressing the Augustinian viewpoint that humans were damned without God's divine grace. Luther fully accepted the latter theology. Beginning his theological study at the Order of the Augustinian Eremites in Erfurt, Luther was indebted to Augustine from the very beginning. Rebellious against the Catholic Church's *via moderna* - a theological perspective that proposed that humans did have some capacity to work towards their own salvation – and suspicious of Aristotelian Thomism (especially Aristotelian reason), Luther began to turn to the Pauline Epistles and Augustine's interpretations in order to understand salvation.<sup>55</sup> This reliance on Paul and Augustine's own readings of him would cement Luther's theology, particularly with regard to sin.

Luther's devotion to the Pauline Epistles and his skills in Greek and Hebrew exegesis helped him develop an individualistic and more personal theology that concerned the relationship between God and each human, a relationship that had been irrevocably damaged for many because of “original sin.” However, it is important to read Luther's commentary on Genesis first in order to understand how he pictured the story of “original sin.” Unlike Augustine and Aquinas, Luther could read Hebrew and Greek, and was therefore able to read the original biblical texts. Luther was for the most part, a literal reader – which would have serious consequences for his later followers and all of Protestantism – and he read Genesis thoroughly, paying close attention to aspects of the story that many had overlooked. But what is most significant about Luther's commentary on Genesis was his depiction of Adam and the woman, for this would greatly affect

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<sup>53</sup>Ibid, 113.

<sup>54</sup>Ibid, 111.

<sup>55</sup>Ibid, 117-118.

his “original sin” conception. For Luther one of, if not the most, distinguishing factor about Adam was that he had been made in the image of God, and therefore was not meant to devote his life to pleasure and satisfaction the way other animals did. Echoing some of the anti-materiality sentiments of the early Christian period, Luther wrote that:

For godly teachers well affirm that if Adam had not fallen God would have translated him from an animal life to spiritual life after a certain number of saints had been perfected. For Adam was not designed by his creator to live without food, drink, and procreation. But all these corporeal things would have ceased at an appointed time.<sup>56</sup>

Luther emphasized Adam's perfection as the first human in order to show what life had been like for humans before the Fall, and to contrast this state to the “fallen” world. Before the Fall, Adam had been “endowed... with a twofold life: an animal life and an immortal life,”<sup>57</sup> the latter of which would have been Adam's future eventually if he had not sinned. Adam had been wholly pure in his reason and his will and Adam had possessed “charming security, without any fear of death, and without any care or anxiety whatever.”<sup>58</sup> Although Luther elevated Adam's purposes for an ultimately spiritual life, Luther did also present a physically perfect image of Adam and the woman. Luther argued that Adam had probably possessed superhuman abilities like sharper eyesight, incredible strength, and acute senses. He and the woman, whom Luther called Eve, were both beautiful just like the earth which had also been safer, brighter, healthier, and more peaceful. Although Eve was beautiful and righteous and her and Adam's wills had been in perfect harmony, Eve still “did not equal the glory of the male creature... [though she was] not

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<sup>56</sup>Martin Luther. “Genesis I, Part VI. God’s Work on the Sixth Day.” *The Precious and Sacred Writings of Martin Luther*. Ed. John Nicholas Lenker. Minneapolis: Lutherans in All Lands Co., 1904. 108. Online.

<sup>57</sup>Ibid, 109.

<sup>58</sup>Ibid, 115.

excluded from all the glory of the human nature.”<sup>59</sup> Luther also believed that Adam and Eve had probably had sexual intercourse, although his Augustinian background stressed that Adam would have had “the most pure and confident mind towards God... [with] a will most obedient to God, [and] a soul the most free from all impurity of thought.”<sup>60</sup> Differentiating between the two, Luther compared Adam as man to the sun and Eve as woman to the moon; both were important and beautiful, but the sun was ultimately superior. It was true “that Adam possessed it [God's image] in its moral substance or nature; that he not only knew God and believed him to be good, but that he lived also a life truly divine, that is, free from the fear of death and of all dangers and happy in the favor of God.”<sup>61</sup> But despite this wonderful existence, Adam still existed “in a middle state... a state of neutrality of liability... where he could be deceived by Satan; and could fall into awful calamity.”<sup>62</sup> Adam and Eve had been in the process of becoming perfect and immortal, but when they sinned they had failed the ultimate test.

For Luther, sin equated to unbelief or a lack of faith. By disobeying God and believing the serpent instead of God, Adam and Eve had committed the “original sin.” Luther did not see sin as merely an act of the body or the will, such as the picking of the fruit. Luther emphasized that “[t]he word sin in the Bible means something more than the external works done by our bodily action. It means all the circumstances that act together and excite or incite us to do what is done; in particular, the impulses operating in the depths of our hearts.”<sup>63</sup> Unlike Augustine, Luther did not see sin as a corruption of the will, he saw it as a corruption of all “flesh.” Adam and Eve had fallen into sin because of their unbelief, and as a result, they had become sinners, a

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<sup>59</sup>Ibid, 125.

<sup>60</sup>Ibid, 116.

<sup>61</sup>Ibid.

<sup>62</sup>Martin Luther. “Genesis II, Part III. The Introduction of Man Into the Garden, the Command God Gave Him, and the Threatening God Attached to It.” *The Precious and Sacred Writings of Martin Luther*. Ed. John Nicholas Lenker. Minneapolis: Lutherans in All Lands Co., 1904. 183. Online.

<sup>63</sup>Martin Luther. “Preface to the Epistle of St. Paul to the Romans.” *Martin Luther: Selections from His Writings*. Ed. John Dillenberger. New York: Anchor Books, 1958. 22.

state in which there was “complete destruction of body and soul.”<sup>64</sup> Flesh included the body, the senses, the will, the reason, and the soul, meaning that Adam and Eve had damned themselves and all of their descendants because they “transmitted sin to us [humans] through our earlier, physical birth.”<sup>65</sup> Luther saw this as a quick succession of depravity and destruction as Adam's and Eve's descent into a “fallen” nature meant that they and their descendants would act according to the “flesh,” meaning, “[t]he progression of generation... [was] lowered and weakened beyond description; and it [was] so absorbed in lust that it differs little from the generation of the beast.”<sup>66</sup> For Luther, this explained why things had degenerated so quickly in Genesis, why it had devolved to the point where God wanted to destroy humankind and regretted his creation. Adam and Eve had possessed the opportunity to become perfect and immortal, but their lack of faith had introduced sin and they would never be able to escape it.

“Original sin” was imperative to Luther because of what it had done to the relationship between humans and God, a struggle that he believed plagued every single person and resulted in a fate worse than death. Sin's consequences had been resoundingly destructive. Believing that all human beings were eternally damned because of sin, Luther compared the sinful person to a prostitute who had defiled herself and needed to be cleansed, just as Paul had done in 1 Corinthians.<sup>67</sup> But cleansing oneself from sin was impossible, particularly because Luther interpreted God's warning in Genesis 3 that He would put enmity between the serpent and humans, as the symbolic and eternal struggle between humans and sin. Unbelief was “the head of the serpent”<sup>68</sup> that humans fought against until Christ could crush it. But although Luther saw

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<sup>64</sup>Ibid.

<sup>65</sup>Ibid, 28.

<sup>66</sup>Martin Luther. “Genesis I, Part VI. God's Work on the Sixth Day.” *The Precious and Sacred Writings of Martin Luther*. Ed. John Nicholas Lenker. Minneapolis: Lutherans in All Lands Co., 1904. 127. Online.

<sup>67</sup>Martin Luther. “Martin Luther on Justifying Faith.” Ed. Alister E. McGrath. Oxford, Blackwell Publishers, 1995. 229-230.

<sup>68</sup>Martin Luther. “Preface to the Epistle of St. Paul to the Romans.” *Martin Luther: Selections from His Writings*. Ed.

“original sin” as Adam’s and Eve’s unbelief, he also focused on its consequences, which were worse than sin itself. “Original sin” had created the constant fear of death in which humans were “never confident and happy in God, [for] fear and dread in the highest [were] perpetually trying”<sup>69</sup> human beings. Anxiety “and the like evils [were] the image of the devil, who [had] impressed his image upon [humankind].”<sup>70</sup> These mixtures of evils however, were merely symptoms of the ultimately most horrific consequence, which was God’s wrath.<sup>71</sup> Luther had noticed the heavy presence of death like the ancient church fathers and theologians. Yet interestingly, “[a]lthough death was a fate that man shared with all other creatures, human death was unique [for Luther] because it was a consequence of sin and of divine wrath.”<sup>72</sup> Luther was much more concerned with the fact that Adam and Eve had disobeyed God and upset his justice than the fact that they had brought death. Death was only the beginning but God’s punishment afterward was eternal. Plagued by this realization and the absolute fear that accompanied it, Luther tried to sort out what this dilemma meant for every single human being who had inherited “original sin.”

Unlike Aquinas, who had portrayed the story of “original sin” and Christ’s sacrifice as a holistic story that eventually resulted in God’s restorative justice for humankind, Luther illustrated a portrait of “original sin” as the individual struggle for each human being and his or her salvation. “Original sin” had completely corrupted human nature, and Luther emphasized that there was absolutely nothing humans could do about this. All a person could do was to have faith in Christ, which coincidentally had to be the result of the gift of grace. Fortunately for some,

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John Dillenberger. New York: Anchor Books, 1958. 23.

<sup>69</sup>Martin Luther. “Genesis I, Part VI. God’s Work on the Sixth Day.” *The Precious and Sacred Writings of Martin Luther*. Ed. John Nicholas Lenker. Minneapolis: Lutherans in All Lands Co., 1904. 117. Online.

<sup>70</sup>Ibid.

<sup>71</sup>Jaroslav Pelikan. *The Christian Tradition: A History of the Development of Doctrine – 4: Reformation of Church and Dogma (1300-1700)*. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1984. 132.

<sup>72</sup> Ibid.

“God put aside his wrath as judge for human beings who he chose as his elect. They received a gift of faith that had nothing to do with their own sinful actions.”<sup>73</sup> This “gift” was the only way one could eventually rid themselves of the effects of “original sin” after death:

[Faith] unites the soul with Christ (*voreynigt auch die seele mit Christo*), as a bride is united with her bridegroom. From such a marriage, as St. Paul says (Ephesians 5:31-2), it follows that Christ and the soul become one body, so that they hold all things in common, whether for better or worse... The soul possesses lots of vices and sin; these now belong to Christ. Here we have a happy exchange (*froelich wechtzel*) and struggle. Christ is God and a human being, who has never sinned and whose holiness is unconquerable, eternal and almighty. So he makes the sin of the believing soul his own through its wedding ring (*braudtring*), which is faith, and acts as if he had done it [i.e., sin] himself, so that sin could be swallowed up in him... Christ, the rich, noble, and holy bridegroom, takes in marriage this poor, contemptible and sinful little prostitute (*das arm vorachte boetzes huerlein*), takes away all her evil, and bestows all his goodness upon her!<sup>74</sup>

Through his reinterpretation of Genesis, Luther was able to paint “original sin” as the beginning of humans’ weakened relationship with God. “Original sin” was not simply a story of when the human will had become corrupted or when humans’ reason and understanding of natural law had become deficient. It was the story of what had happened when the first man and first woman had divorced God, when their faith had evaporated in the face of temptation like the prostitute. Luther had rejected the Thomistic interpretation which stressed that humans could still do some good and know some of God, and had instead adopted the Augustinian emphasis on corruption, extending this corruption to the entire being. For Luther, this was not so much a bad

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<sup>73</sup> Diarmaid MacCulloch. *The Reformation: A History*. New York: Penguin Books, 2003. 120.

<sup>74</sup> Martin Luther. “Martin Luther on Justifying Faith.” Ed. Alister E. McGrath. Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, 1995. 229-230.

situation for the whole world as it was for each person. Here he departed from both Aquinas and Augustine. The physical world's fate paled in comparison to the individual's broken relationship with God, to the individual's salvation, which was now in serious jeopardy. "Original sin" was a frightening story for Luther, a nightmare that symbolized what happened when humans relinquished their faith and gave in to the devil, who was always lurking in the corner, just like sin. The only hope Christians could possess was that God would declare them righteous and thus, justify them despite their inherent sinful state. Yet even this fate was uncertain because it was entirely contingent upon God's grace. No one, not even Luther, could know his fate, making one's life an eternally difficult and uncertain struggle for spiritual survival like that of the prostitute that only Christ could save.

Luther's story was not Aquinas'. Luther had departed from the Thomistic interpretation that aimed to focus on God's love and mercy. "Original sin" had happened and its effects were destructive, but there was hope in the restorative justice God had achieved through Christ. Luther had opted instead for a story that focused on God's wrath, a fact that would mean eternal punishment for many. But for those whom God had chosen, God's grace meant a spiritual marriage that trumped the sort of marriage one could find on earth. Desacralizing marriage and many other aspects of Christian life in the physical world, Luther emphasized that for those who had received God's grace, the only thing that mattered was one's relationship with Christ. Adam and Eve had divorced themselves from God through "original sin," but some of their descendants would be reunited with Christ.

Luther's conception of "original sin" certainly colored his theology, but for our purposes, what is significant is how it attempted to answer the questions with which Genesis left us. 1) Why is the woman unnamed? 2) How is the serpent convincing?; 3) When does death enter the

scene?; 4) Why is nudity a marker?; 5) Why do things degenerate so rapidly?; and 6) When does sin exactly enter the story? Oddly enough, Luther does not really answer the first question. When he first discusses the woman he calls her “his [Adam’s] wife Eve.”<sup>75</sup> Yet Luther’s discussion of the woman does seem to indicate that she is unnamed because she was for some theologians, like Luther, a theological nuisance.<sup>76</sup> Like Paul’s story, Luther was more concerned with the line running from Adam to Christ, making Eve somewhat obsolete. But if she was not important, then neither was Mary, whose worship was insignificant for Luther. Though Luther did not seem to explicitly answer this question, his lack of attention towards it perhaps stems from the fact that he had emphasized the inherent inferiority of Eve. She was indeed the moon, but the sun was more important.

Of course, the woman had become a nuisance because she had listened to the serpent who was convincing because “Satan employed [it] in his temptation of Eve.”<sup>77</sup> Like Augustine and Aquinas, Luther ultimately blamed Satan for acting through the serpent and tempting Adam and the woman. Luther considered Satan a very real force who actively took a role in making sure humans did not have faith. Nudity was a marker in the story because of its connection to sexuality. Because sin had caused such a destruction of the entire human being, it had also heightened the awareness of sex and the actual sexual drive. After Adam and the woman had sinned, their nudity was significant because the naked form now “awaken[ed] in [humans] shame

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<sup>75</sup> Martin Luther. “Genesis I, Part VI. God’s Work on the Sixth Day.” *The Precious and Sacred Writings of Martin Luther*. Ed. John Nicholas Lenker. Minneapolis: Lutherans in All Lands Co., 1904. 116. Online.

<sup>76</sup> “For the female sex was necessary for the generation and multiplication of the human race. Hence it follows that if the woman had not been deceived by the serpent and had not sinned, she would have been in all respects equal to Adam... But we may here inquire when God says, ‘It is not good that man should be alone,’ what is that ‘good’ of which God is speaking, seeing that Adam was righteous and had no need of the woman as we have, who bear about with us our flesh all leprous with sin? ... All personal good Adam already possessed. He enjoyed perfect innocence. But the common good of which all other animals partook, he possessed not. He could not propagate his species by generation.” Ibid, 189.

<sup>77</sup> Ibid, 229.



and inflame[ed] us with evil lust and passion.”<sup>78</sup> The shame of their nudity after they had eaten highlighted the contrast between their innocent, pure sexuality and the depraved sexuality they inherited after becoming sinners. However, Luther provided the best and most extensive answers to the third, fifth, and sixth questions. Sin had entered the story the moment Adam and the woman had listened to the serpent and divorced God, not when they necessarily ate. This “original sin” of unbelief was the impetus that then began the process of degeneration and death, and led to a progressively worse humanity. And though Luther emphasized that sinful actions and their consequences would increase from the new sinful state that Adam and the woman had appropriated, the consequence of death had become a reality when God banished them from the Garden of Eden, and He reminded Adam that he would return to the earth as dust. This interpretation of the Genesis story – so perfectly representative of the fear and pessimism that shadowed Luther – would be instrumental for later Protestants. It would also provide Friedrich Nietzsche with the perfect antagonist which he would try to defeat.

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<sup>78</sup> Ibid, 222.

## Chapter Five: Nietzsche and the Will to Dismantle “Original Sin”

Luther’s views on Christianity quickly swept across several parts of Western Europe, taking root in countries that had previously been part of the Roman Church. But Luther was not the only ‘reformer’ to challenge the doctrines and practices of the Roman Catholic Church. Protestant leaders such as John Calvin (1509-1564) and Huldrych Zwingli (1484-1531), as well as the movements they and others inspired (Calvinism, Anabaptism, Puritanism, etc.), were instrumental in revolutionizing the religious landscape of Western Europe. Reform certainly had occurred, but deep dissension and conflict had also erupted, resulting in religious wars and violence of such magnitude that some Western European intellectuals in the 18<sup>th</sup> century began to consider the virtues of a secular state that either ridded itself of religion or allowed citizens to worship in any denomination they chose. Yet the rise of secularism and the development of modern states did not mean the death of religion in Europe. The Council of Trent (1545-1563) and subsequent Roman Counter-Reformation inspired a revitalization in the Catholic Church, whereas countries and provinces that (fell under the sway of one of the major) Protestant denominations developed new religious cultures, adopting the traditions of Calvin, Zwingli, or Luther. However, though not all European countries adopted Protestantism, Luther’s ideas about the individual’s relationship with God, as understood through the prism of his interpretation of “original sin,” had an indelible effect on Early Modern Western Christian culture. This was the culture that Friedrich Nietzsche so vehemently criticized.

Nietzsche had been born into a family and province that had adopted Lutheran Christianity. Born “in the heartland of the Protestant Reformation [in Rocken]... about seventy

kilometres from Eisleben, the birthplace of Martin Luther, ”<sup>79</sup> Nietzsche’s father, Ludwig, was a pastor in the Lutheran Church. Ludwig’s grandmother, Erdmunthe, had come from a long line of Lutheran Church pastors.<sup>80</sup> Yet even though Nietzsche insisted that he had not come from “a fundamentalist or puritanical background,”<sup>81</sup> his critiques of Christianity often strongly hinted at a culture that had been infused with some of Luther’s harshest commitments. In *Human, All Too Human*, Nietzsche criticized the dilemma of the ‘every day Christian’ for “[i]f Christianity were right in its tenets of a vengeful god, general sinfulness, predestination, and the danger of an eternal damnation, it would be a sign of stupidity and lack of character not to become a priest, apostle, or hermit, and with fear and trembling, work exclusively on one’s own salvation.”<sup>82</sup> Some of these tenets were and are still present in various denominations of Christianity not exclusive to Lutheranism, but it is hard to ignore that Luther, like Paul, emphasized God’s anger, the completely sinful nature of humans, predestination, and the threat of eternal damnation. Nietzsche on some occasions specifically blamed Luther and his followers for stalling some of the achievements of the Renaissance, for the Reformation’s resentment against humanism. Not only had Luther and other reformers inspired “an energetic protest of backward minds who had not yet had their fill of the medieval world view and perceived the signs of its dissolution... with deep displeasure,”<sup>83</sup> but they had also “delay[ed] the complete awakening and rule of the sciences for two or three centuries, as well as making impossible, perhaps forever, the complete fusion of the ancient and modern spirit.”<sup>84</sup> Luther’s reading of Genesis and the conclusion that he had

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<sup>79</sup> Julian Young. *Friedrich Nietzsche: A Philosophical Biography*. New York: Cambridge University Press, 2010. 4.

<sup>80</sup> Ibid.

<sup>81</sup> “This is what makes the ferocity of the mature Nietzsche’s attack on Christianity a biographical puzzle. Christianity was the material and emotional foundation of an extended family that filled his childhood with love and security, a warmth he never ceased to value.” Ibid, 4-5.

<sup>82</sup> Friedrich Nietzsche. *Human, All Too Human*. Trans. Marion Faber and Stephen Lehmann. Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1986. 86.

<sup>83</sup> Ibid, 147.

<sup>84</sup> Ibid. This was Nietzsche’s life work.

drawn from it about man's utter depravity not only ran completely counter to the tenets of this new humanism, but also lined up with Nietzsche's criticism that it was "a trick of Christianity to teach the worthlessness, sinfulness, and despicableness of man in general so loudly that disdain for one's fellow men becomes impossible."<sup>85</sup>

It was the Lutheran emphasis on humans' utter depravity and state of sinfulness that partly drove Nietzsche to criticize the concept of sin, particularly "original sin." Nietzsche saw this apparent in Luther's theology but he also saw some of the Augustinian emphasis on sin in the medieval Christianity that had preceded and influenced Luther. Nietzsche was aware that other Christians, besides and before Luther, had emphasized humans' sinfulness. He eviscerated Eastern and Western saints, and Catholic believers like Pedro Calderon de la Barca whose infamous quote that "the greatest guilt of man is that he was born," was for Nietzsche, the "craziest paradox there can be."<sup>86</sup> Nietzsche criticized the emphasis on sinfulness as a ploy that Christians had used in order to argue for this version of salvation and redemption:

It is the device of religion, and of those metaphysicians who want to think of man as evil and sinful by nature, to have him cast suspicion on nature and to make himself bad; for he learns thus to experience himself as bad, since he cannot take off the dress of nature. Gradually, after a long life of nature, he feels so oppressed by such a burden of sins that supernatural powers become necessary to lift this burden; and with that, the need for redemption.<sup>87</sup>

Though Lutheran Protestantism had ridded itself of many Catholic practices and some beliefs, it had married Luther's conception of "original sin" with the atonement theology that had developed in the medieval period. As I showed in the chapter on Aquinas, atonement theology

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<sup>85</sup> Ibid, 86.

<sup>86</sup> Ibid, 98.

<sup>87</sup> Ibid, 99.

relied on the belief that Adam's and Eve's mistake in the garden had made all humans by nature guilty of trespassing against God. Nietzsche observed that the "advent of the Christian god, the 'highest potency' god yet conceived by man, [had] been accompanied by the wildest dissemination of the sense of indebtedness, [and] guilt."<sup>88</sup> Examining the relationship between "original sin" and Christ's sacrifice, Nietzsche blamed human beings' psychological predisposition towards guilt for Christianity's assurance that "the curse [fell] upon man's *causa prima* ('Adam,' 'original sin,' the 'bondage of the will'); or upon nature, which gave birth to man and which is now made the repository of the evil principle."<sup>89</sup> "Original sin," as Nietzsche conceived it, not only taught Christians that they were completely and helplessly sinful merely because they were human, but that they also owed God a debt for being the human descendants of Adam and Eve. Nietzsche was convinced that "[j]ust as man [had] inherited from the blood aristocracies the concepts good and bad... so he [had] inherited from the tribes, together with the tribal gods, a burden of outstanding debt and the desire to make final restitution."<sup>90</sup> These qualities of utter depravity and atonement made "original sin" a masochistic and damaging story for Nietzsche, one that he would attempt to dismantle with his own re-reading of Genesis.

Nietzsche first began examining the creation story in Genesis 3 by comparing it to another creation story. In *The Birth of Tragedy*, Nietzsche fleshed out the Ancient Greek myth of Prometheus, who created humans from clay and then gave them fire so they could build civilization. In the Greek myth, Prometheus had defied Zeus by giving humans fire and as punishment, hence Zeus banished Prometheus to Tartarus where an eagle would eat his liver every day after it had regenerated overnight. Nietzsche theorized that the Prometheus myth had

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<sup>88</sup> Friedrich Nietzsche. *The Genealogy of Morals*. Trans. Francis Golffing. New York: Anchor Books, 1956. 225.

<sup>89</sup> Ibid.

<sup>90</sup> Ibid, 223.

“the same importance for the Aryan<sup>91</sup> mind as the myth of the Fall [had] for the Semitic, and that the two myths [were] related as brother and sister.”<sup>92</sup> Just as the Prometheus myth illustrated cultural values and beliefs about the divine and the origins of human beings, so did the Genesis story. Both revealed key understandings about the relationship between humans and gods, which was for Nietzsche, the “huge boulder [lying] at the gateway to every culture.”<sup>93</sup> But Nietzsche distinguished between the two creation myths because of their contrasting qualities that revealed very different conceptions of human resistance as rebellion against the divine.

Nietzsche’s rehearsal of divine disobedience in the Prometheus myth, allowed him to examine the role of sin in Genesis 3. Though both stories illustrated that “[m]an’s highest good [had to] be bought with a crime and paid for by the flood of grief and suffering which the offended divinities visit[ed] upon the human race,”<sup>94</sup> Nietzsche saw very different values at work in the two myths. Prometheus was a hero in his myth, but in the Genesis story Adam and the woman were neither. Instead:

[The Fall myth] exhibit[ed] curiosity, deception, suggestibility, concupiscence, in short, a whole series of principally feminine frailties, as the root of all evil. What distinguishes the Aryan conception is an exalted notion of active sin as the properly Promethean virtue; this notion provides us with the ethical substratum of pessimistic tragedy, which comes to be seen as a justification of human ills, that is to say of human guilt as well as the suffering purchased by that guilt... The individual, in the course of his heroic striving towards universality, de-individuation, comes up against that primordial contradiction and

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<sup>91</sup> Nietzsche’s use of the term “Aryan” concerns the popular historical theory in the 19<sup>th</sup> century that the Aryan peoples had traveled from India and settled in Greek provinces, bringing with them their religion and culture, which some believed, had influenced Greek civilization.

<sup>92</sup> Friedrich Nietzsche. *The Birth of Tragedy*. Trans. Francis Golffing. New York: Anchor Books, 1956. 63.

<sup>93</sup> Ibid.

<sup>94</sup> Ibid, 63-64.

learns both to sin and suffer. The Aryan nations assign [crime to the male], the Semites [sin to the female gender]; and it is quite consistent with these notions that the original act of hubris should be attributed to a man, original sin to a woman.<sup>95</sup>

Though in the Greek myth, Prometheus had been punished, storytellers considered his disobedience a good thing not only because of how it helped humanity, but also because his motive was to help humanity. Nietzsche specified that the Prometheus myth contained a tragic conception, in which one's tragic decision led to suffering but also to the possibility of transformation, where humans were able to experience through Prometheus' rebellion. Though this tragic conception looks somewhat similar to Irenaeus' interpretation, in that it focused on the transformation of humanity, Nietzsche seemed to base his understanding of Genesis closer to Augustine's or Luther's interpretation. For Nietzsche, Genesis 3 was entirely opposed to the tragic Prometheus myth due to its conception of sin and motive. Even though the text suggests that Adam and the woman ate because they wanted knowledge, presumably, to be like God, Nietzsche theorized that the myth treated these motives as evil, and necessary preludes to suffering, instead of moral striving in order to enable human knowledge.

By comparing the two myths and their values, Nietzsche also paid significant attention to the treatment of the woman in Genesis 3. Unlike most of the other thinkers we have encountered thus far, Nietzsche neither ignored the woman nor took it for granted that she was to blame. While she had not played much of a role in Aquinas' reading, and Augustine and Luther had highlighted her moral inferiority and seductive capabilities, Nietzsche noticed that "[while the] Aryan nations assign[ed] [this] crime [to] the male, the Semites [assigned]... sin [to] the female gender... the original act of *hubris* [was] attributed to man, original sin to a woman."<sup>96</sup> This not

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<sup>95</sup> Ibid, 64.

<sup>96</sup> Ibid.

only suggests that Nietzsche's reading was probably influenced by Luther and Augustine, but also that his reading unveiled a gender bias in the story that many feminist theologians would later also critique. Why was the woman to blame? Why had the serpent approached her first and not Adam? Nietzsche seriously posed these questions, finding them indicative of the problems inherent in the Fall myth. The woman's placement in the story would only fuel the belief "that 'every evil comes into the world through woman.'"<sup>97</sup>

Nietzsche would continue this investigation into the importance of gender relations to the Genesis story in *Beyond Good and Evil*. Nietzsche began the text with a question for philosophy: "Supposing truth is a woman – what then?"<sup>98</sup> If truth was a woman, how should one approach her? How should one pursue her? Should one ever let her go, and if so, when? Nietzsche posed these questions, but then complicated the issue by making a connection between Eve and her role in the garden. She is the one who listens to the serpent, hears the promise of knowledge, and then decides to pick the fruit. She is the first to pick from the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil. One could argue that she is the first philosopher. But her decision and Adam's compliance produce catastrophic results that seem to say something about the pursuit of knowledge, or "truth," as well as the dynamics of the male-female relationship. Nietzsche explored this idea by once again turning to Greek myth.

Nietzsche's reading of the Genesis story led to the belief that Adam's and Eve's relationship was flawed, but not for the same reasons that the previous three theologians would have articulated. He saw this flaw by comparing it to the Greek myth of Dionysus and Ariadne. The daughter of King Minos of Crete, Ariadne was significant in Greek mythology for the role she played in helping the hero Theseus. After falling in love with Theseus at first sight, she

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<sup>97</sup> Friedrich Nietzsche. Section 48. *The Anti-Christ*. Trans. R.J. Hollingdale. London: Penguin Books, 1990. 176.

<sup>98</sup> Friedrich Nietzsche. "Preface." *Beyond Good and Evil*. Trans. Walter Kaufmann. New York: Vintage Books, 1989. 1.



decided to help him kill the Minotaur, her half-brother, and helped Theseus escape from the labyrinth. But when Theseus and Adriane left Crete together, he abandoned her on the island of Naxos. While there, Dionysus found her, and according to some legends, married her. But unlike Adam, Dionysus did not stay with Ariadne. As Nietzsche explained:

Thus he [Dionysus] once said: “Under certain circumstances I love what is human” – and with this he alluded to Ariadne who was present – “man is to my mind an agreeable, courageous, inventive animal that has no equal on earth; it finds its way in any labyrinth. I am well disposed towards him. I often reflect how I might yet advance him and make him stronger, more evil, and more profound than he is.”<sup>99</sup>

Dionysus did care for Ariadne, but he was willing to let her go. As the god who was “a philosopher,”<sup>100</sup> he sought out truth, but could recognize the circumstances when it was no longer worth the pursuit. If truth was a woman, this meant he would also have to let go of her when it was time. This did not make him unfaithful and selfish, however, in Nietzsche’s eyes. Dionysus’ treatment of the woman as truth was an example of his “courage, his daring honesty, truthfulness, and love of wisdom.”<sup>101</sup> From Nietzsche’s perspective, this was how the ideal philosopher was supposed to treat truth, and how the man was supposed to treat woman.

One of the problems with Genesis, according to Nietzsche, was that Adam had not treated Eve in this fashion. When God had found them and subsequently, banished them from the garden, Adam and Eve stayed together and began reproducing. Adam remained faithful despite Eve’s actions and the effects that they had caused. But instead of seeing this as faithful and loyal, Nietzsche saw this as a mistake that did not face the realities of woman or the duties of philosophy. Nietzsche theorized that like the philosopher who stubbornly kept pursuing truth

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<sup>99</sup> Ibid, 236.

<sup>100</sup> Ibid, 235.

<sup>101</sup> Ibid.

without any regard to its nature, Adam had stayed with Eve when instead he should have let her go. This was how one was supposed to treat a woman. Yet the “original sin” story was not only problematic for its characterization of the first woman, but also for its treatment of knowledge.

As Nietzsche continued writing, his critique of Christianity and “original sin” became ever-more scathing. In *The Anti-Christ*, Nietzsche castigated Christian morality, institutions, and its teachings about the nature of humankind. This brought Nietzsche once again to the subject of “original sin” and the creation story in Genesis 3. Now Nietzsche not only saw a strange story that paled in comparison to the Prometheus myth, but even more, a story in which God had punished his “blunders” for seeking out knowledge, or “science.” Nietzsche depicted God’s actions in Genesis 3 as that of an insecure and fearful deity who did not want his creation to have knowledge or freedom. God had not created humans because he loved them and wanted to share his earth with them. Instead, “[t]he old God, all ‘spirit,’ all high priest, all perfection, promenade[ed] in his garden: but [was] bored.”<sup>102</sup> But when Adam also became bored, God created woman, “God’s second blunder,”<sup>103</sup> for when the woman entered the world, “[c]onsequently, science too [came] into the world through her’... Only through woman did man learn to taste the tree of knowledge.”<sup>104</sup> Drawing upon his earlier criticisms in *The Birth of Tragedy*, Nietzsche depicted what he believed was the foolish set-up of Genesis 3. God had created humans because he was bored and when they had become naturally bored as well, he panicked:

A mortal terror seized on the old God. Man himself had become God’s *greatest* blunder; God had created for himself a rival, science makes *equal* to God – it is all over with priests and gods if man becomes scientific! – *Moral*: science is the forbidden in itself – it

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<sup>102</sup> Friedrich Nietzsche. “48.” *The Anti-Christ*. Trans. R.J. Hollingdale. London: Penguin Books, 1990. 176.

<sup>103</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>104</sup> *Ibid.*

alone is forbidden. Science is the *first* sin, the germ of all sins, *original* sin. This alone constitutes morality. – ‘Thou shalt not know’ – the rest follows. – God’s mortal terror did not stop him from being shrewd. How can one *defend* oneself against science? – that was for long his chief problem. Answer: away with man out of Paradise!<sup>105</sup>

Nietzsche had discerned another layer in Genesis 3: God made humans, and when they discovered knowledge, he banished them from Eden because knowledge rivaled his power. “Original sin,” the “first sin,” had been the quest for knowledge, science. Nietzsche did not depict Adam and the woman as disobedient and unfaithful the way other theologians had. Instead, Nietzsche placed the blame on God. When Adam and the woman had sought out science and knowledge, God punished them, making it appear as if such desires were evil. In fact, Nietzsche agreed that the quest for knowledge was against God, but that reflected poorly on God, not Adam and the woman. Instead of fostering and encouraging the search for knowledge and science and independence, God “invent[ed] distress, death, the danger to life in pregnancy, every kind of misery, age, toil, above all sickness – nothing but expedients in the struggle against science! Distress does not *allow* man to think...”<sup>106</sup> God had not wanted Adam and the woman to flourish, so he had punished them. The quest for science was thus the “original sin,” and thus Nietzsche believed it to be not only ridiculous, but also a deleterious idea for human beings.

Nietzsche’s depiction of “original sin” as science is actually surprising, considering that he was quite critical of modern science. Why would he have then depicted the quest for science as a natural and noble cause? Perhaps Nietzsche’s emphasis on Adam’s and the woman’s desire for knowledge meant to emphasize the human aspect of the story. Nietzsche was concerned with how the story had characterized human nature, how it depicted curiosity and the natural desire to

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<sup>105</sup> Ibid.

<sup>106</sup> Ibid.

know more. Nietzsche wanted to highlight what he saw as the unfairness of the story. The Genesis creation story displayed for him what was one of the essential problems with Christianity: its denial of human nature. It seemed odd and foolish to Nietzsche that a god who claimed to love his creations would punish them for being what they were. Connected to his critique of morality, Nietzsche saw Genesis 3 as indicative of Christianity's attempt to subvert nature under this kind of morality. For this reason, Nietzsche examined many aspects of the story that dealt with human nature and "morals" – knowledge, obedience, faithfulness, relationships, and the differences between men and women – and found them all troublesome.

The question we are left with after reading Nietzsche's interpretation of "original sin" is why it is pertinent to the Western tradition of the concept. Nietzsche's attitudes towards and critiques of Christianity were exceedingly complex, too much so to do them justice here. Nonetheless, Nietzsche is one of the most significant modern critics of Christianity, and was for some time, a follower of Christianity himself. Like the three thinkers before him, Nietzsche's critique provided some answers to the Genesis story, even if he also was unable to fully answer all of them. Again, my questions are: 1) why is the woman unnamed? 2) How is the serpent convincing?; 3) When does death enter the scene?; 4) Why is nudity a marker?; 5) Why do things degenerate so rapidly?; and 6) When does sin exactly enter the story?

While Nietzsche's insights into the gender dynamics of the story did not necessarily reveal why the woman was unnamed, he did acknowledge her role in a way the three theologians before him had not. Perhaps she was unnamed because she had brought sin into the world or perhaps because she was not "truth" yet. Though still unclear, it is significant that Nietzsche lifted her up as an active character and highlighted the inferiority theologians had often bestowed upon her. She was much more sympathetic in Nietzsche's reading, a trait that also perhaps

explained why the serpent had been convincing. The serpent had promised something that human beings naturally desired, for which they constantly searched. In Nietzsche's eyes, if anyone was to blame for Adam and the woman's disobedience, it had been God. Nietzsche believed that God's immaturity and insecurity were why things had also degenerated so rapidly. God had not wanted Adam and Eve to have knowledge, so he decided to introduce pain and death into the world to make it that much harder to learn. For Nietzsche, the Genesis story did not reflect poorly on Adam and the woman, but on the one who had created them.

However, the most interesting answer that Nietzsche attempted to provide concerned when sin came into the story. For Nietzsche, although he had deemed "original sin" as the first attempt at science, his project was to refute the very idea of sin. By highlighting how masochistic and unnatural it was, Nietzsche wanted to show how the idea of "original sin" was a lie, a lie that had done nothing but intimidated people from living out their natural desires and instincts. Why had nudity been such a marker? Because "original sin" was supposed to make Adam and the woman guilty for being in their natural state. For Nietzsche, the concept of 'original sin' had allowed Christianity to convince people that they were depraved and guilty merely for being human, something he could never accept. "Original sin" was not part of a story about the corrupt human will, or Christ's love, or the worthless and hopeless state of man. For Nietzsche sin, original or otherwise, did not exist.

## EPILOGUE

By performing a critical reading of Genesis 3 and examining four major interpretations of it, I have presented a reception history of "original sin." Despite the popular conceptions

surrounding “original sin,” I have highlighted not only some of the intricacies and nuances of the biblical text but also the dynamic and fluid nature of the story as it has developed among different thinkers. As this paper has shown, four major thinkers who have contributed to “original sin” story in the Western tradition have been Augustine of Hippo, Thomas Aquinas, Martin Luther, and Nietzsche. Amid their various social locations, theological commitments, and historical settings, each provided readings that aimed to understand what “original sin” was and how it connected to human beings. Augustine had determined “original sin” was the corruption of the will, Aquinas, a deficient ability to know God, Luther, a depraved and hopeless humanity, and Nietzsche, human beings’ first attempt at seeking knowledge. Together, these interpretations provided some of the answers to the questions with which I began my inquiry: 1) why is the woman unnamed? 2) How is the serpent convincing?; 3) When does death enter the scene?; 4) Why is nudity a marker?; 5) Why do things degenerate so rapidly?; and 6) When does sin exactly enter the story? Whether anyone will ever answer all of these questions remains to be seen.

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