

## Handouts on Genesis 2–3 for “Teaching Creation: A Modular Approach”

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### Genesis 3: The “Fall” and Original Sin

The doctrine of original sin is an example of a Catholic teaching that derives from a combination of Scripture, Tradition, and the teaching authority of the Church that interprets revelation.

Note that Judaism accepts Genesis 3 as Scripture, but has no doctrine of original sin. Instead, Judaism teaches that humans have an “inclination to evil” and an “inclination to good.” This teaching is based on the biblical statement that creation is good (Gen 1:31) and humans are made in the image of God (Gen 1:27), but humans continuously sin (Gen 6:5, The LORD saw that the wickedness of humankind was great in the earth, and that every inclination of the thoughts of their hearts was only evil continually).

Christian interpretation of Genesis 3 begins to move toward a notion of original sin within the New Testament. St. Paul write in Romans 5:12-21: Therefore, just as sin came into the world through one man, and death came through sin, so death spread to all because all have sinned . . . . Yet death exercised dominion from Adam to Moses, even over those whose sins were not like the transgression of Adam, who is a type of the one who was to come . . . . If, because of one man’s trespass, death exercised dominion through that one, much more surely will those who receive the abundance of grace and the free gift of righteousness exercise dominion in life through one man, Jesus Christ . . .

Church Fathers took up Paul’s line of thinking and expanded on it. For example, St. Augustine (4th century) writes: For, as soon as our first parents had transgressed the commandment, divine grace forsook them . . . and therefore they took fig leaves . . . and covered their shame; for though their members remained the same, they had shame now where they had none before. They experienced a new motion of their flesh, which had become disobedient to them, in strict retribution of their own disobedience to God. For the soul, reveling in its own liberty, and scorning to serve God, was itself deprived of the command it formerly maintained over the body . . . . Then began the flesh to lust against the Spirit, in which strife we are born, deriving from the first transgression a seed of death, and bearing in our members, and in our vitiated nature, the contest or even victory of the flesh.

In 1546, the Council of Trent restated the traditional teaching concerning original sin in response to the reformers who claimed that the sacrament of baptism did not remove the guilt of original sin: In those who are born again [baptized], God hates nothing . . . but . . . are made innocent, immaculate, pure, guiltless and beloved of God . . . so that there is nothing whatever to hinder their entrance into heaven. But this holy council perceives and confesses that in the one baptized there remains concupiscence or an inclination to sin, which, since it is left for us to wrestle with, cannot injure those who do not acquiesce but resist manfully by the grace of Christ.

As modern scientific theories about the origins of the universe and human beings made the literal reading of Genesis 3 untenable, Vatican II (*Gaudium et spes*, 13) restated the basic idea of original sin without recourse to a literal reading of the text: What Revelation makes known to us is confirmed by our own experience. For when man looks into his own heart he finds that he is drawn toward what is wrong and sunk in many evils which cannot come from his good creator. . . . Man therefore is divided within himself. As a result, the whole life of men, both individual and social, shows itself to be a struggle, and a dramatic one, between good and evil, between light and darkness. . . . Both the high calling and deep misery which men experience find their final explanation in the light of this Revelation.

Contemporary theologians are seeking to articulate the content of the doctrine in a way that accommodates contemporary scientific knowledge. These theories become complicated, but one theologian (Steven Duffy) summarizes the core of the doctrine as follows: [Original sin] is the contradiction between what humans are and what they are called to become in Christ.

Immanuel Kant (from *Conjectures on the Beginning of Human History*, 1786)

Modern philosophers during the Enlightenment (1600s and 1700s) interpreted Genesis 3 not as a “Fall,” but a rise from barbarism to civilization.

Initially, the newcomer must have been guided solely by instinct, that voice of God which all animals obey. It permitted him to use some things as food and forbade him to use others (Gen 3:2-3). . . . So long as inexperienced man obeyed this call of nature, his lot was a happy one. But reason soon made its presence felt and sought to extend his knowledge of foodstuffs beyond the bounds of instinct; it did so by comparing his usual diet with [similar seeming

things] (Gen 3:6). Even if instinct did not recommend it, this experiment had a chance of succeeding so long as instinct did not contradict it. But it is a peculiarity of reason that it is able, with the help of the imagination, to invent desires which not only lack any corresponding natural impulse, but are even at variance with the latter. Such desires . . . gradually engender . . . luxuriousness. But the outcome of that first experiment whereby man became conscious of his reason as a faculty which can extend beyond the limits to which all animals are confined was of great importance, and it influenced his way of life decisively. Thus, there may have been only a fruit which, because it looked similar to other agreeable fruits which he had previously tasted, encouraged him to make the experiment. . . . This was enough to give reason the initial inducement to quibble with the voice of nature (Gen 3:1), and despite the latter's objections, to make the first experiment in free choice—an experiment which, since it was the first, probably did not turn out as expected. No matter how trivial the harm it did may have been, it was nevertheless enough to open man's eyes (Gen 3:7). He discovered in himself an ability to choose his own way of life without being tied to any single one like the other animals. But the momentary gratification this momentary realization of his superiority may have afforded him was inevitably followed at once by anxiety and fear as to how he should employ his newly discovered ability . . . . Whereas instinct had hitherto directed him towards individual objects of his desire, an infinite range of objects now opened up, and he did not yet know how to choose between them. Yet now that he had tasted this state of freedom, it was impossible for him to return to a state of servitude under the rule of instinct.

The last step which reason took, thereby raising man completely above animal society, was his (albeit obscure) realization that he is the true end of nature, and that nothing that lives on earth can compete with him in this respect. When he first said to the sheep, 'the fleece which you wear was given to you by nature not for your own use, but for mine' and took it from the sheep to wear it himself (Gen 3:21), he became aware of a prerogative which, by his nature, he enjoyed over all the animals; and he now no longer regarded them as fellow creatures, but as means and instruments to be used at will for the attainment of whatever ends he pleased. . . .

Thus, man had attained a position of equality with all rational beings, whatever their rank (Gen 3:22), because he could claim to be an end in himself, to be accepted as such by all others, and not to be used by anyone else simply as a means to other ends. . . . Consequently, this step of reason is also associated with man's release from the womb of nature, a change of status which undoubtedly does him honor, but which is at the same time fraught with danger; for it expelled him from the harmless and secure condition of a protected childhood—from a garden, as it were, which provided for him without any effort on his part (Gen 3:23)—and thrust him out into the world at large, where so many cares, labors, and unknown evils awaited him.

### The "Fall": Blaming the Woman

Traditional interpretations have placed the greater share of blame for the Fall on Eve and generally discredited women as rebellious and unreliable.

**Sirach 25:14** [ca. 200 BC, one of the books in Catholic and Orthodox Bibles, but not in Jewish or Protestant Bibles.]  
From a woman was sin's beginning, and because of her, we all die.

**Romans 5:12-14** [New Testament, ca. 55 AD, by St. Paul]

12 Therefore, just as sin came into the world through one man, and death came through sin, and so death spread to all because all have sinned— 13 sin was indeed in the world before the law, but sin is not reckoned when there is no law. 14 Yet death exercised dominion from Adam to Moses, even over those whose sins were not like the transgression of Adam, who is a type of the one who was to come.

**Ephesians 5:22-33** [New Testament, ca. 80 AD, by a student of Paul]

Wives, be subject to your husbands as you are to the Lord. 23 For the husband is the head of the wife just as Christ is the head of the church, the body of which he is the Saviour. 24 Just as the church is subject to Christ, so also wives ought to be, in everything, to their husbands. 25 Husbands, love your wives, just as Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her, 26 in order to make her holy by cleansing her with the washing of water by the word, 27 so as to present the church to himself in splendour, without a spot or wrinkle or anything of the kind—yes, so that she may be holy and without blemish. 28 In the same way, husbands should love their wives as they do their own bodies. He who loves his wife loves himself. 29 For no one ever hates his own body, but he nourishes and tenderly cares for it, just as Christ does for the church, 30 because we are members of his body. 31 'For this reason a man will leave his father and mother and be joined to his wife, and the two will become one flesh.' 32 This is a great mystery, and I am applying it to Christ and the church. 33 Each of you, however, should love his wife as himself, and a wife should respect her husband.

**1 Timothy 2:13-14** [New Testament, ca. 80 AD, by a student of Paul]

I permit no woman to teach or have authority over men; she is to keep silent. For Adam was formed first, then Eve;

and Adam was not deceived, but the woman was deceived and became a transgressor.

**St. Ephraim (306-373) Commentary on Genesis** [Ephraim was an ancient Christian who lived in what is now Syria. He wrote an enormous quantity of literature in the Syriac language, which is a Semitic language related to Hebrew and Aramaic (Jesus spoke Aramaic). His work deeply influenced the development of Christianity in the Middle East.]

[Eve] then went after that which her eyes desired and, being enticed by the divinity that the serpent had promised her, she stole away from her husband and ate. Afterwards, she gave some to her husband and he ate with her. Because she believed the serpent she ate first, thinking that she would be clothed with divinity in the presence of that one from whom she, as woman, had been separated. She hastened to eat before her husband that she might become head over her head, that she might become the one to give command to that one by whom she was to be commanded and that she might be older in divinity than that one who was older than she in humanity.

**St. Ambrose, *Paradise* 12.56.** [ca. 375. Ambrose was bishop of Milan in Italy from 374–397 and a Doctor of the Church. He was famous for several well-received theological works and has a significant influence on St. Augustine (see Augustine’s Confessions).]

But the woman’s reply will indicate that that there was nothing questionable in the command of God: “Of the fruit of all the trees in the garden, we may eat, but of the fruit of the tree in the middle of the garden, God said, you shall not eat of it neither shall you touch it, lest you die” [Gen 2:16]. There was nothing inexact about the command itself. The error lay in the report of the command. The Scriptural passage under discussion is self-explanatory. We realize that we ought not to make any addition to a command even by way of instruction. Any addition or qualification of a command is in the nature of a falsification. The simple, original form of a command should be preserved or the facts should be duly set before us. It frequently happens that a witness adds something of himself to a relation of facts. In this way, by the injection of an untruth, confidence in his testimony is wholly shattered. No addition therefore—not even a good one—is called for. What is, therefore, at first sight objectionable in the addition made by the woman: “Neither shall you touch anything of it”? God did not say this, but rather: “You must not eat.” Still, we have here something that leads to error. There are two possibilities to the addition she made: Either it is superfluous, or because of this personal contribution she has made God’s command only partly intelligible. John in his writings has made this clear: “If anyone shall add to them, God will add unto him the plagues that are written in this book. And if anyone shall take away from these words of the book of this prophecy, God will take away his portion from the tree of life” [Apocalypse 22:18-19]. If this is true in this case, how much truer is it that nothing should be taken away from the commands laid down by God! From this springs the primary violation of the command. And many believe that this was Adam’s fault—not the woman’s. They reason that Adam in his desire to make her more cautious had said to the woman that God had given the additional instruction: “Neither shall you touch it.” We know that it was not Eve, but Adam, who received the command from God, because the woman had not yet been created. Scripture does not reveal the exact words that Adam used when he disclosed to her the nature and content of the command. At all events, we understand that the substance of the command was given to the woman by the man. What opinions others have offered on this subject should be taken into consideration. It seems to me, however, that the initial violation and deceit was due to the woman. Although there may appear to be an element of uncertainty in deciding which of the two was guilty, we can discern the sex which was liable first to do wrong. Add to this the fact that she stands convicted in court whose previous error is afterward revealed. The woman is responsible for the man’s error and not vice-versa. Hence Paul says, “Adam was not deceived, but the woman was deceived and was in sin.”

**St. Ambrose, *Paradise* 14.72**

Because Eve has admitted her crime, she is given a milder and more salutary sentence, which condemned her wrongdoing and did not refuse pardon. She was to serve under her husband’s power, first, that she might not be inclined to do wrong, and, secondly, that being in a position subject to a stronger vessel, she might not dishonor her husband, but on the contrary, might be governed by his counsel [cf. 1 Peter 3:7]. I see clearly here the mystery of Christ and his Church. The Church’s turning toward Christ in times to come and a religious servitude submissive to the word of God—these are conditions far better than the liberty of this world. Hence it is written: “You shall fear the LORD your God and serve him only” [Deut 6:13]. Servitude, therefore, of this sort is a gift of God. Wherefore, compliance with this servitude is to be reckoned among the blessings... By this kind of servitude Christian people grow strong, as we have it expressed in the words of the Lord to his disciples: “Whoever wishes to be first among you, let him be the slave of you all” [Matthew 20:27]. Hence love, which is greater than hope and faith, brings this servitude to pass, for it is written: “By love serve one another” [Galatians 5:13]. This, then, is the mystery mentioned by the Apostle in reference to Christ and the Church [Ephesians 5:32].

**St. Augustine, *The Literal Meaning of Genesis*, Book 11, chap. 37** [ca. 401. Augustine, like Ambrose, is a Doctor of the Church. After his misspent youth as a Manichean, he was baptized by Ambrose in 387, became a priest in 391, and bishop of Hippo Regius (in modern Algeria) in 396. He was the most prolific writer in early Christianity and his work deeply influenced the subsequent development of Christianity in the West (Catholicism and Protestantism). This

work is a detailed commentary on the first three chapters of Genesis.]

And furthermore we must give consideration to the statement, And you shall be subject to your husband, and he shall rule over you, to see how it can be understood in the proper sense. For we must believe that even before her sin woman had been made to be ruled by her husband and to be submissive and subject to him. But we can with reason understand that the servitude meant in these words is that in which there is a condition similar to that of slavery rather than a bond of love (so that the servitude by which men later began to be slaves to other men obviously has its origin in punishment for [original] sin). St. Paul say, Through love serve one another [Galatians 5:13]. But by no means would he say, "Have dominion over one another." Hence married persons through love can serve one another, but St. Paul does not permit a woman to rule over a man. The sentence pronounced by God gave this power rather to man; and it is not by her nature but rather by her sin that woman deserved to have her husband for a master. But if this order is not maintained, nature will be corrupted still more, and sin will be increased.

**St. Augustine (354-430) from *The City of God* 14.11**

[Satan by means of the serpent] first tried his deceit upon the woman, making his assault upon the weaker part of that human alliance, that he might gradually gain the whole, and not supposing that the man would readily give ear to him, or be deceived, but that he might yield to the error of the woman. . . . The woman accepted as true what the serpent told her, but the man could not bear to be severed from his only companion, even though this involved a partnership in sin. He was not on this account less culpable, but sinned with his eyes open.

The "Fall": Rescuing Eve's Reputation

Many modern interpreters (especially feminists) have exposed ways in which the traditional understanding of Genesis 3 derived less from the biblical text than the prejudices of the interpreters. The first quote below is a rare example of an ancient interpretation of Genesis 3 that places the blame more on Adam than Eve. The second quote is from a contemporary feminist.

**Abot de R. Nathan (A) chap. 1** [A Midrash, or narrative commentary, on Genesis 3 from an ancient Jewish source]

The text says, "And God commanded Adam saying, "of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil you shall not eat, for in the day that you eat of it you shall die" [Gen 2:17]. But Adam did not choose to tell God's word to Eve exactly as they had been spoken. Instead he said to her, "God said, 'You shall not eat of the fruit of the tree which is in the midst of the garden, neither shall you touch it, lest you die'" [cf. Gen 3:3]. Whereupon the wicked serpent said to himself, "Since I seem to be unable to trip up Adam, let me go and trip up Eve." He went and sat down next to her and started talking with her. He said, "Now you say that God has forbidden us to touch the tree. Well, I can touch the tree and not die, and so can you." What did the wicked serpent then do? He touched the tree with his hands and feet and shook it so hard that some of the fruit fell to the ground . . . . Then he said to her, "[You see? So Likewise] you say that God has forbidden us to eat from the tree. But I can eat from it and not die, and so can you." What did Eve think to herself? "All the things that my husband has told me are lies." . . . Whereupon she took the fruit and ate it and gave it to Adam and he ate, as it is written, "The woman saw that the tree was good to eat from and a delight to the eyes" [Gen 3:6].

**Alice L. Laffey** [*An Introduction to the Old Testament: A Feminist Perspective*, 1988]

Male chauvinists interpreting this text have blamed [Eve] for all the sin in the world. Feminists are now lauding her as a true initiator, the significant decision maker in the story. . . . [However,] she—and the serpent and the man—each had a role in disobeying God. Each bore a punishment; most likely, the author intended to explain the reality of female submission—a situation contrary to the man's equal helpmate (chap. 2) and a situation worthy of lament—as well as the lamentable situation that women gave birth to their babies with great pain, as the price paid for woman's part in the disobedience. Nothing more and nothing less. . . . One must conclude that to malign Eve as the cause of sin in the world and to defend such a depiction on the basis of Genesis 2–3 is to do a grave injustice to textual interpretation and to women. It is to do interpretation out of a gross patriarchal bias.

See also and especially the reading from **Phyllis Tribble** posted on Blackboard. Her article, published in 1973, changed the way most scholars read Genesis 2–3. She was awarded the Yves Congar Award for Theological Excellence by Barry University in 2001.

Since Christians have seen a parallel between Adam and Jesus (see Romans 5:12-14, quoted above), they have also developed parallels between Eve and Mary. The first two quotes are from the 2nd Century and the last two from the 4th Century.

**Justin Martyr, Dialogue with Trypho, Chap. 100** [ca. 135 AD, Justin was a philosopher who sought wisdom. His quest finally lead him to Christianity (which he spoke of as a philosophy). His Dialogue lays out many biblical interpretations that become standard in Christian tradition. He also wrote two “apologies” in which he argues to the Romans that they should not persecute Christians. He died as a martyr.]

He became man by the Virgin, in order that the disobedience which proceeded from the serpent might receive its destruction in the same manner in which it derived its origin. For Eve, who was a virgin and undefiled, having conceived the word of the serpent, brought forth disobedience and death. But the Virgin Mary received faith and joy, when the angel Gabriel announced the good tidings to her that the Spirit of the Lord would come to her, and the power of the Highest would overshadow her. Wherefore also the Holy Thing begotten of her is the Son of God; and she replied, “Be it unto me according to thy word.” And by her has He been born . . . by whom God destroys both the serpent and those angels and men who are like him.

**Irenaeus, Against Heresies, 3.22.4** [ca. 140 AD, Irenaeus was bishop of Lyon until his martyrdom in 177. He wrote many works defending and articulating the Christian faith against a variety of heresies.]

In accordance with this design, Mary the Virgin is found obedient, saying, “Behold the handmaiden of the Lord; be it unto me according to thy word.” But Eve was disobedient; for she did not obey when yet she was a Virgin, . . . having become disobedient, was made the cause of death, both to herself and to the entire human race. And on this account does the law term a woman betrothed to a man, the wife of him who had betrothed her, although she was as yet a virgin; thus indicating the back-reference from Mary to Eve, because what is joined together could not otherwise be put asunder than by inversion of the process by which these bonds of union had arisen; so that the former ties be cancelled by the latter, that the latter may set the former at liberty again. . . . And thus also it was that the knot of Eve’s disobedience was loosed by the obedience of Mary. For what the virgin Eve had bound fast through unbelief, this did the virgin Mary set free through faith.

**St. Jerome, Letter 22.21** [ca. 400 AD. Jerome was one of the rare ancient Christians who studied Hebrew. He produced the Latin version of the Bible known as the Vulgate that was, until recently, the standard Bible of the Catholic Church. He is the patron saint of biblical scholars.]  
Death came through Eve, but life has come through Mary.

**St. Augustine, Homily 51.3**

[By being born of a woman] He has shown us, that humans of neither sex might despair of its salvation, for the sexes are male and female. If therefore being a man . . . He had not been born of a woman, women might have despaired of themselves, as mindful of their first sin, because by a woman was the first man deceived, and would have thought that they had no hope at all in Christ. He came therefore as a man to make special choice of that sex, and was born of a woman to console the female sex. . . . Let each sex then at once see its honor, and confess its iniquity, and let them both hope for salvation. The poison to deceive man was presented him by woman, through woman let salvation for man’s recovery be presented; so let woman make amends for the sin by which she deceived the man, by giving birth to Christ. For the same reason again, women were the first to announce to the Apostles to Resurrection of God.