

**LYDIA JAEGER**

## **Models of the Fall Including a Historical Adam as Ancestor of All Humans: Scientific and Theological Constraints**

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### **Response to Peter G. Nelson and Andrew Steane**

First of all, I would like to thank Peter G. Nelson and Andrew Steane for their comments on my article. They are mostly concerned with certain aspects of the strong notion of original sin that my article assumed rather than defended. The editor has kindly allowed me some space to respond, which I will therefore use in order to explain my view on these subjects.

Let me start with Steane's first comment on my treatment of sin. Steane helpfully points out that sin covers different realities: it refers both to specific acts (or omission of acts) and to 'a disposition towards bad ways of thinking and behaving'. When I used the phrase 'Eve's partaking in Adam's sin', I had the first meaning in mind: Adam and Eve partook together in the first sin by both eating from the forbidden tree (using the language of the second creation account). When I spoke of 'a mechanism for the transmission of original sin', I was thinking of the second meaning. There are accounts of original sin that include the transmission of original guilt, that is the guilt of Adam's first sin is transmitted to his descendants. My article is agnostic on this point and its conclusions do not depend on which side of the debate one chooses.<sup>1</sup> I agree with Steane that 'the disposition to think and act in certain ways can be transmitted, and we know how: it is transmitted through the combination of nature and nurture'. My article tries to go beyond this general statement and to make some suggestions about how this combination of nature and nurture may work. I leave it to the reader to decide whether or not they are helpful.

Our disagreement concerns the moral evaluation of this disposition towards sinful ways of thoughts and deeds: I consider, and Steane does not, that this very disposition is *culpable*. On what grounds do I reject the contention that 'the thing to be avoided is the practice of identifying what people are on the basis of something other than their actual choices'? First and foremost, there are solid biblical grounds for the view that the disposition towards evil thinking and acting is not morally and religiously neutral. To start with, this is the viewpoint of the book of Genesis itself: the judgment of the flood is brought about man because 'every intention

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<sup>1</sup> Thus statement 1 in the list which Steane provides at the outset of his letter does not correspond to a position which I endorse. Statement 5 and 6 correspond to positions I criticise in the article.

of the thoughts of his heart was only evil continually' (Gen 6:5-7).<sup>2</sup> In subsequent biblical texts, the Lord repeatedly accuses sinful humans of being rebels 'from before birth' (Isa 48:8; Ps 58:3-4; cf. Gen 8:21). Unless one considers that unborn children can already commit specific sinful acts, this implies that the very inclination to sinful action offers grounds for divine accusation and condemnation. This view is confirmed by the apostle Paul when he writes that all humans are 'by nature children of wrath' (Eph 2:3). 'Children of x' is a Hebraism, meaning that because of their corrupted nature, all people are under God's judgement. This is in line with David's confession: 'I was sinful at birth, sinful from the time my mother conceived me' (Ps 51:5, NIV). I agree with Steane that the psalm 'should be received as a whole and mulled over as that which it is: a poem and a heartfelt cry, not a technical dissertation on doctrine'. But this is precisely the way the psalmist teaches us that 'a sense of wrongness deep in his nature and in all human society' (to quote Steane again) concerns something which is not morally neutral. Notice how the quoted verse functions in the overall movement of David's confession of sin. It is not a lament about some unfortunate fact, for which the psalmist does not bear any responsibility. Nor is it used as an excuse ('I can't do any better, given where I come from'). Instead, it serves to bring into light even more fully David's guilt: 'Not only have I behaved badly, but my act manifests what I *am*, deep down to the very root of my being'.

In addition to the biblical data, further arguments can be put forward in support of original sin as outlined above. It is certainly the majority traditional view. Not only do convinced Augustinians, Lutherans and Calvinists accept it, but for example John Wesley considered that the doctrine of total and sinful corruption constitutes a strategic difference between any non-Christian belief system and the Christian faith. In his sermon on original sin, he speaks 'about one grand fundamental difference between Christianity ... and the most refined Heathenism':

Many of the ancient Heathens have largely described the vices of particular men. ... Some have dared to say that 'no man is born without vices of one kind or another'. But still as none of them were apprized of the fall of man, so none of them knew of his total corruption. ... This, therefore, is the first grand distinguishing point between Heathenism and Christianity. The one acknowledges that many men are infected with many vices, and even born with a proneness to them ... The other declares that all men are conceived in sin,' and 'shapen in wickedness;' -- that hence there is in every man a 'carnal mind, which is enmity against God ...'

Allow this, and you are so far a Christian. Deny it, and you are but an

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<sup>2</sup> Unless otherwise stated, all biblical quotations are taken from the English Standard Version (ESV).

Heathen still.<sup>3</sup>

I agree with Steane that the traditional doctrine of sin is a scandal for the modern Western mind and that we need to carefully reflect upon it and diligently explain it, avoiding as far possible any misunderstandings. But we cannot do away with it, because the message of salvation we bring to the world depends on a correct diagnosis of the ill to be cured.

Considering the disposition towards sinful thoughts and acts to be itself sinful is also in line with the biblical emphasis on the importance of the heart, of the inner motivations. Since God is omniscient, his judgment will take into account not only 'the realities how people behave in tangible measurable ways' (to use Steane's words), but 'people's secrets' (Rom 2:16). This is even identified as a difference between divine and human evaluation, safeguarding the fairness of the former: 'People look at the outward appearance, but the Lord looks at the heart' (1 Sam 16:7, NIV; cf. Heb 4:12). As moral subjects, persons are not only blamed and praised for what they do, but for what they are, in terms of inclinations, habits and character.

The Bible repeatedly emphasises that God's judgment will be 'according to each one's deeds' (2 Cor 5:10; 1 Pet 1:17). But deeds are not to be understood in a restricted sense as 'tangible measurable' behaviour. In fact, what is measurable for God is different from what is tangible for us. Thus his judgment will not only take into account acts, but also words (Matt 12:36), thoughts (Matt 5:22,28), and will even 'disclose the purposes of the heart' (1 Cor 4:5; cf. Rev 3:23). Sinful dispositions and specific evil acts can't be neatly dissociated. In fact, Blocher's quotation (which Steane approves) shows that it is incoherent to take an inclination to wrongdoing to be morally neutral: 'Righteousness is disposition, behaviour, relationship. ... To lack righteousness is to *practise* unrighteousness.'<sup>4</sup> But if that is true, then nobody can be in the state of lacking righteousness without being unrighteous. Having an inclination to evil thoughts and acts is itself unrighteous.

With regard to the sinful bending of the human will, we have to ponder the paradox outlined in Romans 7: it is both true that '*I do not do the good I want, but the evil I do not want is what I keep on doing*'; and that '*it is no longer I who do it, but sin that dwells within me*' (v. 19-20). Our disposition towards evil thoughts and deeds is both inflicted on us and confirmed by us whenever we act in accordance to our sinful inclinations. Therefore it is not unjust that divine judgment goes deep down, right to the root of our being. That this being is influenced by the whole of human history, and in particular by the tragic choice of our first parents, may be a scandal to

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<sup>3</sup> John Wesley, *Sermon 44 'Original Sin*, retrieved 10 July, 2017, <http://wesley.nnu.edu/john-wesley/the-sermons-of-john-wesley-1872-edition/sermon-44-original-sin>.

<sup>4</sup> Blocher, H. *Original Sin: Illuminating the Riddle*, Leicester: Apollos (1997), p. 121.

the modern Western mind with its over-individualistic understanding of persons. But it may well be worthwhile to rediscover the diverse channels of solidarity which unite the human family. They are part of God's good creation, even if they are also sadly corrupted and put to evil use in the propagation of sin.

Let me now turn to Steane's second remark on human death as the consequence of the first sin. In my article, I do not adopt the view that human mortality is the result of sin, but I do defend the view that the actual occurrence of human death resulted from the primeval sin. That is, the original state of humans allowed for the possibility of death, but humans only died because they had sinned. This is once again the traditional view. Pelagius, at the turn of the fifth century, held human death to be natural. At first glance, there is much to be said in favour of such a view and Steane rightly points to the all-pervasiveness of death in the natural order. But the obvious reading of New Testament texts such as Romans 5:12; 6:23 and 1 Corinthians 15:21 led the Christian Church to reject such a view. It would go against principles of sound interpretation if one restricted the meaning of the word 'death' in these texts to 'spiritual death', thereby excluding physical death. A word has to be understood in its most common sense unless the context leads us to adopt a less common meaning. Although death which is 'the wages of sin' certainly goes beyond physical death, it includes this dimension as well.

Paul's reading of the Genesis account of origins finds support in the book itself.<sup>5</sup> The attentive reader simply cannot read the recurring refrain 'and he died' in the first genealogy in Genesis 5 without discerning in this fact the fulfilment of the warning in Genesis 2:17: 'In the day that you eat of it [the tree of the knowledge of good and evil] you shall surely die.' And Paul is not alone in his understanding of sin and death. The most prominent Old Testament voice joining Paul in his reading of the opening chapters of Genesis is certainly Ecclesiastes, with his lament about the vanity of human existence in the face of death.

That the death which entered into the world by the first sin includes physical death is particularly clear when Paul in 1 Corinthians 15 underlines that it is overcome by Christ's resurrection (1 Cor 15:21-22; cf. v.47-49)<sup>6</sup>. The whole chapter is concerned with the hope of bodily resurrection. It

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5 On the OT background of 1 Corinthians 15:21-22, see Wright, N.T. *The Resurrection of the Son of God*, London: SPCK (2003), p. 334: 'This passage is, indeed, all about new creation as the fulfillment and redemption of the old. ... The stories of creation and fall, as told in Genesis 1.26-28 and 3.17-19, lie below the surface throughout, and the later parts of the chapter will allude frequently to the same passages.'

6 In the second passage, Paul does not distinguish between what belongs to the Adam's earthly created condition and what is due to corruption, as his focus is on the future hope of a renewed bodily existence. But v. 56 leaves no doubt where the power of death originated from: 'The sting of death is sin' (Blocher *op. cit.*,(4), p. 48).

is in this context that Paul states: ‘The last enemy to be destroyed is death’ (v. 26). Far from being natural, human death is a foe of God’s good created order. It was conquered at the Cross, when the Son of God died physically in order to pay for sin. His bodily resurrection made the victory over death manifest on Easter morning. Death will be definitively suppressed at the resurrection of all humans when Christ returns. Thus taking human bodily death to be natural, part of the created order, changes the content of the gospel hope. This is the fundamental reason that we can’t follow Pelagius and his view of human death as part of the natural order.

But can this view be upheld in the light of what we know about the importance of death for life? Biological life simply cannot flourish without death processes occurring at every level. The key to this puzzle lies in the breadth of the semantic field of the word ‘death’ in English (and most, if not all, modern languages). Cell ‘death’ does not imply the end of the existence of a self-conscious individual. I do not see any reason why anybody should consider its occurrence to be a moral (or even a natural) evil. Even the death of a sentient animal has a very different theological weight from the end of the bodily existence of a being created in the image of God. Humans are meant to be covenant partners with the living God. It is here that the theological scandal of human death lies and that Jesus himself grounds the hope of future (bodily) resurrection (Luke 20:37-38). My article tries to outline a model of how we can hold to both a created mortal nature and human death as a consequence of sin. It can certainly be improved upon and it does not answer all the questions.<sup>7</sup> But even if we currently had no sufficient model at hand, we could not give up the theological conviction that human physical death is a consequence of the fall, given the coherence of the biblical teaching on death and how it will be overcome.

It is time to move on to the question Nelson raises. Nelson asks if Genesis teaches the doctrine of original sin. Note the limited scope of the question raised: even if original sin could not be found in Genesis, it would be a valid doctrine, as other biblical passages teach it.<sup>8</sup> But given the foundational character of the opening chapters of Genesis, it is still interesting to see whether the doctrine of original sin is present there.

The answer to the question is an unambiguous yes, as soon as one realises that the author (as is the case for many Old Testament narrative texts) teaches more by showing than by telling:<sup>9</sup> instead of explicitly stat-

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7 As e.g. the population problem which Steane raises. As far as I can see, the Genesis texts are just not concerned with this kind of counterfactual problem and I don’t see why we should be under any obligation to solve it. Let us also not forget that God foreknew the decision of the first humans. Thus the population problem was from the outset a theoretical problem.

8 See the references already provided in response to Steane’s first comment.

9 Collins, C.J. *Genesis 1-4: A Linguistic, Literary, and Theological Commentary*, Philippsburg, NJ : P&R Publishing (2006), pp. 11-12 ; and Collins, C.J. *Did Adam and Eve really exist ? Who they were and why it matters*, Nottingham : IVP(2011), pp. 24, 61.

ing most doctrinal truths, he narrates the story from which the reader is meant to infer them for himself.

The goodness of the original creation is explicitly affirmed in Genesis 1:31. With this background, Genesis 2-3 describes the first human sin and how discord, pain, toil and death entered into human experience as a consequence (Gen 3:16-19). The sanction against the serpent explicitly mentions the woman's offspring (v. 15, cf. v. 20). What happened in Eden was not some isolated event, but had consequences for all Adam and Eve's children. All of their descendants now live outside of Eden as a result of their first parents' act (Gen 3:24).

The consequences of the primeval sin are not limited to the *punishment* for sin. The foremost – and perhaps most dreadful – consequence of the first sin was the proliferation of sin itself. Genesis 4 shows this very clearly: Adam and Eve's firstborn son cannot live in peace with his brother, but first envies and then murders him (Gen 4:5-8). Cain's determination to sin goes beyond what his parents had done: he murders his brother even after having been explicitly warned by the Lord not to persist in his evil ways (v. 6-7). In Cain's line, Lamech incarnates the proliferation of revenge and anger: 'If Cain's revenge is sevenfold, then Lamech's is seventy-sevenfold' (Gen 4:24). There are signs of hope as well, when the text states that at the time of Enosh, 'people began to call upon the name of the Lord' (v. 26). But these signs of hope are to be held against a progressively darkening background, until at the time of the flood, 'the Lord saw that the wickedness of man was great in the earth, and that every intention of the thoughts of his heart was only evil continually' (Gen 6:5). Even the drastic judgment of the flood, eradicating all but one human family, does not change this assessment. It remains true that 'the intention of man's heart is evil from his youth' (Gen 8:21), as the behaviour of Noah himself sadly confirms (Gen 9:21). The short mention of Enoch who 'walked with God' (Gen 5:24) does not invalidate this conclusion, as the expression is nowhere used in Scripture to denote sinlessness. Instead, the text encourages the reader to have the right priorities. Enoch has the shortest lifespan of all antediluvian patriarchs. Long life is a (relative) good in the Old Testament, but 'your steadfast love is better than life' (Ps 63:3). All earthly blessings, good as they are, fade against the privilege of being taken up into the presence of the Lord.<sup>10</sup>

What is the origin of the proliferation of sin and universal human sinfulness, so woefully depicted in the biblical proto-history? The storyline of Genesis 1-11 leaves but one answer: the rebellion of the first humans led to a corruption of humanity, which has ever since marred history with evil, disaster and death. It is this fact that Christian theology would later name

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<sup>10</sup> Private communication from C. John Collins at the Dabar conference, June 15-17, 2017, Trinity Evangelical Divinity School, Deerfield (Illinois).

original sin. The name may not be present, but the reality is there from the very first pages of the Bible – together with the hope that in the fullness of time, the offspring of the woman would bruise the Serpent's head and restore what sin had corrupted.



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