

Evolution and Original Sin¹

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I. Introduction

Probably the major area of perceived conflict between the theory of evolution and Christian theology centers around the Christian doctrine of original sin. As traditionally formulated, this doctrine has involved three claims: (i) the claim that there was a first human couple, Adam and Eve, who existed in a paradisaical state of spiritual, moral, and intellectual rectitude, without corruption or sin, from which they fell by disobeying God; (ii) the claim that our nature is fallen as a result of this sin, and thus bound over to evil; and finally, following Augustine, it has often been considered part of this doctrine that (iii) all human beings are guilty of the sin of Adam and hence everyone is deserving of eternal death.²

Addressing the question of original sin involves at least five different dimensions, that of scripture, theology, church tradition, science, and experience. In this paper, I will attempt to put all these dimensions together into a coherent view of original sin. The view I will suggest is

¹ I would like to thank Keith Miller, George Murphy, John Yeatts, John Stanley, Doug Jacobsen, Richard McGough, Sandra Ellis-Killian, Thomas Ryba, and my wife Rebecca Adams for helpful comments on an earlier version of paper.

² As stated in the new catechism of the Roman Catholic Church (which reflects the traditional teaching), Adam and Eve were created in “an original state of holiness and justice,” from which they fell. (Article 375.) Further, “this sin affected the *human nature* that they would then transmit in a *fallen state*.” (Article 404.) (From, *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, New York, Doubleday, 1995.)

what I call the historical/ideal (HI) view, and I will argue that this view is scripturally, theologically, experientially, and scientifically sound, and retains the important theological core of the traditional idea. I will end by briefly indicate how this view fits into a coherent model of how God works within an evolving creation. (For my view of the nature of the evolutionary process, and God's relation to it, see section IV below.)

The Historical Ideal View

Although the HI view denies that human beings were ever in a paradisaal state, it nonetheless holds that the garden story in Genesis 2-3 is rich in theological meaning along several dimensions. First, this view claims, the original state described in the garden story represents an ideal state that was never realized. The idea is that Genesis 2 falls into the category of a "golden age" story. As the prominent anthropologist and historian of religion Mircea Eliade has pointed out, the idea of an ideal golden age was a widespread motif in the ancient world and symbolically represented the ideal for human beings.³ In light of the way these sort of golden age stories functioned in many ancient cultures, it is reasonable to suppose that the Genesis story would, among other things, serve as a symbolic story that provides a preliminary and partial sketch of what an ideal relation with God would be like.

Second, according to HI view, Adam and Eve play two further representative roles, that of representing "everyperson" – that is, each one of us – and that of representing the first hominids, or group of hominids, that had the capacity for free choice and self-consciousness. With this capacity for self-consciousness and free choice, the HI view hypothesizes that these hominids also became aware of God and God's requirements, but more often than not rejected it. One could even imagine that this awareness was particularly clear, uncluttered by the spiritual darkness that eventually clouded the minds of the human race because of their turning away from God. (See my discussion of Romans 1:18-32 in the next section for a scriptural justification of this claim.) So, in this sense, these first ancestors were in what could be considered an original state of "justice and holiness," free from bondage to sin. Nonetheless they were subject to various temptations arising both from the desires and instincts they inherited from their evolutionary past and from various new possibilities for self-centeredness, self-idolization, self-

³ *Myth and Reality*, New York: Harper and Row, 1963, pp. 50 - 51.

denigration, and the like that came with their new self-consciousness. Instead of the “Fall” corrupting human nature as in the traditional view, however, under the HI view the sinful acts of our first ancestors created a form of spiritual and moral darkness along with an accompanying bondage to sin.⁴ The motivations for preferring this view over the more traditional view will become clearer below, especially in section III, subsections (1) and (2).

Under the HI view, therefore, original sin refers to: (i) the sinful choices of these hominids, (ii) the continuing sinful choices of the succeeding generations including ourselves as we come to self-consciousness, and (iii) the resulting bondage to sin and spiritual darkness that is inherited from our ancestors and generated by our own choices. This spiritual darkness and bondage is hypothesized to be inherited in analogy to the way in which we inherit the genetics and culture from our ancestors. It should be stressed, however, that just as cultural inheritance operates at its own level, the psychological and social, this inheritance is hypothesized to operate on its own level (namely the “spiritual”), and therefore cannot be reduced to some sort of genetic or cultural inheritance, though it is no doubt deeply intertwined with these other levels. Further, like our cultural inheritance, this spiritual inheritance is not just personal, but has a communal dimension. And the hypothesis of such an inheritance makes sense. First, the existence of a spiritual dimension is plausible, being recognized by all major faith traditions

⁴ At least part of this spiritual bondage is bondage to the “principalities and powers” in heavenly realms. (For example, see Col. 1:13 and 6:12.) One way of understanding these principalities and powers, which fits well with the HI interpretation, is provided by Walter Wink’s extensive and important study of the New Testament’s use of these terms. The phrase “principalities and powers,” Wink claims, primarily refers to those *spiritual* and *invisible* forces and patterns that correspond to the internal dimensions of human existence, culture, and institutions, and that in turn exert great influence and control over human behavior. This spiritual or invisible dimension is claimed to be inextricably part of the nature of human culture and institutions, but not reducible to its outer manifestations. In the same way that the free choices of each individual affect our culture, though culture is something that transcends the sum of individuals, Wink claims that human sin has perverted these principalities and powers from their true calling, as given in Colossians 1:16. Wink links this perversion with the Fall, which Wink sees as referring to the “sedimentation of thousands of years of human choices for evil”(Wink, *Engaging the Powers*, p. 69). According to Wink, the redemption we have in Christ in turn has broken the hold these powers have over our life, and further enables us to help redeem them to their true purpose. (See, e.g., Col. 1: 13, 20.) (For a general account of Wink’s idea, see his highly acclaimed *Engaging the Powers: Discernment and Resistance in a World of Domination*, Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1992. For a more exegetical treatment of relevant New Testament passages, see his *Naming the Powers: The Language of Power in the New*

throughout the world. Second, given that there is a spiritual dimension to human beings, it makes sense that it would be inherited just as our physical and cultural characteristics are inherited.⁵

Further, I submit, this understanding of original sin increases the overall plausibility of the doctrine. First, under this understanding, original sin can be seen as a natural consequence of the assumption that human beings are spiritually interconnected, and that we have free will: if our ancestors had free will, it makes sense that they might have misused it, and thus that this misuse would have had negative spiritual consequences for their decedents. Second, the hypothesized original state of relatively “clear” awareness of God by our first ancestors follows from the assumption that God did not abandon the human race to moral and spiritual darkness from the very beginning. Without this hypothesis, one is left with a picture of God as an “abandoning father.”

Finally, it should be noted that although the HI view is in close conformity with many aspects of the traditional doctrine of original sin, with one qualification (see below) it disagrees with the idea that the Fall somehow deeply affected human nature, an idea advanced in both the western and eastern branches of Christianity. One problem with this idea is that it is not found in scripture, as will be seen when we look more closely at the relevant scriptural passages below. In fact, as I will argue below, scripture seems to suggest something closer to HI view – that is, the loss of direct awareness of God and bondage to sin. Another problem with this idea is that it is difficult to make sense of how human nature could have been corrupted or distorted, especially within an evolutionary perspective. There are three major views of the human person: the view

Testament, Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1984.)

⁵ Similar interpretations of original sin have been offered by many others, such as theologian and Christian apologist Bernard Ramm (*Offense to Reason: A Theology of Sin*, San Francisco: Harper and Row, 1985, Chapter 5), scientist/theologian Allan Day (“Adam, Anthropology and the Genesis Record – Taking Genesis Seriously in the Light of Contemporary Science,” in *Science and Christian Belief*, Vol. 10, No. 2, 1998, pp. 115 - 143), and scientist/theologian John Polkinghorne (*The Faith of a Physicist: Reflections of a Bottom-Up Thinker*, Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1994, p. 15) and Walter Wink (see footnote 4 above). None of these authors work this idea out in detail, however. Somewhat related theories of Original Sin can be found in the contemporary Roman Catholic theologians Piet Schoonenberg, S.J., and Bernard Lonergan, S.J. For references to the writings of these thinkers and for an accessible summary of some major Western understandings of the doctrine of original sin, see Tatha Wiley, *Original Sin: Origins, Developments, Contemporary Meanings* (New York, N.Y: Paulist Press, 2002.)

that we are merely physical objects, the view that we have a soul that emerges from the brain/body (either as an irreducible aspect of the brain or as a separate “immaterial” (or quasi-material) entity), and the view that we have a soul or spirit that was directly created by God and united with the body sometime at conception or between conception and birth. Under the first view, the Fall would have had to somehow corrupt or deeply distort our physical bodies, which seems particularly implausible from an evolutionary perspective. Under the second view, one would have to postulate that the Fall corrupted or distorted the laws governing the emergence of the soul from the brain in such a way that the soul now emerges in a corrupted form. Under the third view, since God creates each soul/spirit individually, God would have had to create each soul/spirit in a corrupt state in response to the Fall, which implies that the Fall did not directly cause each soul/spirit to be distorted. Finally, one might claim that the Fall disrupted the relationship between soul/spirit and body. This would mean that God changed the laws governing the relationship between soul and body in response to the Fall, which once again implies that the Fall did not directly corrupt or distort human nature.

I’m not claiming that there is no way around these difficulties, only that they present a significant problem. One could, for instance, try to circumvent this problem by holding a view in which original sin is a sort of inherited “virus” that infects the soul as soon as it is created by God; or one could conceive of the soul as an inherited “form” of the body whose distorted nature gets passed on from generation to generation. As explained above, the HI view does not run into these difficulties because it views the spiritual dimension of our existence as analogous to the cultural dimension, and since the latter can clearly be corrupted, it is plausible to think the former can. Further, as argued in the next section, the HI view has a significant basis in scripture. Finally, one could understand this communally-shared spiritual dimension of human experience as constituting a core part of our nature. Understood in this way, the HI view is compatible with the traditional idea that our nature was distorted or wounded by the Fall.

II. The Scriptural Dimension

Introduction:

In this section, we will develop the scriptural basis for the HI interpretation sketched above. To

do this, we first need briefly to discuss the nature of the inspiration of scripture. We will assume that the inspiration of scripture takes at least two forms: i) God's enlightening human beings, both individually and as a community, at a very deep, semi-conscious level that involves their entire orientation to the world; and ii) God's enlightening humans, both collectively and individually, at a more explicit conscious and propositional level, thereby enabling human beings explicitly to grasp new truths about the nature of reality and God – e.g., that God created everything that exists or that God is Lord of Israel.⁶ Further, I assume that this revelation would be expressed through the various literary genres produced by the culture at the time, such as psalms, story, history, letters, and the like.

Now, revelation of form (i), which is arguably the most deep and involves the entire human being, is most naturally expressed through symbol, metaphor, stories, and other related forms of literature. Jesus, for instance, extensively used the rhetorical devices of parable and paradox. Given that much of our understanding of the world is subconscious or implicit – that the conscious, explicit, understanding that we can express in propositions is only the tip of the iceberg – we would expect much of revelation in scripture to take this form. This will be particularly important when we address Genesis 1 - 4.

On the other hand, revelation in the form of (ii) would probably most naturally take the form of propositional revelation – that is, specific theological claims such as those found in the Pauline letters – but could also be conveyed through literary genres. Often, however, the writer

⁶ Of course, there are other possible means of inspiration than these two, but they do not seem to undercut our main point below. Of particular relevance is the widely held theory of inspiration among more conservative Protestants that God inspired scripture by guiding the hand of the authors, editors, and redactors, at least in limited contexts. One who holds this view must either hold that this guidance was very limited, or that such guidance often preserved the culturally conditioned viewpoint of the author, even for those cases in which the viewpoint is in contradiction to the moral and spiritual truths affirmed in other parts of scripture. For example, in Ecclesiastes, the author states that “humans have no advantage over the animals; for all is vanity” (3:19) and in Psalm 137:9, a blessing is pronounced on anyone who will smash the babies of the Babylonians against a rock. Each of these passages clearly express the viewpoint of the author, not of God. Many other examples could be cited. So even those who adopt this theory of inspiration must admit that the text often preserves the culturally determined viewpoint of the author. Thus, in general, one cannot dispense with the need to look for the theological truth behind the text, something I claim science can help us do. Further, as I argue below when we discuss Romans 5, even if God explicitly guided the writing of a text, there are good reasons for God to use the culturally conditioned, pre-scientific ideas of a culture as vehicles for

through whom propositional revelation is expressed will have an undeveloped grasp of this revelation: for example, Paul and the other New Testament authors appear to have had an undeveloped concept of the Trinitarian nature of God, which is one of the main reasons it took three centuries for the Church to resolve the issue by developing the doctrine of the Trinity. Further, as Biblical scholars are well aware, in practice it will often be difficult to exactly determine what the author is claiming, and whether the claims are to be taken universally or applied to a particular cultural situation.

Especially in these cases the theologian must try to determine the truth about reality that the author only partially grasped or which underlies what the author says. This is where sources of information external to those normally used in exegesis play a key role: in determining what an author intends to say or what a text meant to the hearers at the time, one must restrict oneself to information such as the author's other writings, the character and background of the author, and the culture at the time. Bringing in modern science, for instance, would be inappropriate. But, in determining the truth the author is only partially grasping, or that underlies what an author is saying, it is appropriate to bring in the full resources of information one has available, such as philosophy and science.

Now, this is true of any author we might consider to be inspired, even if he or she was not inspired directly by God. For example, when trying to understand the deep truths Shakespeare's plays were getting at, which certainly went beyond even the intention of Shakespeare, it is fair to bring in all the insights of later authors, and even some areas of science, such as that of psychology. This is even more true for scripture, for which we believe in some sense God is the ultimate author. If God is the ultimate author, we would expect scripture to point to truths beyond the grasp of any individual author, indeed truths that people might not be able to understand nearly as well without the knowledge gained from modern science.

Accordingly, after attempting to determine as best that we can the intention of the author or the meaning a text had to the hearers at the time, we will use all of our knowledge, including that of science, to try to understand the theological truth to which the text is pointing. This means that we will inevitably go beyond what the text actually claims, while nonetheless trying to remain grounded in a careful exegesis of the text. In other words, we properly use every

revelation.

resource at our disposal to search out the theological truths hidden in the text.

Given these preliminaries, we will now turn to looking at the major scriptures relevant to the doctrine of original sin.

The Pauline Epistles: Romans 1: 18 - 32

Romans has been commonly recognized as the major scriptural basis for the traditional formulation of the doctrine of original sin, with several passing references elsewhere in the New Testament epistles, such as 1 Cor. 15:22, 45. Further, it is commonly agreed that the idea of original sin is not in itself found in Genesis 2-3, which is one reason this doctrine is not part of Jewish theology.⁷ This, of course, is not to deny that Genesis 2-3 both provides the backdrop for the doctrine and can be interpreted in such a way as to support the doctrine.

Given this situation, I will begin by looking at the relevant scriptures in Romans. In discussing original sin and evolution, commentators typically focus on the so-called *locus classicus* of original sin, Romans 5, often entirely neglecting Romans 1:18 -32. It is my contention, however, that it is primarily in Romans 1, not in Romans 5, that Paul gives his account of the “Fall” of human beings – that is, his account of why we are in a state of bondage to sin. These passages in the first chapter of Romans lay the foundation assumed throughout the rest of Romans that all human beings are unrighteous, in bondage to sin and spiritual darkness, and under the judgement of God. According to Paul,

...the wrath of God is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and wickedness of those who by their wickedness suppress the truth. For what can be known about God is plain to them, because God has shown it to them. Ever since the creation of the world his eternal power and divine nature, invisible though they are, have been understood and seen through the things he has made. So they are without excuse; for though they knew God, they did not honor him as God or give thanks to him, but they became futile in their thinking, and their senseless minds were darkened....

⁷ See, for example, Rabbi Joseph Telushkin, *Jewish Literacy: The Most Important Things to Know About the Jewish Religion, Its People, and Its History*, New York: William Morrow and Company, 1991, pp. 27 - 29.

Therefore God gave them up in the lusts of their hearts to impurity, to the degrading of their bodies among themselves, because they exchanged the truth about God for a lie and worshiped and served the creature rather than the Creator And since they did not see fit to acknowledge God, God gave them up to a debased mind and to things that should not be done. They were filled with every kind of wickedness, evil, covetousness, malice...(18-32).⁸

Commentators differ concerning who Paul is talking about in this passage. One view, and which seems to me the most likely, is that Paul is primarily talking about the human race in general, not each individual person. Understood in this way, this passage essentially says that because the human race as a whole has turned away from the knowledge of God and of right and wrong, our minds were darkened and we fell into idolatry. Another possible interpretation is to take this passage as saying that each individual person was once aware of God and God's requirements, but at some point – perhaps as each of us came to self-consciousness– we decided to “suppress the truth in unrighteousness.” Standing alone, however, this latter interpretation does not accord well with the empirical fact that some people grow up situations or cultures in which the existence of God, let alone God's requirements, are only dimly perceived, if at all.

Finally, one could claim that Paul is only talking about the Gentiles in these passages. Even if Paul's immediate concern is the Gentiles, however, the basic claims that Paul makes here are certainly applicable to everyone, both collectively and individually. If one simply were to restrict the applicability of this passage to the Gentiles, then one would be in the implausible position of claiming that this is how the Gentiles came into bondage to sin, but the Jews came into bondage to sin by some other route.

It seems to me, therefore, that the most plausible understanding of the theological truth to which this passage points is that the suppression of truth has occurred both at the level of human beings in general – so that one is to a large extent born into a culture that suppressed the truth – and to varying degrees at the level of each individual person, so that we all participate in this suppression to some extent. That is why we are “without excuse,” both collectively and individually. Whichever way one interprets these passages, however, whether as referring to

⁸ All scripture quotations in this paper are from the NRSV translation.

people individually or collectively, or some combination of the two, the important point for our purposes is to note that, according to this passage, the knowing suppression of the truth is the cause of our minds being spiritually darkened and our being in bondage to sin. Romans 1:18 - 32, therefore, could be understood as presenting Paul's account of original sin.

Now, understood as referring to humanity collectively, this account of original sin is essentially the HI account for which I have been arguing: namely, that our bondage to sin and spiritual darkness is the result of successive acts of "suppressing the truth in unrighteousness" of our ancestors, and that this bondage and darkness is strengthened and continues insofar as each of us freely contribute to this suppression of truth.

Romans 5: 15 -19

We will now turn to Romans 5:15 - 19, the *locus classicus* of the doctrine of original sin. In several places in Romans 5 (5:15, 17, 18, 19), the Apostle Paul refers to Adam as a single individual. In Romans 5:15, for instance, Paul states that "...if the many died through *one man's* trespass, much more surely have the free gift and the grace of one man, Jesus Christ, abounded to the many." So, doesn't this show that the New Testament teaches that Adam is a single individual and that contrary to the HI view, that such a single individual was the source of our sinful state? Here we can invoke a distinction philosopher Richard Swinburne makes between the *statement* or *assertion* a speaker makes when he or she utters a sentence, and the *presuppositions* of the statement.⁹ According to Swinburne, "The statement [a speaker makes] is whatever the speaker, by public criteria, is seeking to add to the existing beliefs of the hearers."¹⁰ In contrast, the presuppositions of an utterance can be thought of as the set of assumptions that the speaker and hearer hold in common, and which form the context in which the statement is framed.

This distinction is important for trying to understand what theological truths scripture "teaches" or points to. Assuming, as briefly discussed above, that revelation takes the form of God's opening individuals and communities to new and truer understandings of the world, both at a conscious and subconscious level, we would not expect revelation to extend to the text's presupposition. The reason for this is that God's revelation to communities or individuals did

⁹ *Revelation: From Analogy to Metaphor*, Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1992, pp. 28 - 33.

not involve God's showing them the entire truth about reality, such as the scientific nature of the cosmos. Thus, in expressing the revelation given to them by God, they would naturally use many of the pre-scientific concepts and beliefs of the time as vehicles for this revelation.

Further, even if God explicitly directed the writing of the text, in general we would not expect God to override the widely held cultural beliefs in delivering divine revelation unless those beliefs were particularly harmful. One reason for this is that, as philosopher Peter van Inwagen has pointed out, using a culture's own belief system is often the most effective way of conveying some truth. Van Inwagen presents the analogy of trying to teach Amazonian natives some basic techniques of hygiene necessary for midwives. One method is to teach them modern germ theory. As van Inwagen points out, however, such a method, even if understood, might quickly be forgotten in their culture since it has no model or precedent, and there are no educational institutions to sustain this knowledge. He then suggests that a more effective technique might be to refine and purify the existing medical lore of the natives. So, for instance, if the natives believed that childhood fever was caused by demons, then "why not teach them that the demons must make their way into bodies of new mothers via the hands of midwives, and that this path could be blocked by scrupulous rituals of washing before delivery?"¹¹ Unless the belief in demons was particularly harmful, it seems that such a method would be preferred since it would likely be much more effective to achieve the immediate goal of preventing childbirth fever. Perhaps, with a further development of their cultures, the natives would come to understand that the demons were not to be taken literally, but merely represented germs.

Now, it is often argued that in Romans 5 Paul is not trying to inform his hearers that Adam and Eve are literal individuals; rather, it is claimed, Paul's real interest in this passage is about Christ.¹² Following this line of reasoning, Paul's talk of sin coming into the world through *one* man, Adam, can plausibly be considered a presupposition of the text – it is the common cultural framework of belief that Paul and his hearers share, and which Paul uses to make his theological points about Christ. This is particularly suggested by Paul's repeated use of the phrase "just as" (and similar phrases) such as in verse 18: "Therefore just as one man's trespass led to

¹⁰ Ibid., p. 33.

¹¹ *God, Knowledge, and Mystery: Essays in Philosophical Theology*, Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1995, p. 141 - 142.

¹² See, for example, Paul Ricoeur, *The Symbolism of Evil*, New York: Harper and Row

condemnation for all, so one man's act of righteousness leads to justification and life for all."

As an analogy, compare what Paul says with the following fictitious statement that one could imagine being in a contemporary editorial: "Just as Dr. Frankenstein could not see the grave consequences of his action in creating his 'monster,' we must be very careful before undertaking any sort of human genetic engineering." Surely, we would not take the editorialist as *asserting* that Frankenstein really existed, but rather as using the well-known story of Frankenstein as a vehicle to make a point about the dangers of genetic engineering. Or, suppose that in one of the epistles Paul made a statement such as "just as the Prodigal Son had to experience the depths of suffering among the pigs before coming to his senses, we must all" Surely, we would not take Paul as asserting that there was a real Prodigal Son, but rather we would immediately understand that Paul was using Jesus's parable of the Prodigal Son as a vehicle to make a theological point.

Similarly, one could argue, we should not take Paul to be asserting that Adam really existed, even if Paul himself believed in a literal Adam.¹³ As New Testament scholar J. D. Dunn writes in his commentary on Romans 5,

"an act in mythic history can be parallel to an act in living history without the point of comparison being lost. So long as the story of Adam as the initiator of the sad tale of human failure was well known, which we may assume (the brevity of Paul's presentation presupposes such a knowledge), such a comparison was meaningful."¹⁴

Although I find it plausible to consider Paul's reference to Adam as a single individual a presupposition of the text, I nonetheless feel uncomfortable with entirely dismissing Paul's discussion of Adam as theologically superfluous. For, arguably, Paul is also trying to say something about Adam, namely that there is an analogy between the way Christ's redemption works and the way we got into our state of bondage to sin, though admittedly Paul's discussion of Adam is of secondary theological importance.

So, what theological truth about the source of our bondage to sin, if any, might Paul be

Publishers, 1967, pp. 238-239.

¹³ As Swinburne notes, *op. cit.*, p. 29, since the presupposition of a statement is not itself the information that the speaker intends to convey to his hearers but just a vehicle for something else, its status as a presupposition does not depend on whether the speaker believes it.

getting at here? Now, since around the time of St. Augustine, Paul has been interpreted in these passages as saying that our nature is fallen, that original sin involves an inherited change in our nature. Is this really what Paul is claiming? As many exegetes have pointed out, if we carefully look at the relevant passages, Paul nowhere claims or presupposes that our natures became corrupted through Adam.¹⁵ Rather, Paul presupposes that Adam is responsible for the entrance of sin into the world; it is the continuing sin of the human race, however, that brings death: “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” (Rom. 5:12). Paul presupposes, however, that Adam’s sin is the seed that led what leads to us all becoming sinners: “For just as by the one man’s disobedience the many were made sinners, so by the one man’s obedience the many will be made righteous.” (Rom. 5:19). As for the condemnation of all people resulting from Adam’s sin (verse 18), this could have simply resulted from everyone becoming sinners, and as a result being under condemnation, in the same way that (spiritual) death “has spread to all because all have sinned” (verse 12).¹⁶

Further, it should be noted, the story of the Fall in Genesis 2-3 never says or even suggests that Adam’s and Eve’s nature was distorted. Rather, the punishment is banishment from Eden and thus banishment from the uninhibited relationship with God that Eden

¹⁴ J. D. Dunn, *Word Bible Commentary*, Vol. 38A., Romans 1 - 8, Dallas: Word, 1988, p. 289.

¹⁵ Neither does any other scripture in the New Testament state that human nature was distorted. Ephesians 2:2 comes closest, asserting that we are “by nature children of wrath.” But even here, many commentators interpret the word “nature” as referring to ingrained habit, not something intrinsic to us. (See Ramm, *op. cit.*, p. 47.) Rather, in accordance with the HI view (see footnote 4), scripture predominately speaks of us being cut off from the life of God, being under spiritual darkness (Eph. 4:17 -18), being slaves to sin (Romans 6) and being subject to the powers of darkness (Eph. 2:1-3, Col 2:15). Further, insofar as Paul speaks of the “flesh,” (e.g., Romans 8:6) we need not interpret it as an inherited distortion of our nature stemming from Adam, but as those desires that have been inherited from our evolutionary past and which are one of the prime sources of sinful temptation.

¹⁶ Following Augustine, this condemnation has traditionally been interpreted as involving every person being guilty for Adam’s sin. At least in part, however, Augustine based this doctrine on a faulty Old Latin translation of Romans 5:12, which read “death spread to all men *in whom* [i.e., Adam] all men sinned” instead of the correct translation which reads “death spread through all men *because* all men sinned.” (See p. 839 of Paul Blowers, “Original Sin,” in the *Encyclopedia of early Christianity*, second edition, Everett Ferguson, editor, New York: Garland Publications, 1997, pp. 839-840.) Further, as Blowers notes, “there is little notion among the Greek fathers for a notion of inherited guilt or physically transmitted sinfulness.” (p. 839). Thus, Augustine went

symbolized. Thus in accordance with the HI view, the Fall story seems to be about how we came to lose the state of direct awareness of and fellowship with God.

Our next question is, how can we fit these passages in Romans 5 together with what Paul says in Romans 1 as explicated above? The traditional doctrine of original sin says that our bondage and condemnation are solely or almost entirely the result of Adam's first sin: once Adam sinned, human beings were from then on in bondage to sin. If we adopt the traditional interpretation, however, there is an immediate tension, if not conflict, with Romans 1. As we discussed above, the account in Romans 1 seems to imply (when extended to all humanity) that our bondage to sin was not simply a result of a single act of Adam, but a collective suppressing of the truth by the human race.

One plausible way to avoid this tension, I suggest, is to understand Adam, in light of evolutionary theory, as theologically representing both everyman and the very first members of the evolving group of hominids that had gained moral self-consciousness.¹⁷ This combines both the understanding of Adam as representing "everyperson" (see discussion of Genesis below), with one in which Adam has an historical reference. Given this understanding, one of the main theological truths underlying this passage, or to which this passage points, is that sin *entered* the world from the very beginning, as soon as the evolving group of hominids leading up to human beings became morally conscious. Further, this sin of "suppressing the truth" and turning away from God was imitated by other members of the evolving group of hominids, and thus effectively snowballed until we all became deeply in bondage to sin.

Admittedly, this last move in which Adam represents the very first members of self-aware, free-willed hominids instead of a single human being living in some state of spiritual and moral rectitude is not an interpretation that one would come up with apart from modern science. Nonetheless, it certainly seems to be a plausible reading, and a reading that retains the core theological idea that our human condition of spiritual darkness and bondage to sin was largely the result of free choice, not the way humans were created (or made by nature). Moreover, there is some basis in the text itself for thinking that Adam is being used to represent the first acts of

contrary to the tradition at the time.

¹⁷ Of course, this is not to say that Paul intended for "Adam" to represent these hominids, or that the readers at the time would have understood it in that way. Rather, just as the meaning of a poem can transcend its meaning for the author or the people at the time, what a term such as

disobedience, not merely the first human being. As Paul certainly would have been aware, in the Genesis story the disobedience is a joint act of both Eve and of Adam, yet Paul never mentions Eve. This suggests that within the text, Adam's disobedience implicitly represents the disobedience of both of them, not just a singular Adam. The idea of Adam representing the first self-aware hominids, therefore, could plausibly be considered a natural extension of this representative role already implicit in the text.¹⁸

Finally, this whole passage can be viewed as leading up to Romans 6, where Paul emphasizes that it is through our unity or connection with Christ, particularly in his death, that we are redeemed. In light of this, the point of Romans 5: 12 - 19 can be thought of as drawing a parallel between the transmission of sin from Adam and the transmission of righteousness from Christ. If Adam is viewed as single individual, however, our connection with him seems very remote, and hence it becomes difficult to see how or why his sin would have such devastating consequences on us. Was there some spiritual "gene" that got mutated with Adam's sin that was then passed on to all succeeding generations? And even if there was, why would an all-good God allow this "gene" to be passed on to the rest of us? Further, God's failing to prevent this corruption from occurring, or spreading, does not fit well in the singular Adam scenario, since within that scenario God is already pursuing an interventionist policy: why not go all the way and intervene some more to stop the effect of Adam's sin, or give Adam and his children a strong and resilient disposition not to sin?

If viewed as representing our ancestors, particularly our remote ancestors, however, our spiritual connection with Adam suddenly makes sense as part of the interconnectedness of all human beings. As explained above, just as we inherit from our ancestors physical and cultural characteristics, it also makes sense that we would inherit their spiritual characteristics – in this case, the accumulated weight of spiritual darkness and bondage to sin. To eliminate such an inheritance, God would have had to eliminate human spiritual interconnectedness in general, not simply the effects of a single act of sin. Accordingly, this interpretation makes sense of why God would not eliminate the deleterious effects of the sin of "Adam" (as representing our remote

"Adam" represents or means can transcend that given by its historical context.

¹⁸ I should finally note that I deal with the other texts, such as 1 Cor. 15:22, that suggest a singular Adam in the same way as I do the text in Romans 5, though I am not sure what to say about 1 Timothy 2:13 -14.

ancestors). Further, in the process, it deepens the theological import of the idea of original sin by linking it with the fundamental interconnectedness of all human beings.

Genesis 1 -4:

Before going into a more detailed discussion of Genesis 1-4, we will first present a cluster of internal textual reasons for why it should not be understood as literal history. (For the scientific evidence against a literal reading, see below.) To begin with, Genesis 2 and 3 have the literary marks of a symbolic story. First, the serpent is clearly symbolic. The text says, "now the serpent was more crafty than any other wild animal that the Lord God had made. He [the serpent] said to the woman . . ." (Gen. 3:1). Clearly a literal serpent is not more crafty than a dog or a cat. (Just look at its brain size!). And serpents don't talk. Of course, this would have been known by the authors, editors, and redactors responsible for Genesis and hence they probably did not intend for it to be taken literally. There is no more reason to take the serpent in Genesis as a literal serpent, than there is to try to become literally as wise as a serpent. Indeed, it would make sense to use the serpent to represent the poisonous lie, or source of the poisonous lie, that led to Adam and Eve's disobedience: snakes were strange creatures whose venomous bite was often deadly.

Other features of the story are also clearly symbolic: a tree of life, a tree of good and evil, and God, who presumably does not have a physical body, walking around in the garden. Further, if one does try to take the story literally, one runs into other well-known problems. Genesis 2:19 strongly implies (in the original Hebrew) that God formed the animals after creating Adam;¹⁹ in Genesis 4:15 God puts a mark on Cain so others will not kill him, and in Genesis 4:17 Cain takes a wife, and later his sons take a wife, all indicating that there were groups of people living at the time. To fit this into a literal interpretation of Genesis, one would have to hypothesize that Adam and Eve had other sons and daughters before Cain slew Abel. Further, one would have to hypothesize that these sons and daughters produced enough progeny to populate the surrounding regions before Cain got his mark. This hypothesis of additional sons and daughters, however, seems to go strongly against the so-called "plain" reading of the text, the very thing a literal interpretation is purportedly trying to preserve. For instance, a "plain" reading of Genesis 4:25 suggests both that Seth was the next son in line after Abel and that he was born after Cain got his

¹⁹ The NIV translation translates the Hebrew to imply that God formed the animals before Adam.

mark, implying that there was no other living human beings around to murder Cain or for Cain to marry.

How then are we to interpret Genesis 1-3? Much has been written about how to understand Genesis. Let me present what I believe to be a plausible reading. To begin, in interpreting Genesis, we must consider the ancient Near-Eastern context. Stories about the origin of the world were common in the ancient world. The purpose of these stories was primarily to establish a framework of meaning in which to understand the world and society, along with one's place in them. Academics call stories that serve this function "myths," whether or not those stories are true or false. One of the most common myths in the ancient world was one in which the universe began in a state of chaos, which was identified with evil. This chaos in turn was overcome by the imposition of order through some sort of primeval violence.

The ancient Babylonian epic of *Enuma elish* is a good and relevant example. In this story, Tiamat the primordial mother and Apsu the primordial father represent the chaotic primordial waters which are commingled and undisturbed. The younger gods, the offspring of the Tiamat and Apsu, disrupt this primordial peace, and because of this Apsu plots revenge against them. But, they kill Apsu before he can do anything, making Tiamat inflamed with rage. She therefore gives birth to monsters-viper, dragon, great lion, mad dog, and scorpion-man and prepares for battle against the gods. Eventually, Marduk who is her most able offspring, is able to kill Tiamat and produces the cosmos out of her divided corpse and creates human beings out of her blood. Thus, in this myth, evil is part of the fabric of creation. The production of the world arises out of a primordial conflict of vengeance.

This myth, along with the recognition that in the ancient world the various heavenly bodies were often considered deities, provides the basis for understanding the new theological framework of meaning that Genesis 1 - 3 is trying to establish. First, Genesis 1 establishes that the world has its origin in God, and hence is in essence good, not primordially evil or the result of violence as in the myths mentioned above. In fact, Genesis 1 says seven times that creation is good, ending with the words "very good" after the creation of human beings. This goodness, however, does not mean that creation is complete or perfect. As Romans 8:20-22 and other New Testament passages make clear, nature has yet to be redeemed from its "bondage to

The Hebrew scholars I have consulted, however, say that such a translation is "a real stretch."

corruption.” Rather, I suggest, from a New Testament perspective, to say that nature is good means that the *essential* nature and calling of creation is to be a full participant in the divine life, in which case nature will become fully itself.

Second, Genesis 1 establishes that the heavenly bodies are not divinities, but creatures of God. Just as one might put profound insights into a form of a poem – since, among other things, a poem has more impact than prose and is easier to remember, repeat, and enact – the author or authors of Genesis put these insights into a poetic form structured around the sequential repetition of days.

Genesis 2 and 3 address more fully the origin of human beings and particularly the origin of evil. Contrary to other surrounding myths such as the Babylonian *Enuma elish* recounted above, evil is not portrayed as being primordial or essential to creation, but resulting from the contingent free choice of a first human couple, Adam and Eve, and thus not the way things are supposed to be. Thus not only is God distanced from evil, but the Genesis narrative involves a colossal shift in point of view from a perspective in which evil and violence are part of the fabric of creation and the primordial nature of things. Practically speaking, the yearly ritual re-enactment of the Babylonian myth by the king, in which the king symbolically represents Marduk’s slaying of Tiamet, reifies violence as the way to establish order, both in creation and society. On the other hand, in the Genesis story human violence (as represented by the slaying of Abel by Cain) is portrayed as being the result of loss of fellowship with God through disobedience, not something primordial or *essential* to being human.

It is important to point out, however, that there is nothing in the Genesis story that indicates that inclinations towards evil and violence – or at least inclinations that can lead to evil and violence in certain circumstances – were not present from the beginning. Rather, the point of the Genesis story is that it is not part of our *essential* nature (that is, what it is to be human) to be evil or violent toward one another; from a New Testament perspective, we will only become fully human when we become full participants in the life of God.

Indeed, two features of the story indicate such inclinations were already present. First, the fact that Adam and Eve so readily gave into the temptation to disobey God shows that they already had inclinations to “be like gods”; one cannot be tempted to do something for which one has absolutely no desire to do. As common experience shows, and as James 1:14 indicates,

temptation always plays off some desire one already has.

Second, the figure of the serpent shows that things were not perfect in the Eden. Although traditionally the serpent has been identified with Satan, neither the Genesis story nor any other scripture actually makes this identification. (The closest scripture comes to suggesting the serpent is Satan is in Revelation 12:9 where Satan is referred to as “that ancient serpent”). Within the Genesis story, there are positive reasons *not* to identify the serpent with Satan. To begin with, the idea of Satan was a later development, and thus was part of the cultural vocabulary at the time Genesis was written. Moreover, the serpent is a natural creature, a “beast of the field” (Gen. 3:1), not some supernatural agency. Given this, I suggest that *within the Genesis story* the serpent itself can plausibly be thought of as representing those inclinations – such as selfishness, the need for control, and the like--that often tempt us to do evil.²⁰ As Paul Ricoeur says, the serpent could be interpreted as “a part of ourselves that we do not recognize ...the seduction of ourselves by ourselves, projected onto the seductive object.”²¹ This fits in with the book of James which says that “one is tempted by one’s own desire, being lured and enticed by it” (1:14).

The particular inclination in the Genesis story is to be like God, knowing good and evil. Even though these temptations are based in our own desires and hence in some sense internal to ourselves, we often consider them as also in some sense external to ourselves. As Paul states in Romans 7:14-20, the “sin nature” often seems to be a force inside us pushing us to do that which our inner person does not really want to do, and thus is in a sense external to who we are.

Within an evolutionary framework, these inclinations that tempt us to evil can be seen as partly involving those inclinations toward self-preservation, self-interest, aggression, and kinship interest that result from natural selection. Such inclinations are not themselves evil since they can often lead to beneficial actions, such as keeping one’s self alive. But they provide the temptation or basis for evil action. It is our choosing to follow these temptations over the good that often results in actual evil. Our evolutionary history and our kinship with the animals, however, does not provide the whole story here. Despite the popularity in certain circles of

²⁰ Following Christian tradition, one could also postulate that within scripture taken as a whole the serpent represents both these inclinations and Satan, since Satan is traditionally thought to tempt us through our own desires.

²¹ Op. cit., p. 256.

biological reductionism, human beings are more than the sum of their genes or instincts. We have self-consciousness, and which opens up the possibility of radically new sorts of evils, such as self-idolization, self-centeredness, self-hatred and denigration, and the like; human wickedness and perversion, therefore, can go far beyond those arising out of our more primitive biological instincts.

Finally, it is important to note that the word “Adam” is “the common noun in Hebrew for ‘humankind.’”²² Only in Genesis 1-5 and 1 Chronicles 1:1, when used without the article, does it function as a proper name.²³ Thus, the word “Adam” can both generically represent human beings in general and represent a particular human being. This has suggested to many people that Adam in Genesis 1 is a figure that is representative of human beings in general, and thus is a story about the “fall” of every human being as we come to self-awareness. To understand this interpretation, one could imagine substituting every occurrence of Adam in Genesis 1-4 with the word “everyman.”

Although I think this interpretation captures an important representative role of Adam, I would suggest that “Adam” should also be understood as having an historical reference, as also representing what could be called the “stem-father” of the human race. In evolutionary terms, such a “stem-father” would be the first group of evolving hominids that gained moral and spiritual awareness. This idea of Adam representing the “stem-father” fits better with Paul’s use of “Adam” in Romans 5 than *merely* viewing “Adam” as representing human beings in general. Moreover, it fits better with the fact that there is a continuous saga connecting Genesis 1 - 4 and the later chapters of Genesis which recount the call of Abraham and the formation of Israel, which clearly purport to be historical. Given this, and given that the early chapters of Genesis should not be read as literal history as argued above, I suggest that a plausible interpretation of the early chapters of Genesis is to regard them as a theological commentary on and partially symbolic reconstruction of *primal* history using the concepts and re-renderings of the various stories around at the time, such as the Babylonian Gilgamesh epic. In this way, it is sort of prophecy in reverse: just as prophecy, in the popular sense of prediction, uses images and concepts of the time to theologially comment on the future, Genesis 1-11 does the same for the

²² *The Oxford Companion to the Bible*. Bruce Metzger and Michael Coogan (Eds.), New York, Oxford University Press, 1993, p. 10.

²³ *Ibid.*, p. 10.

past.²⁴

Indeed, I suggest, chapters 1-11 should be considered an extended theological commentary on the “fall” of the human race, beginning with the various first humans represented by Adam and Eve, and then continuing with the story of Cain and Abel, the flood, and the Tower of Babel. Up until the time of Abraham, the initiatives that God takes are all negative and ultimately ineffective, simply means of temporarily slowing down the tide of evil; immediately after the flood, for instance, sin and evil began all over again. One theological message here is that our bondage to sin is so deep that it cannot be cured simply by wiping out the bad people. Rather, only a positive initiative on God’s part can solve the problem of human sin. Thus, just as Paul’s account of the Fall in Romans 1: 18-32 is a prelude to his discussion of salvation through faith in Christ, Genesis 1 - 11 becomes a fitting theological prelude to the story of the call of Abraham, in which God makes the first positive initiative to solve the problem of human evil, an initiative that from a Christian perspective foreshadows the work of Christ.

Finally, the following analogy might help those who still feel uncomfortable with reading the early chapters of Genesis symbolically or “mythically,” as I have suggested. Imagine God inspiring Hollywood. What would God do? Would God make Hollywood only write true stories? No. Rather it seems God would inspire them to write more edifying fiction, not override what the kind of writing that they are already doing. So, if, as scholars tell us, writing origin stories was a common practice in the ancient world (much as futuristic science fiction is a common practice today), it makes sense that God would inspire an author or community to write an inspired version of such a story using the concepts and myths around at the time as raw materials. Further, such a story could convey theological truth in a much more powerful, imaginative way than any mere prose could, and finally, the text itself seems to almost cry out that it is not literally history, being loaded with symbolism.

At least part of the continuing resistance to reading the early chapters of Genesis in a non-literal, symbolic way, I believe, is motivated by two factors. First, unlike parables or “once upon a time . . .” stories, we are not familiar with the genre of literature that I am suggesting

²⁴ For a fuller development of this view and discussion of others, such as Karl Barth, who held a similar view of Genesis, see Ramm, *op. cit.*, chapter 4. Of course, this interpretation does not exhaust the theological purpose of these texts. For example, these texts also functioned as commentaries on the surrounding nations and as theological alternatives to their myths.

Genesis 1-11 belongs: namely, a theological commentary on and partially symbolic reconstruction of primal history using the concepts and stories of the time as raw materials. Many readers thus tend to overlook the literary markers – such as the anthropomorphism of God’s walking around in the garden -- that indicate it is a symbolic story. Consequently, they are tempted to read it literally, as traditionally has been done. Nonetheless, there do exist some analogies. One analogy to this sort of literature is the historical novel, which attempts to provide a generally accurate, though non-literal account of some period in history.²⁵ Another analogy is certain plays of Shakespeare, such as Othello, which reworked older stories in order to provide a profound commentary on human existence. Similarly, Genesis 1-11 can be understood as a reworking of older stories and myths to provide a theological commentary on the origin and nature of human evil.

Second, I suggest, among many contemporary Christians, the desire to read Genesis as literal “scientific” history is often motivated by a latent form of scientism, in which one holds that the most legitimate and informative form of discourse is the type that occurs in science, thereby relegating other more imaginative forms of discourse to an inferior status as far as helping us understand the nature of reality. Thus, in their own way, many advocates of a literal reading of Genesis fall into a similar trap as those who let the purported findings of science drive their theologizing.

III. Comparison With Other Views

In the following subsections, we will explicate and then evaluate various other competing views of original sin.

1. Historical/literal interpretation:

The traditional interpretation of the Fall, which is sometimes called the historical/literal interpretation, subscribes to a literal Adam and Eve who were in a literal paradise in which they were in fellowship with God. By disobeying God’s command to eat of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, this first

²⁵ Further, such novels attempt to link their fictional characters with actual historical characters and events. In a similar way, Genesis links its theological reconstruction, such as the genealogies in chapters 1-11, with the historical figures such as Abraham.

couple violated their relationship with God and fell into a state of condemnation and bondage to sin. This fallen state was passed on to all Adam and Eve's descendants.

This interpretation usually takes two versions. In one version, the Fall of Adam and Eve is responsible for all the death and suffering throughout creation. In a second version, the Fall only affected Adam and Eve and their descendants, but did not directly affect the rest of creation.

The first version is highly implausible on two grounds. To begin with, it is committed to Young Earth Creationism, since if one believes in an old earth then clearly death and suffering have been around long before Adam and Eve. Second, this version runs into problems when we consider animal death and suffering. Much of the death and suffering in the world is a result of the way creatures are constructed. It is not the result of some corruption of the creature's original design. The tiger, for instance, has instincts, teeth, and a digestive system intricately well designed to catch and eat prey; various bacteria and viruses are well-constructed to cause illness and sickness; and grass is constructed to grow and then die in order to make room for other grass. Thus, this version implies that the Fall somehow reconstructed, or redesigned various organisms on earth. But, the only way this could have happened is through some intelligence. One is thus left with claiming either: (i) that some evil power reconstructed the organisms, in which case God would no longer be the creator of present day animals and plants; (ii) that God redesigned the organisms; or (iii) that God created some "redesign program" that got activated by the fall.

Clearly the claim (i) is unacceptable. Thus, one is left with the claim (ii) or (iii). Claims (ii) and (ii), however, are not much better since they end up hypothesizing a second re-creation, either by God or through the redesign program, of animals and plants after the creation recounted in Genesis 1 and 2. Such an hypothesis has no basis in scripture and runs contrary to any natural reading of Genesis 1 and 2: Genesis 1, for instance, clearly indicates that God created the creatures we have today before the Fall, not in response to the Fall.

To avoid these problems, advocates of a literal Adam and Eve often claim that the Fall only affected Adam and Eve and their descendants, but did not directly affect the rest of creation. According to one version of this view, Adam and Eve were supernaturally protected from illness, suffering, and death by their perfect relationship with God. Because of the Fall, however,

they and their descendants became subject to these things.

Even though this second version is more plausible than the first, it also runs into severe problems insofar as it ascribes to a literal reading of Genesis 2-4, which is what typically motivates its advocates. Besides the textual implausibilities in interpreting Genesis 2-4 literally, as recounted above, there are serious scientific problems with taking this approach. The major problem is that the anthropological evidence we have overwhelmingly points to the worldwide existence of modern humans for at least 40,000 years. Further, these “humans” were culturally fairly advanced, as advanced as many tribal societies throughout the world: as Davis Young remarks, they buried their dead in ritualistic ways indicative of religious impulses and possibly some conception of an afterlife, engaged in toolmaking, and produced cave art and a variety of beautiful art objects.” They also used fire, produced ornamentation, and made simple musical instruments, such as a bone flute.²⁶ Further, the evidence that the humans who did these things existed for at least 40,000 years does not rely on a single method of dating, but a whole multiplicity of methods: e.g., Carbon 14, potassium/argon dating, Uranium track dating, amino acid racemization, paleomagnetic, electron spin, thermoluminescence, and methods involving looking at the plant and animal life contemporaneous with the fossils. Moreover, it is based on a large number of fossil finds.²⁷ The only way around this evidence seems to be to adopt a Young Earth Creationist position. Yet, as even such leading defenders of Young Earth Creationism such as Paul Nelson and John Mark Reynolds admit, “Natural science at the moment seems to overwhelmingly point to an old cosmos.”²⁸

If we interpret Genesis literally, however, then it would be very implausible to push the time of Adam and Eve to 40,000 years. Although even literalists accept that the genealogies in Genesis have gaps in them, few find it plausible to stretch them much beyond 10,000 B.C.E. For instance, Gleason Archer, who defends Genesis 2-4 as literal history, claims that “However the statistics of Genesis 5 [and the genealogies in general] may be handled, they can hardly end up

²⁶ See pp. 390, 395 of Davis Young, “The Antiquity and Unity of the Human Race Revisited,” *Christian Scholars Review*, XXIV:4, May 1995, pp. 380-396.

²⁷ See Young, *op. cit.* Also see James Hurd, “The Fossil Hominid Record,” in this volume. Actual examples of this abundance of fossils and different dating methods can be obtained by a search of a general science index under “Dating of hominid fossils.”

²⁸ “Young Earth Creationism” in *Three Views of Creation and Evolution*, J. P. Moreland and John Mark Reynolds, editors, Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1999, p. 49.)

with a date for Adam much before 10,000 B.C.”²⁹ Moreover, taken literally, the genealogy of Genesis implies that Adam and Eve, and their descendants, were farmers and lived in settlements. Genesis 4:4, for instance, refers to Abel as tending a flock and Genesis 4:17 refers to Cain as building a city. The extensive archeological and anthropological evidence we have, however, implies that humans did not start tending flocks and building settlements until around 10,000 B.C.E.³⁰ Thus, combined with this anthropological and archeological data, a historically literal interpretation of the early chapters of Genesis implies that Adam and Eve could not have existed much earlier than 10,000 B.C.E. This means they could not have been the first humans, contrary to what a literal historical interpretation seems to imply.

Davis Young presents an excellent review of the four major responses those who wish to defend a literal view of Genesis could give to the above problem, and concludes that the all face serious difficulties, though we do not have space to further discuss these issues.³¹ In light of these difficulties, I think that we have very good, though not definitive, scientific reasons to reject an historically literal interpretation of the early chapters of Genesis. Notice, however, that these difficulties have nothing to do with the theory of evolution *per se*, but merely the evidence from archeology and anthropology.

Of course, despite these archeological and anthropological findings, one could hold the view that there was a first couple, Adam and Eve, who were the common ancestors of all humans and who lived in a paradisaic state before they fell, but disassociate this from a literal interpretation of Genesis. Although such a view is certainly possible, it becomes largely unmotivated, at least apart from Church tradition. If Genesis is not taken literally, why should we feel a need to believe in a literal Adam and Eve? The only scriptural motivation that I can think of is that associated with the doctrine of original sin and the related Pauline statements, which we dealt with above.

²⁹ *The Encyclopedia of Bible Difficulties*, Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1982, p. 64.

³⁰ Young, *op. cit.*

³¹ *Ibid.* One such response is to deny that Adam and Eve were the first humans, but instead claim that they were merely “representative” humans. Among other problems, this view seems to conflict with the “plain” literal-historical reading of Genesis that this response is being advanced to save, particularly Genesis 3:20 which says that Eve was the “mother of all the living.” (A related view in which Adam and Eve are seen as mythical humans that *symbolically* represent each human being is advanced by those who do not believe in a literal Adam and Eve, particularly by advocates of what I call the *existential view* discussed below.)

Moreover, unless one believes in some form of special creation of Adam and Eve – which does not fit well with the evidence for hominid evolution – one runs into a further problem: namely, God’s bringing these first humans into a paradisaal state seems unmotivated. In the traditional Young Earth Creationist account of Adam and Eve, one could make sense of why God would create them in such a state: God is a perfect God, and hence God would create a perfect world, including a perfect human couple in a perfect relationship with him. Within this scenario, the imperfections, suffering, and death of the world are the result of God's perfect gift of free will. Once one admits that humans evolved from ancestral hominids, however, then the scenario looks much different. God would have had to take creatures with imperfect physiologies, imperfect brain structures, and imperfect instincts and somehow brought them into perfect fellowship with himself, knowing full well that they would fall again in a short amount of time because of the frailty of their own nature. What purpose could God have in doing this? It seems unmotivated, some game that God plays with these first humans.³²

Finally, this view runs into the following theological problem: If this fellowship was perfect, what could possibly be the motive for disobeying God? Thus, I conclude that although one could follow church tradition and defend a literal Adam and Eve living in an original state of justice and holiness, it faces significant scriptural, theological, and scientific problems.

³² One could attempt to reply to the above argument by adopting the increasingly popular “open view” of God which claims that God does not know with certainty the future free acts of human beings, and hence would not have known with certainty that Adam and Eve would fall. This reply, however, still runs into the further problem of why God allowed the sin of Adam and Eve to infect their decedents. The usual answer is that it was practically inevitable that humans would eventually fall, if not Adam and Eve, then one of their descendants. So, the only way God could prevent humans from becoming fallen is continually to perform miracles to restore individuals to their unfallen state or not let them infect others, which would arguably have negative consequences for human community and mutual interdependence. This answer, however, reintroduces our original problem in a modified form: Why would God put humans into an uncorrupted state knowing that it was practically inevitable that they would eventually fall and become infected?

One might wonder if the HI view runs into a similar problem by hypothesizing an original state of unclouded awareness of God. I would argue that it does not, since God’s being present (immanent) with creation flows from God’s relational nature. In the case of self-conscious creatures, this immanence would naturally involve them being aware of God, unless something intervenes to obscure that awareness. Thus, under the HI view, there is a clear theological motivation, flowing from God’s nature, for God’s bringing about this postulated state of unclouded moral and spiritual awareness among the first self-conscious hominids.

Accordingly, we have good reason to look for an alternative.

2. Historical/Quasi-literal.

The next view we will look at is what I will call the Historical/Quasi-literal view. Like the HI view, this view denies the existence of a literal Adam and Eve, but unlike the HI view, it still retains the traditional idea that humans fell from some sort of state of moral, spiritual, and intellectual integrity through an act of disobedience to God. C. S. Lewis, for instance, expresses this sort of view in what he calls a “Socratic myth” that is, a likely story.³³ According to Lewis, when hominids reached a certain state of development, God gave them the capacity for both self-consciousness and consciousness of God, while at the same time putting them in a paradisaal state in which all their appetites were completely under their control, and in which they lived in complete harmony with one another and God. Eventually, however, one or more of these creatures decided to choose their own selves over God, to “call their selves their own.”³⁴ Once this happened, they fell, their minds and hearts becoming darkened and alienated from God, and in the process losing control over their own appetites.

Although Lewis’s view runs into fewer problems than the literal Adam and Eve view, it still runs into two of the same problems which the HI interpretation avoids. First, it runs into the problem of accounting for how human beings fell: if they were in such perfect relationship with God, how could they be tempted to turn away? Second, as explained in more detail when we critiqued the literal Adam and Eve view at the end of the last subsection, God’s bringing these first humans into such a paradisaal state knowing that they would inevitably fall seems unmotivated, a sort of game that God plays. The only advantage I can see of Lewis’s interpretation over the HI view is that it is closer to the traditional view of Adam and Eve being created in a moral, spiritual, and intellectual rectitude.

Finally, although this is not necessarily a problem, Lewis’s account involves more of an act of special creation than he suggests. The reason is that a linguistic community seems to be essential to human self-consciousness and free will. But, since a particular language is something that one learns from one’s ancestors, either that language would have had to slowly evolve – which would imply a slow evolution of self-consciousness, contrary to what Lewis

³³ *The Problem of Pain*, New York, MacMillan, 1962, chapter 5, particularly pp. 77-85.

presupposes – or God would have had specially to teach the first humans some particular language, which would involve a major act of special creation.

3. Ideal Interpretation

As in the HI view, this interpretation sees the Genesis story as representative of an ideal for which we ought to strive. However, our “fallen state” is more the result of our evolutionary heritage than the result of free choice. The evolutionary process left humans in a state of incompleteness, with various impulses – such as aggression – that we must learn to transcend or control.

This view fits the best with process theology and traditional liberal theology, which typically embraced some sort of evolutionary optimism. Taken as a *complete* interpretation of the doctrine of original sin, this view, I believe, both fails to take sufficiently seriously the depth of our bondage to sin as assumed in scripture and to include the social, communal, and historical dimension of sin as part of the doctrine.

4. Existential Interpretation.

Under this interpretation, Adam and Eve are symbolic figures that represent every man and woman. (Indeed, as mentioned previously, the Hebrew word for Adam simply means human being, thus rendering plausible the idea that Adam and Eve represent “everyperson.”) The Genesis story and the doctrine of original sin are about the existential choice each of us face of God over self as we come to self-consciousness. As Langdon Gilkey explains, this is the view adopted within much contemporary theology. Original sin – which is defined as our estrangement and alienation from God – is seen as what inevitably happens to each of us when our “self forms itself, when the self, through its own freedom and choice of itself, constitutes its own existence.”³⁵ This choice, which we continually make each day of our lives, is one in which we ultimately place ourselves at the center of existence, in which we depend on ourselves instead of God. This is the Fall, and is something that happens again and again everyday as we

³⁴ Ibid., p. 80.

³⁵ “Protestant Views of Sin,” in *The Human Condition in the Jewish and Christian Traditions*, edited by Frederick Greensphn, Hoboken, NJ, KTAV Publishing House, and Denver, CO : Center for Jewish Studies at the University of Denver, 1986, p. 159

constitute our own self-existence.

Although this view is certainly insightful, as is existential philosophy which provides a large part of its philosophical underpinnings, as a *complete* account of original sin, it runs into the same problem as the last one in that it fails explicitly to include the historical and social dimension of sin as part of the doctrine. Further, as explained above, I do not believe it fits as well as the HI interpretation with the Biblical texts pertaining to original sin, such as Romans 1, Romans 5, and Genesis 2-3.

5. Biological Interpretation:

The biological interpretation sees original sin as nothing more than biologically inherited propensities, such as aggression and selfishness, that help the individual or one's kinship group survive, but typically do not promote the flourishing of the larger community. Essentially, under this view, the doctrine of original sin, the Genesis story, and the various statements in the epistles tell us nothing more than what science tells us.³⁶ Advocates of this view often assume that we are purely biological and physical beings. Hence science, not theology, becomes the primary place to look to understand the nature and origin of human beings.

There are at least four major objections to this view. First, I believe a strong case can be made for thinking that human beings are more than merely physical creatures. Such qualities as consciousness are difficult to explain on merely physical grounds.³⁷ Second, this view tends to reduce evil merely to our acting on biological impulses, ignoring the particularly serious forms of evil that our made possible by our own self-awareness and transcendence – evils such as idolatry of self, viewing other people as mere objects, and the like. Many twentieth century

³⁶ This view of original sin is fairly common. For example, theologian Phil Hefner suggests a version of this view, suggesting that the “concept and the fall and original sin may well be considered mythic renditions of this biologically grounded sense of discrepancy [between the requirements of culture and our genes].” (*The Human Factor: Evolution, Culture, and Religion*. Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 1993, p. 132) Two other examples of this view are philosopher Patricia Williams's article, “Sociobiology and Original Sin,” *Zygon*, vol. 35, no. 4, December 2000, and relevant sections of philosopher Michael Ruse's book, *Can a Darwinian be a Christian?: The Relationship Between Science and Religion*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001.

³⁷ Much has been written of the problem that consciousness presents for physicalism. One good recent book is David Chalmers, *The Conscious Mind : In Search of a Fundamental Theory*, New York : Oxford University Press, 1996.

Christians and other religious believers find such a view implausible: they will argue that events of the twentieth century, such as the Holocaust, show that the roots of evil go very deep, well beyond our biological nature.

Third, within this understanding, the voices of theology, scripture, and Church tradition are practically ignored, becoming simply a sort of fifth wheel. Instead, it is the purported findings of science that are claimed to provide us with the correct understanding of human nature and the human condition. The only role theology plays is to give a name – original sin – to what science discovers. Specifically, this view ignores those scriptures on which the doctrine of original sin has been traditionally based, such as Romans 5 and Genesis 2-4, which provide a clear link between human bondage to sin and the free choice of our ancestors.

Finally, as theologian Langdon Gilkey has pointed out with regard to similar views held by the liberal Protestantism,³⁸ this sort of view tends to minimize the necessity of Atonement: if evil is simply the result of instincts and dispositions bred in us by the evolutionary process, human beings can be perfected through proper social or genetic engineering. A bloody death on the cross certainly does not seem as necessary. Of course, advocates of this interpretation could respond that Christ's Atonement and the related work of sanctification by the Holy Spirit give us the power to transcend, overcome, or transform these instincts and dispositions. Even with this response, however, Christianity will be put into a losing competition with science: wouldn't neurology and related disciplines eventually offer a surer and better means of dealing with these otherwise negative instincts and dispositions, such as aggression? If our problem is biological, then a biological solution seems most appropriate, not a religious solution. The vitality of religions in general, not just Christianity, depend on the claim that the human problem is at least in part "spiritual," not merely physical or cultural. (Nonetheless, the spiritual might very well be interwoven with both the cultural and physical, just as the cultural is interwoven with the physical.)

Despite these problems with the biological interpretation, it could plausibly be thought of as providing a component of original sin. My objection to the biological account is that it reduces original sin to certain inherited biological traits.

³⁸ Op. Cit., p. 163.

IV: A Theological Postlude

Above, I have sketched the basics of the HI view of original sin, and have indicated why I believe that it is more adequate than the major alternative views that we have examined. Here, I want to briefly indicate how it fits into an entire theology that takes evolution seriously.

The view of evolution I propose is what I will call *theistically guided* evolution. I define theistically guided evolution as the view that all life on earth is the result of the evolutionary process (“descent with modification”), but in various places God guided or influenced this process. God could guide the evolutionary process by mutating some gamete or even adding new information to the gametes thereby resulting in one organism giving rise to a significantly different offspring.³⁹ Since in this view God works in and through the natural process of reproduction, the offspring could be said to be both the product of the natural operation of the world and a creation of God. The extent to which God guides the process, and the extent to which the evolutionary process is a result of unguided chance plus natural selection, however, remains an open question.⁴⁰

³⁹ I prefer to think of God’s guiding the evolutionary process in a non-mechanical way, a sort of nurturing or brooding over the evolutionary process as God is said to brood over the waters in Genesis 1:2. (For a sophisticated account of how God could have guided the evolutionary process, see Robert Russell, “Special Providence and Genetic Mutation: A New Defence of Theistic Evolution,” in this volume.)

⁴⁰ I should note that I also consider it an open question as to whether God’s guidance of the evolutionary process is detectable, having never seen a good argument against this idea. Thus, at least in this sense, the view I sketch above is sympathetic towards the so-called intelligent design movement, the central claim of which is that some sort of intelligent guidance is detectable in the evolutionary process. My primary theological motivation for postulating that God guides the evolutionary process is that it puts God into a deeper interrelationship with creation, while still leaving room for creation to act on its own. Accordingly, it fits better with the image of a relational God, as suggested by the doctrine of the Trinity. Further, it paints a picture of a God who is a nurturing but not overbearing parent with respect to creation, which I believe conforms better to the Biblical witness. The other view, in which life is left to develop by means of unguided chance plus natural selection, tends to portray God as a great engineer who after the act of creation abandons the world to its own devices.

The view of theistically guided evolution that I am advocating also seems to be the best explanation of the scientific evidence: unlike the other major positions, it accounts for both the evidence for macroevolution such as presented in this volume and the seemingly impressive arguments against the adequacy of unguided chance plus natural selection as the primary driving force of evolution. For a fairly good overview of many of the scientific arguments for some sort

Theistically guided evolution is part of a more general view in which God *typically* works incarnationally *within* the natural world to bring it to fulfillment, instead of working by externally imposing form and design on the world as postulated by various scenarios involving some type of special creation. In effect, this view takes the Christian doctrine of the Incarnation as indicative of the general way in which God redemptively works within all creation. God enters into the material matrix – the Word becomes flesh– and from the inside brings it to fulfillment.

Now, the New Testament implies that the fulfillment of creation is one in which God is all in all, in which God is in some sense fully present within matter. Many New Testament scriptures speak of this ultimate fulfillment of creation. Romans 8:18-23, for example, tells us that the whole creation will be set free from its bondage to decay and share in the glorious liberty of the children of God. Similarly, other scriptures speak of God’s ultimate purpose being directed toward the redemption of all creation: In Ephesians 1:10, this ultimate purpose is to “gather all things in him [Christ], both in heaven and earth”; in Ephesians 4:10 it is for Christ to “fill all things”; in Colossians 1:20 it is to “reconcile to himself all things, whether on earth or in heaven”; and finally, in 1 Corinthians 15:28 it is for God to be “all in all” What I am suggesting here is that just as from the beginning matter had the potentiality to be conscious, or at least embody consciousness, so matter has the potentiality of carrying or being infused with the divine life in a much deeper and more complete way than it is now, though we cannot at present see how this will occur (just as we cannot yet see how matter can embody consciousness).

From this perspective, one can see God’s ultimate purpose being that the material cosmos become a full participant in the divine life. Following standard Eastern Orthodox theology, this

of guidance of the evolutionary process, see David Ray Griffin, *Religion and Scientific Naturalism: Overcoming the Conflicts*, Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 2000, chapter 8, specifically pp. 265 - 292. One of the most impressive arguments against the adequacy of unguided evolution, I believe, is the argument that unguided naturalistic evolution cannot explain human consciousness or our capacity for highly abstract theoretical reasoning. This argument has been advocated by both prominent atheists and theists. See, for instance, philosopher Thomas Nagel (*The Last Word*: New York: Oxford University Press, 1997, pp. 130 - 143), philosopher Alvin Plantinga (*Warrant and Proper Function*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993. 1993, chapter 12), and theoretical physicist Paul Davies (“The Intelligibility of Nature.” In *Quantum Cosmology and the Laws of Nature: Scientific Perspectives on Divine Action*, second edition, edited by Robert John Russell, Nancey Murphy, and C. J. Isham, Berkeley, CA: The Center for Theology and the Natural Sciences Publications, 1993, pp. 149 - 164.),

complete participation of humans and creation in the divine life could be understood as participation in what the Orthodox call the “energies” of God in contrast to the essence of God.⁴¹ For the Orthodox, the energies of God refer to the life of God – that is, “God in his activity and self-manifestation”⁴² – whereas the essence of God refers to God’s innermost self, which is forever inaccessible to us. Using this distinction, Orthodox theologians claim to be able to affirm the eventual complete participation of redeemed humanity and creation in the divine life while at the same time excluding “any pantheistic identification between God and creation.”⁴³

God’s ultimate purpose being this full participation does not mean that evolution necessarily needs to be linear, however. As we know from the fossil record, evolution is more like a giant bush, with the human line being one small twig. At first this might make the process of evolution look purposeless, and the evolution of human beings as a lucky accident, as Harvard paleontologist Stephen J. Gould has claimed.⁴⁴ The existence of all these other branches, along with the many that have died off, only appears purposeless if we claim that God’s sole purpose was the eventual evolution of human beings. But, there is no necessary reason to restrict God’s purpose to us. In fact, even though humans can be considered the “highpoint” of creation and the avenue through which it will be redeemed (e.g, see Romans 8:21), the above scriptures make clear that God’s purposes involve *all* of creation.⁴⁵

⁴¹ See, for instance, Vladimir Lossky, *The Mystical Theology of the Eastern Church* (Crestwood, N.Y.: St. Vladimir’s Seminary Press, 1976), pp. 74-5, 97 -101, 133-34.

⁴² Bishop Kallistos Ware, *The Orthodox Way*, Revised Edition, (Crestwood, N.Y.: St. Vladimir’s Seminary Press, 1976), p. 22.

⁴³ Ware, *Orthodox Way*, p. 23.

⁴⁴ For example, see Stephen Jay Gould, *Life’s Grandeur*, London: Jonathan Cape, 1996.

⁴⁵ This perspective also helps, I believe, with the question of the redemptive status of highly evolved hominids that are clearly not human, such as *Neanderthals* and *homo erectus*. Recent genetic evidence strongly indicates that Neanderthals were not human. (See David Wilcox, *Hominid Origins: The Genetic Evidence*, in this volume.) Nonetheless, they had a larger brain than humans, and they used tools and probably fire, and seem to have buried their dead, indicating religious beliefs. The existence of such beings – which have a form of sentience between currently existing non-human primates and humans -- really presses the case, I believe, for including all of God’s creation in God’s redemptive plan. Otherwise, it looks as though God abandons creation. Further, once we adopt this perspective, the meaning of human existence is put into a different light. This world is not simply a testing ground for us to make a decision for or against God. Rather, I suggest, our purpose is to have “dominion” over all creation in the sense that Jesus gives to this idea: that is, those who are in authority are servants of all. Humans are called to be servants of each other and creation, and thereby be the agents of the redemption

It should also be noted that this idea of God working within creation provides a theory of inspiration of scripture according to which God worked incarnationally through the literature and concepts of the Hebrew culture, with the end result being that some of their writings became the vehicle of divine revelation. This theory was already implicitly behind our account Genesis 1-11, and is fairly common among Biblical scholars. It was well articulated, I believe, by C. S. Lewis, for seemingly independent reasons based on his profound knowledge and appreciation of literature. According to Lewis,

“The Scriptures proceed not by conversion of God’s word into literature but by the taking up of a literature to be the vehicle of God’s word Thus something originally merely natural –the kind of myth that is found among the nations–will have been raised by God above itself, qualified by Him and compelled by Him to serve purposes which of itself it would not have served. Generalizing this, I take it that the whole Old Testament consists of the same sort of material as any other literature –chronicle ... poems, moral and political diatribes, romances, and what not; but all taken into the service of God’s word. Not all, I suppose, in the same way. There are prophets who write with the clearest awareness that Divine compulsion is upon themthere are poets like those in the *Song of Songs* who probably never dreamed of any but a secular and natural purpose in what they composedOn all of these I suppose a Divine Pressure the human qualities of the raw materials show through. Naivety, error, contradiction, even (as in the cursing Psalms) wickedness are not removed. The total result is not “the Word of God” in the sense that every passage, in itself, gives impeccable science or history. It carries the Word of God.”⁴⁶

Lewis then goes on to say that we might not like this method of inspiring scripture, but that we

of all creation (Romans 8:21), an idea stressed in standard Eastern Orthodox theology. (For example, see Lossky, *Mystical Theology*, pp. 74-5, 97-101, 133-34.) Perhaps Adam and Eve’s tending the garden of Eden could be thought of as an image of this sort of servanthood. But, we chose control, instead of servanthood, in eating of the knowledge of good and evil, and this was the Fall.

⁴⁶ *Reflections on the Psalms*, New York: Harcourt, Brace, Jovanovich, pp. 111-112, p. 116.

must be very careful not to impose on God what we think is best, or our preconceived ideas of how God must have done it. Rather, he claims, we must look to the form and content of Scripture itself to determine how it was inspired. Similarly, I would argue, we must not impose on God preconceived ideas about how we think God should work in the world, but rather look both to nature and to scripture.

This idea of God's working within creation also makes sense of the doctrine of the Atonement. According to the doctrine of the Atonement, it is through Christ's life, death, and resurrection that we are saved from sin and reconciled to God. In the view of Atonement I develop elsewhere – which has close affinities with the views of several of the early Greek fathers of the Church and which were later developed through the centuries by the Eastern Orthodox Church – salvation consists of fully sharing the life of Christ, as implied by Jesus's analogy of the vine and the branches in John 15.⁴⁷ Because of the Incarnation, this life is both fully divine and fully human; And because of the Cross, it is fully in solidarity with the depths of human brokenness, sin, alienation, mortality, and the like. Because of its fully human component, and because it is in full solidarity with the depths of our life situation, we can participate in it. As Paul indicates in Romans 6, by participating in this life we are redeemed from sin and reconciled to God, and freed from spiritual bondage and darkness. Thus, the effect of original sin is reversed. I call this theory the *Incarnational theory of Atonement*, and defend it as being scripturally, morally, theologically sound.

Moreover, this incarnational way of God working in the world also fits with the way in which God works as revealed on the Cross and in the kenosis hymn of Philippians 2: 5-11: God does not work by external force from the outside, but from the inside through a process of self-emptying love.⁴⁸ In fact, I would suggest, insofar as creation has sentience, Christ has been sharing the sufferings of creation since the foundation of the world.⁴⁹ God has never been an absentee father. The crucifixion is simply the culmination of this process. Finally, this idea of

⁴⁷ For a development and defense of this theory, see part II of my, "Girard and Atonement: An Incarnational Theory of Mimetic Participation." In *Violence Renounced: Violence Renounced: Rene Girard, Biblical Studies, and Peacemaking (Studies in Peace and Scripture, 4)*, Willard Swartley editor, Herald/Pandora Press, 2000.

⁴⁸ See George Murphy, "Christology and Evolution," in this volume.

⁴⁹ Indeed, this could be thought of as the deeper meaning of Rev. 13:8, which under the "non-predistinarian" translation states that Christ was slain from the foundation of the world.

God's working incarnationally within the material matrix makes sense of God's continuing work in the Church and in history in general. For instance, God uses weak and frail human beings to carry the Christian gospel, and God appears to work within history largely by inspiring human beings to great moral and spiritual endeavors.

In sum, the idea of God's working incarnationally within the material Cosmos provides an overarching idea that coherently unites many elements of Christian theology and disparate things we know about the world: it sheds light on the significance of the Incarnation, eschatology, the nature of inspiration of scripture, the doctrine of Atonement, the Cross of Christ, and how God works in human history. The HI interpretation of original sin simply provides one part of the story regarding how God has worked and continues to work incarnationally in the world.