

Evolution and the Historical Fall: What Does Genesis 3 Tell Us about the Origin of Evil?



"God Judging Adam" by William Blake, 1795

By **J. Richard Middleton** on March 2, 2017

Unlike some BioLogos bloggers who had to be convinced of the validity of biological evolution later in life, I have no memory of ever dismissing evolution as fundamentally incompatible with biblical faith. Having become a Christian at a very young age, I not only accepted, in my teenage years, that the earth was very old (based on what seemed to be reasonable scientific research), but as a young adult I avidly read books on human evolution – including the discovery of *Australopithecus afarensis* (nicknamed Lucy) by Donald Johanson.

However, I was somewhat troubled that evolution didn't seem compatible with the biblical notion of the "Fall," the origin of evil recounted in Genesis 3. I had always been taught that this text portrays Adam and Eve (an original couple) forfeiting a primal paradise through a single act of disobedience, which led to the introduction of death for both humans and the natural world. I couldn't get my head around how this might fit with what scientists claimed about human evolution. So I did what many Christians do when confronted with cognitive dissonance – I put it out of my mind and concentrated on other things.

It is time to take a closer look at what Genesis 3 actually says, to see how we might address perceived tensions between an evolutionary account of humanity and the biblical story of the origin of evil.¹ There are two primary sets of tensions. The first has to do with the historicity of the Fall – whether it really happened (and in what sense). The second has to do with the consequences of the Fall, the so-called "curse" that affected both humans and the earth. In my next BioLogos post I will address the second issue, whether "nature" was changed because of human sin; this will take us into questions of death, predation, and randomness in the natural order, and their relation to the providence and goodness of God. In this post I will focus on what we might mean by the Fall as an event in history.

In What Sense was the Fall “Historical”?

It has always been important to me that the Bible claimed that the world God created was good (indeed, “very good”; Gen. 1:31), and that evil was later introduced into this world by human disobedience. This notion of a historical Fall, which denies a pre-existing principle of evil and lays the origin of evil clearly at the feet of humanity, distinguishes the biblical version of creation from other accounts of origins.² Yet it has become *de rigueur* among many Christian proponents of evolutionary creation to deny the classical doctrine of a historical Fall and to claim that *Homo sapiens* emerged in a sinful state. However, I don’t think this is a necessary move for those who want to affirm the truth of the Bible and an evolutionary account of human origins.³

Part of the problem has to do with what we mean by calling the Fall “historical.” For some this means a punctiliar event perpetrated by an original couple that automatically changed human nature, such that every person born after comes into the world with a sin nature (this is sometimes thought of as a genetic inheritance). But this interpretation of the Fall (a version of “original sin” as formulated by Augustine) is not the only plausible way to read the Garden story.

In my previous BioLogos post (on humanity as *imago Dei*), I addressed the initial problem that many Christians perceive between human evolution and the idea of a historical Fall, namely, the contradiction between two individuals (Adam and Eve) and the larger population group postulated by the modern scientific picture. After all, if there wasn’t an original couple, how could we attribute the origin of sin to them? Here I’m going to assume what I previously argued, namely that Genesis isn’t incontrovertibly committed to the idea of two original humans, but allows us to think either of a larger population group (in Genesis 1) or of *ha’adam* / “the human” (in Genesis 2) as archetypal of all people everywhere.

This might mean that the narrative of disobedience in Genesis 3 is not simply about a single event in the past (though that is not thereby excluded), but describes what is typical in the process of temptation and sin in human experience. Indeed, when preachers expound the Garden story they tend to emphasize how this is true for all of us, rather than locating it in a singular event long ago.

Once we are open to viewing the Garden narrative in this manner, the dialogue between the woman and the snake in Genesis can be seen as a profound study in the phenomenology of temptation and sin, which may be applied not only to our own present experience of temptation, but also to the experience of early *Homo sapiens*.

A Phenomenology of Temptation and Sin

The temptation begins with a question from the snake about whether eating from all the trees of the Garden really was prohibited (Gen. 3:1). This question accurately depicts the way temptation comes to a person, in that it seems to arise from an external source. In both the snake’s question and in the woman’s response there are a number of cases of slippage from what the narrator says – all of which ring true to the experience of temptation.

Whereas the narrator consistently uses the compound name “YHWH God” to designate the Creator (throughout Gen. 2:4-3:24), the snake speaks about “God” only, and the woman follows suit in her response. The covenantal name YHWH is not used anywhere in their conversation (Gen. 3:1-5), which may well be a distancing tactic, which serves to disassociate the prohibition from YHWH, the God of Israel’s covenant (see Exod. 3:13-15). Beyond that, the narrator’s reference to YHWH God *commanding* (Gen. 2:16) has been softened to God *saying* in the snake’s question (Gen. 3:1); here again the woman follows the snake’s lead (Gen. 3:3).

But in contrast to this distancing and softening, we find that the woman adds to the prohibition against eating from the tree, when she claims that God also said, “nor shall you *touch* it, or you shall die” (Gen. 3:2-3). Yet the Creator never prohibited touching the tree, according to the narrator.

Then comes further slippage in the woman's answer to the snake, when she modifies the warning YHWH God had given concerning the consequences of disobedience. The original warning was that *in the day* you eat of the forbidden tree you will *surely die* (Gen. 2:17). But the woman omits reference to *in the day* (which suggested immediate consequences) and describes the consequence simply as "you will die" (omitting a Hebrew grammatical construction that indicated the certainty or seriousness of the consequence).

From initially questioning the woman about whether eating of any of the trees in the garden was permitted (Gen. 3:1), the snake finally denies outright that they will die, while trying to make the Creator seem stingy, "for God knows that when you eat of it your eyes will be opened, and you will be like God, knowing good and evil" (Gen. 3:5).

This entire conversation is a profound representation of the inner dialogue of conscience, first questioning God's word, then softening the prohibition, then overstating it (perhaps in compensation for the softening), then toning down the consequences, and finally questioning God's motives. The conversation ends up sowing the seeds of doubt in the woman's mind concerning God's generosity, resulting in a lack of trust in God's intentions for humanity. Then both she and the man (who was with her) eat of the forbidden fruit.

The entire conversation realistically depicts the way temptation works, either as an intra-human, psychological process or as an inter-human, communal process. And this could be applicable either to each person throughout history wrestling with the demands of conscience or to an "original" fall among early *Homo sapiens*.

Was There a Primal Paradise?

But it leaves very little time, if any, between the origins of conscience and the beginning of sin. Yet many Christians assume that the Garden of Eden story includes a period prior to sin, when the first humans lived innocently in a paradise-like state, fulfilling their initial calling from God, working and protecting the Garden (Gen. 2:15).

Yet it turns out that there is no actual narration of such a period in the book of Genesis. At the end of Genesis 2, the woman is created to be a helper to the man, which presumably means sharing in the task of working and protecting the garden. But instead of portraying the first humans fulfilling their explicit *raison d'être*, the Genesis narrative rushes to tell of their disobedience. The notion of a paradise period in Eden is much more a function of Christian theological assumptions read back into the text, rather than anything clearly narrated.

Could the almost immediate transition from the creation of the first humans in Genesis 2 to the primal transgression in Genesis 3 be significant for thinking about the possibly limited time frame between the rise of moral and religious consciousness in *Homo sapiens* and the onset of sin in the human population?

The Growth and Development of Sin according to Genesis

Not only is there no paradisiacal period in Genesis 2-3, but human nature does not suffer any sort of immediate and radical corruption, as the classical doctrine of "original sin" might suggest (such that all people born afterwards inherit a sin nature). This does not mean there are no changes narrated in Genesis 3, but these are existential and behavioral. Humans acquire a sense of shame at their nakedness and a fear of God, which leads to their hiding (Gen. 3:7-10). And God announces certain consequences for sin, including new difficulties in the relationships between people and the ground, between women and childbearing, and between women and men (Gen. 3:16-19). Finally, God announces that the humans have become "like God, knowing good and evil" (Gen. 3:22), in an inappropriate way – which will not be good for them.

Here it is helpful to counterbalance the classical notion of original sin (which assumes that all post-Fall humans come into the world enslaved to sin, by a quasi-genetic inheritance) with the actual narration of the development

of sin in Genesis 4, and later in Genesis 6. The initial transgression by the parents develops in the next generation into murder (Cain kills Abel). But this is not a necessary progression; the narrative portrays Cain's struggle with anger and even depression (Gen. 4:5) leading up to the murder, including God's claim that he can "do well" and that although "sin is lurking at the door" he "must master it" (Gen. 4:7). God's words to Cain suggest that *sin* (the first use of this word in Genesis) is not inevitable for human beings; it can (initially, at least) be resisted.

Rather than an immediate change in human nature, the narrative of Genesis portrays a *process* by which humans come more and more under the sway of sin. After Cain's murder, we find Lamech's revenge killing of a young man who injured him, a killing that he boasts about to his wives (Gen. 4:23). Yet even here the growth of sin is intertwined with positive cultural innovation, such as the building of cities, the invention of new forms of livestock tending, musical instruments, and metal tools (Gen. 4:17, 20-22). But sin continues to infect the human race, until every "inclination of the thoughts of [the human heart] was only evil continually" (Gen. 6:5), and the earth was destroyed or ruined (*shachat*) by the violence with which humans had filled it (Gen. 6:11).

Here we finally have something as pervasive as "original sin" in the later theological sense of the term – that is, a situation of communal and systemic evil we are all born into – but this is a historical progression and not a genetic inheritance. Such a developmental and communal view of sin as narrated in Genesis is true to human experience and is quite compatible with the evolution of religious and moral consciousness among *Homo sapiens*.

A Possible Evolutionary Scenario for a Historical Fall

Although we can't know exactly when *Homo sapiens* first became aware of the prodding of conscience, we can speculate that at some point God entered into a relationship with some representative population of early humans, calling them to live as his image in the world (for more on the *imago Dei* as a calling or vocation, see *The Liberating Image: The Imago Dei in Genesis 1*). This new relationship (with its concomitant ethical call) would have engendered a significant change in the consciousness of *Homo sapiens* and then in their behavior.

We know from experience that relationships change us, sometimes decisively. No one who enters into marriage or becomes a parent is the same after (at least, if we take the relationship seriously). Even our pets change us; and evolutionists have discussed how various human-animal relationships may have led to significant adaptations in human behavior.⁴

Being in relationship thus puts certain (explicit or implicit) demands on us; and as we respond to the other we begin to change, not only in our actions, but also in our thinking and our values. We now know that behavioral changes begin to lay down new neural pathways in the brain; we quite literally become different people over time.

It is therefore plausible to think that the rise of moral consciousness was a decisive development among anatomically modern *Homo sapiens*, which resulted from a developing awareness of God's call to a certain (moral) form of life.⁵ It is also plausible to think that it was not long before these humans began to go against the new revelations of conscience, and thus sin was introduced into the world (and both moral consciousness and sinful resistance then spread to all *Homo sapiens*). While this may not be the Fall as a punctiliar event perpetrated by an original couple, it would still be a temporal event (and thus a *historical* Fall), which took place among early humans. This is a faithful interpretation of Scripture, and fully consistent with evolutionary science.

Notes & References

1. I began this closer look a few years ago when I joined a group of scholars working on the topic of *Evolution and the Fall* (the title of the book of essays we produced, ed. by William T. Cavanaugh and James K. A. Smith [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2017]). My reflections in this blog post are based on my essay (chap. 4) in that book, entitled “Reading Genesis 3 Attentive to Human Evolution: Beyond Concordism and Non-Overlapping Magisteria,” and also on another essay, “From Primal Harmony to a Broken World: Distinguishing God’s Intent for Life from the Encroachment of Death in Genesis 2–3,” chap. 7 in *Earnest: An Interdisciplinary Work Inspired by the Life and Teachings of Benjamin Titus Roberts*, ed. Andrew Koehl et al. (Eugene, OR: Pickwick, forthcoming).
2. Paul Ricoeur has noted that the emphasis of Genesis 3 on human choice as the origin of evil is unique among myths of origins; see Ricoeur, *The Symbolism of Evil* (New York: Beacon Press, 1969), esp. the chap. on “The Adamic Myth.”
3. Here I agree with James K. A. Smith, “What Stands on the Fall? A Philosophical Exploration,” chap. 3 in *Evolution and the Fall*.
4. See Celia Deane-Drummond, “In Adam All Die? Questions at the Boundary of Niche Construction, Community Evolution, and Original Sin,” chap. 2 in *Evolution and the Fall*.
5. See the excellent multi-disciplinary essays on the development and transformation of *Homo sapiens* in *The Emergence of Personhood: A Quantum Leap*.

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