

# PARALLEL GUIDE 4

## *The JE Account of Creation and the Fall*

**Summary:** The narrative on creation and humanity is far more than a tightly packed doctrinal statement. The JE account of creation includes the famous story of the Fall. This chapter progresses verse by verse culminating with comments on the doctrine of original sin as it has been developed by St. Paul and others.

### Learning Objectives

- Read Genesis 2:4b-3:24
- Differentiate between God breathing life into the human body and the point of view that separates human beings into a ‘body and soul’
- Explain what moral autonomy means
- State the meaning of sin in the Adam and Eve story
- Distinguish between “original sin” as a doctrine and acts of sin
- Describe the difference between an “etiological legend” and an “etymological legend”

### Assignments to Deepen Your Understanding

1. In your notebook, write a short essay which contrasts the difference between the Greek understanding of *hubris* and the Christian doctrine of “original sin.”
2. Record in your notebook meanings for the following terms:
  - narrative, etiological legend, typology, etymological legend
  - *ruach*, *nephesh*, *neshama*, omniscience
  - moral autonomy, original sin, *hubris*, duty, alienation.-
3. Other religions have their stories to explain human behavior. See what stories you can find from other major faiths or from the stories told by Native Americans or people native to Africa.

### Preparing for Your Seminar

When do you think most people become aware of “original sin”?

What do you think of the idea that we sin even when we do not intend to do so, or are unaware that this has happened?

What can we do to save ourselves from sin?

### Additional Sources

Anderson, pp. 151-166, discusses the Yahwist epic. Note especially on pages 156-157 Anderson’s explanation of how the Yahwist moves backward from an awareness of Israel’s history to an eventual concern with God as Creator of all. This is an important correction to one’s natural impression that creation, since it comes on the first page of the Bible, is the primary doctrine of the Bible.

There are two other books well worth looking at in connection with the JE story of the creation and fall. One is Phyllis Trible’s *God and the Rhetoric of Sexuality* in the *Overtures to Biblical Theology* series (Fortress Press, 1978); the other is Richard

Hanson's *The Serpent Was Wiser; a New Look at Genesis 1-11* (Augsburg Press, 1972). Tribble suggests, among other things, that we translate *ha'adam* as "the earth creature," at least until the woman is created. This underlines the notion that the "Man" is incomplete—he is not man—until the woman is created. Tribble has some good things to say about language also.

Hanson makes much of the notion of "the Fall." He is a modern popularizer of the basic conviction that we do not have any account of a fall in the Bible, *if* by fall we mean the smashing of the divine image and the total depravity of human beings. This stands in contrast to Augustine's view.

## THE JE ACCOUNT OF CREATION AND THE FALL

The JE story is quite different in both style and content from the P account. The P story is a very tightly packed statement of doctrine; with very few words and a rhythm like the ticking of a metronome or the swing of a pendulum, the P author “explains” creation. The JE account is narrative. The author lets us in on the thoughts of the characters—God, man and woman, and the serpent. The story not only tells us of the creation of human beings and the terms under which human life is to be lived, but it also describes the present state of affairs in which these terms are violated. The sin of Adam and Eve is told, not so much to explain how sin came into the world, as to describe what sin is. Still, the story did come to be regarded, at least by the fifth century CE if not earlier, as an explanation of how and when sin first appeared; Adam and Eve were thought of as two individuals who lived long ago. Actually, the JE narrative is the story of Man and Woman; *Adam* is ‘*adam*—humankind. It is the story of Everyman and Everywoman.

We call this the JE account because at this point in Genesis it is almost impossible to separate these two sources. There are places in the Pentateuch where it will be both possible and important to separate these authors, but this is not one of them. Remember that when we speak of “the author,” both here and elsewhere, we are not speaking of an individual writer but of a group of contributors who worked over a fairly long period of time.

A final comment before we examine the text: the divine name. In this story the name is “the LORD God.” You should recognize in this translation that the Hebrew words are YHWH *Elohim*. This is a very strange combination. It occurs in Genesis only in this story. Although the two words are used within the same sentence elsewhere in the Old Testament, they are used as a single name in just one place. The form is such that in English we would use a hyphen to join the words: YHWH-*Elohim*. There have been various guesses about this. Perhaps it is an old Hebrew expression meaning “YHWH of the gods.” Such a pattern is found in the Old Testament, as, for example, in the expression “YHWH of hosts.” “YHWH of the gods,” however, sounds too polytheistic for Old Testament usage. Perhaps originally only the name YHWH was used, and the redactor added *Elohim* to make clear that it was the same God as the one in the P account. At any rate, it is used consistently in this story and serves to mark it off as a complete story in itself, distinct from Gen. 4, the story of the birth of Cain and Abel.

A very minor point, but one that sometimes causes confusion, is the division of the Bible into chapters and verses. Why should the P account go over into chapter 2, and especially why should it end in the middle of a verse, and the JE story pick up in the middle of the same verse? The answer is simple: the division marked by chapters was developed during the Middle Ages. Verses were inserted during the Reformation when printing became possible. These were not present at all in the Hebrew text nor in the Greek text of the New Testament.

## The JE Account of Creation and the Fall

### Genesis 2:4b-7

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These verses treat the creation of the universe in a very summary way. In contrast to P, who lays out in detail the creation of the cosmos in which human beings finally appear, JE assumes its creation. Instead of preparing the earth with vegetable life for humans and animals to eat, as P does, JE draws a picture of a desert world in which humans are created first so that the ground may be tilled. This is a completely different approach. Both P and JE describe *chaos* as the first state of the world, but the P writer has in mind the total universe in which the dry earth and, eventually, living creatures find their proper place. JE's eyes are focused on the earth directly around humanity. Chaos in this account is the lifeless desert. Instead of bringing order into the chaos of unlimited waters, creation for JE is bringing life into the chaos of the desert land.

Water, for JE, is the element necessary for life, not a threat of the destruction of life as it is for P. In the desert—and remember that much of the Near East is desert—water is precious. The two great centers of early civilization in this area were Egypt along the banks of the Nile and the civilizations which sprang up in the Tigris-Euphrates basin. (You will notice that the Euphrates is mentioned in the JE account.)

The close link between humanity and earth, as we saw in the last chapter, is expressed in the words themselves: *'adam* and *'adamah*. Here it is made even more clear as the man is made out of the earth.

After he shapes the man, as a mud doll, God breathes into him the “breath of life,” and the man becomes a “living being.” This is very important as an expression of how the Hebrews understood human nature. We sometimes speak of “body and soul,” meaning a physical shell and the really important part of us which lives inside it. We sometimes think of the “soul” as the same as the mind, or as an immortal substance that continues to live after the body dies. Nothing like that is found in this story. The being who is formed from the dust is the whole person. God does not breathe a *soul* into the body, but *life*. When the breath leaves a human being, he or she is dead. The idea of two parts of a human, body and soul, comes into our thinking from Greek rather than Hebrew thought.

### Ruach, Nephesh, and Neshama

Three Hebrew words should be distinguished: *ruach*, *nephesh*, and *neshama*. *Ruach* is “wind, storm, spirit”; it is used in Gen. 1:2. It occurs frequently in the Old Testament and is the usual word used when speaking of the “Spirit of God.” *Nephesh* is most usually translated “soul” in the English Bible, but it does not have the connotations of an immortal substance or a “spirit” as in the popular use of the word “soul.” As we saw in the discussion of Gen. 1, it combines the meanings “animation” and “uniqueness.” *Neshama* basically means “breath,” though it is sometimes translated “spirit” and once as “soul.” Obviously these words are closely related in meaning. Indeed, *ruach* and *neshama* are often indistinguishable. In Job 33:4, they are both used in a poetic form which indicates that they are synonymous, and both refer to God's creating an individual life. When you see the English word “soul,” the Hebrew is likely to be *nephesh*. Still, it may help you to resist thinking in terms of our body-soul distinction if you remember that the Gen. 2:7 expression describing the man when he became a “living being” is the same as that in Gen. 2:19 for the animals, there translated “living creature.”

Both P and JE show humanity as closely connected with the earth, and each describes it as different from the rest of creation. P does this by saying that humanity is made in the image of God; JE does it by having God bend over the mud doll and directly breathe life into it.

After the creation of the human creature, God plants the garden. It was usual in the Near East for kings to own large gardens, usually orchards with nut- and fruit-bearing trees. This is almost certainly the imagery here. This is God's garden, and God puts the man in it to take care of it. Verse 9 mentions two special trees: the tree of life in the midst of the garden and the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. There is no further mention of the tree of life until the end of the story in 3:22. Apparently we have two traditions here, one of which mentions the two trees and another which deals only with the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. We will hold off discussion of the significance of these trees until they reappear in the story. Do note, however, that the trees are described as having been made by God to be pleasant to see and good for food. This is a crucial point in Gen. 3.

This section has no relationship to anything else in the story. It must have been a separate story having to do with an original "paradise" which the author added, without further development. The life-giving water of rivers is the point of this section. The river which is in the garden is sufficient not only to water all of the garden but also to provide the water for all the other rivers of the world! The four rivers into which the river divides are supposed to be the rivers which water all the known world. The first river, Pishon, is impossible to locate. There are many guesses, but none is very convincing. The second, Gihon, is probably the upper Nile. The third and fourth are, as named in the story, the Tigris and the Euphrates. Nothing further is done with this little section, but when we get to the book of the prophet Ezekiel, written during the time of the Exile, we shall find him speaking of a stream which will flow from the Temple in Jerusalem, and this stream will water all the earth. The stream is the Torah, the Law, which in Ezekiel's vision of the future will be the salvation of all humankind. Thus, this imagery in Genesis is picked up as a theme in the picture of the hope for a future salvation.

The man is put into the garden of Eden to till it and keep it. The garden is not a wonderful paradise in which the man simply reaches forth his hand for anything that he wants. He is put there to work. This should make it clear that work is not originally considered a curse. Many of the pictures of Eden or paradise depict it as a place in which there is no more work—where everything is there for the grasping. At the end of this story we see the author's view of why work has become so unpleasant for us that we want to think of paradise as a place where it does not exist. The man in the garden of Eden is God's steward, tending the garden for its owner. This is similar to P's idea that humankind is given dominion over the earth but only as God's representative.

God forbids the man to eat of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. Every other tree he may eat from, but if he eats from this tree, he will die. In the Hebrew, this warning is very emphatic. Literally, the last part of v. 17 reads, "for in the day that you eat of it, dying you shall die."

**Genesis  
2:8-9**

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**Genesis  
2:10-14**

**Genesis  
2:15-17**

What does “the tree of the knowledge of good and evil” mean? Why should God forbid the man to eat from it? Is it not a good thing for us to know good and evil? In answering this, we should realize that many of our questions are not the ones the JE story deals with. Its main point is that God has provided everything that the man needs and has told him not to eat of that tree. God’s reasons are God’s own; the man is supposed to obey. Arguing that it is good for humans to know good and evil is exactly the temptation that the serpent offered! JE asserts that it is not our place to argue with God about what is best; God has spoken and we should obey! The attempt on our part to decide for ourselves what is good and what is evil is called *moral autonomy*. Autonomy literally means “self rule” or “self law.” To a people like the Israelites who had covenanted with God to obey God’s law, *moral autonomy* is the same thing as taking the place of God.

Gerhard von Rad argues that the expression “good and evil” in Old Testament usage is not necessarily used in a moral sense. It frequently means “everything” or, when used with a negative, “nothing.” “Knowledge of good and evil” means, therefore, “knowledge of everything,” *omniscience*. von Rad notes that the verb “to know” in Hebrew does not mean simply intellectual activity, but participation or experiencing. It is used for sexual experience in 4:1. When we speak of knowing good and evil, argues von Rad, we speak of the kind of life which characterizes maturity.

The serpent insinuates the possibility of an extension of human existence beyond the limits set for it by God at creation, not only an increase in pure intellectual enrichment but also familiarity with and power over mysteries that lie beyond human capacity. That the narrative sees man’s fall, his actual separation from God, occurring again and again in *this* area (and not, for example, as a plunge into moral evil, into the subhuman!), i.e., in what we call Titanism, man’s *hubris*—that is truly one of its most significant affirmations.

The outcome of von Rad’s argument, that it is humankind’s overreaching pride (*hubris* is the Greek word for this) which is the issue in the Fall, is no doubt correct, but his theory that the tree of the knowledge of good and evil is the same as the tree of knowledge as such seems unconvincing. W. Malcolm Clark (*Journal of Biblical Literature*, September, 1969) presents a much more convincing case. He maintains that to discern rightly between good and evil is, for the Yahwist writer, a divine characteristic. This characteristic can be shared with humankind, but the person with whom it is shared serves only as God’s representative in the act of discernment. The leader of a tribe or clan, the judge, the good king, all make judgments upon members of the clan or on courses of action that are to be taken. These people are supposed to pronounce God’s judgment, not give their own opinion. Indeed, one function of both prophets and priests was to ascertain that it was divine wisdom and not opinion that prevailed in such matters, that the ruler had rightly fulfilled the responsibility to speak God’s word truly.

To eat of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil would be to presume to discern, to make judgment, on one’s own—not as God’s representative. It would also involve taking the risk of being held responsible for such judgments and for their results.

In the P account, humanity is created male and female from the beginning. In the JE story, *'adam* seems to us to be male, in part because the word is transliterated into the name “Adam.” We need to remember, however, that the Hebrew word itself means “human being”; there is a separate word for “male human being” which we will see when the “female human being” is created. There was no question in Old Testament times about the relationship of man to woman. Man was superior; woman was subordinate to him. The P statement, “Male and female created he them,” is remarkable in view of the attitudes of the times. JE is much more typical of the Old Testament ethos in equating, in our translations at least, *'adam* with the male sex. Yet JE has God say, “It is not good that the man should be alone. . . .” That verse could just as well be translated “It is not good that the human being should be alone . . . .” How much of our difficulty in understanding the relationship of the genders stems from English’s lack of a generic singular noun and pronoun? At this distance from the original authors it is, of course, impossible to say. We would do well to try to translate what is actually in the text and not what is limited to our traditional understandings of the text. From the P account we could see that it would not be good for humankind to be represented only as male, because half of the nature of humankind would be missing. In JE, however, it seems that what is not good about the man’s being alone is that he would have no suitable “helper.” What kind of help does he need? Is it physical help in tending the garden or some other kind of help?

What comes to mind when you hear the word “helper”? Probably you think of an assistant of some sort. So we may think that the first creature needs a sort of “assistant creature.” But the word “helper” is used in the Bible more often in Psalms than any other book. There it refers to God, and God is scarcely an “assistant human being.” Thus, the “suitable helper” which the first creature needs is probably not to be considered intrinsically subordinate.

The type of helper deemed suitable emerges as we see what kind of helpers are offered. God forms all of the animals out of the ground, the same earth from which man was made. These are the first helpers to be offered. The man names each of them. As P has God give humankind dominion over the animals, so JE accomplishes the same thing by having the man name them. In naming them, the man takes possession of them and asserts his dominion over them, just as in the P account God takes possession of the darkness by naming it “night.”

None of the animals is “fit” for him as helper, although humans have used animals to help them in their work for thousands of years. The JE writer knew that animals were used for plowing and carrying loads for human beings. The “fitness” of the animals as the human’s helpers, therefore, cannot refer simply to this.

The animals, no matter how much they may help physically, could not prevent the first individual from being “alone.” A helper is needed to assuage loneliness.

God creates the woman. He causes a “deep sleep” to fall on the human. This is a supernatural sleep; one cannot watch God’s direct actions. It was a Hebrew belief that no one could see God and live: God’s majesty is too much for humankind to

bear. During this deep sleep, God took something from the body; “one of his ribs” is the usual translation, but it is not clear in the Hebrew. The word means something much bigger than a single bone; it is more like our term “a side of beef.” From the body of the first human God forms the woman and brings her to the man.

Then the man recognizes her: she is bone of his bone and flesh of his flesh. When he calls her “Woman,” he is not naming her, as the animals were named. Rather, this is a cry of joyous recognition that she is part of him. *’ish* is Hebrew for “male human being”—*’ishshah* means “female human being.” The two words are the same except that one is masculine and the other feminine. From this, JE traces the bond between husband and wife. The man and woman are as close to each other — *’ish* to *’ishshah* —as humanity is to the earth— *’adam* to *’adamah*. The helper that is “fit” for the man, then, is one who is of his same nature, one who can make him no longer alone.

Note that the woman is not subordinate to the man as his helper. In the world in which JE was writing, the place of women in society was very low indeed. A woman was almost everywhere regarded as a possession of a man. She was on the same level as his animals or his slaves. In those circumstances, JE was raising the status of woman very high: she is part of man’s own flesh. The subordination of one to the other is not presented in JE until after both have sinned. Much later St. Paul urged that “. . . husbands should love their wives as their own bodies. He who loves his wife loves himself. For no one ever hates his own body, but he nourishes it and tenderly cares for it . . .” (Eph. 5:28-29). (Note that in this same passage, however, St. Paul says that the husband is the head of the wife as Christ is the head of his body, the church. No one can doubt that this is subordination—and there is good reason to overcome this attitude now—but for those times, St. Paul’s total exhortation was a big advance beyond the common attitude.)

Besides dealing with the main theme of the story of creation, JE does something else here that is characteristic of this source: it gives an explanation for why something came to be as it now is. Woman (*’ishshah*) is called woman because she was taken from man (*’ish*); also, a man leaves his father and mother when he marries, because he and his wife are one flesh. A word and a custom are explained. We should note here that throughout Old Testament history, it was the woman who left her family at marriage. Does this verse, perhaps, give us a glimpse of an older custom? We do not know for sure, although there is some recent evidence that points in this direction.

### **Etymological Legends**

A story that explains how a word came about is called by scholars an *etymological legend*. (Etymology is the study of word origins.) A story that explains the origins of a thing, a place, a custom, or almost anything else, is called an *aetiological* (or *etiological*) *legend*. The origin of the word “woman” is explained by the etymological myth of the creation of the woman from the man. The origin of the marriage custom is explained by the same story as an etiological myth. The author may have more than one purpose in telling this story. Sometimes, as here, JE includes an etymological and an etiological purpose along with its major purpose. At other times, the story may be told simply for its etiological or etymological value. While very often we

know that the words which are “explained” did not come about as JE claims they did, that the customs or the other things have some other more likely explanation, nevertheless the author’s explanations show us a bit about the society in which the author lived. (We discuss later the last verse in this section, about the man and the woman being naked but not ashamed.)

The story of the Fall is one of the best known stories in the Bible. It is also one of the most difficult and most misunderstood.

**Genesis  
3:1-7**

With a wonderful use of words—so few that say so much—the writer sums up the temptations that the woman faces: the fruit is good for food, pleasant to the eyes, and would make one wise. It is attractive on the physical level (food), the aesthetic level (beauty), and the intellectual level (wisdom). Note especially that the woman in 3:6 recognizes the fruit as having precisely the same characteristics God gave it in 2:9. That is, the trouble does not arise because the woman fails to investigate the properties of the fruit, or because she is wrong in the conclusions she draws. The error is on quite another level.

When we come to study *ethics* (the study of how we make our moral decisions) in more detail, we see that a moral problem arises only when there is a conflict between what we ought to do and what we want to do. As long as our desires and our duties agree, there is no problem. In this verse we have a summary of desires, any one of which may conflict with duty: we may desire something because it is useful, because it is pleasing, or because it will increase our stature, status, or power. None of these desires is bad in itself—the problem comes about only when such desires conflict with duty.

But what is duty? Particular duties may come from any number of sources. A parent gives an order to a child and expects the child to receive this order as a duty. Society requires certain things of its members and expects them to regard these requirements as duties. No command has the force of duty unless it is accepted by a person as rightfully his or her duty. A command that is issued by a more powerful person to a weaker person may be obeyed because of fear of punishment, but it will not be obeyed out of duty unless the person commanded agrees that the command is right and proper. That is, no conflict inside the conscience of the person will arise between desire and duty unless the duty is accepted as forced by the conscience.

The serpent first dismisses the threat of the use of power to enforce God’s command by saying: “You will not die.” It then moves to dismiss the rightness of the command by suggesting that God was wrong to have forbidden the woman to eat of the fruit: God was jealously protecting himself against possible competition when humankind becomes like one of the gods. When the force of duty has been done away with, when neither fear nor perception of rightness counsels obedience, then desires can have their way. So Eve eats of the fruit and gives some to her husband, and he eats too.

“They knew that they were naked; they sewed fig leaves together” and made clothing for themselves to cover their nakedness. We are certainly not supposed to think

that they could not see before eating of this fruit, but when they saw each other then, they did so in innocence, whereas now they do so in shame. They were “one flesh” before, and this was proper; the woman had been created for the man so that he could overcome loneliness. When an individual puts his or her desires ahead of duty—ahead of what is due another—the bond between them is broken. The individual is then thinking only selfishly, and not of the other. The other becomes merely an object to satisfy the individual’s desires. Here the man and the woman are no longer “one flesh,” each fulfilling the other; they have become strangers, each concerned with his or her own desires. The result is *alienation*. Alienation is an important and powerful word; it is the state of affairs that exists when one is alien, foreign, a stranger in regard to others; it points to the walls that come up between people and separate them. Alienation cancels out the communion or companionship which overcomes loneliness. In such a state of affairs, the very physical signs of communion, the sex organs, became objects of shame.

More than simple awareness of their sexuality is seen in verse 7. Their eyes are opened and they are aware of themselves. In the state of innocence the relationships of the man to the woman and of both to God were easy and natural, without the need for thought. Duty was not a burden but the natural response of each to the other and of both to God. The moment the man and the woman ate of the fruit, they put their own judgments first. They focus on themselves, and in so doing, become self-conscious and aware of themselves.

There are two sides to this situation. On the one hand, by deciding to follow their desire rather than their duty to be obedient to God, they sin. The JE writer sees the very heart of sin as the creature’s grasping the role of God and deciding what is good and what is evil. JE arranges a wonderful word play that makes the point forcefully. The word for “naked” in 2:25 and 3:7 sounds the same as (is a homophone of) the word describing the serpent as “crafty” in 3:1. The man and woman wanted to be like God; instead, they ended up like the serpent. This is the story of a fall from the perfect state in which God created humankind. On the other hand, there is a sense in which it can be said that, until humankind in full self-awareness risks making decisions and being held accountable for them, we are less than free creatures who show forth the divine image. While the Fall marks the fact of sin, it also marks the beginning of human moral life. It is only by being a moral person, making decisions, that righteousness is possible. A person who has never been tested in the conflict between desire and duty never really knows if he or she is able to be obedient. The fact that the man and the woman chose disobedience makes this the story of the Fall; the fact that they chose makes it also an upward movement. For this reason, some later interpreters have understood the fall as an upward (or even “fortunate”) fall. JE does show, however, that to enter into the life of moral responsibility is to take upon oneself a life which demands a great price—the price of innocence.

### Genesis 3:8-13

The picture which the writer paints of God walking in the garden in the cool of the day is *anthropomorphic* (speaking of God in human terms). We have already noticed (in chapter 2) that J and E both use anthropomorphic symbols. In this story, however, the symbol is more than simply JE’s customary way of speaking; it shows that in

the garden God and human beings live together in a close relationship. There is no need for temple, ritual, or priesthood for God and humankind to speak with each other or be in each other's presence.

Because of their disobedience, however, the woman and the man feel *shame* in their relationships with each other, and they feel *fear* in relation to God. The close, natural relationship with God is broken, so they hide from God.

Then God asks, "Where are you?" Does the writer not know that God is *omniscient* (knowing all things)? Or, is the writer denying this teaching about God? Actually, neither is happening. It seems that the writer is using this form of words to make a point. The same form of words is used later (Gen. 4:9) in the story of the murder of Abel by his brother Cain. Here God is asking an open-ended question. He gives the man a chance to confess and seek to restore the broken relationship. The man understands the nature of the question and answers it appropriately. The answer is that they are afraid and hide. Shame and fear, both of which come about as results of humankind's striving to overreach, have resulted in alienation from both fellow human beings and God.

When God asks the man if he has eaten from the tree, the answer given is typical of the ways in which we try to avoid responsibility for our actions. The man says that the woman, whom God had given to him, gave him the fruit to eat. He shifts the blame to another person; he also suggests that God was to blame, since God gave the woman to him. We often try to blame forces outside ourselves for our wrongdoings. God, the fates, or simply bad luck, on the one hand—the powers which are supposed to be in control of things—or another human person, on the other hand.

God then begins to question the woman, and she shifts the blame to the serpent. Notice that the questioning stops here. God does not ask the serpent why it did this thing. Moral responsibility belongs to humankind alone, and no appeal to forces in nature is allowed. As we see, humanity's sin has an effect on the world of nature: among other things, the serpent is cursed. The serpent is not asked to account for his acts. Sin belongs to humankind. This is one of the main reasons, as we suggested earlier, that we should not regard the serpent as Satan or the Devil.

Next comes the judgment. These verses are mainly etiological: they explain why certain things are as they are. Why does the snake crawl on its belly—a very difficult way to travel, it would seem, in comparison with walking on legs—and why is it so feared by people? Why do women have so much more pain in childbirth than other animals? Why is woman subordinate to man? Why is it so difficult to make a living, when the earth has such abundance?

There is meaning on a deeper level than this. While the serpent is not cast in the role of Satan in the story, it is easy to see why the notion of Satan would come about and why he should be linked to the serpent. So many times in our lives we know that the evil we have done did not happen because we set out on purpose to do it. It seems as though wrong ideas come to us with suggestions that seem very appealing. Often we

see that they were wrong only after we act on them. It would really be quite simple if the only evil that happened was what we wanted to happen: we would quickly learn not to want evil! The trouble is that we seem to be tempted from outside ourselves in ways we too often do not recognize in time. The JE writer is quite certain that we cannot escape our responsibility because of such temptations. The decisions remain ours to make. Yet the reality of temptation makes the notion of Satan an obvious one. The loathsomeness of the serpent crawling about, hissing and leering out of hidden places with evil-looking eyes, makes it an obvious symbol of this evil force.

The odd syntax of Gen. 3:15 makes it so difficult to translate that it is impossible to know how to render the part about the seed of the woman striking the serpent's head and its striking the heel of her seed. Early Christian writers used it as a sign of the Messiah: Mary, the "new Eve," gave birth to the one who defeated the power of evil—struck the head of the serpent—but to do it he had to undergo the destructive power of evil himself—his "heel" was struck by the serpent. This could not have been what JE meant! But it is an example of a way the early church interpreted the Old Testament: they looked for signs of the Christ in it.

This way of using the Old Testament is called *typology*. Typology refers to the practice of seeing certain Old Testament figures or events as being types (*typoi* in Greek) which foreshadow things to come, e.g., the coming Messiah. Christians have also seen Noah's ark as a type of the church—the shelter in which those who are elected by God for salvation will ride out the destruction at the time of God's judgment. Passover has been seen as a type of Easter: as the Israelites were delivered from slavery in Egypt and brought into the covenant with God, so Christians are delivered from bondage to sin and are brought into the new covenant by Jesus Christ.

Sometimes typological images can be helpful in interpreting Christianity in the context of its Israelite heritage; sometimes the types suggested are too remote and fanciful to be entertained. One thing should be kept in mind, however, in dealing with the Old Testament: its writers did not intend these persons or events to be interpreted in this way. It is one thing to say that we can understand this or that Christian image in the light of an Old Testament image; it is something else entirely to say that the Old Testament means a prediction of this or that Christian image. The meaning of the Old Testament must be sought first in its own terms, and not in those imposed by later Christian interpretation.

Neither the man nor the woman is cursed by God. Judgments are pronounced, and they are unpleasant; but there is no curse on people as there is on the serpent. Traditionally, the woman's punishment has been seen as pain in childbirth. However, the verse actually uses the same term for "hard labor" as is used in verse 17 for the man's punishment. Although their spheres are different—children for the woman and crops for the man—the labor of each is commensurate with that of the other. The subordination of woman to man is stated, and her situation is shown to be frustrating in other ways: ". . . your desire shall be for your husband . . ." The woman will seek rest and fulfillment in her husband, but she will never find it there. Instead, she will find a subordinate role. JE is offering an etiological explanation of a situation which

was the cultural norm at that time, and the cultural norm, this subordination, comes as the result of sin. It is not presented as part of God's intention in creation.

When God's judgment turns to the man, the ground is cursed for his sake. The man himself is not cursed. God's purpose of redemption is always in the writer's mind. Humanity is in a special relationship with God which even sin cannot destroy. The man is judged, but not cursed. The ground is cursed because of him: '*adam* brings a curse on '*adamah*.

The man and the woman will eat only as a result of toil. The man was created for work. He was to till the garden and care for it. Now, work has become toil. It is hard, bitter, and offers few rewards. Instead of being a plentiful garden, the earth is now a hostile place in which the barest necessities of life must be eked out by the sweat of one's brow. This is the kind of world in which humankind has lived throughout the ages and is still the situation of most people today. Modern affluent America is quite different from most of the societies of the world, but we are becoming aware that even we may not have escaped the ancient judgment after all.

Finally, the part of the judgment which sounds so harsh even in English is almost brutal in Hebrew: "By the sweat of your face you shall eat bread until you return to the ground, for out of it you were taken; you are dust, and to dust you shall return." Not only will it be necessary to labor and toil for little reward, but it shall all be done with the knowledge that death stands at the end. Life is futile, useless.

The judgment which is given shows forth a disruption in the created order. God had looked at creation and found it very good: it all fit together and was suitable for God's purposes (the P story). In JE, the world is a garden, a suitable place for God to walk in the cool of the evening. This perfection has been shattered by the man and the woman. It does not mean that the divine image in humankind is shattered—nowhere does the Bible suggest that—but it does mean that humanity is now out of joint in relationship to the earth (toil and death), in relationship to his or her mate (shame and lack of fulfillment), and in relationship with God (fear and hiding). In trying to be like a divine being, humankind has sinned and spoiled God's wonderful creation.

The man names his wife. The Hebrew is *hawwah*, which is similar to the word for "living." St. Jerome, who translated the Old Testament into Latin, made "Eve" out of it. Here the man uses the naming formula with the woman as he had done previously with the animals. The pattern of domination and subordination is acted out. It is only at this point that we should call the two by the proper names, Adam and Eve. Until this point, "the man" and "the woman" are better translations.

Notice that even though the judgment has been given, God does not simply wash his hands of Adam and Eve. God does not kill them on the day they eat of the fruit of the forbidden tree. In his mercy God stays that punishment. Moreover, God mitigates the punishment given. In an undeserved act of tenderness, God clothes them properly with coats of skins. God the creator deigns to become God the tailor. We notice again and again in these first eleven chapters of Genesis that God never

abandons the people, even when the judgment for sin is most severe. The intention of God to redeem humankind, later directly expressed in chapter 12 with the call of Abram, is indirectly expressed in these chapters by the fact that no matter how severe the judgment, life goes on; moreover, God continues to care. God's judgment and God's grace are bound together.

At this point, the second tree—the tree of life—appears in the story. Death has already been introduced into the story with the judgment on the man, but the writer uses the tree of life to make a further point. Immortality was never promised to the man. He is told that if he eats of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil he will surely die, but this is simply a statement of the consequence of the act. It does not imply that the man would live forever if he refrained from eating of it. If the garden has a tree of life, the man might eat of that tree and *obtain* immortality. We might think that it would be good to live forever. But if the description given by JE is correct, that the man must live in toil and pain until he returns to the ground, what could be more merciless than to allow him to live this way forever? God removes the possibility of humankind's becoming immortal by driving Adam and Eve from the garden where the tree grows. The punishment is not to be eternal.

YHWH expels Adam and Eve from the garden “to till the ground from which he was taken.” The *cherubim* (plural; the singular is *cherub*) which are placed at the east of the garden are winged creatures, frequently lion-like. In ancient mythology they were the protectors of the gods. Cherubim supported the throne of the king of Babylon. In the Temple in Jerusalem, cherubim were placed in the “holy of holies” with their wings touching across the top of the “ark,” a boxlike structure in which relics of the making of the covenant in the wilderness of Sinai were kept. With their flaming swords they prevent humankind from reentering the garden.

What is the meaning of Adam and Eve's being driven from the garden? First, it illustrates that human sin makes it impossible to show forth clearly God's image in the world and be God's stewards toward creation. The man is still commanded to do this: he is to “till the ground from which he was taken.” Adam cannot do it with the simple naturalness he knew in the garden; he is now, because of his sin, alien in respect to the earth and he must toil in order to till it.

Second, it shows that man and woman are forever cut off from the innocence they enjoyed in the garden. The cherubim guarding against any return present a powerful symbol of something everyone has experienced: once sin has occurred, there is no return to innocence.

Third, if the Fall is also a fall upward, humankind now faces an important choice: will men and women go forward to a life of responsibly chosen obedience and righteousness, or will they continue to choose disobedience and sin?

The Christian vision of the fulfillment of human life, found in the Book of Revelation, is set not in a garden but in a city: the new Jerusalem. A city—and, of course, a nation or the whole community of nations—is a human construction. Two very

important English words come from words which mean “city”: *civilization* (from the Latin *civitas*, “city”) and *politics* (from the Greek *polis*, “city”). Humankind creates civilization when it moves from simply depending on what nature sends to building a life with fellow human beings. Growing crops, herding animals, making the things one needs in order to do one’s work and to live with some amount of comfort and safety—all these activities require that people live and work together. They must have at least some degree of justice and sense of community if they are to succeed. Political organization has as its purpose the formation of ways of living together so that community and justice can be found. Community and justice are two of the most important notions that we see developing in the biblical story.

The “upward fall” may set humankind on the path toward community and justice. The new Jerusalem or the Kingdom of God—both political symbols—mark the destination toward which this path is to go. The path is strewn not only with some degree of success, but also with inhuman failures. They are inhuman because they show human beings in sinful contradiction of their created status in the image of God. It is wrong to call our cruelty to one another bestial, for beasts do not act this way. When they kill, it is to eat or to protect themselves, as their created instincts order them to do. They show forth their nature as beasts, and the word “beast” has no bad meanings when it is used about them. Humankind, created to live together (male and female, Gen. 1:27; not alone, 2:18) and in God’s image, fails to show forth its own nature, but rather denies it and is inhuman when it disrupts the bonds of community and acts unjustly.

In the next few chapters of Genesis we see what humankind does. In between the expulsion from the garden and the coming of the new Jerusalem, the Bible tells the stories of human wickedness, unfaithfulness, and disobedience. It also tells of the actions of God to construct a nation which will be a means of establishing justice and community among all people.

Before leaving this story we should make some comments on original sin, which is a term often used in connection with the Fall. The doctrine of “original sin,” which has been taught in the church for many centuries, says that there is an inclination to sin in every human being from the very beginning of his or her life. Original sin is different from acts of sin. Acts of sin are specific things that we do that are wrong in the sight of God; original sin is the tendency in us that leads us to do these acts. Since at least the fifth century CE the church has taught that every person who is born shares in original sin, even before she or he has committed any acts of sin.

We do not go into the question of whether or not this teaching should be accepted. Many people today think it should not, but there are also important reasons for us not to discard it too easily. At this point we are concerned with the fact that the doctrine of original sin has been connected with the story of the fall in Genesis. The tendency in us to commit acts of sin is traced to the fall of Adam and Eve. We have, according to this doctrine, inherited the tendency to sin—or original sin—from them.

## Original Sin

Paul says, “. . . sin came into the world through one man [Adam], and death came through sin, and so death spread to all because all have sinned” (Rom. 5:12). In the fifth century, Augustine used this text to formulate the doctrine of original sin which has prevailed in western Christian thought ever since. The point that Paul is making in Rom. 5:12-21 is that Christ’s righteousness is, by God’s grace, more than enough to offset the effects of sin. “For just as by one man’s disobedience the many were made sinners, so by the one man’s obedience the many will be made righteous” (5:19).

There are three thoughts expressed here. One is that death came by Adam’s sin and that death has been the common lot of all. The second is that death has become the common lot of all because all have sinned. And the third is that, by the disobedience of one man, all were made sinners. This is ambiguous, however, since it is not clear in what way Paul thinks all were made sinners by Adam. Is sin viewed as a kind of “power” which “came into the world” with Adam’s fall to grasp all so that they sin? Is sin such a “power” that it has altered the structures of life so that death is now an option for humankind? That is, if death for all is due to the fact that all sin, if some did not, would they not die? Must people sin because Adam did?

There are many issues in all of this, and most of them belong more properly to a study of Paul’s Epistle to the Romans. The main question as far as the doctrine of original sin is concerned is whether Paul thought that Adam’s sin made it inevitable that all humankind would sin, or that Adam’s having caused sin to “come into the world” was what made sin a possibility for humankind. There is nothing in the Romans passage to compel us to make the former interpretation—that sin is inevitable because of Adam. It is a possible interpretation, but not a necessary one. Equally possible is the interpretation that sin as a disruptive power was introduced into the good creation by Adam’s act, and that from then on it has grown and spread so that all men and women in fact now do sin.

Essentially, Augustine removed the ambiguity. He said that our natures are tainted and corrupted by the sin of Adam so that we inherit an irresistible tendency to sin from birth. This corruption of nature is inherited in the process of procreation, much the way genetic traits are passed on from generation to generation.

The Genesis story of the Fall does not seem to say this. Jewish scholars have never interpreted the story as meaning that we all have to disobey God because Adam did. All people do sin; chapters 5-11 of Genesis show sin spreading in wider and deeper circles until it reaches into the hearts of all people. The main point of the story of Adam and Eve is freedom. They were free to obey or disobey. Without freedom there would be no responsibility for sin. Sin is freedom reaching beyond its limits. Hebrew thought has always insisted that freedom remains after the Fall. Humankind must either do right or disobey. When we move from freely doing right as God commands it, to deciding what is right, in the place of God, our freedom has overreached its limits.

In their freedom, Adam and Eve do what humankind has done all along: they attempt to remove themselves from the role of creatures and to judge God for themselves. The

understanding of sin in this story is not—as the doctrine of original sin has it—that sin is due to an infection in our nature inherited from Adam. It is that now, as always in the past, sin springs from the same source as does human goodness—freedom and dignity—but sin is an overreaching misuse of these gifts.

A final note about the understanding of sin in Genesis 3: sin is a conscious, willful, deliberate act of disobedience. For the writers of Genesis, sin is not something one can do “by accident.” And it is possible to sin in two ways: by doing what you know is wrong (the woman picks and eats the fruit) or by neglecting to do what you know is right (the man does not remind the woman of God’s prohibition against eating the fruit of that particular tree).

