

Original Sin in Genesis 1-11

Churchman 104/4 1990

Gordon Wenham

The interpretation of Genesis 1-11 is exceptionally difficult. The days of Genesis 1 and the ages of the antediluvians in chapter 5 spring at once to mind. Superficially the stories from which the doctrines of original sin are derived, the garden of Eden, Cain and Abel and the Flood, are much simpler to understand. A fairly cursory reading is sufficient to reveal the main points being made. But when one enquires more closely into the character of these stories, (are they myth, history, parable or historical aetiology?), opinions sharply divide. Further complications for the interpreter are introduced by the practice of source criticism, which tends to view Genesis as a collection of different fragments deriving from a variety of sources. Is P's view of sin identical with J's and so on?

To explore all these aspects of the interpretation of Genesis 1-11 that bear on its view of original sin would require a long monograph not a short essay. Here the discussion must necessarily be restricted. I shall begin by reviewing three representative exegetical approaches to these chapters, those of Von Rad, Westermann and Drewermann. Then bypassing the source-critical issues, we shall enquire what Genesis 1-11 in its final form teaches about sin, first through its narrative structure, second by its modification of Near Eastern mythology, and finally by its explicit comments.

Before turning to Genesis, it may be as well to clarify the notion of original sin. In the western church Augustine's view has traditionally held a pre-eminent place: later theologians have tended to react more or less consciously to his position. Similarly interpreters of Genesis 1-11 often have as part of their hidden agenda to endorse or criticize the Augustinian view of original sin. So to clarify the issue, we shall first summarize what Augustine said on this subject, before we go on to enquire how far his views are similar to those of Genesis.

Augustine's starting point was the perfection of the first man Adam before he fell. He was free from physical ills. He had liberty not to sin. He was devoted to obeying God. He was wrapped in divine grace, indeed he had the grace of perseverance, so that he could have continued to obey God's will.

Adam's fall was entirely his own fault. Because he was nobler than any other man and his will was completely free, his sin was more serious than any other sin and had consequences for the whole human race. These consequences involved condemnation for all mankind. 'The essence of original sin consists in our participation in and co-responsibility for Adam's perverse choice'.¹ All sinned in Adam.

Secondly, the fall results in the corruption of human nature. Everyone now falls far short of the moral and physical perfection that Adam enjoyed. Man is enslaved to ignorance, to a godless search for pleasure and to death. Moral struggle and failure is the fruit of the fall and an aspect of original sin.

Thirdly, original sin deprives us of free will, so that we cannot avoid sin without God's help.

In short, the Augustinian doctrine of original sin comprises four elements: a historical fall focused in a decisive act of disobedience, making all men guilty before God, corrupting human nature and enslaving them to sin.

Von Rad on Genesis 1-11

G. von Rad's commentary on Genesis, which was first published in 1949, has rightly been acclaimed as one of the great theological commentaries on Genesis. He does, of course, presuppose the distinction between the J and P sources in Genesis 1-11 and expounds them independently. However, this does not affect his discussion of original sin too much in that most of the relevant material appears in J, and von Rad sees J as a coherent theological narrative.

Like most modern commentators von Rad is cautious about affirming the historicity of the fall, but he is clear that the author of Genesis (or J) understood it this way. It is a story, but not just doctrine, that is, not just parable.

One must, therefore, bear in mind that here a factual report is meant to be given about facts which everyone knows and whose reality no one can question ... We read a narrative that proceeds amidst the simplest and clearest imagery; but that, of course, does not mean it does not intend throughout to report actuality.²

So what does Genesis actually say about the fall? Von Rad believes that commentators have often read 'non-biblical mythical ideas about the blessedness of man's original state.'³ into Genesis and these must be rooted out. For example, he holds that the garden of Eden was not the home of God, but simply a gracious gift given to man by God. 'Life in paradise consisted completely in the question of obedience to God and not in pleasure and freedom from suffering.'⁴

The narrative in Genesis 2-3 is not interested in describing the situation before the fall, but in explaining man's present plight. Why he suffers from frustration, toil, pain and death.

The manifold, profound troubles in human life have their root in the *one* trouble of man's relationship to God. Expressed more concisely, Genesis 3 asserts that all sorrow comes from sin.⁵ Man was surrounded completely by God's providential goodness. Paradise is irreparably lost; what is left for man is a life of trouble in the shadow of a crushing riddle, a life entangled in an unbounded and completely hopeless struggle with the power of evil and in the end unavoidably subject to the majesty of death.⁶

Commenting on the Cain and Abel story von Rad says:

The narrator shows what happened to mankind when once it had fallen from obedience to God. This is actually the first picture of man after he was expelled from Paradise and the picture is a terrible one. Sin has grown like an avalanche. It has taken total possession of the man who associated with it, for this man outside of Paradise is a fratricide from the beginning. The story expresses something of the essential element of all mankind by condensing it into a picture of quite elemental power.⁷

Von Rad describes the plot of Genesis 2-11 more than once as the progressive power of sin engulfing humanity in an 'avalanche.'⁸ Further steps in man's downward path are noted in Lamech (4:23-24) and in the Sons of God episode (6:1-8).

From Adam and Eve to the Tower of Babel, Genesis portrays sin as laying waste ever larger areas of human activity.

This succession of narratives, therefore, points out a continually widening chasm between man and God. But God reacts to these outbreaks of sin with severe judgments. The punishment of Adam and Eve was severe; severer still was Cain's. Then followed the Flood and the final judgment was the Dispersion, the dissolution of mankind's unity.⁹

In von Rad's exposition of Genesis there is little that an Augustinian would take exception to. Augustine might feel von Rad had left out the idea of original guilt, our co-responsibility for Adam's sin, and by emphasizing the consequences of the sin of Adam's descendants underplayed the magnitude of Adam's sinful act and its effects. He also fails to discuss in any detail several key texts in Genesis 6:5; 9:20-29, that relate to the doctrine. Yet these are points unsaid, rather than explicit disagreement with Augustine. Very different is the approach of Westermann, who on many occasions takes issue with von Rad.

Westermann on Genesis 1-11

C. Westermann's great commentary on Genesis appeared in instalments between 1968 and 1982. The first volume covering Genesis 1-11 appeared in English translation in 1984. In it Westermann adopts an approach to these chapters quite different from von Rad's. Though he subscribes to the standard source-critical analysis of Genesis, his focus of interest is not the final form of the book, nor the work of J as a coherent whole (which is von Rad's interest) but an earlier stage in the tradition, the originally independent stories which Westermann holds have been amalgamated by J. So in his exegesis he tends to interpret each episode in isolation rather than as part of an ongoing story. This has profound consequences for his understanding of Genesis' view of sin.

Westermann recognizes the affinities of the stories in Genesis 1-11 with the tales of Near Eastern and primitive peoples about primaeval times. Stories about creation, flood and the origins of hardship, pain and flood are known the world over. But though the ancient Hebrews thought these stories were about primaeval antiquity, Westermann holds that they are really about the present.

Westermann does not think one can speak of a historic fall. There was never a time in which man enjoyed perfect fellowship with God. The stories in Genesis 1-11 are to do with primaeval time, not chronological time. There was not a fall umpteen years before Abraham. Rather they express the experiences of all humanity. They are paradigms of sin and its consequences. They are not in any real sense historical. They are simply stories illustrating how man can choose to rebel against God and the terrible effects this can have.

The intention of J in the main body of this early narrative is to use a series of stories of crime and punishment to illustrate the various ways in which the creature can revolt against the creator; direct disobedience to God (i.e. Genesis 2-3), the murder of one's brother (Genesis 4), impiety towards one's parents (Genesis 9).¹⁰

Summing up his view of Genesis 2-3, he explicitly denounces the idea of it being a 'fall' from a state of innocence to our present predicament.

The goal of the narrative of Genesis 2-3 is not a state which is to be opposed to an earlier state, but the expulsion of the man and the woman from the garden and the consequent separation from God. The question behind the narrative is not primarily, how did death come into the world? or

what is the origin of sin? even though these questions contributed to its formation. The real question which determines the whole narrative is: Why is a person who is created by God limited by death, suffering, toil and sin? But this question is not primarily causal, an objective search for the *primaeva* cause. It is the question of human beings affected by their limited state. It is this existential question that the narrative is really about.

The answer which the narrative gives then is not a piece of objective information which answers directly the question about the cause. The answer is found in the connexion shown between one's guilt and one's limitation by suffering, death and toil. But the narrative does not say the last word here: the death sentence which was announced is not carried out. The curse does not touch the couple directly, but only in passing. The alienation of the man and the woman from God does not mean a definitive separation. God drives them out of the garden, but leaves them life and by giving them a commission outside the garden, God gives meaning to their alienated existence. Guilt and death are now stark realities that keep them shackled, but even so they remain creatures of God. The narrative of Genesis 2-3 will always retain its meaning for humankind. Something basic is said about humanity which no religious or ideological, no scientific, technical or medical development or change can or will in any way alter. It is part of human existence that a person is fallible. One cannot be a human being other than a fallible human being. This is the context of the limitation of human existence; not indeed that death is the penalty for the offense committed by a first man, but rather that fallible, sinful, disobedient humanity is humanity separated from God. A person separated from God is a person limited by death, suffering and toil.¹¹

So for Westermann, man's sinfulness is an aspect of his creatureliness. He is still free to serve God if he wants or to rebel and pay the penalty. Between Genesis 3 and Genesis 4 there is no intensification of sin; the stories simply illustrate different ways of sinning. While Chapter 3 shows how sin breaches the relationship between God and man and man and wife; Chapter 4 shows how sin leads to bad relations between brothers. Cain's sacrifice was not defective. Cain was not wicked before he killed Abel, Abel was not righteous. Abel 'is no more than a victim of rivalry in a competition which belongs to human existence as a community of brothers.'¹² Similarly commenting on the very important verse 6:5 'The Lord saw . . . every imagination of the thoughts of his heart was only evil continually.' Westermann minimizes the impact of these words. They simply represent J's attempts to think of an explanation for a catastrophe like the flood.

Ham's unfilial act of viewing his father's nakedness is seen by Westermann as little more than an illustration of how not to keep the command to honour one's parents.

It is saying that . . . human existence can only be healthy when it is acknowledged that a relationship of respect of the new generation to the older is basic to human community ... To dishonour one's father threatened . . . progress.¹³

Finally, Westermann rejects the view that the Tower of Babel is a story of judgment on mankind's pride. Rather 'the purpose of God's intervention in verse 8 is to guard humanity against a danger that grows with its unity'. . . Division of mankind into a multitude of peoples saves humanity from destruction.

From Westermann's treatment of the individual stories it is apparent that he does not see any decline from Genesis 2 to Genesis 11.

Indeed he explicitly rejects von Rad's notion that these chapters describe an avalanche of sin gradually getting worse and engulfing all mankind. He says

It is questionable however that J ... intends to present a crescendo of sin. In any case one should not speak of a growth of sin to avalanche proportions.¹⁴

From these remarks it is apparent that Westermann does not merely reject the old Augustinian views of original sin, he is also out of sympathy with the more cautious restatement offered by von Rad. He denies that there ever was a historic fall. Consequently he does not view the story of Adam's sin as describing an act which fundamentally changed human nature. No, the stories in Genesis 1-11 describe possibilities inherent in the creation and portray what happens when man chooses to disobey God.

The material . . . is concerned on the one hand with the person's capabilities and accomplishments and on the other with the story of crime and punishment and the terrifying possibility that a human being, created free, can revolt against God the creator.¹⁵

Man is not therefore enslaved to sin, nor is he guilty because of the first man's sin. 'Not that death is the penalty for the offense committed by the first man.'¹⁶ Man as man is fallible and although all men sin, Westermann does not believe Genesis teaches that this is inevitable. Thus though he rarely criticizes the traditional doctrine of original sin, it is clear that in his interpretation of Genesis, Westermann is closer to the rabbis than to St. Paul, to Pelagius than to Augustine.

Earlier I observed that a weak doctrine of original sin is helped by the tendency to read the J and P passages in Genesis as independent. P's view of the original perfection of creation, which is emphasized in Genesis 1 is divorced from the Garden of Eden story ascribed to J. The magnitude of the fall is thereby diminished. But even von Rad who accepted the division of Genesis into J and P saw that the narratives ascribed to J show a progressive deterioration of the human situation from Eden to Babel. But Westermann misses this by focussing on the individual stories in J, rather than on the relationship of one story to one another.¹⁷ Indeed in interpreting the individual stories, he is so interested in its background and putative traditiohistorical development, that his exegesis of the final form of the stories hardly does justice to their setting in J, let alone in the present book of Genesis. Drewermann has drawn attention to this weakness in Westermann's exegesis.

E. Drewermann on Genesis 2-11

Drewermann's work on Genesis 1-11 is not as well known as von Rad or Westermann. His work *Strukturen des Bösen* published in three large volumes (1976) deals in turn with the exegesis of Genesis 2-11, its psychoanalytic and its philosophical implications. In other words it is more a work of systematic theology than simple exegesis, which it is beyond my competence to assess in its entirety. I simply wish to draw attention to his exegetical work on Genesis in Volume 1 of his work, which draws attention to some of the weaknesses in Westermann's approach.

Like Westermann, Drewermann describes Genesis 2-9 as *Urgeschichte*, *primaeval history*, that is these chapters portray the situation in remotest antiquity, before history in any modern sense began. They describe acts that have affected all mankind. With the curse on Canaan in 9:20-29, the story starts to focus on the fate of individual nations or groups of nations, and this represents a second and different phase in the *Urgeschichte*, a transition between the lost world before the flood and the present.

Thus Drewermann, like Westermann, would not describe the fall as a historical event. Drewermann holds that man is fallen and entrapped by sin, whereas Westermann says man is and has always been fallible. However, Drewermann does not think man was created fallen. He takes seriously the picture in Genesis of a perfect situation before man sinned. Genesis 2 does not describe merely what life could be like without sin, but that life is now no longer what God intended.¹⁸ 'Genesis 2 describes how it is when God acts, Genesis 3 what happens when man acts.'¹⁹ The two chapters can be contrasted as grace and sin.

But Genesis 2 and 3 cannot be set over against each other as preferences that may be chosen at will. Rather Genesis 2 describes what has been irrevocably lost by human guilt, what God originally had intended.²⁰

Contrasting the story of Genesis 2-3 with other ancient stories of origins, which often portray the gods as mean and jealous of human activities, Drewermann points out the LORD is generous and liberal towards mankind. The account focuses on man disobeying his creator. This makes Genesis 3 an account of a real fall.

Genesis 2-3 shows sin to be both an original and self-inflicted human plight. The situation created by sin cannot be reversed by man. It would appear simply as something given, if it were not self-inflicted. Genesis 2-3 intends to show that man is culpable. J is not saying that there was a temporal situation before sin existed. Rather that human life, as it is, need not have been this way and that it stands completely under the sign of failing away from God and expulsion.²¹

Pointing out the parallels between Genesis 3 and 4, Drewermann argues the Cain and Abel story is not simply another way of describing sin. It portrays the logical, not chronological, development of sin. It is not saying that fratricide is merely a possibility, 'rather that it is the fundamental reality of our history,'²² since man has fallen away from God.

Similarly Drewermann insists on the importance of Genesis 6:1-8 for the interpretation of Genesis 1-11. 'In J's *Urgeschichte* the story of the marriage of the Sons of God comes at the end of a development, that began in Genesis 3 and will culminate in the destruction of humanity.'²³ In particular he draws attention to 6:5 'The LORD saw that the wickedness of man was great in the earth and that every imagination of the thoughts of his heart was only evil continually.' To say that this is just J's attempt to find an explanation for the flood fails to do justice to this statement.

The heart is the centre of conscious life. So man is not merely evil, he intends evil. Evil is the direction of his will and not just from time to time, but always . . . To describe this verdict as pessimistic (so Gunkel) is too mild: it is hopeless. So God determines the end.²⁴

The study of Drewermann challenges many of the conclusions of Westermann quite effectively. By reading Genesis atomistically, Westermann has missed many of the theological points which J is making by juxtaposing one story beside another. He also seems to understate the consequences of passages such as 6:5, even though he believes this verse to be composed by J and therefore gives a clear insight into his theology. Drewermann is right to point out these weaknesses in Westermann. He is also correct to insist that Genesis is insisting on the universality of sin and its effects, that sin's power and destructiveness grows. His insistence that Genesis 2-3 is blaming man for sin and its consequences rather than the creator seems truer to the statements in the text than Westermann's claim that fallibility is a consequence of creaturehood and the corollary that God is to blame for human sinfulness. Drewermann's stance thus puts him closer to von Rad than Westermann. But it still seems to

me that he is open to criticism in differentiating the stories in Genesis 2-9 from those in 9-11. He seems to want to insist on the timeless historic quality of the earlier chapters, while he regards Chapters 9-11 as transitional to the real history of Chapter 12 onwards. One may wonder how far this reflects the intention of the narrator of Genesis. Furthermore, like von Rad and Westermann, he ignores the so-called P passages in formulating the teaching of Genesis on sin: whatever source-critical theory one favours, it is surely legitimate if not mandatory in any enterprise in biblical theology to examine the canonical form of the text as well as putative earlier stages in the tradition.

Re-interpreting Genesis 1-11

In developing an alternative to the views of von Rad, Westermann and Drewermann, I first want to look at the development of the story-line within Genesis 1-11. This tells against Westermann's attempt to view them all independently as different sides of the same problem. Secondly the way Genesis 1-11 handles ancient Near Eastern traditions needs examination. This suggests that the writer of Genesis had a much more pessimistic view of human nature than Westermann assumes. The stress on sin in the biblical material when compared to ancient Near Eastern parallels is very obvious. Thirdly, I shall look at some of the key texts within Genesis 1-11 for understanding their view of sin; 6:5, 8:21 and 9:20-27 are particularly significant for our study.

The perfection of the creation as it left the hand of God is one of the clearest points made by Genesis 1. Six times God observes that what he has made is good, and on the seventh, note the sacred number, that 'everything he had made . . . was very good.' (1:31). Now it may be that Chapter 1 comes from a different source from most of Chapters 2-11, but in Genesis as we now have it, the statements of Chapter 1 are peculiarly important in setting the framework for understanding later material and in subsequent chapters, especially 6-9, there are many back references to Chapter 1. The situation before and after the flood is thus often implicitly compared with the original creation.²⁵ The same view that man's original situation was 'very good', seems therefore likely to apply to the second story of creation in Chapter 2. But rather than just assume this the narrative of Genesis 2-3 must be examined on its own terms.

The story of the Garden of Eden is clearly the most important for our discussion and it raises a number of problems for the interpreter. Does the narrator think in terms of a fall or of an educational experience for Adam? Does he hold that this story of Adam is the story of every man, that the story simply offers a paradigm of sin rather than a unique *primaeval* sin? We may break this question down more precisely: is the story purporting to tell history, however symbolically, or myth? Did Adam's obedience affect only himself or also his descendants?

Let me first say that the answers one gives to these questions are not determined by how literally the story is understood. Though I incline to a symbolic reading of the story, the theological points it makes are similar on a more literal reading.

So is it right to talk of a fall? Did Adam and Eve lose something when they were expelled from Eden? They were threatened with death, but as commentators enjoy pointing out, that apparently did not occur 'on the day they ate from the forbidden fruit.' Indeed Genesis 5 allows Adam to live nine hundred and thirty years.

Despite the prolongation of Adam's life after the fall, Genesis 2-3 does seem to imply that the expulsion from Eden was a severe punishment. Eden means 'delight'.²⁶ Within this garden God walked, and the tree of eternal life was to be found. To be expelled from Eden

represented then, a dire loss, at least of opportunity. But we can go further. Many of the features of Eden suggest that it was the perfect sanctuary, the ideal place to worship God. There was also water, gold, precious stones, a tree of knowledge, cherubim, all items that adorned the later Israelite Sanctuaries. To be in Eden was therefore to enjoy the most intimate fellowship with God, an intimacy so amazing that man could walk unclothed in God's presence, something that later priests were strictly forbidden to do.²⁷

Clearly man's disobedience led to him forfeiting all these privileges. Before even the climactic expulsion, we find him hiding from God, clothing himself with fig-leaves. The dialogue between the creator and his creatures confirms these instinctive attitudes. Curses are pronounced on man, woman, serpent and land. Then the changed relationship is confirmed by them leaving Eden and the stationing of the cherubim to prevent their readmittance. Clearly the story describes a great loss for mankind. That disobedience of God's law leads to curse and punishment is the obvious message of these chapters. It is thus fair to describe these chapters as an account of man's fall.

But does the writer intend to describe every sin, or one particular original sin? Does he offer any clues as to whether he regards the story he relates as merely paradigmatic, or in some sense as a real event in *primaeval* history? The symbolic dimensions of the story linking the garden with the later sanctuaries support a paradigmatic reading. Water, gold, jewels, cherubim and so on link the Garden of Eden with the tabernacle and temples described later. The curses pronounced on the guilty for disobeying the divine instructions anticipate those pronounced on those who disregard the law. These elements give the story a universalistic flavour, or at least a pan-Israelite setting. 'Adam' is every man in Israel.

Yet other features of the narrative point in a more historical direction. The heading of the story, 'These are the generations of', links Genesis 2-4 with the subsequent narratives of Noah, Abraham, Jacob and the other great figures from Israel's past. The ensuing story of Cain and Abel and especially the genealogy of Chapter 5 linking Adam with Noah shows that the author understood the earliest stories to be about real people. Within the story itself there are features which suggest that the actions described have consequences stretching far beyond the lifetime of the participants. The curse on the snake making him crawl on the ground and making him man's inveterate enemy is not something that every man rediscovers when he disobeys his creator. It is rather part of the present situation which everyone takes for granted. Similarly pain, toil and death are surely viewed by the author as part of his human inheritance and not to be ascribed to his personal sin: they are blamed on the first couple's disobedience. Most obviously the expulsion from the garden indicates an irreversible change in man's situation. Cain and Abel begin their lives outside Eden, not inside. Cain's own sin drives him further from Eden, but he never enjoys his parents' initial privilege. Finally when set against the affirmation of Genesis 1:31 that everything God made was very good, it seems likely that Chapters 2-3 are explaining why the world fails to exhibit that perfection today.

This reading is confirmed by looking at Genesis 4. Westermann says that Genesis 4 simply describes a different aspect of sin: the Cain and Abel story shows how sin can disrupt fellowship between brothers, whereas Genesis 2-3 shows how it disrupts relationship between God and man and between man and wife. Again this is a partial truth. Genesis 4 does offer us another paradigm description of sin, but it also shows us mankind further away from God and descending to even more heinous practices than Adam and Eve.

It is noteworthy that both the Garden of Eden story and the Cain and Abel story have a similar scenic structure. Narrative and dialogue precede the crucial central scene in which the sin is committed, followed by dialogue and narrative afterwards.²⁸

Not only is the overall pattern of this story similar to the account of the fall but many of the scenes are closely parallel. The central scene in each case is a terse description of the sin (3:6-8; 4:8), which contrasts strikingly with the long dialogues before and afterwards. The following scene in each case where God investigates and condemns the sin is remarkably similar; cf. 'Where is Abel your brother?' 'Where are you?' 4:9; 3:9; 'What have you done?' 4:10; 3:13; 'You are cursed from the ground'; cf. 'Cursed are you above all cattle; Cursed is the ground because of you' 4:11; 3:14, 17.

The marking of Cain (4:15) is analogous with the clothing of Adam and Eve (3:21) and both stories conclude with the transgressors leaving the presence of God and going to live East of Eden (4:16; cf. 3:24).

It is not merely the structure of the stories that runs parallel, but there are interesting cross-linkages. For instance God's warning to Cain 'Its desire is for you, but you must master it' is even closer in Hebrew to the curse on Eve than the English suggests 'Your desire shall be for your husband and he shall rule over you' (4:7; 3:16). After God asked Adam 'Where are you?' Adam replied 'I heard your voice'. After questioning Cain similarly, God says 'The voice of your brother's blood is crying to me.' (3:10; 4:10). Finally according to 3:24 the LORD 'drove man out of the garden', and Cain's complaint is similar: 'You have driven me this day away from the ground' (4:14).

These similarities between Chapters 3 and 4 confirm that the former should be read as a paradigm of human sin. Fratricide gives a further illustration of the way sin works. Yet the difference between the two stories must not be overlooked either. Whereas in Chapter 2 there is no sense of alienation between man and God to start with, this is present from the outset in Chapter 4, because the LORD does not accept Cain's sacrifice. If the two temptation scenes are compared, differences spring to the eye. Eve has to be persuaded to disregard the creator's advice by the serpent (3:1-5), but Cain is not dissuaded from his murderous intention by his creator's appeal (4:6-7). Finally when God pronounces sentence on Adam, Eve and the serpent, they accept it without demur (3:14-20), but Cain protests that he is being treated too harshly (4:14). Clearly then though the writer of Genesis wants to highlight the parallels between the two stories, he does not regard the murder of Abel simply as a rerun of the fall, there is development: sin is more firmly entrenched and humanity is further alienated from God.

Thus the Cain and Abel story portrays a further decline from righteousness. The brief description of Lamech, great-great grandson of Cain, emphasizes that the process of degeneration did not stop with Cain. He boasted 'I have slain a man for wounding me, a young man for striking me. If Cain is avenged sevenfold, truly Lamech seventy-seven fold.' (4:23-24).

The ultimate act of human arrogance and decadence is recorded in Genesis 6:1-4, the intermarriage of the Sons of God and the daughters of man. Whatever view is taken of this episode, (I see no difficulty in the traditional view of the Sons of God being spirit beings),²⁹ it provides the springboard for one of the most devastating assessments of man's moral plight in the whole of Scripture.

The LORD saw that the wickedness of man was great in the earth, and that every imagination of the thoughts of his heart was only evil continually. And the LORD was sorry that he had made man on the earth.

We shall return and examine the terminology of this passage later. Here simply note that it forms the backdrop to the flood: the greatest recorded act of judgment in Scripture. All mankind, except Noah and his immediate family, and most of the animal kingdom are wiped out. The earth returns to the primordial chaos with water covering the face of the globe just as it did before God said 'Let the waters be gathered . . .' Indeed Genesis views Noah as in some senses a second Adam: like Adam he was told to be fruitful and multiply (9:1). Unlike Adam the narrative implicitly applauds his strict obedience to God's word and he is described as 'righteous, blameless in his generation' (6:9).

But Genesis refrains from contrasting Adam and Noah's moral standing in too black-and-white terms. No sooner has Noah emerged from the ark and offered a sacrifice, we are reminded that 'the imagination of man's heart is evil from his youth.' The reason for the flood has not unfortunately been removed by the flood. And this pessimism is confirmed by the next episode of primaeval history: Noah's self-exposure after drinking wine. It is a moot point whether the narrative intends to blame Noah for his behaviour. It is certainly unsparing in its condemnation of Ham, and this condemnation clearly affects all of Ham's descendants, among whom are to be found most of Israel's major enemies, Assyria, Egypt and the Canaanites (10:6-20).

The primaeval history ends with another story condemning human attempts to make himself like God. The unfinished Tower of Babel stands as a monument to human folly and the multitude of languages as a reminder that God can and will thwart human pride. Man cannot escape divine judgment. The frustration caused by the diversity of language testifies to God's judgment of sin.

Reading of the narratives in Genesis consecutively, rather than in isolation from each other as Westermann does, thus leads to a very different evaluation of their message.

First, Genesis says that some of man's long-term problems, the need for hard labour, linguistic diversity, pain and death go back to specific acts of human disobedience.

This gives these acts a once-for-all quality, though they are also typical of many subsequent acts. This suggests that Genesis views them in some loose sense as historical, not just paradigmatic. 'Protohistorical' might be a fitting categorization.

This proto-historical character of Genesis 2-11 is confirmed by the editorial headings 'these are generations of' in 2:4; 5:1; 6:8 which suggest that the stories of Adam, Cain and Noah are to be read in a similar way to those of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. There is little doubt that the latter are considered by Genesis as real historical persons, so the editorial headings make one think similarly about the former. The genealogies linking the figures of proto-history with patriarchal times point in a similar direction.

Secondly, these stories teach the universality of sin and its consequences. In that Adam and Eve are the parents of the whole human race, their sin has affected every living person. Thirdly, the stories tell that the effects of sin are cumulative. Things have become

progressively worse from the fall, so bad indeed that a flood was necessary to end the first phase of human history and start afresh.

Genesis 1-11 in its Near Eastern setting

This reading of Genesis 1-11 is in direct conflict with Westermann's, but I think it is confirmed by comparing it with other ancient Near Eastern accounts of *primaeval* times. Second-millennium BC Mesopotamia had a vaguely similar outline of world history, from man's creation to the flood. They too thought in quasi-historical terms, not simply in terms of myths explaining recurrent situations.

T. Jacobsen has pointed out that an important Sumerian text, usually called the Sumerian flood story, but by him the Eridu Genesis, explains events in terms of cause and effect. This is a historical rather than a mythical way of thinking, he says:

Now, this arrangement along a line of time as cause and effect is striking, for it is very much the way a historian arranges his data, and since the data here are mythological we may assign both traditions to a new and separate genre as mytho-historical accounts.³⁰

Furthermore Sumerian accounts of *primaeval* antiquity are also very interested in chronology, another feature shared by the early chapters of Genesis. Recall the genealogies of the antediluvian patriarchs. These also set this literature apart from myth according to Jacobsen.

Even more remarkable than this close similarity of structure is a similarity of style of a peculiar and unusual character. Both traditions are greatly interested in chronology. In both we are given precise figures for respectively the length of reigns and the lifespans of the persons listed, and in both traditions the figures given are extraordinarily large. It seems too - as we said earlier on - that in both traditions the underlying concept is that these early men grew exceedingly slowly from child to adult and on into old age.

This interest in numbers is very curious, for it is characteristic of myths and folktales that they are not concerned with time at all. They take *place* 'in illo tempore' or 'once upon a time' and the prince and the princess live happily 'ever after' never any stated number of years. No! - interest in numbers of years belongs elsewhere, to the style of chronicles and historiography. In Mesopotamia we find it first in datelists, lists of reigns and in the king list, later on in the Chronicles, but to find this chronological list-form combined, as it is here, with simple mythological narrative, is truly unique. It suggests that the 'Eridu Genesis' depends directly upon the king list and its style. And that is borne out by the awkward language in which 'Eridu Genesis' has Enki announce the decision of the gods to bring on the flood to Ziusudra. He says of mankind, as you may remember: 'their kingship, their term, has been uprooted!' That is proper terminology for stating that the term of office of a king and his capital has come to an end by a decision of the gods and is given to another king and city. It does not rightly fit the destruction of all mankind and has clearly been mechanically taken over from the language of changing dynasties. The assignment of the tale to a mytho-historical genre is thus further confirmed.³¹

Jacobsen therefore concludes that it is likely that the writer of Genesis or, at least P, the priestly writer, was imitating this style of literature. The Mesopotamian materials will have served as models rather than having been borrowed from.³²

Thus our arguments based on the content and organization of Genesis 1-11 about its proto-historical intentions appear to be confirmed by Jacobsen's comparative approach.³³

But Jacobsen's next point is even more interesting for our study, especially in the light of Westermann's contention that Genesis 1-11 is not particularly interested in original sin. Jacobsen observes that while Mesopotamian mytho-historians were fundamentally optimistic about human existence, Genesis is radically pessimistic.

If we accept - as I think we very clearly must - a degree of dependency of the biblical narrative on the older Mesopotamian materials, we must also note how decisively these materials have been transformed in the biblical account, altering radically their original meaning and import. The 'Eridu Genesis' takes throughout, as will have been noticed, an affirmative and optimistic view of existence; it believes in progress. Things were not nearly as good to begin with as they have become since and though man unwittingly, by sheer multiplying, once caused the gods to turn against him; that will not happen again. The gods had a change of heart, realizing apparently that they needed man.

In the biblical account it is the other way around. Things began as perfect from God's hand and grew steadily worse through man's sinfulness until God finally had to do away with all mankind except for the pious Noah who would beget a new and better stock.

The moral judgement here introduced, and the ensuing pessimistic viewpoint, could not be more different from the tenor of the Sumerian tale: only the assurance that such a flood will recur is common to both.³⁴

Now it is interesting that in making these comparisons Jacobsen is comparing the Sumerian story with the P version of Genesis 1-11, as opposed to the J account. Yet it is within J that mankind's sinfulness is particularly stressed. All Genesis 2-4 is J, so is much of Chapters 6-9 and the Tower of Babel in Chapter 11. If P is pessimistic compared with Sumerian tradition, how much the more is J or the present compiler of Genesis 1-11.

And it is not simply in the way the stories of Genesis 1-11 are arranged that indicates Genesis's pessimism *vis à vis* mankind. The individual stories themselves when set alongside their nearest Mesopotamian counterpart give a much grimmer account of the human situation.

Take for example Adam's eating the forbidden fruit. The closest parallel, though not all that close, is the myth of Adapa, whose name is similar to Adam. Adapa was first of the seven sages of Mesopotamia. One day Adapa was taken to heaven. There he was offered the bread and the water of life. However he refused them. Why? Because his personal God had warned him not to partake of them. Now it is a little uncertain what the Sumerians understood by this story, but it looks as though they believed Adapa to have been both wise and loyal to his god. Compare - 'The fear of the LORD is the beginning of knowledge.' Adam in contrast grasps at wisdom and demonstrates disloyalty to God.³⁵

If drawing parallels between Adapa and Adam is risky, the points of similarity between biblical and Mesopotamian flood stories are striking and close. Yet the similarities at so many points only serve to highlight the theological contrasts. In their explanation of the flood these stories are poles apart. According to Mesopotamian tradition the gods sent the flood because mankind was multiplying too much and disturbing the peace of the gods. Humanity was thus sentenced to annihilation out of divine pique and short-sightedness. The Mesopotamian flood hero survived not because of his moral superiority but because he happened to worship a crafty and powerful deity who disagreed with the other gods' decision to exterminate mankind.

It is hardly necessary to point out the contrasts between this account and the Hebrew version.³⁶ The differences are not simply due to the differences between a monotheistic and

polytheistic culture, but reflect the biblical insistence on the seriousness of sin and the justice of God. Man is destroyed not because he was too noisy or too fertile, but because of his utter depravity: 'God saw the wickedness of man was great in the earth and that every imagination of the thoughts of his heart was only evil continually.' 'The earth is filled with violence [lawlessness] through them.'

Noah was saved not because he was lucky enough to have the best guardian angel, but because of his righteousness and his total commitment to keeping the law. 'Noah was righteous, blameless in his generation. Noah walked with God.'

These cross-cultural comparisons show that sin is a very important theme in the theology of Genesis. The fact of sin and its consequences are present in many narratives in Genesis, when nothing is made of it in parallel oriental stories. These comparisons point to an Augustinian reading of Genesis being closer to the author's intention than Westermann's neo-Pelagianism.

Three Explicit Texts

Finally, three texts that are particularly pertinent to the understanding of sin in Genesis (6:5; 8:21; 9:25-28) deserve scrutiny.

Genesis 6:5 must count among the most devastating analyses of the human condition in all Scripture. It may be translated: 'the LORD saw that the evil of man was great in the earth and that every idea of the plans of his mind was nothing but evil all the time.' The phrase 'the LORD saw' recalls the refrain of Genesis 1 'God saw that it was *good*' and its climax 'God saw all that he had made that it was very *good*.' The contrast could hardly be more total. Note in 6:5 the twice repeated 'every/all' and 'evil' (contrasting with 'good').

The relatively bland statement about the magnitude of human evil is supplemented by a very explicit analysis of its nature and origin. 'Every idea of the plans of his mind was nothing but evil all the time.' Ideas are what are moulded in the mind, or heart, the centre of man's personality where thought and will originate. The core of man's being is rotten, so that every thought from its inception is intrinsically 'evil', a comprehensive term of condemnation, especially for things disapproved of by God. That sin has its root in man's thought-world is certainly a commonplace of biblical ethics (cf. Exod. 20:17). But few texts in the Old Testament are so explicit and all-embracing as this in specifying the extent of human sinfulness and depravity (cf. Ps. 14: 13; 51:1-10; Jer. 17:9-10).

If this is man, then it is not surprising that God destroyed him. What is surprising though is that a similar analysis of the human condition is to be found in 8:21, and is cited as the reason for divine mercy. 'I shall not curse the soil any further because of man for the ideas of man's mind are evil from his youth.'

This does not sound quite so bad as 6:5. Note the omission of '*every idea*' '*Nothing but evil*' and 'from his youth' instead of 'all the day.' Nevertheless there can be no doubt that man's nature has not changed. The milder language simply reflects the creator's more lenient attitude following Noah's sacrifice.

In Exodus 33:3; 34:9 there is a similar phenomenon. God's reason for destroying Israel in Chapter 33 becomes his reason for saving them in Chapter 34. Moberly comments aptly on these apparent contradictions within the narratives.

‘The striking similarity between the flood and Sinai, between Noah and Moses is of great theological significance for the interpretation of each story.’

Each raises the question ‘How before God can a sinful world (in general) or a sinful people, even God’s chosen people (in particular) exist without being destroyed?’ Each time the answer is given that if the sin is answered solely by the judgment it deserves then there is no hope. But in addition to the judgment there is also mercy, a mercy which depends entirely on the character of God and is given to an unchangingly sinful people.³⁷

That this is the correct way to read the story of Noah and the flood is confirmed by the closing scenes. In stressing Noah’s righteousness and obedience throughout the flood, the narrative could suggest Noah’s sinlessness. That with the destruction of all the sinners the world is now again in Eden. Yet Genesis 9 shows that this is not so.

Although God’s first words to Noah after the flood, ‘Be fruitful and multiply’ repeat his original commission to Adam, Noah’s situation is different. While God promises not to add to the curse on the ground, he does not lift it. Though the threat of another flood is removed the ground is still cursed. Furthermore the statement that ‘the fear and dread of you will be on every wild animal’ indicates an abiding enmity between man and animal that the original command to rule them lacked. The original mandate to eat only herbs is now relaxed to allow meat consumption. The warnings against homicide hint further at the less than perfect state of human affairs. The inveterate sinfulness of humanity is a fact of life for Noah. And he himself experiences a fall: over-indulgence in a fruit drink led to his self-exposure and the even more serious sin of his son Ham. His behaviour shows that man is sinful from his youth. And his sin led to a curse which disadvantages all his descendants, as the table of nations makes plain (9:25-27; 10:6-20).

This particular episode deserves more attention from biblical theologians than they normally give it. That Canaan was cursed for his father’s sin has perplexed generations of commentators. Textual emendations and critical reconstructions to alleviate the problem are legion. However none of them is convincing, for the text makes good sense as it stands.³⁸ Ancient principles of talion may partially explain the curse: if Ham was Noah’s youngest son, it was appropriate that Ham’s sin should be visited on his youngest son, Canaan. (10:6). Alternatively it is likely that Ham’s offence is typical of that of his descendants, especially the Canaanites and Egyptians, whom the Pentateuch regards as notorious for their sexual sins (Lev. 18:3). The divine judgment that was to befall these nations is traced back by Genesis to Noah’s curse. Thus the sins of the Canaanites and the judgment which they incurred are prefigured in Ham’s deed and Noah’s curse. It is quite possible that Genesis envisages a similar relationship between Adam’s sin and the divine curses in Genesis 3:16-19 and later human sin and guilt.

Conclusion

Genesis 1-11 presents a very gloomy picture of the human situation without the grace of God. A perfect creation is spoiled by human sin, sin which eventually reaches such a pitch that the old world must be destroyed and a new world created. But this world is not sinless. From his youth, post-diluvian man shows his depravity, and his mistakes mar his descendants’ future. These points are even more apparent when the stories of Genesis are compared with ancient oriental tales of human origins. The optimism of ancient and modern mythology is ruled out by Genesis 1-11. Without God’s grace man is without hope according to Genesis.

In any enquiry into the biblical basis of the doctrine of original sin, a sensitive interpretation of the stories of Genesis 1-11 is essential. Yet they are stories, not statements of systematic theology, and it would be wrong to look for confirmation of every detail of a doctrine in them. Nevertheless a close reading of these chapters does suggest that the author of Genesis would have been in general sympathy with the interpretation of St. Paul and St. Augustine.

GORDON WENHAM is Senior Lecturer in Religious Studies at the Cheltenham and Gloucester College of Higher Education.

Endnotes:

- 1 J.N.D. Kelly, *Early Christian Doctrines* (London: A. and C. Black, 1960), Second Edition p. 364.
- 2 G. von Rad. *Genesis: A Commentary* (London: S.C.M. Press, 1972). Second Edition p. 75.
- 3 *Ibid.*, p. 75.
- 4 *Ibid.*, p. 81.
- 5 *Ibid.* p. 101.
- 6 *Ibid.*, p. 102.
- 7 *Ibid.*, p. 108.
- 8 *ibid.*, pp. 117, 152.
- 9 *Ibid.*, p. 152.
- 10 C. Westermann, *Genesis 1-11: A Commentary* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Publishing House, 1984), p. 53.
- 11 *Ibid.*, p. 277.
- 12 *Ibid.* p. 319.
- 13 *Ibid.*, p. 494.
- 14 *Ibid.* p. 53.
- 15 *Ibid.*, p. 53.
- 16 *Ibid.*, p. 277.
- 17 Westermann is quite uninterested in either redaction criticism or the new literary criticism, both of which focus on the final form of the text as a clue to the author's intentions. Cf. R. Oberforcher, *Die Flutprologe als Kompositions-schlüssel der biblischen Urgeschichte* (Innsbruck: Tyrolia Verlag, 1981) pp. 333-48.
- 18 E. Drewermann, *Strukturen des Bösen: Teil 1, Die jahwistische Urgeschichte in exegetischer Sicht*⁴ (Paderborn: Schöninghen, 1982) p. 23.

- 19 *Ibid.*, p. 24.
- 20 *Ibid.*, p. 24.
- 21 *Ibid.*, p. 108.
- 22 *Ibid.*, p. 116.
- 23 *Ibid.*, p. 188.
- 24 *Ibid.*, p. 210
- 25 For further elaboration see G.J. Wenham, *Genesis 1-15* (Waco: Word, 1987), pp. 155-208.
- 26 A.R. Millard, 'The Etymology of Eden.' *V.T.* 34 (1984) pp. 103-106.
- 27 G.J. Wenham, 'Sanctuary Symbolism in the Garden of Eden Story.' *Proceedings of the 9th World Congress of Jewish Studies* 1986 pp. 19-25.
- 28 A.J. Hauser, 'Linguistic and Thematic Links between Genesis 4:1-16 and Genesis 2-3.' *J. E. T. S.* 23 (1980) pp. 297-305.
- 29 W.A. van Gemeren. 'The Sons of God in Genesis 6:1-4.' *W.T.J.* 43 (1981) pp. 320-48.
- 30 T. Jacobsen, 'The Eridu Genesis.' *J.B.L.* 100 (1981) p. 528.
- 31 *Ibid.*, p. 528.
- 32 *Ibid.*, p. 529.
- 33 This point is also made by P.D. Miller, *H.A.R.* 9 (1985) p. 233 who notes that in both Genesis 1-11 and the Eridu Genesis 'the beginning of history. . . continues . . . in an unbroken stream down to the present.'
- 34 Jacobsen, *J. B. L.* 100 (1981) p. 529.
- 35 N. E. Andreasen, 'Adam and Adapa: Two Anthropological Characters.' *A.U.S.S.* 19 (1981) pp. 179-94.
 J.D. Bing, 'Adapa and Immortality.' *U.F* 16 (1984) pp. 53-56.
 G. Buccellati, 'Adapa, Genesis and the Notion of Faith.' *U.F* 5 (1973) pp. 61-66.
 W.H. Shea, 'Adam in Ancient Mesopotamian Tradition.' *A.U.S.S.* 15 (1977). pp. 27-41.
- 36 Still of most value are the older treatments of A. Heidel, *The Gilgamesh Epic and Old Testament Parallels* (Chicago University Press, 1949), Second Edition pp. 224-69.
 U. Cassuto, *A Commentary on the Book of Genesis II* (Jerusalem: Magnes Press, 1964) pp. 3-140.
- 37 R.W.L. Moberly, *At the Mountain of God* (J.S.O.T.S.S. 22. Sheffield: J.S.O.T. Press, 1983) p. 92.
- 38 See G.J. Wenham, *Genesis 1-15*, pp. 197-204.