

Adam's Fall in the Book of Mormon, Second Temple Judaism, and Early Christianity

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In Father Lehi's justly famous sermon to his son Jacob, Adam's transgression is depicted in a remarkably favorable light: the fall was a necessary precondition for mortality, for redemption, and for joy; the serpent figure in the Garden of Eden was Satan, an angel who fell from heaven. The figure of Adam and the story of Adam's fall square well with the depiction of him in Jewish apocryphal and pseudepigraphic writings, where a positive, if not admiring picture is drawn. But that view diverges sharply from the picture of Adam and his transgression in early Christianity, expressed in definitive form by Augustine, who has a pessimistic outlook on Adam and his fall, a perspective that may have been freighted with his Manichaean baggage.

Adam and the Fall in the Book of Mormon

The consequences of Adam and Eve's transgression are outlined succinctly in 2 Nephi 2 and in King Benjamin's equally famous sermon to the Nephites at the time of Mosiah's assumption of royal authority, presented in Mosiah 3:

1. *A vital precondition for the fall was the expulsion of Satan from the presence of God.* According to Lehi, an "angel of God had fallen from heaven; wherefore, he became a devil, having sought that which was evil before God." Because of his expulsion from the presence of God he "had become miserable forever" and "sought also the misery of all mankind." Satan tempted Eve to partake of the forbidden fruit, saying, "Ye shall not die, but ye shall be as God, knowing good and evil" (2 Nephi 2:17–18).

2. *The fall of Adam resulted in the conditions of mortality.* Lehi further stated: "After Adam and Eve had partaken of the forbidden fruit they were driven out of the Garden of Eden, to till the earth" (2 Nephi 2:19). The fall also resulted in the conditions of mortality that predispose a person to sin, that is, to being a fallen, "natural man," since "the natural man is an enemy to God, and has been from the fall of Adam, and will be forever unless he yields to the enticings of the Holy Spirit" (Mosiah 3:19; cf. Mosiah 16:3). However, as Robert Matthews points out, "there is nothing in our present Old or New Testaments that clearly and unequivocally explains just how the fall of Adam applies to children—whether mankind actually *sinned* in Adam, or whether man only suffers the *consequences* of the Fall."¹ Matthews inclines to accept the latter interpretation: thus the "natural man" is fallen in that he is predisposed to sin and does in fact sin.

3. *All are descendants of Adam and Eve.* Again, Lehi stated: "And they have brought forth children; yea, even the family of all the earth" (2 Nephi 2:20). This is like the traditional Christian teaching concerning monogenism (a doctrine or belief in descent from a single individual or pair), but without the accompanying misconception of inherited sinfulness.

4. *Without the fall, no one would have been born into mortality.* "And they would have had no children" (2 Nephi 2:23). This directly contradicts a statement from the Baltimore Catechism, reflecting the current teaching of the Roman Catholic Church that the fall prevented children from being born in the Garden of Eden without pain or sin.²

5. *Mortality becomes a time of probation for descendants of Adam and Eve.* "And the days of the children of men were prolonged, according to the will of God, that they might repent while in the flesh" (2 Nephi 2:21; cf. Alma 34:3;

42:4).

6. *Without the fall, Adam and Eve and their posterity would not have experienced joy:* “They would have remained in a state of innocence, having no joy, for they knew no misery; doing no good, for they knew no sin. . . . Adam fell that men might be; and men are, that they might have joy” (2 Nephi 2:23, 25). In the book of Moses in the Pearl of Great Price, Adam and Eve learned that redemption and joy were the result of their transgression: “Eve, his wife, . . . was glad, saying: Were it not for our transgression we never should have had seed, and never should have known good and evil, and the joy of our redemption, and the eternal life which God giveth unto all the obedient. And Adam and Eve blessed the name of God, and they made all things known unto their sons and their daughters” (Moses 5:11–12). Joseph Fielding Smith reflected the same sentiment: “I am very, very grateful for Mother Eve. If I ever get to see her, I want to thank her for what she did and she did the most wonderful thing that ever happened in this world and that was to place herself where Adam had to do the same thing that she did or they would have been separated forever.”³

7. *The atonement redeems men and women from the effects of the fall.* “And the Messiah cometh in the fulness of time, that he may redeem the children of men from the fall” (2 Nephi 2:25; cf. 2 Nephi 9:21; Mosiah 3:11).

8. *Adam was prevented from partaking of the tree of life in his sinful state.* As a final note concerning the Book of Mormon’s view of the effects of Adam’s transgression, let us consider a statement made in Alma’s sermon to his son Corianton that cherubim “and a flaming sword” were placed “at the east end of the Garden of Eden . . . to keep the tree of life . . . lest [Adam] should put forth his hand, and take also of the tree of life, and eat and live forever” (Alma 42:2–3).

Images of Adam and His Transgression in Second Temple Jewish Literature

The story of Adam and Eve, the Garden of Eden, and Adam’s transgression is well-known from Genesis 1–3. In an unadorned account, the creation of Adam (man) and Eve (woman), their placement in the Garden, their partaking of the fruit of the tree of knowledge of good and evil, God’s confronting Adam and Eve, and their consequent expulsion from the Garden of Eden are related. No judgment is given in the Genesis account about the character of Adam. No statement is made concerning hereditary sinfulness since “original sin is . . . certainly not in chapters one to three of Genesis.”⁴ A strikingly favorable portrait of Adam and his transgression is presented in Second Temple Jewish literature, which includes the apocryphal Ben Sira (Sirach) (a “wisdom” writing), the pseudepigraphic *Wisdom of Solomon* (also a “wisdom” writing), *Jubilees*, *4 Ezra*, *2 Baruch*, the *Life of Adam and Eve*, the *Apocalypse of Moses*, and the enigmatic *2 Enoch*.⁵

Adam is accounted among the most eminent of the patriarchs described in Second Temple Jewish literature. According to the puzzling *2 Enoch* 32, Adam is formed of “earth” (which, according to Francis Andersen, “implies that Adam, made in a heavenly paradise from materials brought from the earth, is now sent back to his native element to live there”).⁶ In the “wisdom” writings he is on the list of Israelite heroes⁷ and is also portrayed as a “just man.”⁸ As with all heroic figures, Adam is portrayed in *Jubilees* as a priestly Israelite.⁹

The “wisdom” writings of Second Temple Jewish literature refrain from mentioning Adam’s transgression because of their “view that death and mortality are natural aspects of life; they do not result from a primeval transgression.”¹⁰ According to other writers, however, Adam’s transgression resulted in his expulsion from Eden. The *Apocalypse of Moses* relates how Adam, following his transgression, was about to be expelled from the Garden

of Eden. He then asked the Lord if he might yet eat of the tree of life. The Lord denied this request, saying, “You shall not now take from it; for it was appointed to the Cherubim and the flaming sword which turns to guard it because of you, that you might not taste of it and be immortal forever.”¹¹

In the pseudepigraphic *Life of Adam and Eve*, a lengthy account of Satan’s expulsion from the presence of God in heaven is presented. In this passage Satan tells Adam that “because of you I am expelled and deprived of my glory which I had in the midst of the angels, and because of you I was cast out onto the earth.”¹² Satan was called upon to worship the image of the Lord God. When he refused, Satan and his angels were banished and cursed “till the Day of Judgment.”¹³

Fourth Ezra, which “expresses the inner turmoils of the Jews during the first generation following the destruction of Jerusalem,”¹⁴ gives a pessimistic view of the effect of Adam’s transgression on his posterity: “For the first Adam, burdened with an evil heart, transgressed and was overcome, as were also all who were descended from him. Thus the disease became permanent; the law was in the people’s heart along with the evil root, but what was good departed, and the evil remained. . . . O Adam, what have you done? For though it was you who sinned, the fall was not yours alone, but ours also who are your descendants.”¹⁵ But “we should note at this point,” Robert Matthews reminds us, that “there is a difference between a child’s inheriting the actual sin itself and his inheriting only the *consequences* of the sin.”¹⁶ Still, though death came into the world through Adam’s transgression, men are free to act in such a way as to please or displease God. *Second Baruch*, which attempts to understand the catastrophe of A.D. 70—the capture of Jerusalem and the destruction of the temple—insists on this point:

For, although Adam sinned first and has brought death upon all who were not in his own time, yet each of them who has been born from him has prepared for himself the coming torment. And further, each of them has chosen for himself the coming glory. Adam is, therefore, not the cause, except only for himself, but each of us has become our own Adam.¹⁷

After Adam and Eve had been driven out of paradise, they made a tent for themselves and “mourned for seven days, weeping in great sorrow.”¹⁸ After not eating for over two weeks, they were compelled to repent before the Lord: “Let us repent with a great penitence; perhaps the Lord God will be forbearing and pity us and provide for us that we might live.”¹⁹ Adam told Eve to stand in the Tigris River with water up to her neck, while he stood in the Jordan. Though Satan had deceived Eve, both Adam and Eve ultimately obtained forgiveness from God, and Adam was taken up into the paradise of God.²⁰

Let us briefly summarize our inquiry into Book of Mormon and pseudepigraphic writings:

1. Satan’s expulsion from the presence of God was a necessary precondition for the temptation and fall (see 2 Nephi 2:17–18; *Life of Adam and Eve* 12–17).
2. Adam’s fall resulted in the conditions of mortality (see 2 Nephi 2:19; *2 Baruch*).
3. Man becomes “natural,” i.e., predisposed to sin, but he remains free (2 Nephi 2:26–27; Mosiah 3:19).
4. Adam’s transgression resulted in expulsion from paradise (see Alma 42; *Apocalypse of Moses* 28:3).

Adam’s Transgression in Early Christianity

The key passage for understanding the early Christian views of Adam and of Adam's transgression is Romans 5:12–21: "As by one man sin entered into the world, and death by sin; and so death passed upon all men, for that all have sinned" (Romans 5:12). Augustine used this as the basis for his own discussion of human sinfulness in his long-standing dispute with Pelagius,²¹ a "footloose monk" who came to Rome from England and justly earned a reputation for piety.²² According to Pelagius, God blesses us with his commandments, with baptism, with the example and the atoning sacrifice of Christ, but he does not burden us with a sinful nature inherited from our first parents. Augustine's life experience with sin—and possibly also his experience with Manichaeism's somber view of man's nature—left him convinced of man's total depravity, which he could only attribute to original sin passed on to Adam and Eve's descendants. Pelagius's insistence on maintaining his stance—with an assist from episcopal synods that found him innocent of heresy and from popes who died before their decisions could be carried out, as well as Augustine's theological running battles on "original sin" with others, including Julian of Eclanum²³—permitted the controversy to persist during the last decade and more of Augustine's life and radicalized rather than softened his position.

In the end Augustine won, changing the complexion of Catholic Christianity forever.²⁴ He won through the force of his eloquence and the power of his own passionate nature. But the doctrine of "original sin," according to George Riggan, "expressly conceived as involving true guilt, is a novel Augustinian construction, with no unequivocal precedent in the whole antecedent literature of the Hebrew-Christian community. Augustine's claim to its ecumenicity is fundamentally unsustainable."²⁵ Augustine's position won the day, although his impulses as a "residual Manichaean dualis[t]"²⁶ were "reasserting themselves."²⁷ As Julian of Eclanum said of him, "just as an Ethiopian cannot change his skin or a leopard change his spots, nor could he, Augustine, change his Manichaeism."²⁸

Conclusion

On the question of original sin, Augustine's stance was triumphant, and all others, fellow Catholics and Protestants after him—Aquinas, Luther, and Calvin—followed him, with only a few caveats and modifications. Although the Reformation represented a veritable revolution in views on grace and nature, on church organization and government, little or nothing else changed about the nature of God, about the nature of man, about the fall of Adam and "original sin." A restoration, not a Reformation, was required.

In the concluding chapter of Herbert Haag's *Is Original Sin in Scripture?* the author includes a summary containing the following points:

1. "The idea that Adam's descendants are automatically sinners because of the sin of their ancestor, and that they are already sinners when they enter the world, is foreign to Holy Scripture. The well-known verse from the psalms, 'Behold I was born in iniquity, and in sin did my mother conceive me' (Psalms 51:7; 50:7), merely means that everyone born of woman becomes a sinner in this world, without fail. The Bible often uses the device of attributing a man's later deeds or achievements to him from the time of his conception and birth. (Cf., for example, Jeremiah 1:5, where Jeremiah is made a prophet in his mother's womb.)"
2. "The 'inheritance' of Adam's sin means rather that sin, after its entrance into the world, so spread that consequently all men are born in a sinful world and in this sinful world become themselves sinners."

3. “No man enters the world a sinner. As the creature and image of God he is from his first hour surrounded by God’s fatherly love. Consequently, he is not at birth, as is often maintained, an enemy of God and a child of God’s wrath. A man becomes sinner only through his own individual and responsible action.”²⁹

These passages are reminiscent of Joseph Smith’s statement in the “Wentworth Letter” that has since become the second Article of Faith: “We believe that men will be punished for their own sins, and not for Adam’s transgression.” While tentative academic reconsideration of Adam’s position or Adam’s transgression still does not mean acceptance of teachings of the restoration over the Reformation or a concession to the more favorable views of ancient Israel or Second Temple Judaism, it does represent a welcome reassessment of early doctrines.

Notes

1. Robert J. Matthews, “The Fall of Man,” in *The Man Adam*, ed. Joseph Fielding McConkie and Robert L. Millet (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1990), 57.
2. See Herbert Haag, *Is Original Sin in Scripture?* trans. Dorothy Thompson (New York: Sheed and Ward, 1969), 51.
3. Joseph Fielding Smith, *Take Heed to Yourselves*, comp. Joseph Fielding Smith Jr. (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1966), 291–92.
4. Haag, *Is Original Sin in Scripture?* 19.
5. See John R. Levison, *Portraits of Adam in Early Judaism: From Sirach to 2 Baruch* (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1988), 31.
6. With this we may compare a sermon by Brigham Young in *Journal of Discourses*, 3:90; he states that Adam and Eve were placed on the earth from another world. The idea that Adam was created in a heavenly garden and transported to earth is also found in Qur’ān 2:30, 35–36; 7:24.
7. Compare Ben Sira 49:16.
8. Ben Sira 10:1–2.
9. See *Jubilees* 3:26–31; 19:23–25; 22:11–12.
10. Levison, *Portraits of Adam*, 155.
11. *Apocalypse of Moses* 28:3.
12. *Life of Adam and Eve* 12:1, in *The Old Testament Pseudepigrapha* (hereafter *OTP*), ed. James H. Charlesworth (New York: Doubleday, 1985), 2:262.
13. Qur’ān 38:77; compare Qur’ān 2:34; 7:11; 15:31; 17:61; 18:50; 20:116; and 38:73–78.
14. Levison, *Portraits of Adam*, 113.
15. 4 *Ezra* 3:21–23; 7:48 [118].

16. Matthews, "The Fall of Man," 56.
17. 2 *Baruch* 54:15, 19.
18. *Life of Adam and Eve* 1:1, in *OTP*, 2:258.
19. *Life of Adam and Eve* 4:3, in *OTP*, 2:258.
20. See *Life of Adam and Eve* 6:1–3; 17:3; 25–29; cf. *Apocalypse of Moses* 37:1–6, in *OTP*, 2:258, 260, 264, 266, 268, 289, 291.
21. George A. Riggan, "Original Sin in the Thought of Augustine" (Ph.D. diss., Yale University, 1949), 10.
22. See Will Durant, *The Age of Faith* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1950), 69.
23. See Peter Brown, *Religion and Society in the Age of Saint Augustine* (New York: Harper and Row, 1972), 202; Riggan, "Original Sin," 13.
24. See Brown, *Religion and Society*, 206–7.
25. Riggan, "Original Sin," iii. The doctrine of original sin was not the only teaching that appeared relatively late in the history of the early Christian church. Infant baptism was another. In T. Vincent Tymms's rather overenthusiastic estimation in *The Evolution of Infant Baptism and Related Ideas* (London: Kingsgate Press, 1915), 445: "Infant baptism is not an original institution of the Christian religion, and was not generally adopted in the 'Catholic Church' until the fifth century." In the more sober assessment of E. Glenn Hinson, "Infant Baptism," in the *Encyclopedia of Early Christianity*, ed. Everett Ferguson (New York: Garland, 1997), 1:571, "The first explicit evidence for baptism of very young children appears in Tertullian's *On Baptism*, composed before his conversion to Montanism ca. 206." Both Tertullian and Origen mention infant baptism and original sin but, according to Jaroslav Pelikan, *The Emergence of the Catholic Tradition (100–600)*, *The Christian Tradition*, vol. 1 (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1971), 291, "Although Tertullian seemed to have the makings of a doctrine of original sin, he did not have its necessary corollary, the practice of infant baptism; while Origen, on the other hand, affirmed the apostolic origin of infant baptism, he did not formulate an anthropology adequate to account for it." Besides the negative evidence of silence on the question of infant baptism, we have the positive evidence of the expressed belief in the sinlessness of small children. In Franz Bücheler, *Carmina latina epigraphica* (Gotheburg: Eranos' Förlag, 1912), insc. 1439 (cited in Franz Cumont, *After Life in Roman Paganism: Lectures Delivered at Yale University on the Silliman Foundation* [New Haven: Yale University Press, 1922], 140; cf. Cumont, *Lux Perpetua* [Paris: Geuthner, 1949], 327) we read the following tomb inscription: "Thou hast been received, my daughter, among the pious souls, because thy life was pure from all fault, for thy youth ever sought only innocent play"; cf. 1400: "Vos equidem nati caelestia regna videtis/ Quos rapuit parvos praecipitata dies (You children, whom sudden death snatched away so young/ Will see the heavenly realms)"; cf. the following inscription that affirms a child's sinlessness before the age of accountability: "Eusebius, a child without sin because of his age, admitted to the abode of the saints, rests there in peace." Fernand Cabrol and Henri Leclercq, *Reliquiae liturgicae vestustissimae* (Paris: Firmin-Didot, 1912), 1:1:2917; cf. 2974; 3153.
26. William E. Phipps, "The Heresiarch: Pelagius or Augustine?" *Anglican Theological Review* 62/2 (1980): 132.
27. W. H. C. Frend, *The Rise of Christianity* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1984), 679.

28. Cited from Julian of Eclanum in Augustine, *Incomplete Work against Julian* 4.142; cf. Phipps, "The Heresiarch," 132; J. van Oort, "Augustine and Mani on concupiscentia sexualis," in *Augustiniana traiectana: Communication Présentées au Colloque Internationale d'Utrecht*, ed. J. den Boeft and J. van Oort (Paris: Etudes augustiniennes, 1987), 137–52; J. van Oort, "Augustine on Sexual Concupiscence and Original Sin," in *Studia Patristica XXII* (Leuven: Peters, 1989), 132–36.

29. Haag, *Is Original Sin in Scripture?* 106–7.