

The Curse of Being Alive
Original Sin and Pelagianism Across the Mediterranean

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Introduction

The Mediterranean is home to three of the world's largest religions - Judaism, Christianity, and Islam. These religions share a common ancestry in the Abrahamic tradition, and therefore share some similarities. However, as Christianity began to blossom in the Mediterranean after Rome decriminalized the religion under Constantine in the fourth century, Christian thought began to fluctuate with intense periods of interpretation and heretical accusations.

The concept of Original Sin - the belief that humans are born already sinful and deserving of punishment - is one of the many doctrines that was argued, debated, and eventually decided on during the first 100 years of the legalization of Christianity. Geography and language played a large part in the acceptance and rejection of different teachings on a larger scale. The split in the Mediterranean can still be seen in our present day - the difference between Roman Catholic and Eastern Orthodox belief and practice is much different than that of Roman Catholic and most Protestant denominations, even if they would hesitate to agree.

The goal of this paper will be to provide an overview of the different ideas about sin in the Mediterranean during the Patristic years of the Church. I will compare the teachings of Islam, Judaism, and Christianity, providing examples and evidence for each position. With the in-depth look at the culture surrounding the early fifth century CE, I will use the Pelagian Controversy to show the final doctrine of Original Sin and the push for univocality in the Church.

Historiography

The concept of Original Sin - the fuel of the Pelagian Controversy - has deep Judeo-Christian roots. It is important to note that Islam, the other major religion of the Mediterranean, does not hold to the belief of inherited sin. While we see a multiplicity of voices in Judaism and Christianity, Islamic theology has rejected this notion. The Quran teaches that each individual has free will and is tempted by Satan. It is the responsibility of each person to resist evil and not sin. "Whoever chooses to be guided, it is only for their own good. And whoever chooses to stray, it is only to their own loss. No soul burdened with sin will bear the burden of another. And we would never punish a people until We have sent a messenger to warn them."¹

The pedigree of Islam includes the story of Adam and Eve without the hangups of the Original Sin debate, even though their story of Paradise is similar to Judaism and Christianity. The account in the Quran is slightly different, but the major themes are the same. Adam and Eve are in paradise, they are instructed not to interact with a specific tree, eventually do so, and are cast out of paradise.² Adam and Eve pray for forgiveness, "Our Lord! We have wronged ourselves. If You do not forgive us and have mercy on us, we will certainly be losers."³ Allah hears their prayers and accepts their plea.⁴ While Judeo-Christian and Muslim texts note the fall of Adam and Eve and their expulsion from Paradise, Islam includes their forgiveness at that moment. This may be why Islam doesn't have a debate about original sin - the problem was resolved at the time the sin was committed.

¹ Quran 17:15.

² Quran 2:33-39.

³ Quran 7:23.

⁴ Quran 2:37.

Jewish Roots of Original Sin

Unlike Islam, Judaism has a history of debate surrounding the origin of sin. We see the beginning of thought of inherited sin during the Second Temple period, from the return from exile and building of the second temple around 516 BCE, until the destruction of the temple in 70 CE. While this is a general, but accepted timeline, historian John E. Toews extends the end date of Second Temple Judaism into the 3rd century CE.⁵ I believe this is due to the extent of Second Temple writing that continued beyond the collapse of the temple. For example, The Apocalypse of Abraham is a text that has many similarities to the Rabbinic writings of the Second Temple, yet is dated after the destruction of the temple since it refers to the demise of Jerusalem.⁶

While there has been debate, the majority of Jewish thought has refuted the idea of original sin. They see the story of Adam and Eve as an archetypal mythology rather than an account of evil in the world. This majority position in Judaism in the Second Temple period can be seen throughout the interpretation of the Jewish Scriptures as well as the extracanonical writings during this time. Sirach, written between 200-175 BCE, repurposes the Adam and Eve story found in Genesis 1-3:

“The Lord fashioned human beings from the earth, to consign them back to it. He gave them so many days and so much time, he gave them authority over everything on earth... He filled them with knowledge and intelligence, and showed them what was good and what evil. He put his own light in their hearts to show them the magnificence of his works, so that they would praise his holy name as they told of his magnificent works. He set knowledge before them, he endowed them with the law of life. He established an eternal covenant with them, and revealed his judgments to them. Their eyes saw the majesty of his glory, and

⁵ Toews, John E. *The Story of Original Sin*. 15.

⁶ Paulsen-Reed, Amy. *The Apocalypse of Abraham in Its Ancient and Medieval Contexts*. 1.

their ears heard the glory of his voice. He said to them, ‘Beware of all wrong-doing’; he gave each a commandment concerning his neighbour.”⁷

This single example can be extrapolated throughout the Second Temple writings. The majority of Rabbinic thought was more concerned with the relationship of humans to other humans and nature because of Adam and Eve. The sin in the Garden was not a hereditary disease but a community dysfunction - it explained why we work, die, and, perhaps most unfortunately, why we cannot talk to animals.⁸ John Towes notes, “The unequivocal rejection of hereditary sinfulness in this literature does suggest that some people or groups contemporaneous with the writers were making the case for the hereditary transmission of sin from Adam as a way to explain the problem of evil in the world. The writers of 4 Ezra and 2 Baruch say a clear “no” to that theology around the turn of the first to second century CE.”⁹

However, there is a secondary position that affirms the idea of hereditary sin in Judaism. The first, and most obvious, is that Christianity grew out of Judaism. While the religions are drastically different now, in the first century CE the similarities between Judaism and the new religious offshoot were much more similar. The Apostle Paul - a Jewish convert to Christianity and author of several letters in the New Testament - would have been very familiar with the text. Paul’s letter to the church in Rome, specifically chapter 5, is where we find debate. Romans 5 should be read as apocalyptic, and Paul pulls from the same texts that would support original sin, therefore Paul was proposing original sin like 2nd temple Judaism, except that Jesus was payment for the debt.¹⁰ Umbarger addresses the ethical concerns many have with the

⁷ The New Jerusalem Bible. Sirach 17:1–14.

⁸ Toews, 23.

⁹ Toews, 37.

¹⁰ Umbarger, Matthew Wade. *Yeser ha-Ra’ and Original Sin*. 7.

theory of Original Sin, “The prophetic vision of divine justice is simply not democratic. We can indeed suffer terrible judgements when those who represent us before God sin against Him. For Paul, Adam was the Deuteronomistic king par excellence, representing all of humanity, and his sin resulted in our bitter exile of estrangement from God, and consequently, only the Second Adam could restore us to the place of divine honor.”¹¹

Judaism has been a religion of continuous reframing and rethinking. There are often multiple ways of reading a single text, and even more ways to apply the themes and implications based on the reader’s time and place. Original Sin is no different. While there are people who agree and disagree, the majority of Jewish leaders and teachers deny the idea of Original Sin. Even still, it’s important to note that this was not a novel idea of Christianity, although it has a much more prominent role.¹²

Sin in Pre-Augustinian Christianity

As we set the stage for the controversy, the Early Church was as multivocal as we saw in Judaism before. In the same way, a single passage can be viewed from multiple angles. For Christianity, the debate over hereditary sin comes primarily from Romans 5:

“Therefore, just as through one man sin entered into the world, and death through sin, and so death spread to all mankind, because all sinned— for until the Law sin was in the world, but sin is not counted against anyone when there is no law. Nevertheless death reigned from Adam until Moses, even over those who had not sinned in the likeness of the violation committed by Adam, who is a type of Him who was to come... So then, as through one offense the result was condemnation to all mankind, so also through one act of righteousness the result was justification of life to all mankind. For as through the one man’s disobedience

¹¹ Umbarger, 3.

¹² Ibid.

the many were made sinners, so also through the obedience of the One the many will be made righteous.”¹³

For the Church in the first five centuries CE, the schools of thought were pretty well divided by language: the Greek-speaking Church of the East in Asia Minor and Palestine and the Latin-speaking Church of the Western Mediterranean. The Eastern school saw sin as a sickness that could be cured, while the Latin Church of the West saw it as a hereditary curse that was inescapable.

The first 250 years of Eastern thought on Original Sin was developed by Justin Martyr, Theophilus, Irenaeus of Lyons, Clement of Alexandria, and Origen. This view of humanity saw the Fall of humanity in the Garden as an immature act rather than overt rebellion. This immaturity - with Irenaeus arguing that Adam and Eve were literal children - led to, according to Theophilus, them eating before they were old enough. It was the Serpent (or Satan) that tricked Adam and Eve to disobey.

“Adam’s first sin was one of thoughtlessness rather than of malice. The primary blame for Adam’s misstep rests with the devil who acquired power over him unfairly, by a trick. It is not surprising that Irenaeus did not attach a high degree of guilt or culpability to Adam’s sin. God pitied, rather than condemned, his frail, imperfect, inexperienced creature for succumbing to the wiles of a cunning and powerful foe. The sin of Adam was far less serious than Cain’s. Adam’s transgression, though not an infection transmitted to subsequent generations, did lead to death, which Irenaeus also interpreted as a divine mercy.”¹⁴

Origen of Alexandria, the student of Clement, continued to develop the idea of the universal Adam that Clement started. “Adam” in the Genesis story is not an individual, but rather humanity as a whole. While Origen uses theological and philosophical moves that are beyond this paper, it is important to note that there is a

¹³ New American Standard Bible, Romans 5:12-19.

¹⁴ Toews, 53.

consistent theology of the world and humanity's inclination to sin without the need of Original Sin.

The Western School, starting with Tertullian in 200 CE, took a different approach. He viewed sin as a trait that was passed down. Specifically, he saw that sex was the way sin was hereditarily moved from generation to generation. Part of the soul of the man is transplanted into the woman and "If all human souls are detached portions of the original soul which sinned, they must bear the moral responsibility for the primordial sin."¹⁵

Other Church thinkers like Cyprian, Ambrose, and Ambrosiaster continued to push this idea further in the West. They sought to widen the gap between secular and sacred - they held a pessimistic view of humanity. Ambrose's idea of the perfect Adam, or that Adam and Eve were made perfect before the expulsion from the garden, only intensified the trespass they committed. He also equated the sin in the story with pride, because Adam and Eve wanted to be like God, knowing good from evil.¹⁶

One exception to this group, who plays a large role in Augustine's understanding, is Ambrosiaster. There is almost no information regarding him or his life, but we know he wrote a commentary of the book of Romans with simple understanding of Greek and a poorly translated Latin manuscript.¹⁷ Ambrosiaster mistranslation of a key phrase due to a bad translation (*in ho*, or 'in whom', rather than *eph ho*, or 'on account of' or 'because of') which was passed along to Augustine.¹⁸

¹⁵ Toews, 64.

¹⁶ See Genesis 3:4-5.

¹⁷ Toews, 69.

¹⁸ Toews, 70.

Christianity in the first four hundred years was divided East and West on the idea of hereditary sin. The Eastern Church, writing in Greek, believed that humanity was ultimately good, although misguided or immature. They used the story of Adam and Eve to make archetypal claims about the world and God. The Western, Latin Church saw humanity as permanently scarred. This deflection, passed along through the man during sex, was ontologically shifting. A poor translation from Ambrosiaster will change the course of Christianity.

The Trouble with Pelagius

The Mediterranean was the hotbed of Christianity in the fifth century CE. Its legal status and acceptance in the empire allowed for more dialogue between schools, but this came at a price. A religion that has imperial backing needs to be unified. This led to a number of councils to find a singular belief for the entire Church across the entire Mediterranean. The first two ecumenical councils, the First Council of Nicaea and the First Council of Constantinople, focused on how to define Jesus - was he God or man? Both or neither?

While the Church was working out the Christology of Jesus, the smaller Synods were finalizing their own orthodoxies. These worked in the same way - a group would get together to choose the single, authorized view, and excommunicate whoever did not fit. The Pelagian Controversy, from 410-418 CE, would see an entire school of thought removed from the West, crystallizing in low anthropology.

Augustine

Augustine of Hippo (354-430 CE) was born in North Africa to a Pagan father and Christian mother. He was slow to be a good student, but eventually studied Latin literature and became a preacher and orator. “So by those who did not well, Thou didst well for me; and by my own sin Thou didst justly punish me. For Thou hast commanded, and so it is, that every inordinate affection should be its own punishment.”¹⁹ Still, he was not an academic. He did not know Greek or Hebrew and was reliant on Latin translations - an issue we saw earlier with Ambrosiaster.

Augustine was firmly in the Latin camp - believing that Original Sin was the source of evil in the world, passed down from Adam. This is in part due to Augustine’s teen and early adult years of debauchery and foolishness as a Manichaean orator. “Therefore was I at strife with myself, and rent asunder by myself. And this rent befell me against my will, and yet indicated, not the presence of another mind, but the punishment of my own. Therefore it was no more I that wrought it, but sin that dwelt in me; the punishment of a sin more freely committed, in that I was a son of Adam.”²⁰

Finally, the North African Church was a breeding ground for a more strict theology. From Toews: “The harshness of life under the African desert sun had profoundly shaped the theological world views of Tertullian and Cyprian. Through their influence there had developed a legalistic and pitiless Latin-Punic theology. Traditional Christian thought in North Africa was narrowly defined with a predominantly forensic conception of sin and a quasi-commercial treatment of merit.”²¹ The combination of

¹⁹ Saint Augustine Bishop of Hippo, *The Confessions of St. Augustine*, trans. E. B. Pusey 1.12. See also 1.9-1.13

²⁰ Augustine, 8.10

²¹ Toews, 75.

limited academic abilities, negative personal experiences, and a rigid culture led to a more extreme view of hereditary sin.

Furthering The Original Sin Doctrine

Augustine moved the Latin Church's doctrine of Original Sin significantly. While his predecessor Ambrose was the first to posit the idea that Adam was perfect and immortal before the Fall, he includes Adam's intellect as well. "Adam was an intellectual genius; his mental powers were far superior to those of the most brilliant philosophers and scientists of Augustine's time—he could give appropriate names to all the animals."²² This intellectual advance of Adam furthered the devastation of the Fall. The Latin Church believed that it was jealousy and pride that caused Adam to sin - Augustine added the element of the will.

Augustine writes *City of God* in the midst of the Pelagian conflict. He defends the idea that sin is hereditary, passed down by our universal parents (Adam). "In the first man, therefore, there existed the whole human nature, which was to be transmitted by the woman to posterity, when that conjugal union received the divine sentence of its own condemnation; and what man was made, not when created, but when he sinned and was punished, this he propagated, so far as the origin of sin and death are concerned."²³ Whether souls existed before birth or after, Augustine's hereditary sin nature was propagated through procreation.

Augustine intensified the Latin Church's ideas of Original Sin by making the original Adam incredibly great, deepening the rift between that Adam and the post-Fall

²² Toews, 79.

²³ Dods, Marcus, and Thomas Merton. *The City of God*, 414.

Adam, and by reiterating the seminal delivery of sin. This intensity of Original Sin would lead to the excommunication of Pelagius, Caelestius, and several of their followers.

The Pelagian Controversy

Much of the writings of Pelagius are lost, but we do have some fragments. We can also glean a little by what writers like Augustine have written *against*. He was born in Britain or Ireland and eventually traveled to Rome in the 380's CE, before eventually moving again to Carthage in 410 CE. He and his traveler Caelestius (sometimes spelled *Coelestius*) found themselves in trouble with Augustine and the Synods of North Africa.

Pelagius had a positive outlook on humanity. His theology of sin was that of the East - man was good but the world was a strong temptation to sin. "Adam's sin did have disastrous consequences for humanity; it introduced death and the habit of disobedience. But the latter was propagated by example, not by physical descent."²⁴ He disavowed any type of predestination of the human soul to destruction, and saw "the assumption that human beings were born with a bias toward sin was an insult to God..."²⁵

In Pelagius' Commentary on Romans 5, he makes a distinction between inherent sin nature and what the Greek Church would call the Adamic example of sin. "By example or by pattern. Just as through Adam's sin came at a time when it did not yet exist, so in the same way through Christ's righteousness was recovered... And just as through the former's sin death came in, so also through the latter's righteousness life was regained... As long as they sin the same way, they likewise die."²⁶ This is a

²⁴ Toews, 76.

²⁵ Ibid.

²⁶ Pelagius, and Theodore De Bruyn. Pelagius's Commentary on St Paul's Epistle to the Romans. 92.

radically different view from Augustine. Where Augustine thought Adam's sin was universally damaging, by transmitting the sin nature, removing our natural immortality, and our inability to be good enough to live without sin, Pelagius affirmed these statements.

Their trouble began shortly after arriving at Carthage with Caelestius' trial in 411 or 412. The Synod claims that Caelestius was teaching against the Catholic Church, specifically the idea that babies were in the same state as Adam before the fall. To this, at the end of the transcript we have, he replies, "As touching the transmission of sin, I have already asserted, that I have heard many persons of acknowledged position in the catholic Church deny it altogether; and on the other hand, others affirm it: it may be fairly deemed a matter for inquiry, but not a heresy. I have always maintained that infants require baptism, and ought to be baptized. What else does he want?"²⁷

In 415 CE, Pelagius was brought in front of the Lydda Synod for heresy. The council is concerned about Pelagius' teachings that a person can live a sinless life, or that " 'No man can be without sin unless he has acquired a knowledge of the law.'"²⁸ After his excommunication, believed to be around 417 CE, Pelagius sent a confession to Pope Innocent I on behalf of himself and his followers. In the same vein, Caelestius sends a confession, and they affirm the Nicene Creed and denounce several other heretical factions.²⁹ However, Pope Innocent I had died before the letters arrived, and Pope Zosimus found no heresy in Pelagianism.

Finally, on May 1, 418, the North African Synod put forth a list of 19 Canons to completely deny Pelagianism as orthodox. In this proclamation, they claim that those

²⁷ Jennings, Daniel R. Caelestius' Trial At Carthage

²⁸ Jennings, Daniel R., Synod Of Lydda To Investigate Pelagius' Teachings, 415 AD.

²⁹ Wall, William, Jennings, Daniel R., Confession of Faith

who believe Adam was created mortal before the Fall, that God's grace is sufficient to not sin, and those who deny our innate nature of sin, are heretics and should be anathematized.³⁰ The controversy was decided and Christianity in the majority of the Mediterranean was to fall in line behind Augustine and the Latin Church.

Conclusion

The Pelagian Controversy is an example of the way the Churches throughout the Mediterranean would interact and evolve around each other. This is such a great example because it gives us a picture less than 100 years after the Christianization of Rome where the multiplicity of views is flattened in favor of the single, homogenized interpretation.

While we are focused on Christianity, it is important to note the other major religions in the Mediterranean - specifically Judaism and Islam - and how they view Original Sin. The Jewish faith primarily views humanity as neutral, leaning towards the good. We are born unburdened, but the world around us entices us to sin. While Judaism does have a minority view that people are born with inherited evil, Islam is very clearly against such ideas, focusing on and prioritizing the choices an individual makes.

Christianity had two schools of thought - the first saw sin as a disease to be cured, while the other saw sin as a defect that could not be fixed. The Eastern, Greek Church had a high view of humanity and saw free will as a primary aspect of the human experience. The Western, Latin Church had a more pessimistic view of human nature. It

³⁰ Hefele, Charles Joseph, Oxenham, Henry Nutcombe. Council of Carthage To Investigate Pelagianism, May 1, 418

culminated in the writings of Augustine, where each person was condemned from birth with only an elect number of people finding their way out from hellfire.

This came to a head in the early 5th century CE with Pelagius and Caelestius. Their teaching of the importance of free will, the universal Adam, and the neutral nature of the newborn was accepted in the East, but found them in trouble in North Africa and the West. After multiple councils and Synods, they were questioned and condemned as heretics. The Augustinian view of Original Sin became the dominant view throughout the Western Churches. Roman Catholic, and eventually Protestant Churches used the Augustinian anthropology to create doctrine, theology, and even state policy.

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