

Jewish POV: Original Sin

The first theologian to teach that man is born into this world in a state of sin was Augustine who based this belief on Bereishit 3:17-19.¹

*To [the man] he said: Because you have hearkened to the voice of your wife and have eaten from the tree about which I command you, saying: You are not to eat from it! Damned be the soil on your account, with painstaking-labor shall you eat from it, all the days of your life. Thorn and sting-shrub let it spring up for you, when you (seek to) eat the plants of the field! By the sweat of your brow shall you eat bread, until you return to the soil, and from it you were taken. For you are dust, and to dust shall you return.*²

“Original sin may be taken to mean: (1) the sin that Adam committed; (2) a consequence of this first sin, the hereditary stain with which we are born on account of our origin or descent from Adam.”³

Much of Christianity today subscribes to the original sin belief. They maintain that the sin of Adam was transferred to all future generations. Some sects of Christianity believe that original sin even taints unborn children.¹

One man – Adam – transmitted to the entirety of the human race not only physical death which is punishment for sin, but also spiritual death which is sin itself.³ Man is believed to be hopelessly lost in a state of sin. Man is held captive by sin since the fall of Adam in Gan Eden. “As a result, he is powerless to follow the path of obedience and righteousness by his own free will. [Christianity contends], because all are born with an innate and uncontrollable lust for sin, humanity can do nothing to merit its own salvation. In essence, man is totally depraved and true free will is far beyond his grasp. ... In Christian terms, man is not inclined toward sin but more accurately is a slave to sin.”⁴

*Well then, are we better off? Not entirely, for we have already brought the charge against Jews and Greeks alike that they are all under the domination of sin... (Romans 3:9)*⁵

Augustine – and later, Calvin – taught that the fall of Adam has caused all of mankind to be born under the curse of original sin. This teaching is based upon Romans 5:12:

*Therefore, just as through one person sin entered the world, and through sin, death, and thus death came to all, inasmuch as all sinned...*⁵

The term “original sin” is unknown in the Tanakh and is antithetical to the core principles of the Torah and the prophets. The Torah states that humanity was created in the image of God. We are not created in the physical image of God, because God is incorporeal and has no physical appearance. Maimonides points out that the Hebrew word for “image” in Bereshit 1:27 is “tzelem (תְּצַלֵּם).”

*So God created humankind in his image (תְּצַלֵּםוֹ); in the image of God did he create it, male and female he created them.*²

Tzelem refers to the nature or essence of a thing, as in Tehillim 73:20:

...as a dream is, upon awakening. O God, at the time for waking. You will debase their image.
(תְּזַלֵּם)⁶

Similarly, the Hebrew word used for “likeness” is “damut (דְּמוּת),” which is used to indicate a simile, not identity of form. Rashi explains that we are like God in that we have the ability to understand and discern. Maimonides elaborates that by using our intellect, we are able to perceive things without the use of our physical senses, an ability that makes us like God, who perceives without having physical senses.

People have the ability to choose to follow Torah and the mitzvot of God. That is the heart of the Jewish understanding of free will. All people are descended from Adam, so no one can blame his own wickedness on his ancestry. There is no concept of “original sin” in Judaism. On the contrary, we all have the ability to make our own choices, and we will all be held responsible for the choices we make.

Fathers are not to be put to death for sons, sons are not to be put to death for fathers: every man for his own sin (alone) is to be put to death! (Devarim 24:16)²

The Torah, over and over again, dismisses the notion that man has lost his divinely endowed capacity to use his free will to choose good over evil. This notion is not hidden or ambiguous, it is proclaimed in nearly every teaching that Moshe directs to the B’nei Yisrael. In one of his last teachings delivered to B’nei Yisrael, Moshe declares that it is man alone who can – and must – merit his own salvation.⁴

When Moshe had finished speaking all these words to all Yisrael, he said to them: Set your hearts toward all these words which I call as witness among you today, that you may command your children to carefully observe all the words of this Instruction. Indeed, no empty word is it for you, indeed, it is your (very) life; through this word you shall prolong (your) days upon the soil that you are crossing over the Yarden to possess. (Devarim 32:45-47)²

Moshe also admonishes B’nei Yisrael not to question their capacity to remain faithful to the mitzvot as set out in the Torah.

...if you hearken to the voice of YHWH your God, by keeping his commandments and his laws – what is written in this document of Instruction – if you return to YHWH your God with all your heart and with all your being. For the commandment that I command you this day: it is not too extraordinary for you, it is not too far away! It is not in the heavens, (for you) to say: Who will go up for us to the heavens and get it for us and have us hear it, that we may observe it? And it is not across the sea, (for you) to say: Who will cross for us, across the sea, and get it for us and have us hear it, that we may observe it? Rather, near to you is the word, exceedingly, in your mouth and in your heart, to observe it! (Devarim 30:10-14)²

These passages show that man is not doomed by original sin but can – and must – maintain a relationship with God by performing the mitzvot given in the Torah. The mitzvot and Torah are

not “far away” and they are not impossible to keep. This means that original sin is a misnomer – we are all free to choose life by following the mitzvot.⁴

Even earlier in the Torah, there is a statement (shortly after the sin of Adam and Chava) that man can overcome his lust for sin.

YHWH said to Kayin: Why are you so upset? Why has your face fallen? Is it not thus: If you intend good, bear it aloft, but if you do not intend good, at the entrance is sin (חַטָּאת), a crouching demon, toward you his lust – but you can rule over him. (Bereishit 4:6-7)²

The word chatta'ath is translated as sin in this verse and as sinner, sinful, and similar words throughout the Tanakh. The word chatta'ath comes from the root word chata' which means to miss, incur guilt, go the wrong way, or miss the mark.

Sin, as understood in Judaism, literally means to miss the mark – that is, to fall short of following Torah. It is something that mankind does and not something that mankind is internally. In other words, Judaism teaches that mankind sins but mankind is not sinners.

The fact that the Torah places these assuring words immediately following the sin in Gan Eden is profoundly troubling when it comes to the idea of original sin. “[In] just these two inspiring verses, the Torah dispels forever the church’s teachings on original sin.”⁴

Christianity teaches that original sin must be removed through forgiveness through blood (believing in the death and resurrection of Jesus) as shown through the outward sign of baptism which is the washing away of sins.

But God proves his love for us in that while we were still sinners Christ died for us. How much more then, since we are now justified by his blood, will we be saved through him from the wrath. (Romans 5:8-9)⁵

However, in early Church history, the Church Fathers taught that man had free will and it was the choices that we made – not an inherent sinful nature – that caused man to sin.

*Irenaeus said, “Those who do not do it [good] will receive the just judgment of God, because they had not work good when they had it in their power to do so. But if some had been made by nature bad, and others good, these latter would not be deserving of praise for being good, for they were created that way. Nor would the former be reprehensible, for that is how they were made. However, all men are of the same nature. They are all able to hold fast and to go what is good. On the other hand, they have the power to cast good from them and not to do it.” (Jesse Morrell. *The Early Church vs. The Gnostics on Man’s Nature*)⁷*

Origen said, “The Scriptures...emphasize the freedom of the will. They condemn those who sin, and approve those who do right... We are responsible for being bad and worthy of being cast outside. For it is not the nature in us that is the cause of the evil; rather, it is the voluntary

*choice that works evil.” Origen said that “the heretics [the Gnostics] introduce the doctrine of different natures.” (Jesse Morrell. *The Early Church vs. The Gnostics on Man’s Nature*)⁷*

Augustine was the first to teach against the Church’s teaching of free will.

*Episcopus said, “What is plainer than that the ancient divines, for three hundred years after Christ, those at least who flourished before St. Augustine, maintained the liberty of our will, or an indifference to two contrary things, free from all internal and external necessity!” (Jesse Morrell. *The Early Church vs. The Gnostics on Man’s Nature*)⁷*

According to Augustine, in his early life he became involved with the Gnostics.

And since at that time (Thou, O light of my heart, knowest) Apostolic Scripture was not known to me, I was delighted with that exhortation, so far only, that I was thereby strongly roused, and kindled, and inflamed to love, and seek, and obtain, and hold, and embrace not this or that sect, but wisdom itself whatever it were; and this alone checked me thus unkindled, that the name of Christ was not in it. (The Confessions of Saint Augustine, Book III)⁸

Augustine later turned away from the Gnostics and became taught by the Church the ways of Christianity. Augustine initially taught the idea of free will as the Church dictated but in his famous debates with the Pelagians he ceased teaching the Church’s idea of free will and began teaching the idea of original sin.

It is not, therefore, true, as some affirm that we say, and as that correspondent of yours ventures moreover to write, that all are forced into sin, as if they were unwilling, by the necessity of their flesh; but if they are already of the age to use the choice of their own mind, they are both retained in sin by their own will, and by their own will are hurried along from sin to sin. For even he who persuades and deceives does not act in them, except that they may commit sin by their will, either by ignorance of the truth or by delight in iniquity, or by both evils—as well of blindness as of weakness. But this will, which is free in evil things because it takes pleasure in evil, is not free in good things, for the reason that it has not been made free. Nor can a man will any good thing unless he is aided by Him who cannot will evil—that is, by the grace of God through Jesus Christ our Lord. (Against Two Letters of the Pelagians, Book I Chapter VII)⁹

However, Augustine’s idea of original sin was (and still is) rejected by the Orthodox Church that was not influenced by Augustine’s Gnostic background.

In the Orthodox Faith, the term “original sin” refers to the “first” sin of Adam and Eve. As a result of this sin, humanity bears the “consequences” of sin, the chief of which is death. Here the word “original” may be seen as synonymous with “first.” Hence, the “original sin” refers to the “first sin” in much the same way as “original chair” refers to the “first chair.” ... In the Orthodox Christian understanding, while humanity does bear the consequences of the original, or first, sin, humanity does not bear the personal guilt associated with this sin. Adam and Eve are guilty of their willful action; we bear the consequences, chief of which is death. (Orthodox Church of America)¹⁰

This notion of original sin is completely foreign to the Jewish scriptures. God does clearly lay out His plan for His people in Devarim 30:15-16:

*See, I set before you today life and good, and death and ill: in that I command you today to love YHWH your God, to walk in his ways and to keep his commandments, his laws and his regulations, that you may stay alive and become many and YHWH your God may bless you in the land that you are entering to possess.*²

Throughout the Tanakh God unambiguously declares that B'nei Yisrael is to draw near to Him with intense love and faithfully keep His mitzvot. This is the desire of God.⁴

Avraham, the father of the Jewish nation, remained intensely loyal to God's mitzvot. As a result, the Torah regards our first patriarch as the "paradigm of faithfulness."⁴

*I will make your seed many, like the stars of the heavens, and to your seed I will give all these lands; all the nations of the earth shall enjoy blessing through your seed – in consequence of Avraham's hearkening to my voice and keeping my charge: my commandments, my laws, and my instructions. (Bereishit 26:4-5)*²

God did not give us desires that we cannot govern, or mitzvot that we could not keep. The Torah was not delivered to the angels. The Torah was given to B'nei Yisrael long after the transgression in Gan Eden.⁴

*In Jewish terms, sin is not a person, it's an event, and that event happened yesterday. In chapter after chapter, the prophets of Israel beseech those who lost their way to turn back to the Merciful One because today is a new day. (Tovia Singer – Does Judaism Believe in Original Sin?)*⁴

There is no concept of "original sin" in the entirety of the Tanakh. We are all capable of choosing to sin or not sin and we are all capable of returning to God and have our sins forgiven.

¹"Judaism's Rejection of Original Sin." *jewishvirtuallibrary.org*. Jewish Virtual Library, 1989. [http://www.jewishvirtuallibrary.org/jsourc/Judaism/Original_Sin.html]

²Everett Fox. *The Five Books of Moses*. Brooklyn: Schocken Books, 1997.

³Harent, Stéphane. "Original Sin." *The Catholic Encyclopedia*. Vol. 11. New York: Robert Appleton Company, 1911. [<http://www.newadvent.org/cathen/11312a.htm>]

⁴Tovia Singer. "Does Judaism Believe in Original Sin?" *outreachjudaism.org*. Outreach Judaism, 2011 [<http://www.outreachjudaism.org/articles/original-sin.html>]

⁵Gary Anderson, et.al. *Holy Bible: New American Bible*. Charlotte, N.C.: Saint Benedict Press, 2005.

⁶Aryeh Kaplan. *The Living Nach: Sacred Writings*. New York: Moznaim Publishing Corporation, 1998.

⁷Jesse Morrell. *The Early Church vs. The Gnostics on Man's Nature*. *libraryoftheology.com*.

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[http://www.libraryoftheology.com/writings/earlychurch/Early_Church_Vs_Gnostics_On_Free_Will_Jesse_Morrell.pdf]

⁸ Edward Pusey, trans. *The Confessions of Saint Augustine*. 1914. [<http://www.sacred-texts.com/chr/augconf/index.htm>]

⁹ Peter Holmes and Robert Wallis, trans. “Against Two Letters of the Pelagians.” From *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers, First Series, Volume 5*. Buffalo: Christian Literature Publishing Company, 1887. [<http://www.newadvent.org/fathers/15091.htm>]

¹⁰“St. Augustine & Original Sin.” oca.org. Orthodox Church of America, n.d. [<http://oca.org/questions/teaching/st.-augustine-original-sin>]

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