

# Back to “Back to the Garden”

Reflections on Chapter Eleven of Don Bailey's *Religious Explorations*

by Derek Suchard

The Christian doctrine of 'original sin' has been one of the cornerstones of that faith since the doctrine was formulated in its familiar form by Augustine of Hippo. Donald Bailey is right to note its centrality to Christian faith “because it purports to explain the fallen nature of humankind (our “brokenness”) and because it is the problem for which Jesus as Christ is claimed to provide the solution. Without sin and mortality, there is no need for salvation and eternal life.”<sup>1</sup>

Unfortunately, his subsequent treatment fails on almost all essential parts in terms of history of dogma, exegesis, semiotics and a number of other areas.

Bailey's errors begin early on with his contention that “the doctrine [...] argues that over the course of a lifetime every human being (except Jesus, Mary and the saints) inevitably sports more “sin” than goodness and ends his or her days under obligation to God for at least some sins not yet atoned for at the time of death.”<sup>2</sup>

Given the seriousness of this error so early in his considerations, it is hardly surprising that every subsequent step takes the author (and therefore the reader) further and further away from an accurate consideration of this doctrine.<sup>3 4</sup>

Not to put too fine a point on it, this definition of the doctrine is incorrect in every possible way, which makes virtually all of Bailey's analysis completely without foundation.

In point of fact, the doctrine of Original Sin refers to a state of sin with which all human beings have been contaminated in perpetuity following the act of disobedience of eating of the fruit of the tree of knowledge of good and evil in the Garden of Eden.<sup>5</sup>

This means that no further acts are necessary for an individual to find himself or herself in a state of sin. Sinfulness is, since Adam and Eve, the natural state of humanity, the doctrine says.<sup>6</sup> Bailey's definition fails to distinguish between original sin and 'normal' sin. For they are different.

While one may be willing to accept, if pushed and staying within the confines of the faith, that Jesus was not under a state of original sin (though that contention also leads to a number of other problems, primarily that of his being “fully man”), and that a related

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<sup>1</sup> Bailey, Donald A., “Back to the Garden: Teasing Fresh Meaning from the Doctrine of Original Sin” in *Religious Explorations: History, Theology and Spiritual Values*, (Winnipeg: 2012), p. 151.

<sup>2</sup> Op cit, p. 152.

<sup>3</sup> And in an irony that Bailey might have appreciated if he had been aware of it, one scholar notes that the doctrine “means that all humans are born moving away from God” (Greer 2001, 120 (cited in Couenhoyen, Jesse, “St. Augustine's Doctrine of Original Sin” in *Augustinian Studies* 36:2 (2005) 359–396.) Bailey's apology in a footnote that he is not a “biblical scholar, Hebraist or theologian” fails to satisfy given the nature of his subject, which calls for (and may in fact require) some knowledge of biblical scholarship and theology.

<sup>4</sup> For a comprehensive and understandable exposition in English of the doctrine as formulated by Augustine, please see *The Complete Works of Saint Augustine: The Confessions, On Grace and Free Will, The City of God, On Christian*, by Saint Augustine, Philip Schaff (Ed.), Reverend Marcus Dods and Rose Elizabeth Cleveland (Trans.) (Kindle edition; Aug 3, 2011).

<sup>5</sup> Genesis 3.

<sup>6</sup> For the current teaching of the Roman Catholic Church on Original Sin, please see Catechism of the Catholic Church, Part One, Section Two, Chapter One, Article 1, Paragraph 7. sections 386-421 ([http://www.vatican.va/archive/ccc\\_css/archive/catechism/p1s2c1p7.htm](http://www.vatican.va/archive/ccc_css/archive/catechism/p1s2c1p7.htm)).

doctrine, that of the Immaculate Conception (formally defined only in 1854), which states that Mary was uniquely free of the stain of original sin – i.e. that there was no sin of concupiscence (the active transmitter of the stain of original sin) during the act of copulation by which she, Mary, was conceived, the doctrine states nothing about the saints being equally free of original sin.

While it may be so that an individual act of sin may be resolved through atonement, forgiveness, penance, etc., the doctrine states there is no act of atonement sufficient to compensate for the blemish of original sin. Hence the need for substitutionary salvation in the person of the Christ Jesus.

The idea of original sin may not have originated with Augustine (who cites clear references to the concept if not the terminology in the Christian scriptures<sup>7</sup>), but he certainly formulated it in the way that we have received it today, incorporating the writings of others who had gone before him, and gave it much greater prominence than it had enjoyed up to that point. He didn't formulate it as a theological exercise for students or clergy, however, or even as a contribution to a church council; he wrote it in answer to a woman with a question.

The woman had written to ask why the practice of infant baptism had arisen. For she could find no scriptural reference for what had become common practice in pre-fall Rome. The Christian scriptures only referred to adult baptism. So why were babies being baptised?

Certainly not to repent for their own sins. They hadn't yet had time to commit any. So there had to be another reason. That reason, Augustine wrote, was the stain that resulted from the first sin – Eve and Adam eating of the fruit of the tree of knowledge of good and evil.<sup>8</sup> That act alone was sufficient to cause the contamination that would be transmitted down through the ages through the concupiscent act of human sexual reproduction. As a result, even babies who had not sinned were, in fact, sinful. QED.

For reasons that are not clear beyond a simple statement that “asserting [three refinements of traditional Christian thought] disguises or obfuscates the persistent and ubiquitous reality of the individual and institutional application by Christian theology of the doctrine of Original Sin,” Bailey chooses not to explore the Catholic/Protestant difference over the pervasiveness and seriousness of the corruption, the role of baptism in washing away Original Sin and the distinction between “an inexorable inclination to sin and the mere removal of God's Edenic mantle of protection against sin.”

That he would chose to ignore these extremely important aspects of a doctrine that he considers so central to the faith is a matter of no small astonishment to me. One is driven, in fact, to wonder how the doctrine can be adequately considered if the meaning of the stain, the extent of the stain and the means of removal of the stain are ignored. I am confident that we shall return to these matters in the course of this consideration.

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<sup>7</sup> Romans 5:12 (“Wherefore, 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” KJV); 1 Corinthians 15:22 (“For as in Adam all die, so in Christ all will be made alive.” [One of the most persuasive of the universalist verses in the New Testament, though far from being the only one. But I digress.]);

<sup>8</sup> I will mention only in passing my only work in progress with respect to this matter to the effect that one wonders how culpable sin could be imputed *before Eve and Adam had eaten of the tree of knowledge of good and evil* and therefore before they were aware that disobedience was a sin subject to punishment.

Moving ever further from the doctrine itself, Bailey then sees “at least two fundamental objections to the [...] doctrine of Original Sin. One is that it asserts a human proclivity to evil that is critically stronger than any human proclivity to good. [...] The other [...] is that such emphasis on disobedience [...] has a despotic and hierarchical character that has been abundantly exploited by every sort of authority known to and supported (even if often criticized) by traditional Christian thought. [...] The democratic drive to freedom, parity, participation and respect has continually been obliged to struggle against the primordial advantage held by power and authority that the doctrine of Original Sin, wittingly or unwittingly, has historically reinforced.”<sup>9</sup>

On the strength of the foregoing, Bailey then proceeds to “submit that the orthodox Christian doctrine of Original Sin is both scientifically unsubstantiated and socially pernicious.”

The absence of theological training that Bailey so proudly announces early in his book clearly shows how useful it might have been here. It would, for example, have helped him to realize that what he has been referring to as ‘the doctrine of Original Sin’ is in fact the teaching of a contemporary of Augustine who has been so thoroughly condemned by the Church that we only have reconstructed versions of his original writings, and often only through the filter of Augustine himself.

I refer, of course, to the monk Pelagius who denied – as does Bailey – the doctrine of Original Sin as formulated by Augustine, and who maintained – unlike Bailey – that humanity, with the assistance of Grace (i.e., the spiritual assistance of God), is capable of living a sin-free life, although, Pelagius maintained, in practice, no-one ever does.<sup>10</sup>

It might have been more productive if Bailey had titled his article ‘Teasing new meaning from Pelagianism’, which would have been more accurate, and would have at least given him stronger footing for his next step, which was then to reframe sin as something positive, which we shall look at in more detail below.

It is at this point in our deliberations that the question arises as to Bailey's motives for his exploration of the doctrine.

In the normal course of events, such analyses tend to have one of two driving motivations.

For intra-faith theologians (in this case, Catholic or other Christian clergy or academic theologians), the search has to do with finding the true meaning behind the text or the doctrine, the better to be able to see what its relevance is for one's faith life.

This motivation also applies for renegade theologians who are trying to work within a faith tradition, such as, for example, feminist theologians, liberation theologians, etc. Even when their analysis leads them to a conclusion that is at odds with the prevailing dogma, they are generally trying to sincerely identify what the true meaning should be, sometimes concluding that the text has been misread, sometimes that the text has been read correctly, but interpreted incorrectly, and sometimes concluding that someone has been fiddling with the text.

When the exegete arrives at a deviant reading, it then becomes incumbent on her or him to carry the logic of their solution through systematically to explore the consequences on

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<sup>9</sup> Bailey, p. 157.

<sup>10</sup> Pelagius enjoyed a brief resurgence of renown a couple of years ago when his philosophy was crucial as a plot device in the novel by Umberto Eco and the film of the same name, *The Name of the Rose*.

the rest of the faith. If it is not possible to do that to a satisfactory degree, the analyst is forced to conclude that the exegesis has no place in the faith structure as a whole and to take any appropriate steps. Such steps can include rejecting the exegesis and turning away from the faith. Both have a long and noble tradition.

For external analysts, such an exploration of doctrine or dogma is usually intended to learn from the Other, to find out what drives them and what the foundations of the faith are.

Deviant and challenging readings also arise in those cases, as well, but usually serve to point out why a doctrine could not be accepted by outsiders as valid (which is not that big a deal as they have no obligation to accept it anyway). Such analyses are sometimes also used to support the contention of the exegete that the believing community is demonstrably wrong to hold a particular position. Although at first glance, that might appear to be what Bailey has done, but for reasons that will be shown below, it is not.

It seldom happens that an exegetical exercise by an outsider concludes that a doctrine is wrong, but that simply by reversing the meaning of everything, it could be made right, but then with no regard for what that would mean for the rest of the architecture of the faith.

That is what Bailey appears to be doing, however.

There is, then, no apparent reason to want to “tease fresh meaning” from the doctrine, which is the stated purpose of the paper, after all. The following thirty-six pages could easily have been dispensed with.

Curiously, Bailey then criticizes “liberal theologians [who] could chose to reject the doctrine altogether (as many have), but that would be to abandon one of the keystones of all biblical interpretation.” He then claims to want to “prefer to work within the story” before abandoning the story entirely, never to return to its salient points again.

Instead, Bailey goes off on a tangent based in psychology to, in fact, leave the facts of the story intact while giving each element a completely different interpretation and ignoring its relation to everything in the holy text that follows from it.

Why that is necessary, or even desirable, is a complete mystery to me. Why accept the facts of the case, but leave their generally accepted meaning to one side? Would it not be easier to simply dismiss the entire narrative as Myth and move on?

That is not the path that Bailey chooses. He leaves Eve and Adam in the garden. He leaves them subject to the enticements of the snake<sup>11</sup> and to the fatal act. And to the eternal punishment.

He simply reframes their act from that of culpable Original Sin to praiseworthy “Expansive Self-Fulfillment” “a phrase that combines every human being's desire, struggle **and** obligation to realize his or her full potential [...]”<sup>12</sup>

The *story* is correct; the *interpretation* is wrong, in Bailey's view.

A more common objection at this point of the story is the observation that the story has no historical basis in fact, and should be dispensed with altogether, as a consequence of which the salvation story of Jesus becomes, at best, redundant.

Bailey is not interested in exploring the consequences of such an analysis, however, but appears more concerned with trying to explain evil in a human context.<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> Which he curiously does not include among the noble symbolic animals, in contrast to the considerations of snakes and serpents that were common at the time the stories were recorded.

<sup>12</sup> Bailey, p. 159.

As admirable as such an assessment might be, it has ceased to have any connection to the story as delivered, and in whose confines Bailey says he intends to work.

Furthermore, the solution that he proposes -- Expansive Self Fulfillment -- which often leads to sinful behaviour -- has nothing to do with the doctrine of Original Sin. It may have something to do with a doctrine of sin in general, but, as discussed above, that is something completely different.

What it also is is a 21<sup>st</sup> century of the Common Era (CE) imposition of perceived motives onto a 5th to 9th century BCE narrative with no recognition of the fact that 'the past is a foreign country, they do things differently there.'<sup>14</sup> Such an approach does violence to the text as written and completely ignores any attempt at trying to approach the intent of the author based on the surviving documents.

At this point in his presentation, one is surprised to see that Bailey does not then revert to an examination of Jewish exegesis on the Eve and Adam story. This is particularly surprising in light of another article in the same bundle entitled "The shift from Judaism to Christianity: Gains and losses (with a special look at the Trinity and Incarnation)", which concludes that "[...] Christianity appears to have contributed nothing essential to religious belief and worship as the ancient Hebrews understood them. [...] As the new religion was molded by St. Paul and subsequent adherents, it developed [...] several quite repulsive, not to ignore also incredible, traits. [...] [I]t appears, on balance to be a step backwards."<sup>15</sup>

This is additionally interesting because of some interesting differences in analysis between the Jewish text and the Christian text.<sup>16</sup>

Some random observations.

Following the discovery of the disobedience of Eve and Adam, Adonai <sup>17</sup> gives punishment to Eve, Adam and the serpent.

Curiously, however, the punishment for Adam and the serpent are explained... "because you" did this....this is your punishment. No such explanation is provided for Eve's punishment.<sup>18</sup>

The snake is punished "because you have done this".<sup>19</sup> Adam "because you listened to your wife, and you ate from the tree from which I commanded you, saying [...]"<sup>20</sup>

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<sup>13</sup> Which is precisely what the Catholic Catechism states would happen if one chose this type of analysis, as it happens. Cf. Catechism of the Catholic Church, Part One, Section Two, Chapter One, Article 1, Paragraph 7. section 387.

([http://www.vatican.va/archive/ccc\\_css/archive/catechism/p1s2c1p7.htm](http://www.vatican.va/archive/ccc_css/archive/catechism/p1s2c1p7.htm)).

<sup>14</sup> Hartley, L.P., *The Go-Between*, 1953.

<sup>15</sup> Bailey, "The shift from Judaism to Christianity: Gains and losses (with a special look at the Trinity and Incarnation)" in *Religious Explorations: History, Theology and Spiritual Values*, (Winnipeg: 2012), p. 213.

<sup>16</sup> See, for example, Pirkei d'Rabbi Eliezer, commentary on the Torah for some surprising commentary (from a non-Jewish perspective) on the text.

<sup>17</sup> Adonai - "my Lord" in Hebrew -- is the commonly used replacement for the Hebrew tetragrammaton JHWH, the name of the deity. One is not supposed to speak the name of the deity.

<sup>18</sup> "To the woman He said, "I shall surely increase your sorrow and your pregnancy; in pain you shall bear children. And to your husband will be your desire, and he will rule over you." Genesis 3:16.

<sup>19</sup> Genesis 3:14.

<sup>20</sup> Genesis 3:17.

With respect to Adam's punishment, it is not quite clear whether the punishment is due to the fact that he "listened to his wife" or that he "ate from the tree". Would it have made a difference? Inquiring minds want to know.

Furthermore, as part of Eve's punishment, "And to your husband will be your desire, and he will rule over you."<sup>21</sup> Why should *his* punishment include obtaining dominance over his wife? Because he wasn't strong enough to resist her enticements with respect to eating the fruit of the tree? Most curious. And having her punishment condemning her to "desire" to serve her husband sounds rather like using a magical spell to cause her to do something she otherwise would not do. I look forward with anticipation to a feminist theological exegesis of this verse, which I have not yet found.

Perhaps it is just as well that Bailey did not pursue a Jewish exegesis. He demonstrates in his chapter on the Shift from Judaism to Christianity that his grasp of Jewish theology is at least as flawed as his familiarity with Christian theology.

He appears to believe, for example, that Judaism has a salvation doctrine. He states that "While a traditional Jew is supposed to follow 613 biblical commandments to attain salvation, non-Jews can enter Heaven on the basis of only five."<sup>22</sup>

Bailey does not explain what he means by "attain salvation" in a Jewish context. Nor does he provide any sources for his belief that there is such a doctrine, which makes sense as it is a concept that is foreign to Judaism now and in the past.<sup>23</sup> Nor does he explain what he means by a Jew "entering Heaven".

Fighting our way back to Bailey's analysis, we find ourselves puzzled by the fact that he has managed to read the text as a positive action on the part of Eve and Adam, in spite of everything the text itself says.

Bailey wants the story to be about Eve and Adam exercising their ('God-given'?) right of civil disobedience and "intellectual and moral curiosity and courage, without which they would neither be fully and distinctively human nor embody/incarnate the image of God. They were striving to develop competencies without which they could neither think nor act to their full potential, and they were so striving in the face of an unexplained, indeed arbitrary, divine commandment forbidding them to acquire a particular knowledge essential to that self-fulfillment. They proved to their descendents that sometimes it's not only OK but absolutely necessary to disobey, if one wishes to be independent, fulfilled, efficacious and respected."<sup>24</sup>

Apart from his own analysis, Bailey offers no support for such a thesis from inside the text itself or from commentators from Judaism or Christianity.

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<sup>21</sup> Genesis 3:16.

<sup>22</sup> Bailey, op cit. p. 207.

<sup>23</sup> Messianic Judaism...i.e. Christianity, excepted.

<sup>24</sup> One is then forced to wonder that, if disobedience, independence, etc. are so highly valued by God, why all the world's population, save only the family of Noah, was condemned to drown in the great Flood for having displayed such traits in abundance (and leaving open the question of the necessity of taking all of the land animals, who were not capable of such rebellion and sins of pride, with them) (Genesis 6-9). And why being 'stiff-necked', i.e. stubborn and recalcitrant (and therefore disobedient and independent) is one of the greatest accusations made against individuals and against entire peoples in the Bible. (Exodus 32:9; Exod 33:3; Exod 33:5; Exod 34:9; Deut 9:6; Deut 9:13; Deut 10:16; 2 Chronicles 30:8; Acts of the Apostles 7:51.)

For Jews, the story of Adam and Eve has been used to explain flawed humanity and the resultant evil in the world. For Christians, it is the justification for Jesus having come to save humanity.

It is certainly possible to stay within the story and nevertheless devise a positive turn of the story, one that even absolves Adam and Eve of wrongdoing. Jack Katz has done an admirable job of that very thing in “The Social Psychology of Adam and Eve” (1996). The difference between his treatment and Bailey’s is that Katz stays entirely within the story with an interpretation that could work just as well for Christians and Jews, which is the only audience that matters at the end of the day.

The only way it can be turned into a positive tale in the way that Bailey wants to do, is to take it out of the context of the Bible entirely and set it down somewhere completely new. Only then can a new ending be attached and a new meaning be teased.<sup>25</sup>

But what would be the point of that?

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<sup>25</sup> And of course, the recent publication (May 2014) of a translation of Ugaritic tablets from 13<sup>th</sup> century BCE Syria (i.e. 800 years older than the Genesis version) containing a version of the story of Adam and Eve and the Snake and a creator-god called El, which has completely different motivations and a completely different ending, and no hint at all that Eve is guilty of anything, and that could not possibly be used to support anything resembling a salvation story, only adds to the fun. See, *Dagblad Trouw*, De Wever, Robin, “Nederlanders ontdekken voorloper van Adam en Eva” in *Dagblad Trouw*, 16 May 2014 (<http://tinyurl.com/phwm42k>). See also, Korpel, Marjo and Johannes de Moor, *Adam, Eve, and the Devil: A New Beginning*, (Sheffield Phoenix Press).