

Adam and Eve's journey: An original look at original sin

by [Richard Higgins](#) in the [March 27, 2002](#) issue

In a new book on Genesis, Gary A. Anderson focuses not on the textual origin of the story—the customary focus of historical-critical study—but on how the story has been received and retold, imaginatively and liturgically, in Jewish and Christian traditions. Anderson said his goal in *The Genesis of Perfection: Adam and Eve in Jewish and Christian Imagination* (Westminster John Knox) is to “lay out what early Jewish and Christian interpreters were doing when they read these stories.” He sets out to give these interpreters a patient and sympathetic hearing even when their ideas seem outdated or strange.

So unusual is his approach that Richard Clifford, a Jesuit and biblical professor at the Weston School of Theology in Cambridge, wonders if Anderson is proposing a new template for future biblical scholarship—one that takes seriously the theological contexts and ends that commentators have woven around biblical texts.

Anderson, professor of Old Testament and Hebrew Bible at Harvard Divinity School, is a Roman Catholic, but he has a “deep and sympathetic understanding of Judaism,” said his Harvard colleague, Jon D. Levenson, who holds an endowed chair in Jewish studies.

Jewish sources often treat the Eden story as a creation etiology (an explanation of why things are the way they are) that points toward God's election of Israel. Christians, following Paul's example, emphasize Adam's role as a precursor to Christ. But the main tenor of both traditions is downbeat: humanity had it made in the shade but goofed big-time. Anderson is seeking to reclaim a more upbeat note—that Adam and Eve represent the penitential starting point for the human journey back to God.

One issue he explores is the degree to which Christians have emphasized sin as the heart of the Adam and Eve story. Some modern critics, including the creation theologian Matthew Fox, say that Paul and Augustine invented the notion of original sin and gave a gloomier cast to human nature than the Jewish tradition does.

Anderson's scholarship calls that view into question. *The Genesis of Perfection* cites numerous passages in the Hebrew Bible that describe the human predisposition to rebel against God's will and to sin. Anderson particularly focuses on the Israelites' fateful worship of the golden calf in Exodus 32-24 as a kind of template for the Christian notion of original sin. For both Christians and Jews, he notes, the Eden story is only the first of several in which God's benefaction is quickly followed by human rebellion.

"The teaching that there is something fundamentally amiss with human beings is part and parcel of the Hebrew Bible," Clifford said. "When Paul makes the sin of Adam and Eve a universal statement—all human beings stand in need of God's grace—he is not inventing but furthering a teaching he has inherited."

Levenson agrees with Anderson that "the theology of sin and redemption underlying the Christian interpretation of Adam and Eve has deep roots in the Hebrew Bible itself." But he calls the Augustinian notion of original sin a major departure from the Hebrew Bible. "The idea of sin as a condition, a stain upon the soul, is generally foreign to the ancient rabbis," he says. "For them, sin is an act, a deed, although one prompted by the evil impulse with which we are all born and against which we all must struggle. But the newborn baby is innocent and immaculate; there is thus no rite in Judaism that washes away the baby's sin, like the Christian rite of baptism."

The strikingly brief story of Adam and Eve as told in Genesis 1-3 remains "one of the most misunderstood passages in the Bible," according to Levenson. "In terms of being a central, weight-bearing part of Jewish theology, Gen. 1-3 is relatively insignificant," he said. "The gift of the Torah and the Golden Calf are much more important."

Anderson emphasizes that God intended humans to be sexual beings, that God meant to give his law, the Torah, not to angels or other "eternally living" souls, but to full-bodied human beings. In the rabbinic tradition, and even in Augustine's writings, men and women are created to long for each other in sexual union; this is a divine gift. But Augustine connects the theme of sexual shame with Adam and Eve's willful disobedience of God's command. (Augustine locates their sin in their disordered sexual drive.) This helped steer the early Christian church toward sexual renunciation as a path to God.

Anderson seeks to explain religious prohibitions on sexuality not as a repudiation of sexuality per se but as growing out of a Jewish purity restriction on what humans can do where. Sex is good but should take place at home and at the right time; it is forbidden in sacred spaces. The early church fathers, Anderson writes, were aware that scripture does not stigmatize sexuality as evil; nor did they say that sexual continence confers sainthood. It was simply a matter of locating an action or behavior in an appropriate time and place.

“According to the Bible, we are of a composite nature,” he writes. “To the degree that we participate in the divine life, we must periodically renounce our sexual nature. But from this we cannot and must not conclude that this nature is bad in and of itself. As persons created with a nature distinct from God, we must embody sexual passions to the fullest. Emphasizing one side to the exclusion of the other is where error creeps in.”

Paula Fredricksen, Boston University historian of ancient Christianity, said Anderson is making an important point. “Paul’s approach to chastity within marriage has to do with the coming Parousia, the time frame within which, according to Jewish purity regulations, no sex is permitted,” she says.

Levenson finds problematic Anderson’s assertion that the story of Adam and Eve points unambiguously forward toward a joyful affirmation of human destiny. While Judaism has its own messianic and eschatological traditions, Levenson says, Anderson’s tendency to interpret the Genesis creation story as pointing forward to God’s revelation in Christ rubs a sore spot in the history of Jewish-Christian relations. Moreover, it passes too quickly over the intentions of the J or Yahwist source responsible for most of the narrative.

Historical critics “would urge us not to retroject prophetic and apocalyptic thinking into J,” said Levenson. Anderson gives short shrift to etiology, probably one of the main purposes of the Adam and Eve story. The story explains the persistent human longing for the past, the pain of childbirth and the necessity of physical labor.

Anderson replies that assessing J’s intent is difficult because we do not have the entire J narrative, the end of which may have been lopped off and lost. “The shapers of the present cannon preferred to leave the ‘end’ of the Torah open-ended,” he says, noting that the apparent ending, the entry into the promised land, happens outside the Torah, in the books of Joshua and Judges. A full reading of the story of

Adam and Eve, he contends, “requires the ability to see the story pointing toward the future, toward the story coming to its close.”

Early Jewish and Christian readers differed about the end to which the story points, he writes. “But they did not differ as to what the significance of that end was. For these readers, the story of Adam and Eve is not an account of sin alone but a drama about becoming a being who fully reflects God’s very own image. Genesis is not only about the origins of sin; it is also about the foundations of human perfection.”