

The First and The Last

Growing up in the Catholic church, I, like many others, was taught that the Bible had a fixed meaning, and a fixed goal: to hurry up and wait for the end times. With a grandmother who's met three popes and a mother who had to convince herself God existed every time we walked into church, my experience with religion is both vast and vastly limited. I learned in Catholic school that the Bible could answer all questions, so there was no point in asking them aloud. The Church told me, an energetic kid with a tendency to take things quite literally, to sit down, to be quiet, to worship, and sacrifice, and await the day that God would speak to me. I can't say my faith in God ever wavered, because I never had a strong sense of one to begin with. Partially because I didn't understand why certain texts served as literal records of time while others served as metaphorical moral lessons, but mainly because nobody ever truly explained to me why I should. What has consistently made sense to me, through most of the amount of my life that I remember, are things that can be logically explained or mathematically proven. Over the course of my life so far, I've developed two main fascinations: the vast everythingness of the universe, and the complexities of the human mind. There are two major crossroads where these concepts intersect. As they are the two primary methods of how the complexities of the human mind make sense of the everythingness of the universe, these two crossroads are science and spirituality. This paper will focus on developing an in-depth psychological perspective on the origin and aftermath of sin in the Bible. Utilizing a combination of the literal and anagogical senses along with psychological interpretations of several different narratives of the Bible, I will discuss questions surrounding the consequences of omnipotence, consistency of meaning, and why God needs to go to therapy.

Science and biblical teachings have been at war since the beginning. This war is one that has only grown more complex and corrupted over time. As time progressed, the field of science

expanded exponentially and the perceived meanings and translations of the bible had to expand along with it in order to survive. We now have far more advanced fields of study, some three thousand years later, that allow us to look past metaphorical meanings and comforting assumptions. We can rely, in ways like never before, on facts and scientific evidence. The Bible can and has served as a record of many real events throughout ancient history. However, it holds many notable contradictions, and many components for which external, subjective meaning must be applied to form a linear narrative, one example being the story of the original sin. The story of Adam and Eve is one of the foundational narratives of the Bible. A narrative that tells us God made man but, in the realm of developmental psychology, it doesn't tell us very much else. We don't know the state of Adam's brain when life was first breathed into his nostrils, we're not told how a grown body built from dust can open its eyes – mouth open, ready to speak. All we know is that God distinguished light from darkness and sun from moon, water from dry land and earth from sea; he brought life through vegetation and animals and finally, man to till the ground.¹ So, if we are to combine these two highly contradictory schools of thought, basing our understanding of human evolution and development on the biblical origin story of mankind, the timeline of the human race begins to shift and new meanings can be applied to contemporary psychological theory.

In the field of developmental psychology, it is well known and well studied that human beings are born with a nonexistent understanding of what the world is or how it works.² When an infant is born, every single piece of stimulation is being experienced for the first time. They don't know what the feeling of gas buildup is or what causes it. They don't know that the feeling is temporary, they don't even know that they are crying because they are in pain, all they "know"

¹ Gn 1:1-2

² Cynthia Lightfoot, Michael Cole, and Sheila Cole, *The Development of Children* (New York, NY: Macmillan Education, 2018).

is that something hurts, and even then they do not know what pain is. All of this is to say, we come into this world knowing nothing at all. Scholars have deduced, through significant statistical data, the specific ages humans are when certain milestones are typically reached. At roughly twenty five, the prefrontal cortex matures, marking the end of our brains' physical development. In adolescence we develop multidimensional thought. By around the age of seven most of us have learned to read and write. The majority of us say our first words and learn to walk around the end of our first year of life.³ And when we're newborns we open our eyes and we scream.

These understandings of how we grow and what changes as we do, are based on observations of external (height/weight, sex characteristics, proportionality) and internal (neuroanatomical, cognitive, psychosocial) development. As the human brain grows and develops, we gain the ability to see, process, and understand the stimulation we receive from the world around us. We consistently collect this information for the entirety of our lifetimes and as we continue to grow, we continue to learn how to apply said information to our own thoughts, beliefs, and behaviors. This concept is called social learning theory, and it proposes that everything we understand about the world and everything we understand about ourselves, is based on information learned from an outside source. Whether it be caregivers, peers, siblings, teachers, media, or lived experience, social learning theory can be boiled down to a nuanced version of an age-old concept: monkey see, monkey do. We receive information, we process that information, and we learn how to be people. It is difficult to apply much of contemporary psychological theory directly to Adam and Eve as psychology is dependent on cultural experience, and culture is highly dependent on era. However, we can observe patterns through

³ Cynthia Lightfoot, Michael Cole, and Sheila Cole, *The Development of Children* (New York, NY: Macmillan Education, 2018).

other Biblical tales, using broad strokes to apply general understandings of human growth and brain development to ancient peoples. Even with this adjusted psychological framework, it is hard to find Adam and Eve at fault to such a degree that the punishment they received was deserved. How can a thing that knows nothing of “good” make a good decision? How can a child decide the fate of all children to follow it? Jon Berquist investigated the story of Adam and Eve from the perspective of age and the different expectations children, adults, and centenarians can be held to.⁴ In a similar sense, I argue that nothing before the consumption of the forbidden fruit can be considered as anything but the beginning stages of infancy, when time is focused on receiving stimulation rather than processing it, because the foundational basis of developmental psychology is the acquisition of knowledge and the ability to put knowledge into practice.

If we follow this train of thought further down the timeline, it brings us to what I like to call “The Tragedy of Cain.”⁵ The Bible teaches us that Adam and Eve were succeeded by many children, the first of which were brothers Cain and Abel.⁶ Cain worked the fields and Abel herded the livestock and both brought offerings to God; Cain with fruit from the earth and Abel with meat from his cattle. We know that God looked fondly upon Abel’s offering and not on Cain’s but neither we nor Cain are told why.⁷ Emotion then builds in Cain; emotion that there are no words for yet. The bible states “Cain attacked his brother Abel and killed him.”⁸ But how? How did Cain attack him? With his farming tools? With his fists? Did he push Abel? Did Abel hit his head? There is no clarification in the bible; no fine print to settle misunderstandings. So how then is the claim that Cain didn’t mean to kill his brother any more valid than the claim that

⁴ Jon L. Berquist, “Childhood and Age in the Bible,” *Pastoral Psychology* 58, no. 5–6 (June 11, 2009): 521–30, <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11089-009-0219-5>.

⁵ Rein Nauta, “Cain and Abel: Violence, Shame and Jealousy,” *Pastoral Psychology* 58, no. 1 (August 8, 2008): 65–71, <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11089-008-0146-x>.

⁶ Gn 4:1-2

⁷ Gn 4:5

⁸ Gn 4:8

he did? How can a person who does not know of death have premeditation to kill? After Adam and Eve eat the forbidden fruit, God essentially stalks them through the paradise he built for them.⁹ He knows what they've done, he knows where they are, but still he searches for them, still he calls their names, still he instills fear and anticipation for his arrival, in all its omnipotence. After Cain kills Abel, God asks him why his head is downcast. He already knows the answer, he already knows what Cain has done, and yet he begs the question waiting for, almost wishing for, Cain to lie to him. And the cycle repeats itself, as it was designed to do.

With 64 books between Genesis and Revelation, the timeline of the Bible and the original family tree have been stretched and pulled in a desperate attempt at living to see the End Times. The cascade began with Adam and Eve's original sin, when the consumption of the forbidden fruit gave them the unforgivable godliness of knowledge. From this, God decided that his creation had eternally failed him and that all humans to follow would be born into sin and the consequences of that sin. While the knowledge itself was pure, it was punished with God's many curses upon the land and all who would inhabit it, and has since lost the separation between the two. This sin introduced hierarchies of goodness and greatness; goodness being determined by the extent of your worship, and greatness being determined by how many people kneel to you. From this point we can trace countless conflicts and massacres to the quest for greatness and all acts of Christian worship to the quest for goodness. In response to these hierarchies corruption was born and both the political landscape of the world and the expectations of worship changed shape. And with this began the End Times. When we ask some of the most basic of questions about the bible we can get some quite basic answers in return. If Adam and Eve eating from the tree of knowledge marked the official beginning of an unmediatable downward cascade toward the End Times, what can be called the true cause of the apocalypse? The answer – a

⁹ Gn 3:8-9

demonization of knowledge. The day an empire begins to fall is the day it loses its inherent uniqueness. It marks the beginning of a gradual conformity into the same composite image in which all empires that came and fell before it currently lay. Because of this, the sequence of events leading up to empirical downfall tend to progressively look more and more similar to one another. The most significant of these symptoms nearly always being the demonization or criminalization of knowledge.¹⁰¹¹ When God's empire was threatened by knowledge of good and evil being held by entities other than him, he reacted with the same rhetoric and ferocity as modern day tyrants.

Correspondence bias describes the tendency many of us have to overemphasize personal characteristics and ignore situational factors in judging others' behavior. This tendency can lead us to believe that others do bad things because they are simply bad people.¹² A description that can be seamlessly applied to the tale of Adam and Eve's fate. The Bible clearly states on several different occasions that man was made in God's image.¹³ When looking at the literature surrounding correspondence bias along with God's responses to misbehavior in the Bible, we can deduce that man's thought must then at least mirror that of God. A typical standpoint of scholarly biblical interpretation is that we can't assign "right" or "wrong" to the actions of people who lived and died thousands of years ago.¹⁴ This standpoint rings true in the study of human psychology as well, but when combining this idea with the concept of God being all that is, all

¹⁰ Brad Dress, "The Long History of Book Burning," The Hill, May 25, 2022, <https://thehill.com/blogs/blog-briefing-room/3499551-the-long-history-of-book-burning/>.

¹¹ I. Ismatu Gwendolyn, "You've Been Traumatized into Hating Reading (and It Makes You Easier to Oppress).," "you've been traumatized into hating reading (and it makes you easier to oppress).," February 15, 2024, <https://ismatu.substack.com/p/youve-been-traumatized-into-hating>.

¹² Irene Scopelliti et al., "Individual Differences in Correspondence Bias: Measurement, Consequences, and Correction of Biased Interpersonal Attributions," *Management Science* 64, no. 4 (April 2018): 1879–1910, <https://doi.org/10.1287/mnsc.2016.2668>.

¹³ Gn 1:27

¹⁴ Paul E. Corcoran, pg. 160, Chapter 12, "The Sense of Time," in *Awaiting Apocalypse* (New York, NY: St. Martin's Press, 2000).

that was, and all that will be, it adds a new variable, or rather reorganizes existing ones. With this we have somewhat of a formula of what man is to God and God to man, and with it, we can apply, albeit very roughly, contemporary psychological theory to God, as he exists outside of time and therefore outside of era. A man and a woman eating a fruit they were told not to eat is all it took for God to decide that all of humanity was sinful and eternally indebted to him. He blamed this consumption not on himself for his instructions lacking clarity, but instead on the character of Eve and Adam and the serpent being inherently bad and deserving of eternal damnation.

In her 2014 TED talk, developmental psychologist, Carol Dweck, introduced her theory of entity vs. incremental ability, explaining how a person's mindset, from childhood through adulthood, influences their long-term success and learning.¹⁵ The theory is based on copious amounts of research and of how individuals' self-perception of their capabilities can either foster or inhibit the cultivation of a growth mindset throughout their lives. According to Dweck, there exist two distinctive mindsets: those with a fixed mindset see their ability as predetermined and immutable, believing that they are either naturally gifted or not. On the other hand, those with a growth mindset believe in “the power of ‘yet’,” embracing the notion that new skills can be learned and enhanced, viewing challenges as opportunities for growth. These mindsets are mainly focused on the perception of one’s own self but they can also be applied to concepts like correspondence bias. While Jesus Christ held many views that coincide with this concept; that humans could improve and learn to live differently, the God of the Book of Genesis wholly disagrees. If the result of the first ever transgression made against God was the eternal curse of an entire species, it is fair to say that God not only falls victim to correspondence bias, but also

¹⁵ 1. Carol Dweck, “The Power of Believing That You Can Improve,” Carol Dweck: The power of believing that you can improve | TED Talk, 2014, https://www.ted.com/talks/carol_dweck_the_power_of_believing_that_you_can_improve.

that he exists in a completely fixed mindset. When Adam told God that Eve had given him the fruit to eat, God said to Eve “What is this that thou hast done?” It is strange to think that the rearrangement of one sentence could have single handedly altered the thousands of pages of biblical text that followed it. If only God had utilized a growth mindset and corrected his correspondence bias, if only he had instead asked Eve “Why hast thou done this?,” the entire basis of the Christian religion, that we are born into sin and must spend our lives atoning for it, would have unraveled. If we are to approach these ideas of the Bible from a literal interpretation of it, that means that humanity had the chance to have an open, communicative relationship with God, and his inability to accept that the beings he created could hold will of their own, ripped that possibility away. The apocalypse and the new world that is to follow it, can be seen as a subjective representation of many different things. The biblical inference is that it represents the final freedom from oppression. I argue that not only can it be seen as freedom but also as humanity’s final obedience and God’s final forgiveness. It serves as the day that humanity will finally outlive the sins of its forebears and sacrifice knowledge of the future for God’s divine vision of it. Depicting the somewhat pitiful formation of a long awaited healthy attachment based relationship to the Father, God.

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