



Roy Clouser

Three Theological Arguments in Support of Carol Hill's Reading of the Historicity of Genesis and Original Sin

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This article offers three theological buttresses for the immediately preceding article by Carol Hill. Information about and from Genesis and Romans is presented that I think will be new to most readers. Several of the most important points are drawn from Jewish sources which I think Catholic and Protestant commentators have overlooked to their detriment. Ignoring these sources has produced needless, grievous troubles for scripture interpretation – especially for Genesis.

Keywords: *nephesh*, *ruach*, *neshamah*, documentary hypothesis, canonical reading of the Old Testament

The three buttresses constructed here will be textual and/or theological considerations in support of the preceding article by Carol Hill. Since she is confining herself to scientific and anthropological information, these buttresses are intended to show that her data are not in conflict with the text of Genesis or any other biblical source, or with any doctrine that has a biblical basis. They are, however, in contradiction with a number of traditional ideas about original sin and related arguments which are actually not biblical – Augustine's in particular.

Although I have said that the scriptures are not in conflict with the scientific data Hill presents, the point of my support will not be concordist. Rather, the support I offer will show that the text of Genesis has little, if anything, to do with the scientific data explained by Hill. In short, while Genesis and science do not need to be reconciled, Augustine and science cannot be.

The interpretation I take of early Genesis, and which forms the basis for what I say

here about its relation to scientific data, is based on an ancient Jewish interpretation of Genesis 1 and 2 as set out in a marvelous little book titled *The Lonely Man of Faith*, by Joseph Soloveitchik,¹ the leading Orthodox Jewish thinker of the twentieth century in North America. That discovery leads me to the following observation.

I find it inexcusable that Christian interpreters of Genesis have so thoroughly ignored Jewish commentators – especially the commentary of Orthodox Jews. After all, we share with them not only the worship of the one true God, but also a high regard for the written record of his dealings with humans. There is a long history of Christians slighting Jewish thought, and I think Christian interpretation has suffered because of it. Here's one quick example. I have known many Christians – myself included – who were troubled by the ages ascribed in Genesis to the outstanding figures in the early

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history of the covenant: Adam is 600, Methuselah is 969, and so on. These ages seemed to support the fundamentalist claim that the laws of nature were somehow radically different prior to the Fall.

I do not know exactly when it was first discovered that people of importance in the ancient Near East were ascribed an age that was symbolic of their character or accomplishments instead of their chronological age, but there is an article on that fact in the *Jewish Encyclopedia* for 1903.² Just think how many Christians could have been helped for over a century by knowing that! So when I began work on Genesis for a new book some years ago, I said to myself, "Well, let's see what the rabbis have said about it—they've had 1,000 years more than we've had to think about this stuff." That has led to a number of what I see as crucial insights into the story of Adam and Eve and into the Noah story, some of which appear in the three buttresses that follow.

Buttress 1:

Old Testament Support for the Claim That Adam and Eve Were Not the First Humans

Not only does the text of Genesis avoid saying that Adam and Eve were the first humans, it also relates several details that are flatly inconsistent with the claim that they are the parents of the entire human race. One of them is that Cain, after being banished for murdering his brother, complains that "everyone who finds me will [try to] kill me" (Gen. 4:14). When God promises him protection, Cain moves to the land of Nod, marries, and has a family, and, later, he founds a city. All these items plainly presuppose the existence of other humans.

If the writers and/or editors of this story had believed that Adam, Eve, Cain, and Abel were the only four humans on the planet, they could not have dropped these details of Cain's story on their readers without explanation. The very fact that they saw no need for explaining such clear references to other people is evidence that they did not think that Adam and Eve's family were the only folk on Earth. So why did Saint Augustine persist in holding that Adam and Eve were the first humans ever?

Part of the answer to this is both shocking and dismaying. Augustine was convinced that all humans inherited their sinful nature from Adam because *the Latin text of Romans 5:12 that he used was faulty!* It read: "... death spread to all men *in whom* (Adam) all sinned." But the Greek actually says, "... death passed upon all men *because* all sinned."³ Therefore, he accepted the doctrine that we are all guilty for what Adam did, or as the *McGuffey Reader* famously put it, "In Adam's Fall, we sinned all." For this to be true, Adam would have to be the ancestor of all humans. Thus, both Roman Catholic and many Protestant churches have followed Augustine in affirming the doctrine that all humans are descendants of Adam and are born with the guilt of Adam's sin staining their souls (original sin).

Augustine tells us in his autobiography that he tried to learn Greek but could never get the hang of it. Therefore, it is safe to surmise that he did not read that text in Greek. For that reason, the fault lies with the translator, not Augustine. Nevertheless, there was a good reason for him to be at least suspicious of what his Latin translation told him: namely, the fact that scripture says, in more than one place, that God never holds anyone responsible for the misdeeds of another person. The entire eighteenth chapter of Ezekiel is an example. Here are two short excerpts:

What do you mean by using this proverb concerning the land of Israel, saying, "The fathers have eaten sour grapes, but the children's teeth are set on edge"? As I live, declares the Lord, you are surely not going to use this proverb in Israel any more ... (vv. 2-3)

The person who sins will die. The son will not bear the punishment for the Father's iniquity, nor will the father bear the punishment for the son's iniquity; the righteousness of the righteous will be upon himself, and the wickedness of the wicked will be upon himself. (v. 20)

Jeremiah 31:29 makes the same point in virtually the same words.

No doubt Augustine thought his view was confirmed by the story of Noah's flood. But that, too, suffered from his inability to check his translation against the original language (he never learned Hebrew either).

The key to the Noah story is actually in Genesis 2:7. Here is how the KJV translates it:

And the Lord God formed man of the dust of the ground, and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life; and man became a living soul.

There are several important things about this text that are not easily apparent. The first is its location in the text. It follows a formula in verse 4 that begins: "These are the generations of the heavens and the earth ..." This formula occurs ten times in Genesis, and every other time it introduces a new story. So, there is no reason to think that it does not do so in Genesis 2:4. For that reason alone, we should at least suspect that verse 7 is not going to be another creation story. The formula also shows that the chapter break should have been after verse 3.⁴

The second is the term used for what God is said to breathe into Adam. If this were a second creation story, we would expect to be told that what God breathed into Adam was his soul (*nephesh*) or spirit (*ruach*). But instead the term is *neshamah*, a term used for God's inspiring of prophets. This point is what the Jewish interpretation I referred to earlier got exactly right, namely, that in Genesis 2:7, God is not imparting to Adam the breath of biological metabolism but the gift of God's own Spirit. So, the new story introduced by the formula in verse 4 ("These are the generations of ...") is not a repeat of creation, but is instead the introduction of the central theme, not only of Genesis but of all the rest of the Pentateuch (and the entire Bible, for that matter), namely, redemption. *God is here depicted as imparting his Spirit to Adam and redeeming him from death.* That is why the contrast drawn in Genesis 2:7 is important. The contrast is between Adam's original nature—where "dust of the ground" signifies mortality⁵—and what God now wants for his mortal creature, namely, everlasting life as a gift of redemption.

So, how does seeing that Genesis 2 is not a repeat account of creation, but an account of the beginning of redemption, help with understanding the Noah story? It is crucial to the Noah story because that story specifies that the objects of God's wrath are all those "in whom is *neshamah*"! So, the people being punished for their wickedness are not every

human on Earth other than Noah and his family, but only those who knew of God's grace, had been given God's covenant and Spirit, but then—owing to intermarriage with unbelievers (Gen. 6:1–4)—turned away from the truth that had been revealed to them, and became "exceedingly wicked."

Conclusion

Genesis not only fails to say that Adam and Eve were the first humans, but it also asserts a number of things that are inconsistent with that idea. In addition, the right understanding of Genesis 2:7 yields guidance for how to read the Noah story, confirming the view that the flood was local because it targeted only covenant people who had become apostate.

Buttress 2:

New Testament Support for Adam and Eve Not Being the First Humans, and for Their Having Been Created Neither Morally Perfect nor Immortal

In addition to the evidence from the Old Testament cited in Buttress 1, there is a New Testament basis for believing that Adam and Eve were not the first humans on Earth but, rather, the first humans in the history of redemption. That basis is in the crucial passage in Romans 5, in which Saint Paul compares Adam's covenantal failure with Christ's covenantal success:

Therefore, just as through one man sin entered the world and death through sin, and so death passed to all men because all sinned ... (Rom. 5:12)

At that point, Paul interrupts himself with a startling aside:

... for before the Law *sin was in the world* but was not imputed, for sin is not imputed when there is no Law ... (Rom. 5:12, 13, emphasis mine)

The first thing that we might suppose Paul to be referring to by "law" would be the law as contained in the Ten Commandments—the Torah. After all, Paul had been an orthodox rabbi who knew the Torah inside and out. But what he says here makes no sense whatsoever if he was referring to the Law of Moses. Was there really no sin held against anyone

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prior to Moses receiving the Torah? Had not Adam's sin and Cain's sin been imputed to them? Clearly, the answer is yes. Recall, too, that the great flood that came upon Noah's contemporaries was punishment for sin that was held against them, just as the worship of false gods in Egypt was held against the Egyptians and punished by the ten plagues, each of which was aimed at humiliating an Egyptian pseudo-god. And the punishment for the Egyptian resistance to that lesson was the death of the firstborn in every household. Plainly, all of this was prior to the Law given on Mount Sinai.

So, what can Paul be referring to when he implies that there was a time when sin had already been "in the world" before any law had been given by God? Since Adam's sin was imputed to him, Paul can be referring only to the law given to Adam. Paul cannot possibly mean anything other than the very first commands given to humans, which were the mandates not to eat of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, and to keep the garden and care for it (and perhaps other commandments not recorded in Genesis⁶). But, in that case, he is clearly implying that there existed humans other than Adam: humans who had lived before or were contemporary with Adam, but whose sin was not held against them because God had not yet made himself known, nor had yet revealed any law as part of a redemptive relationship with himself.⁷ It is significant in this connection that Paul, in his preaching as recorded in Acts, twice refers to a time when God did not hold people responsible for their sin (Acts 14:16; 17:30).

Moreover, it seems clear that, in Romans 5, Paul intends to assert a strict parallel between sin and death. From what we learned in Genesis 2:7, we now know that Paul, in Romans 5:12, is telling us that with Adam's disobedience sin *re-entered* the world—this time in violation of God's law. It therefore follows that Paul means to convey that death is also *re-entering* the world. In context, this makes perfect sense, because God had made clear that Adam and Eve were given the gift of God's Spirit conditionally. They were on probation because God had warned them that the day they ate the forbidden fruit, they would be returned to mortality.⁸

Interestingly, the Eastern Church has always refused to call Adam's fall from grace the "original" sin. They speak instead of his disobedience as the "Ancestral Sin," the trespass that broke faith with God's gracious offer of redemption to the entire human race through Adam.⁹ It was the first sin against God's first offer of grace, but it was not the origin of sin altogether.

One final point here about Augustine's interpretation. Because of his admiration for Plato, he took God's having pronounced all of creation "good" as meaning good in a platonic sense, rather than in the Jewish sense. For Plato, "good" meant a perfection: the maximal instance of a "great-making" property.¹⁰ That is also how Augustine interpreted "good" as it applied to the first humans, leading him to insist that they were, originally, religiously and morally virtuous.¹¹ The Jewish use of "perfection," by contrast, always meant "complete." For example, when Jesus told his disciples to be "perfect as your Father in heaven is perfect" (Matt. 5:48), he was not telling them to be God—as would be meant if "perfect" were intended in Plato's sense. Rather, on the Jewish meaning of "perfect," Jesus would have meant that they should be as completely faithful to their end of the covenant as their heavenly Father is to his end of it.

This means that Augustine's assumption—that the creation being pronounced "good" requires that Adam and Eve were originally without sin—falls flat. Everything was good in the sense that it completed God's plan; the creation was exactly as God wished it to be. This understanding is supported by the way in which the Jewish translation of Genesis into Greek (the LXX) renders the Hebrew word "*tov*" (good). It is not translated by "*agathos*" (virtuous) but by "*kalos*," the term used to wish someone a good day. Moreover, this interpretation is explicitly endorsed by the Talmud, in which Adam is said to have been created with evil intent as well as good intent—a view that makes sense of how he could fall from grace.¹²

Finally, Genesis does not say that Adam and Eve were created with immortal souls. That idea is pure

Plato and purely the result of Augustine's reading Plato into Genesis.¹³ What the text of Genesis does say is that humans were originally created "of the dust of the ground," an expression that always connotes mortality (for example, Job 14:19, 17:16; Pss. 22:15, 30:9, 103:14; Eccles. 3:20, 12:7; Isa. 26:19, and Dan. 12:2). The fact that humans were created mortal but are offered everlasting life as a covenantal gift from God was recognized by thinkers before Augustine, such as Theophilus of Antioch (d. 185).¹⁴ After Augustine, this idea is generally replaced by the platonic idea of an immortal soul because of Augustine's great influence.

Given the corrective points made so far, the all-important text of Genesis 2:7 would be understood in this way:

And the Lord God [who had already] formed the man mortal, now breathed into his face [God's own] life-giving Spirit, and the man became a living [redeemed-from-death] soul.

This interpretation is strikingly supported by the way Jesus imparted the gift of the Holy Spirit to his disciples. In John 20:22, we find him deliberately re-enacting Genesis 2:7:

And when he had said this, he breathed on them and said, "Receive the Holy Spirit."

Conclusion

Although God had given Adam his spirit and eternal life, those gifts were lost through disobedience. So when Paul says that "death reigned from Adam to Moses," he is referring to the fact that not only Adam but also every other covenant recipient after him failed to fulfill the covenant requirements so that death continued unabated. All that changed with Christ, the righteous Israelite and covenant hero, who defeated Satan's temptation, fulfilled every covenant requirement, died in place of sinners, and has redeemed all creation.

Buttress 3:

Support for Taking Old Testament Covenant Celebrities as Real People

The extensive list of covenant celebrities recorded in Genesis 10-12 is no doubt modeled on the Sumerian king lists, and is presented with a view to memorial-

izing heroes of the covenant who lived faithful lives that perpetuated belief in the true God and passed it on to succeeding generations. The evident detail and care that went into preserving those lists does not give the impression that the people named in them were fictional characters.¹⁵

But there is a broader issue at stake here, one that has to do with the adoption of an interpretive slant. I will never forget the first day of my graduate course in Old Testament (OT) with Ernest Wright.¹⁶ He opened with the observation that how a person interprets specific texts or stories in scripture is largely influenced by the view that person takes of the Bible as a whole. He then added that, in his view, the proper way to characterize the Bible as a whole is as a record of the *covenants* of God. To that I would add that the covenant record is to be read "canonically." That is the term used by Brevard Childs in his *Introduction to the Old Testament as Scripture*.¹⁷ He described the interpretive slant in this way:

The reason for insisting on the final form of scripture lies in the peculiar relationship between text and people of God which is constitutive of the canon. The shape of the biblical text reflects a history of encounter between God and Israel ... the significance of the final form of the biblical text is that it alone bears witness to the full history of revelation ... (pp. 75-76)

By shaping Israel's traditions into the form of a normative scripture the biblical idiom no longer functions for the community of faith as a free-floating metaphor, but as the divine imperative and promise to a historically conditioned people of God whose legacy the Christian Church confesses to share. (p. 77)

It is this attitude, more than individual arguments and pieces of evidence, that leads me to accept the actors named in the biblical drama as real. Or, to put it more strictly, it leads me to accept their reality as the default position until and unless there are powerful reasons to the contrary. It is not *impossible* that a character who appears in a biblical story is the subject of a parable rather than a history. Serious scholars take Jesus's story about the rich man and the beggar in Luke 16 both ways, for example. But there are good reasons for thinking that that story is a parable, even if the reasons are not conclusive.

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I say this not because there are no “pieces of evidence” for the reality of OT personages. Often there are.¹⁸ And some of these individual evidences consist of the way in which New Testament writers assert, or take for granted, the reality of an OT character. That is stronger evidence, so far as I am concerned, than the fact that a character is regarded as suspect because his or her story is traced to a strand of documents not favored by some particular version of the documentarian hypothesis.¹⁹

The investigation of the source documents that contributed to the final form of scripture is an interesting project for its own sake, and it has, at times, led to a better understanding of the culture and circumstances of the time of their writing. This, in turn, has led to a clearer meaning of some difficult biblical texts. But from the canonical point of view, no discovery about the sources that contributed to the final text of scripture can possibly tell us anything that would justify us in accepting only one particular strand of the canon as inspired and discarding the rest. As the above quote from Childs makes clear, the compiling and editing of the scriptures was equally as inspired as the writing of the source materials—warts and all.²⁰

From a broader theological perspective, however, I have another—an even more serious—reservation about that sort of use of the documentary approach. The assumption that the Bible we have is a conglomeration of texts, only one of which is inspired by God, is at odds with God's very purpose in revealing himself. So, in addition to Childs's reasons quoted above, I want to add the objection that accepting such a hypothesis would mean that God has not providentially overseen the collecting, editing, and transmission of a record of his interactions with his people so as to preserve it *in a form they can all access*.

On the assumption that only one strand of documents combined in scripture is truly the Word of God, then that Word is assumed to be something that is not open to all God's people as their guide for living in proper relation to him. Instead, its “discovery” is made to be a highly scholarly project carried on by specially trained experts who, with great difficulty

and residual uncertainty, must deduce the message of divine grace for the rest of the world.

Against that, I contend that, since the Bible we have is the Word that God's providence has passed on to us, we should honor it as exactly that. †

Notes

¹Joseph B. Soloveitchik, *The Lonely Man of Faith* (New York: Doubleday, 1992).

²Emil G. Hirsch et al., “Chronology,” in *The Jewish Encyclopedia*, ed. Isidore Singer and Cyrus Adler (New York: Funk and Wagnalls, 1903), 64–75, <https://www.jewishencyclopedia.com/articles/4373>.

³See Paul Blower's entry “Original Sin” in the *Encyclopedia of Early Christianity*, 2nd edition, ed. Everett Ferguson (New York: Garland Publications, 1997), 839–40. Because of this translation error, Augustine endorsed the idea that Adam and Eve were the ancestors of all humans. See St. Augustine, *City of God*, trans. Henry Bettenson (New York: Penguin Classics, 2004), 14.1.

⁴This is also confirmed by the way the Jewish evening home liturgy ends the reading at Rom. 2:3 and does not include v. 4. See Philip Birnbaum, ed., *Daily Prayer Book: Ha-Siddur Ha-Shalem* (New York: Hebrew Publishing, 1949), 273. The same chapter break occurs in the text as chanted in the annual and triannual cycles of the recitation of the Torah. See J. H. Hertz, ed., *The Pentateuch and Haftorahs*, 2nd ed. (London, UK: Soncino Press, 1969), 6.

⁵For example, Job 14:19, 17:16; Pss. 22:15 and 29, 30:9, 40:25, 103:14, 104:29; Eccles. 3:20, 12:7; Isa. 26:19; and Dan.12:2.

⁶For example, although a divine command to bring offerings to God is not recorded in the Adam and Eve story, it seems there must have been such a command, since both Cain and Abel are described as doing it in Genesis 4.

⁷If you are wondering what Augustine did with this clear reference to humans before Adam, the answer is that he took it as a reference to angels! I find that proposal wildly implausible. It requires (1) that angels believed in false gods while being in God's presence, (2) that their belief in other gods was not imputed to them until God gave them a law, and (3) that they now remain subject to death because of Adam's probationary failure—all patent absurdities. Other Christian commentators seem to be satisfied to ride the coattails of Augustine's authority, even such luminaries as Martin Luther and Matthew Henry. By contrast, a long-standing Jewish tradition takes Adam and Eve as the first people in the history of redemption, rather than the first humans. See Soloveitchik, *The Lonely Man of Faith*, 22.

⁸There is a strong but unspecified implication in Genesis that had Adam and Eve been faithful to God's law for them, then their permanent redemption would have been somehow passed to all humans. This would not, however, require all people to descend biologically from Adam any more than all people must descend from Christ in order to benefit from his redemption of the world.

⁹See John S. Romanides, *The Ancestral Sin* (Ridgewood, NJ: Zephyr Publishing, 1998).

¹⁰The expression “great-making property” was coined by Alvin Plantinga to connote a property that makes its

possessor better to have it than not. Some examples are maximal goodness, maximal justice, maximal honesty, maximal knowledge, and maximal power. In theologies accepting this idea, God is then defined as the one who has all the perfections and only perfections. See Plantinga, *God, Freedom, and Evil* (New York: Harper & Row, 1974), 98.

¹¹Augustine, *City of God*, 13.14; and 14.10, 11, 12.

¹²Soloveitchik cites *Berakot*, 61a and *Ketuvot*, 8a on this point. Soloveitchik, *The Lonely Man of Faith*, 10–11.

¹³Augustine, *City of God*, 13.10

¹⁴“Ad Autolychum” in *The Ante-Nicene Fathers*, vol. 2, ed. A. Roberts and J. Donaldson (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1989), 91. Interestingly, Augustine himself held the biblical view early on, only to give it up later. In *On the Literal Meaning of Genesis*, he says:

This immortality was given him (Adam) from the tree of life, not from his nature ... He was mortal, therefore, by the constitution of his natural body, and was immortal by the gift of his creator. (6.25)

But in his work *Soliloquia*, 2.24, he gives a proof of the immortality of the soul, even presenting it as an alternative to Plato’s proof in *Phaedo*, 102d–109c, and he affirms it also in *City of God*, 13.1. Apparently he never changed his mind as the proof reappears again (reworked) in *De Trinitate*, 13.12.

¹⁵The great ages ascribed to them do not warrant dismissing them as fictive persons. Recall the point made earlier that it was customary at that time to ascribe ages to important people that were symbolic of their character or achievements rather than reports of their real chronological age. For example, the Sumerian king list ascribes to King Eridu Alulim a reign of 28,800 years! See Hill, “Making Sense of the Numbers of Genesis.”

¹⁶George Ernest Wright was a distinguished archeologist and Professor of Old Testament at Harvard from 1958–1974.

¹⁷Brevard S. Childs, *Introduction to the Old Testament as Scripture* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2011).

¹⁸For example, the discovery that the covenant with Moses is in the form of a Suzerainty Treaty lent support to the dating of the account of the exodus and the subsequent conquest of Palestine, since Suzerainty treaties were in vogue only between 2000 and 1000 BCE. See George E. Mendenhall, *Law and Covenant in Israel and the Ancient Near East* (Pittsburgh, PA: Biblical Colloquium, 1955); and Meredith G. Kline, *Treaty of the Great King: The Covenant Structure of Deuteronomy: Studies and Commentary* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1963).

¹⁹The documentary hypothesis of the Pentateuch was originated in the nineteenth century by Karl Heinrich Graf and Julius Wellhausen. It distinguishes sources mainly by the term they use for God (J, E, D, P). In this way it tries to discover the particular themes and interpretive slant of each source prior to its being compiled by later editors into the scriptures we now have.

²⁰C.S. Lewis has given an excellent statement of what I mean by “warts and all”:

The scriptures proceed not by conversion of God’s word into literature but by the taking up of a literature to be the vehicle of God’s word ... [scripture] consists of the same sort of material as any other literature ... but all taken into the service of God ... On [scripture] I suppose a Divine pressure ... [nevertheless] the human

qualities of the raw materials show through. Naivety, error, contradiction, even (as in the cursing psalms) wickedness are not removed. The total result is not “the word of God” in the sense that every passage, in itself, gives impeccable science or history. It carries the word of God. (C. S. Lewis, *Reflections on the Psalms* [New York: Harcourt, Brace, and Co., 1958], 111–12, 116)

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