

History of the Doctrine of Original Sin

From C. G. Bretschneider's Manual of Dogmatic History
TRANSLATED FROM THE GERMAN, BY PROF. HENRY COWLES, Feb. 1848

SINCE Gen. 3: contains nothing respecting the origin of entailed sin, it should not surprise us that no part of the Old Testament makes any use of this chapter, and that it speaks only in general of the sinfulness of man without any particular explanations of the subject.

Moreover death is presented throughout the Old Testament as occurring in the course of nature and not as a consequence of Adam's sin. First during the exile the Jews began to reflect upon the origin of moral evil, and to find historically the source of sin and death in Gen. 3. Probably their reflections on this subject were prompted by the teachings of Zoroaster.*

* [The doctrine of Zoroaster concerning the fall, bears some resemblance to the Mosaic account, yet differs from it very widely. According to Zoroaster, heaven was pledged to the first human pair on condition that they persevered in virtue, and would not worship any demons. At first, they were virtuous but Ahriman (Satan,) caused a demon to suggest to them evil thoughts, as e. g. whether himself was not the Creator of the world. Through their belief of this lie, the first pair became like Ahriman, wicked and wretched. They went out to hunt and found a white goat whose milk they ate and found it very stimulating, but it was a poison to their bodies. The demon now gave them fruits which they ate and thereby lost a hundred fold of blessings and reduced themselves to a single one.

Immortality, Zoroaster does not ascribe to the first pair. Of original sin and its punishment, death, he says nothing.

[Note.—Zoroaster, the celebrated reformer of the doctrines and worship of the Magi, flourished among the Medes probably from B. C. 650 to 600. His writings are comprised in the Zendavesta.—Tr.]]

Yet were their opinions not more remarkable for being few, than for being harmonious. Sirach does not indeed deny the sinfulness of men, (chap. 8: 5,) yet he knows nothing of original sin, but believes that men are not born morally ruined, (chap. 10: 18, 19, & 51: 13) and holds to free will, (chap. 15: 14—17.) The fall he passes over, (chap. 18: 1,) in total silence, and regards death, (chap. 17: 1,2,) as something original and natural.

On the other hand there appears in his book another view of this subject according to which the beginning of sin and of death are derived from Eve;* a proof that opinions on this point among the Jews were various. Proof of this may be seen also in the manner in which Philo and Josephus** understood the Mosaic passages.

* [Chap. '25: 24. " From the woman is the beginning of sin, and through her (or *it*,) we all die." These words obviously look towards Gen. 3, but it remains uncertain in what way Sirach derived sin from Eve's transgression, and whether the original Greek words, translated, *through her*, or *through it*, refer to "*Eve*," or to '*Sin*." The former is more probable.

** Josephus knows nothing of original sin, but on the contrary affirms that the posterity of Seth were in the highest degree virtuous and wise *by nature*. He derives from the fall not even one evil affecting the whole race, and attributes to man before the fall only this, that God had pledged to him a happy and *long* life, wholly free from evil.]

The author of the Book of Wisdom also recognizes no inherited sinfulness, originating from the sin of Adam. He does indeed mention the fall of Adam, chap. 10: 1, and affirms, chap. 2: 23. ff, that death originated through envy of the devil; but he understands by the term *death*, not the death of the body, but the eternal death of the soul.

We have moreover no ground to regard the doctrine of the imputation of Adam's sin as the common doctrine of the Jews before the time of Christ, and therefore to explain Rom. 5: 12. ff, accordingly; for although this doctrine may be found at an older period in the writings of some of the Rabbis, yet it does not follow with certainty that Paul already had it***

*** [Wetstein in his commentary on Rom. 5: 12. ff, has quoted a multitude of Rabbinic passages to show that all men have sinned in Adam and therefore must die; but these passages do not prove all they are adduced to prove, and are for the most part too recent to be used in explaining Rom. 5. 12. ff. To prove this to be the sense of the passage it must be shown that the term "sin," as used by Paul denotes universal sin-guiltiness, which sense of the term, however, is forbidden by the expressions, sin entered the world," " sin is not imputed," "not sinned after the similitude of Adam's transgression," and " where sin hath abounded," &c.]

On this point also, opinions in the most ancient Christian Church were not very harmonious or settled, and yet some points were held by the church with sufficient firmness. Origen says expressly that the church taught that every human soul has free-will so as to choose either good or evil, but that the church doctrine did not determine whether the soul is propagated by the course of natural generation, or what its mode of coming into existence may be. This view is confirmed by the writings of the oldest Christian teachers, which contain nothing about Augustine's original sin and its propagation. Hence John Damascenus (died A. D. 760) does not reckon this among the doctrines held by the Church.

With the same harmony of sentiment the oldest church fathers ascribe to man freedom of will in the exercise of which he can choose either good or evil; and it should be especially noted that they ascribe this to him, not as he may perhaps have been before the fall, but as he is still,* and that they find herein the ground of the occurrence of sin, inasmuch as

they distinctly notice the fact that God is hereby vindicated from all blame in view of the occurrence of sin in the race.

* [The passages on this point are superfluously abundant. See Recognitions of Clement of Rome, 111. 23, V. 8, IX. 30. " For no other reason does God punish the sinner either in the present or future world, except because He knows that the sinner was able to conquer but neglected to gain the victory."

Justin Martyr in his Apology to the Roman Senate, page 71, represents it as impious to deny the freedom of the will. He recognizes the fact that without freedom there could be no retribution, in a passage where he says— "If the human race have not the power by free choice to fly from the base and to choose for themselves the noble and the good, then are they guiltless of their own deeds however done. But that they can of free choice either walk uprightly or barely wrong, we show thus."

Origen, in a passage in his commentary on Romans chap. 3, in which he applies the term "law" used by Paul, to the moral law of the reason, and illustrates the waking up of the consciousness of law in developed minds, says, "Now they are under the law who are passing the period of life in which they already have the power of discerning moral good and evil. Surely God has given to man all those sensibilities and powers of voluntary action, which are requisite in order to strive successfully for virtue, and has moreover added the faculty of reason, whereby he may know what he ought to do and what avoid. These qualities, accordingly, God is found to have given in common to all men. But if man, having received these endowments, shall neglect to walk in the way of virtue—man to whom nothing has been wanting from God—then will he be found to be wanting himself in the use of those faculties which have been given him by God."]

Hence they know absolutely nothing of the dogma that man is born contaminated with a deadly original sin and is obnoxious to damnation by reason of his very nature; but on the contrary they represent new-born infants as pure, guiltless, and pleasing to God.**

** [Shepherd of Hermas, Book 2d, command 2; "Have simplicity of heart and thou shalt be innocent; and be as the infant who knows nothing of that malice, which destroys human happiness."

The same author, Book 2, similitude 29, in a passage which describes the mountain of the blest, says—"The twelfth mountain which gleams in brightness is the abode of those who have believed as pure infants do, whose sensibility no sin has ever reached, nor do they know what sin is, but they have always continued in purity. Men of such a character without any doubt shall dwell in the kingdom of God. For all infants are held in honor before the Lord and hold the first rank."

In respect to the fall of Adam, all the early fathers did not indeed hold precisely the same views, yet they all differed widely from the later church writers. Looking to the freedom of the will for the intrinsic ground of the rise of sin, they regarded the agency of demons as pre-eminently its extrinsic occasion and exciting cause. In the Recognitions of

Clement (1: 29,) the dominion of sin over the race is by no means derived from Adam, but from the fact that in the eighth generation after Adam, the righteous and men leading a life of angels, enticed by the beauty of the women, had indulged in illegal and promiscuous intercourse, whence human passions became so impetuous as to draw all the race thence forward into sin. This first sinning generation which begat the giants, was wholly swept off by the flood.

The golden age, moreover, was not located in Paradise, but comprised all the first eight generations; for then, even wild beasts obeyed man, and old age did not come on before the thousandth year of life. This long period of enjoyment and repose seduced men to forget God as the great Giver of good, and to withhold from him all further reverence, and consequently they became fearfully depraved. Hence God suffered physical evil to attach itself then to human nature, for the purpose of bringing man back again to himself.

Just so little also do the Homilies of Clement know (see Homilies 3: 22) of the fall in consequence of eating of the tree of knowledge. On the contrary, they, like "The Recognitions," derive sin from that ingratitude which originated during the golden age, and from the influence of angels and demons.

[See Athenagoras on the resurrection of the dead, pg. 55.

Clement of Alexandria, [Pedagogue I. 2,] affirms that all men have the endowment of reason (logos) which would lead them to truth and goodness. As well among Christians as among the heathen, the wise who follow the light of reason do not sin intentionally, and if sin does occur, it quickly passes over. All men are, by reason of the circumstances of their rational nature, the beloved of God. Clement does indeed say (Pedagogue III. 12,) "Only the Logos himself is sinless, for to sin is inborn and common to all; but after sinning to recoil and return appertains not to every common man but to the good alone;" yet he expresses in this passage only what occurs customarily, not what must occur of necessity, and he ascribes to every man the ability to be a *good* man. Hence also his affirmation that the heathen become blessed through philosophy—the Christian, through faith in Christ.

See also Origen's homily on Jer. 14, 10, "Every man is endowed with reason; but though all men receive the gift alike, yet in the case of some its moral power grows stronger, but in the case of others it dies away."]

Justin Martyr also derives the origin of sin from the passions of men together with the influence of demons, He does indeed in several passages mention the transgression of Adam, but does not suppose that either moral ruin or guilt passes over from that transgression to subsequent generations. On the contrary he holds that each man brings eternal death on himself whenever he sins as Adam sinned. With him also idolatry is the greatest of sins.

Theophilus teaches that man was not yet perfect in Paradise, but must first become so, and thus be transformed to the likeness of a God and ascend to heaven. The tree of

knowledge and its fruit were not noxious, but imparted knowledge; yet Adam, being still a child, did not know how to use this knowledge right, and hence God forbade him its fruit. After the transgression of this command, God drove man out of Paradise and subjected him to death, that under the influence of labor and sorrow he might again learn obedience, so that he might be restored to Paradise, after the resurrection. By sin, man brings on himself death, but by virtue, he attains eternal life. But the devil enticed Eve in order to introduce idolatry.

Athenagoras comprises all sin in idolatry, and this was introduced by the demons. These demons he supposes to have come into existence through the intermarriage of incarnate angels with females of the human race.

Clement of Alexandria speaks in very strong terms against the opinion that man is by his birth, sinful and condemned, (Strom. III. p. 556 ff.) and seeks for the origin of all sin in the freedom of the human agent—a doctrine which he held most firmly. The Mosaic account of the fall and of paradise, he explains as an allegory to show how sin originates in the case of every man, and affirms that the devil i. e. the old serpent, seduced Adam into idolatry, and does the same yet continually with other men, by which means they incur the punishment of spiritual and eternal, but not of temporal death. Since death results from ignorance and irreverence of God, so on the other hand does immortality ensue from knowing and revering him. He was very far from concurring in the opinion held by later theologians that Adam before his fall was perfect, but that he and with him all the race lost by his fall their concreated perfection, he affirmed on the contrary that Adam had, as all men now have, the capability of becoming perfect, only they do not use it aright.

Just so little does Origen know of any original sin. He not only defends the free choice of men between good and evil in the remarkable passage (*peri archon* III. § 2 ff.) and very explicitly in other places; but he also recognizes the fact (*Contra Cels.* IV. 45) that men differ widely by nature in a moral respect, and that so long as man is in childhood and knows not the distinction of moral good and evil, his offenses against the letter of the law are not reckoned against him as crimes.

He does indeed in some passages appear to affirm that the whole race sinned in, and with Adam; but it should be considered, first, that we have those passages only through the faulty Latin translation of Rufinus who often makes Origen speak after the style of the later theology; and secondly, that according to the explicit illustrations of Origen and the scope of his whole system, he could have meant only this, that souls might be punished for the sake of Adam because they were born as men on this earth through him.

In consequence of his opinions concerning the pre-existence of souls, he held that the souls of all men existed originally in a heavenly paradise, and that the fall consisted in this, that they, having already sinned, came into human bodies and were born as men upon this imperfect world—a state most opposite to that of the heavenly paradise—and consequently were far from God, in whom alone is all life. He considers the fall of Adam as a type of that which shall occur again in the case of every human soul, and by the term

"death" he understands not bodily but spiritual death. In his cardinal passage (Com. on Rom. 5.) he says that the Apostle Rom. 5: 12, understands by "*world*," the children whose reason is yet undeveloped, and by "*all men*" those whose reason is developed, upon whom sin comes, since even the righteous experience from it at least some slight contagion, and well may sin come from all men, inasmuch as the birth of the soul has already been to every man a source of moral pollution (Commentary on Matt. 15,) but not of spiritual death which befalls only "the many." The sins, however, which are actually committed are propagated not so much by natural birth as by example and education.

The discussion of Archelaus with Manetes also teaches (chap. 29,) that because the divine law written on the heart of man was not at all times sufficiently present to all minds, therefore God caused a transcript of it to be made by Moses. By this means the power of eternal death was broken so that it does not have dominion over *all* through sin; for it affects only those who do not obey the law.

On the other hand, Lactantius understands the scripture narrative of the fall more in the spirit of the African church, yet he ascribes to all men, even the heathen, the ability to do good if they only will it, ("since it is the easiest thing possible to be virtuous if men only choose to be,") and he represents all men as having by their natural constitution an impulse towards wisdom; but he also teaches that sin first originated through the fall of the angels and the procreation of the giants who introduced idolatry; that idolatry is the chief sin and the fountain of all evil, and that the death which results from the fall is not that of the body which is natural and necessary, but that which the scriptures call "the second death."

Ireneus also affirms that we lost the divine image and became subject to death in consequence of Adam's disobedience. God had given the first man immortality, who however held it as a natural and inherent quality of his constitution, and was in this respect like God. This author defends the infliction of death on the ground that God ordained it out of his compassion for man, to prevent his sinning forever.

But he not only recognizes the fact that already some among the Fathers had kept the law, (Her. IV, chap. xv., sec. 3.) but he also ascribes to man, after the fall, the freedom of choice between good and evil, and says expressly that the guilt of those who do not make themselves better when God calls them to repentance, is wholly their own.

On the contrary, Tertullian, led on by his Traducianism, is the first who not only derives from Adam the death of all men as a result of the fall, but also affirms--(a thing of chief importance.) that a moral ruin descends from Adam by ordinary generation, because the devil has introduced into human nature an demerit which is utterly hostile to the reason. This he does indeed regard as something foreign to human nature, a perversion of the work of God, for Satan is in his view "an interpolator" as to the works of the Deity, yet is every human soul afflicted with it by consequence simply of birth in the line of Adam's posterity.

Yet while he regarded this something which comes upon us from Adam as hostile to reason, he did not conceive of it as absolutely fixed and changeless, but he believed that the children born of pious Christians who had discarded this anti-rational element were by virtue of such a birth already better off than the heathen. Still he held (with a less degree of faith however,) that the entire nature of man is ruined by means of this entailment from Adam. His faith in the latter point must have been of the weaker sort, for he not only ascribes to all men after the fall freedom of will and represents new-born infants as guiltless, but he expressly reserves to man ability for good along with this clement which conflicts utterly with reason.

Cyprian, that great admirer of Tertullian, has left behind for us no very specific explanation of his views. We may well suppose that they coincided in all important points with Tertullian's. He only remarks that Adam by his fall lost the image of God and became subject to death, without explaining his views any further. He appears to have believed that no guilt passes over from Adam to his posterity as "the contagion of death" does, inasmuch as he expressly mentions only the latter, while he represents new-born infants as being guiltless.

To this doctrine of the first three centuries, the subsequent church fathers universally adhered. They affirmed the freedom of the will—a view which Augustine also maintained in his earliest writings; but they all agreed that the death which originated from Adam is physical mortality, according to the view of Ireneus, Tertullian, and Cyprian. Such were the sentiments of Athanasius, Cyril of Jerusalem, Basil the great, Gregory Nyssen, Chrysostom, Jerome, Ambrose, and Hilary of Pictavium. But the Greek church fathers come no nearer to the views of Tertullian than this. Chrysostom expressly resists the opinion that in consequence of Adam's sin any thing is imputed to us. Indeed he held that before Adams fall, and while as yet mortality had not attached itself to his constitution, his passions were all in due subjection; but subsequently, in consequence of physical mortality, the impulses and passions became more powerful. These were obviously his views, inasmuch as he yet maintained that man can control these passions by the power of his rational soul.

The Latin church fathers, Athanasius, Hilary, and Ambrose, derived from Adam's sin not only physical death, but also, with Tertullian, a seed of evil, a contagion of sins, which attached itself to human nature in consequence of the fall.

We might perhaps be compelled to leave the doctrine of original sin in this indefinite form, if a controversy on these very points had not arisen in the fifth century between Augustine and Pelagius. Pelagius, a British monk, and his pupil, Celestius, denied that we have lost any thing earthly by reason of Adam's sin, or that this sin can be imputed to us, or that an original sin came into existence through Adam. On the contrary they maintained that death is an original and natural arrangement, and not in any sense a punishment of sin; that the divine image has not been lost, but that the race are to this moment born as guiltless and as truly possessed of free will as Adam was by his creation; and that we can call Adam the author of sin in our race only in view of the fact that he sinned first, and also seduced others to sin by his example; for the allurements and the

imitation of bad examples are the only fountains of sin. [ed. note, for a brief, but more precise examination of Pelagius' beliefs see [*The Pelagian "Boogie Man"*](#)]

Augustine, bishop of Hippo in Africa, opposed this opinion with the utmost energy, and in opposition to it taught not only that physical death results from Adam's fall, but that the whole race thereby lost utterly both the divine image and free will; and that in their stead there now came into action a decided and resistless propensity to sin which has its seat principally in the soul and is perpetuated by ordinary generation. This original sin which shows itself in vicious desires, or the preponderance of sinful inclinations, brings down eternal damnation upon man although he may have committed no sins, and hence must also involve infants from their very birth. Original sin must thus affect the whole race because it is imputed to all men as a sin, causes them to lose the grace of God, and subjects them to the power of the devil. Hence no unbaptized person can be blessed. Original sin and death may have been imposed upon us by God as a punishment for Adam's sin which is imputed to us. That with these views Augustine must hold that men since the fall are wholly incompetent to any good, have utterly lost free will, and are enlightened and converted only by, an act of Divine grace, was as natural as it was opposed to the common doctrine of the earlier Christian teachers.

Neither the doctrine of Pelagius, nor that of Augustine, coincided entirely with the views of the ancient fathers. For the later Greek fathers had at least explained physical death to be a consequence of the fall, and some of them had admitted a growth of moral deterioration originating from it; but it is also true that the Latin Church fathers had at least taught no imputation of Adam's guilt, no loss of free will, and no damnation of the race, already experienced in consequence of this birth from Adam. Pelagius and Augustine were both in the wrong when they each maintained that he had only followed the already established Church doctrine; but the greater wrong was on the side of Augustine. We must pardon him however for this because, being ignorant of the Greek language he had never read the Greek fathers.

Although in the Council at Ephesus A. D. 431, his theory gained a transient victory over Pelagius, yet it did not in consequence find the least access to the Greek Church, and even in the Latin Church, it secured no permanent approval. On the other hand the system of the so-called semi-Pelagians, which in truth was not new, but had been hitherto the common doctrine, made itself very soon the controlling sentiment in the Latin Churches. Especially some monks at Marseilles, (for example, Cassian, Faustus, Vincent and Gennadins) taught that there does indeed result from Adam a certain moral weakness and inclination to evil, which is coincident with the infliction of physical death upon the race, but is not to be regarded as a punishment for Adam's sin. They also taught that man has evermore a free will, and can at least commence his own moral improvement in his own strength, but that he then needs grace to carry the work forward.

The Scholastic writers followed universally in the wake of these opinions. They soon held original sin to be a mere condemnation of Adam's posterity to physical death, yet without innate guilt; next they held it to be a mere deprivation of the lower faculties of the soul; and finally, as something negative, viz: a want of original perfection which as a

supernatural gift of God, had wrought out the divine image whereby human nature might itself remain wholly unimpaired.

The vigorous controversies between the Dominicans and the Franciscans concerning the stainless conception of the virgin Mary, the doctrine of good works, and the consequent disputes carried on with the Reformers, were the reason that the doctrine of original sin did not maintain a more definite form in the Catholic Church down to the time of the Reformation; yet the Catholic Theologians adhered for the most part to Semi-Pelagianism.

Luther in his work on the bondage of the will (*de servo arbitrio*) taught the strongest form of Augustinianism. The defense of his own yet stronger opinions led Flacius to affirm that original sin is the *substance* (not merely an attribute or quality) of man—an opinion which was rejected in the Formula of Concord as a Manichean error. Calvin also and his followers held the strong form of this and of its kindred doctrines, and must of necessity have held it in accordance with their views of predestination. It also passed over into the symbols of the Reformed Church although Zwingli had previously expressed milder opinions on these points.

But the Anabaptists had already denied the existence of original sin, and the Socinians and Arminians utterly rejected the doctrine and maintained the views of Pelagius which in modern times had found a growing number of friends, of whom we might name Eberhard, Steinbart, Stark, Cannabich, Wegscheider and others. Already had Michaelis, Morus, Starr and Reinhard claimed that man after the fall has yet the power of knowing the good and admitted as the results of the fall only a wayward preponderance of sensuality over the reason. Doderlein, Eckermann, Henke, and Ammon considered this preponderance, which they called *innate vitiosity*, as something natural, not as something which springs up accidentally. Hence accrued what is called by Kant a radical evil in human nature.

The system of De Wette, which borrows the philosophy of Fries, and considers freedom as the intelligent action of a free will, represents the innate ruin as something originated in time, inasmuch as he locates it in this, that the intellectual conception of the rule of life is in part not a pure determination of the will, and in part it has not always, in point of power and vivacity, equal weight with the sensual conception of sensual motives, so that the rational free will cannot always determine according to its own taste. But the conscience, which always presupposes that we should and can withstand the sensual impulses, imputes to us this weakness as a free choice and as guilt.

Still farther do the Schelling school recede from the views held by the Church and taught in the Scriptures.

Since the doctrine of an inherited sin and sin-guiltiness is not grounded upon the New Testament, one need not restrict himself to the popular views of the unscriptural expression—original sin; and the same might be said of the extravagant representations made of the greatness of the moral ruin thence resulting and of the incompetency of

human nature for good. Much more must we notice, in accordance with the New Testament teachings on this point, that the Divine law is written on the heart of man, and that this can and should prove efficient for his moral training. But together with this we must also observe that according to the Scriptures, no man continues wholly free from sin; that no one performs all he should and that the hindrances to moral development which arise in the social and religious life from sin, perpetually strengthen the dominion of sin; whence they become exceedingly perilous as well to the temporal as to the eternal welfare of man. This view of the doctrine will have a good influence, on the one hand, not to crush the spirit of moral improvement by means of the disheartening notion that human nature is utterly ruined, and on the other, to make us keenly alive to the power and ruinousness of sin. This will guard us against a dangerous confidence in our own good estate; will arouse us to the consequences of sin in reference to distant generations; and thereby will instill a yet stronger abhorrence of sin, showing the necessity as to the state of religious institutions for the moral and physical education of the people and the danger of moral indifferentism; will make useful the value of that redemption from sin, which is prepared through Jesus, and will lead us to appreciate the love of God; and consequently will awaken us to a yet more hearty obedience to the institutions of God for our salvation and to the great truths of the Gospel.

[The following note may be convenient for reference to some of our readers, and the translator therefore inserts it here at the request of the Senior Editor. It respects the period when the several ancient Christian fathers flourished whose testimony is cited by our author.]

Barnabas, Hermas, Clement of Rome, (author of the Recognitions and Homiles.) Ignatius and Polycarp, are supposed to have been contemporaries with at least the last of the apostles. Justin Martyr died A. D. 164—Origen, 253—Theophilus 181—Athenagoras flourished about 477—Clement of Alexandria died 222—Archelaus flourished 228—Lactantius died in old age 330. Ireneas lived A. D. 97—202. Tertullius lived 166—220. Cyprian died A. D. 258. Athanasius, Cyrus of Jerusalem, Basil, the great, Gregory, Nyssen, Chrysostome, Jerome, Ambrose and Hilary, all lived in the fourth century. Augustine, Pelagius and Celestius flourished in the early part of the fifth.

The subsequent writers alluded to by Bretschneider belong to the era of the Reformation, or to yet more modern times.