# ADAM, EVE, AND THE SERPENT

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# THE BOOK OF GENESIS

## CHAPTERS 1–3

*(Revised Standard Version)*

*IN THE BEGINNING God created the heavens and the earth. 2The earth was without form and void, and darkness was upon the face of the deep; and the Spirit of God was moving over the face of the waters.*

*3 And God said, "Let there be light"; and there was light. 4And God saw that the light was good; and God separated the light from the darkness. 5God called the light Day, and the darkness he called Night. And there was evening and there was morning, one day.*

*6 And God said, "Let there be a firmament in the midst of the waters, and let it separate the waters from the waters." 7And God made the firmament and separated the waters which were under the firmament from the waters which were above the firmament. And it was so. 8And God called the firmament Heaven. And there was evening and there was morning, a second day.*

*9 And God said, "Let the waters under the heavens be gathered together into one place, and let the dry land appear." And it was so. 10God called the dry land Earth, and the waters that were gathered together he called Seas. And God saw that it was good. 11And God said, "Let the earth put forth vegetation, plants yielding seed, and fruit trees bearing fruit in which is their seed, each according to its kind, upon the earth." And it was so. 12The earth brought forth vegetation, plants yielding seed according to their own kinds, and trees bearing fruit in which is their seed, each according to its kind. And God saw that it was good. 13And there was evening and there was morning, a third day.*

*14 And God said, "Let there be lights in the firmament of the heavens to separate the day from the night; and let them be for signs and for seasons and for days and years, 15and let them be lights in the firmament of the heavens to give light upon the earth." And it was so. 16And God made the two great lights, the greater light to rule the day, and the lesser light to rule the night; he made the stars also. 17And God set them in the firmament of the heavens to give light upon the earth, 18to rule over the day and over the night, and to separate the light from the darkness. And God saw that it was good. 19And there was evening and there was morning, a fourth day.*

*20 And God said, "Let the waters bring forth swarms of living creatures,*

*and let birds fly above the earth across the firmament of the heavens." 21So God created the great sea monsters and every living creature that moves, with which the waters swarm, according to their kinds, and every winged bird according to its kind. And God saw that it was good. 22And God blessed them, saying, "Be fruitful and multiply and fill the waters in the seas, and let birds multiply on the earth." 23And there was evening and there was morning, a fifth day.*

*24 And God said, "Let the earth bring forth living creatures according to their kinds: cattle and creeping things and beasts of the earth according to their kinds." And it was so. 25And God made the beasts of the earth according to their kinds and the cattle according to their kinds, and everything that creeps upon the ground according to its kind. And God saw that it was good.*

*26 Then God said, "Let us make man in our image, after our likeness; and let them have dominion over the fish of the sea, and over the birds of the air, and over the cattle, and over all the earth, and over every creeping thing that creeps upon the earth." 27So God created man in his own image, in the image of God he created him; male and female he created them. 28And God blessed them, and God said to them, "Be fruitful and multiply, and fill the earth and subdue it; and have dominion over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the air and over every living thing that moves upon the earth." 29And God said, "Behold, I have given you every plant yielding seed which is upon the face of all the earth, and every tree with seed in its fruit; you shall have them for food. 30And to every beast of the earth, and to every bird of the air, and to everything that creeps on the earth, everything that has the breath of life, I have given every green plant for food." And it was so. 31And God saw everything that he had made, and behold, it was very good. And there was evening and there was morning, a sixth day.*

2 *Thus the heavens and the earth were finished, and all the host of them. 2And on the seventh day God finished his work which he had done, and he rested on the seventh day from all his work which he had done. 3So God blessed the seventh day and hallowed it, because on it God rested from all his work which he had done in creation.*

*4 These are the generations of the heavens and the earth when they were created.*

*In the day that the Lord God made the earth and the heavens, 5when no plant of the field was yet in the earth and no herb of the field had yet sprung up—for the Lord God had not caused it to rain upon the earth, and there was no man to till the ground; 6but a mist went up from the earth and watered the whole face of the ground— 7then the Lord God formed man of dust from the ground, and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life; and man became a living being. 8And the Lord God planted a garden in Eden, in the east; and there he put the man whom he had formed. 9And out of the ground the Lord God made to grow every tree that is pleasant to the sight and good for food, the tree of life also in the midst of the garden, and the tree of the knowledge of good and evil.*

*10 A river flowed out of Eden to water the garden, and there it divided*

*and became four rivers. 11The name of the first is Pishon; it is the one which flows around the whole land of Hav'ilah, where there is gold; 12and the gold of that land is good; bdellium and onyx stone are there. 13The name of the second river is Gihon; it is the one which flows around the whole land of Cush. 14And the name of the third river is Tigris, which flows east of Assyria. And the fourth river is the Euphra'tes.*

*15 The Lord God took the man and put him in the garden of Eden to till it and keep it. 16And the Lord God commanded the man, saying, "You may freely eat of every tree of the garden; 17but of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil you shall not eat, for in the day that you eat of it you shall die."*

*18 Then the Lord God said, "It is not good that the man should be alone; I will make him a helper fit for him." 19So out of the ground the Lord God formed every beast of the field and every bird of the air, and brought them to the man to see what he would call them; and whatever the man called every living creature, that was its name. 20The man gave names to all cattle, and to the birds of the air, and to every beast of the field; but for the man there was not found a helper fit for him. 21So the Lord God caused a deep sleep to fall upon the man, and while he slept took one of his ribs and closed up its place with flesh; 22and the rib which the Lord God had taken from the man he made into a woman and brought her to the man. 23Then the man said,*

*"This at last is bone of my bones*
*and flesh of my flesh;*
*she shall be called Woman,*
*because she was taken out of*
*Man."*

*24Therefore a man leaves his father and his mother and cleaves to his wife, and they become one flesh. 25And the man and his wife were both naked, and were not ashamed.*

*3 Now the serpent was more subtle than any other wild creature that the Lord God had made. He said to the woman, "Did God say, 'You shall not eat of any tree of the garden'?" 2And the woman said to the serpent, "We may eat of the fruit of the trees of the garden; 3but God said, 'You shall not eat of the fruit of the tree which is in the midst of the garden, neither shall you touch it, lest you die.' " 4But the serpent said to the woman, "You will not die. 5For God knows that when you eat of it your eyes will be opened, and you will be like God, knowing good and evil." 6So when the woman saw that the tree was good for food, and that it was a delight to the eyes, and that the tree was to be desired to make one wise, she took of its fruit and ate; and she also gave some to her husband, and he ate. 7Then the eyes of both were opened, and they knew that they were naked; and they sewed fig leaves together and made themselves aprons.*

*8 And they heard the sound of the Lord God walking in the garden in the cool of the day, and the man and his wife hid themselves from the presence of the Lord God among the trees of the garden. 9But the Lord God called to the man, and said to him, "Where are you?" 10And he said, "I heard the sound of thee in the garden, and I was afraid, because I was naked; and I hid myself." 11He said, "Who told you that you were naked? Have you eaten of the tree of which I commanded you not to eat?" 12The man said, "The woman*

*whom thou gavest to be with me, she gave me fruit of the tree, and I ate."*
*13Then the Lord God said to the woman, "What is this that you have done?" The woman said, "The serpent beguiled me, and I ate."* *14The Lord God said to the serpent,*

*"Because you have done this,*
*cursed are you above all cattle,*
*and above all wild animals;*
*upon your belly you shall go,*
*and dust you shall eat*
*all the days of your life.*
*15I will put enmity between you*
*and the woman,*
*and between your seed and her seed;*
*he shall bruise your head,*
*and you shall bruise his heel."*
*16To the woman he said,*
*"I will greatly multiply your pain in childbearing;*
*in pain you shall bring forth children,*
*yet your desire shall be for your husband,*
*and he shall rule over you."*
*17And to Adam he said,*
*"Because you have listened to the voice of your wife,*
*and have eaten of the tree*
*of which I commanded you,*
*'You shall not eat of it,'*
*cursed is the ground because of you;*
*in toil you shall eat of it all the days of your life;*
*18thorns and thistles it shall bring forth to you;*
*and you shall eat the plants of the field.*
*19In the sweat of your face*
*you shall eat bread*
*till you return to the ground,*
*for out of it you were taken;*
*you are dust,*
*and to dust you shall return."*

*20 The man called his wife's name Eve, because she was the mother of all living.* *21And the Lord God made for Adam and for his wife garments of skins, and clothed them.*

*22 Then the Lord God said, "Behold, the man has become like one of us, knowing good and evil; and now, lest he put forth his hand and take also of the tree of life, and eat, and live for ever"—* *23therefore the Lord God sent him forth from the garden of Eden, to till the ground from which he was taken.* *24He drove out the man; and at the east of the garden of Eden he placed the cherubim, and a flaming sword which turned every way, to guard the way to the tree of life.*

# INTRODUCTION

ABRUPT CHANGES in social attitudes have recently become commonplace, especially with respect to sexuality, including marriage, divorce, homosexuality, abortion, contraception, and gender. Whether we welcome these changes or not, they have altered the way we think of other people and ourselves, how we act, and how we respond to the actions of others. For Christians, in particular, such changes may seem to challenge not only traditional values but the very structure of human nature.

But how did these traditional patterns of gender and sexual relationship arise in the first place—patterns so obvious and "natural" to those who have accepted them that nature itself seemed to have ordained them? Reflecting on this question, I soon began to see that the sexual attitudes we associate with Christian tradition evolved in western culture at a specific time—during the first four centuries of the common era, when the Christian movement, which had begun as a defiant sect, eventually transformed itself into the religion of the Roman Empire. I saw, too, that these attitudes had not previously existed in their eventual Christian form; and that they represented a departure from both pagan practices and Jewish tradition. Many Christians of the first four centuries took pride in their sexual restraint; they eschewed polygamy and often divorce as well, which Jewish tradition allowed; and they repudiated extramarital sexual practices commonly accepted among their pagan contemporaries, practices including prostitution and homosexuality.

Certain Christian moralists of this period insisted that sexual intercourse should not be pursued for pleasure, even among those monogamously married, but should be reserved solely for procreation. Not all these attitudes were original with the Christians, who borrowed much from Jewish and philosophical, particularly Stoic, tradition; but the Christian movement emphasized and institutional-

ized such views, which soon became inseparable from Christian faith.

Heroic Christians went even further and embraced celibacy "for the sake of the Kingdom of Heaven," behavior which, they said, Jesus and Paul had exemplified, and which they had urged upon those capable of the "angelic life." By the beginning of the fifth century, Augustine had actually declared that spontaneous sexual desire is the proof of—and penalty for—universal original sin, an idea that would have baffled most of his Christian predecessors, to say nothing of his pagan and Jewish contemporaries.

Many pagan contemporaries of the early Christians in the Graeco-Roman society of the first four centuries pursued sexual practices that superficially may look familiar to some people in the twentieth century. The Romans, for example, legalized and taxed prostitution, both male and female; and some of them easily tolerated divorce, as well as homosexual and bisexual relationships, especially during adolescence or, in the case of married men, as a diversion from family obligations. Yet when we investigate Roman practices more closely, we find ourselves upon more unfamiliar ground; we may be dismayed to see, for example, that exposing and abandoning infants was widely and openly practiced during the first and second centuries of the common era, as was the routine sexual use and abuse of slaves. To the extent that we recoil from such practices, we reveal, whether or not we explicitly identify ourselves with religious tradition, that we too are affected by the transformation of sexual values that Christian tradition introduced into western culture.

From the first century, when the Christian movement appeared as a new and "deadly superstition" (in the words of the Roman historian Tacitus), through two centuries of persecution, during which its members were subject to arrest, torture, and execution, the movement continued to grow. Then in 313 occurred an event of incalculable significance—the conversion to Christianity of the emperor Constantine; and from that time, with only a two-year interruption during the brief reign of the neopagan emperor Julian, called the Apostate, Christianity increasingly became the official religion of the empire. Accompanying the spread of Christianity—although, as classical historians remind us, not limited to it—was a revolution in sexual attitudes and practices.

Yet when we explore Jewish and Christian writers from the first centuries of the common era, we find that they seldom talk directly about sexual behavior, and they seldom write treatises on such topics

as marriage, divorce, and gender. Instead they often talk about Adam, Eve, and the serpent—the story of creation—and when they do, they tell us what they think about sexual matters. From about 200 B.C.E. (before the common era), the story of creation became, for certain Jews, and later for Christians, a primary means for revealing and defending basic attitudes and values. Our spiritual ancestors argued and speculated over how God had commanded the first man and woman to "be fruitful and multiply, and fill the earth," and how he instituted the first marriage; how Adam, after he found among the animals no "helper fit for him" (Genesis 2:20), met Eve, with well-known and disastrous consequences. Such interpretations of the first three chapters of Genesis, as we can see, engaged intensely practical concerns and articulated deeply felt attitudes.

As I investigated these Jewish and Christian sources, I found myself fascinated with the story of Adam, Eve, and the serpent, written down by members of Hebrew tribes about three thousand years ago, and probably told for generations before that. I had always assumed that this archaic story wields an extraordinary influence upon western culture, but as my work progressed I was surprised to discover how complex and extensive its effect has been.

The anthropologist Clifford Geertz defines culture as

> an historically transmitted pattern of meaning embodied in symbols; a system of inherited conceptions expressed in symbolic form, by means of which men communicate, perpetuate, and develop their knowledge about and attitudes toward life.[1]

If any of us could come to our own culture as a foreign anthropologist and observe traditional Christian attitudes toward sexuality and gender, and how we view "human nature" in relation to politics, philosophy, and psychology, we might well be astonished at attitudes that we take for granted. Augustine, one of the greatest teachers of western Christianity, derived many of these attitudes from the story of Adam and Eve: that sexual desire is sinful; that infants are infected from the moment of conception with the disease of original sin; and that Adam's sin corrupted the whole of nature itself. Even those who think of Genesis only as literature, and those who are not Christian, live in a culture indelibly shaped by such interpretations as these.

But the Genesis accounts of creation introduced into Graeco-Roman culture many values other than sexual ones—for example, the intrinsic worth of every human being, made in God's image (Genesis 1:26). Often these other values would prove immensely

influential. Although the early Christians thought of this conviction of human worth in moral—not social or political—terms, Christians living more than fifteen hundred years later would invoke this idea to help transform the laws, ethics, and political institutions of the West. In 1776 the authors of the Declaration of Independence invoked the biblical account of creation to declare that "we hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal . . ."—an idea so familiar that we may have difficulty seeing that it is empirically unprovable; Aristotle, among others, would have considered it absurd. As we shall see, the idea of human moral equality flourished among converts to Christianity, many of whom, especially slaves and women, were anything but equal under Roman law.

Some Christians today, of course, invoke Genesis against the theory of evolution, criticizing the claims of scientific objectivity and the relative values they associate with "secular humanism"; many insist that the creation story validates their own social and sexual attitudes. Liberal critics accuse such interpreters of literalism; and it is true that such believers often insist that they understand perfectly well what "the Bible says," without considering that what *they* assume it means may differ entirely from what others—even their Christian predecessors—have taken it to mean. Yet such evangelical Christians intuitively understand one thing that their critics often miss: that the biblical creation story, like the creation stories of other cultures, communicates social and religious values and presents them as if they were universally valid. Many people who have—intellectually, at least—discarded the creation story as a mere folk tale nevertheless find themselves engaged with its moral implications concerning procreation, animals, work, marriage, and the human striving to "subdue" the earth and "have dominion" over all its creatures (Genesis 1:28).

This book explores, among other things, how these Christian interpretations of Genesis emerged in the first four centuries, and how Christians invoked the story of Adam and Eve to justify and establish their beliefs; how they saw their own situations, their sufferings, and their hopes mirrored in the story of the creation and the fall. I have not, by any means, written a history of early Christianity; instead, I am interested in a process of intellectual history—how these ideas of sexuality and moral equality, among others, came about; and I am interested in the hermeneutical process—how Christians read the story of Adam and Eve, and often projected themselves

into it, as a way of reflecting upon such matters as sexuality, human freedom, and human nature.

As I began to explore these questions, both substantive and hermeneutical, I soon discovered that Jews and Christians in various times and places have read the creation story—and its practical implications—quite differently, sometimes even antithetically. What Christians see, or claim to see, in Genesis 1–3 changed as the church itself changed from a dissident Jewish sect to a popular movement persecuted by the Roman government, and changed further as this movement increasingly gained members throughout Roman society, until finally even the Roman emperor himself converted to the new faith and Christianity became the official religion of the Roman Empire.

During recent decades, several distinguished scholars, including Professors Robert M. Grant, Georges de Ste. Croix, Ramsay MacMullen, Wayne Meeks, and Paul Veyne, have pointed out that Christians were in many ways similar to their pagan neighbors.[2] Their works document, among other things, social, political, economic, and cultural parallels that I have not reviewed here. Instead I focus upon ways in which Christians *differed* from pagans, or claimed to differ—what made them, in other words, specifically Christian within the pagan world; I am interested, in Tertullian's words, in the "peculiarities of the Christian society."[3]

In each chapter I take up a theme that Christians attempted to understand or justify by means of the creation story. Jewish teachers of Jesus' time and earlier, as I show in Chapter 1, often invoked the story of Adam and Eve to defend Jewish sexual practices ranging from abhorrence of public nakedness (for God clothed Adam and Eve in Paradise) to marital practices designed to facilitate reproduction (for hadn't God said, "Be fruitful and multiply, and fill the earth"?). These Jewish teachers noted that Genesis contains not one but two distinct accounts of creation, of which the first begins with the opening chapter of Genesis and tells how God created the world in six days, crowning his achievement by creating *adam*—that is, humanity—in his image (Genesis 1:26). But this account ends with Genesis 2:3; and the following verse, Genesis 2:4, begins a different narrative. This second story tells how the Lord made a man out of earth, and, after making all the animals and finding none of them a suitable companion for Adam, he put Adam to sleep, brought woman out of his side, and presented her to Adam as his wife. The

woman then persuaded her husband to disobey divine law and earned with him their expulsion from Paradise.

Most biblical scholars today agree that the two creation accounts, originally separate, were later joined to make up the first three chapters of Genesis. The story of Adam and Eve (Genesis 2:4f), told in the language of folklore, is considered the older of the two accounts, dating to 1000–900 B.C.E.; the account now placed first (Genesis 1:1–2:3) dates to postexilic theologians (c. 400 B.C.E.). Jewish teachers in antiquity, like many Christians after them, turned to theological ingenuity rather than historical or literary analysis to account for contradictions in the texts.

According to New Testament accounts, Jesus himself mentioned the story of Adam and Eve only once; and, like many other Jewish teachers, Jesus used Genesis to make a moral point—specifically, to answer a practical question put to him by the Pharisees, the interpreters of Jewish law, about the legitimate grounds for divorce. Jesus' reply—that what God has joined together, let no one put asunder—shocked his questioners, for instead of answering the question he had been asked about the *grounds* for divorce, he simply ruled out divorce altogether. Since procreation was assumed by many Jews to be the purpose of marriage, and since Jewish tradition had taken divorce for granted as a male prerogative—and sometimes as a necessity, in cases of a wife's infertility—Jesus' answer to the Pharisees broke with Jewish teaching. When even his own followers objected ("If such is the case of a man with his wife, it is not expedient to marry"), Jesus must have startled them even more than he had the Pharisees by suggesting that celibacy "for the sake of the Kingdom of Heaven" may, in fact, be preferable to marriage (Matthew 19:10–12). For generations—even millennia—ever since, Christians have been trying to work out the practical implications of such sayings, and those of Paul, Jesus' zealous disciple.

Paul himself, some twenty years after Jesus' death, urged an even more austere discipline upon his followers than Jesus had preached. Although Paul acknowledged that marriage was not sin (1 Corinthians 7:3), he encouraged those who were able to renounce it to do so. Paul invoked the creation account to urge Christians to avoid prostitution (1 Corinthians 6:15–20), and later to argue that women must veil their heads in church, apparently to acknowledge their subordination to men as a kind of divine order given in nature ("For man was not made from woman, but woman from man. Neither was man created for woman, but woman for man," 1 Corinthi-

ans 11:3–16). In the generations following Paul, Christians fiercely debated what the apostle meant. Some insisted that only those who "undo the sin of Adam and Eve" by practicing celibacy—even within marriage—can truly practice the gospel. Others, who were to predominate within the majority of churches, rejected such austerity and composed, in Paul's name, other letters, later incorporated into the New Testament as if Paul himself had written them, which used the story of Adam and Eve to support traditional marriage and to prove that women, being naturally gullible, are unfit for any role but raising children and keeping house (see, for example, 1 Timothy 2:11–15); thus the story of Eden was made to reinforce the patriarchal structure of community life.

But the majority of Christians, as I also show in Chapter 1, rejected the claim made by radical Christians that the sin of Adam and Eve was sexual—that the forbidden "fruit of the tree of knowledge" conveyed, above all, *carnal* knowledge. On the contrary, said Clement of Alexandria (c. 180 C.E.), conscious participation in procreation is "cooperation with God in the work of creation." Adam's sin was not sexual indulgence but disobedience; thus Clement agreed with most of his Jewish and Christian contemporaries that the real theme of the story of Adam and Eve is moral freedom and moral responsibility. Its point is to show that we are responsible for the choices we freely make—good or evil—just as Adam was.

In Chapter 2 I show how Christians also began to apply the creation account to their own precarious political situation, in which they were constantly subject to persecution by the Roman authorities. About one hundred years after Jesus' death, when many Christians lived in fear of a similar fate—arrest, torture, and execution—for refusing ordinary allegiance to the emperor and the gods, the Christian philosopher Justin invoked Genesis to argue that humankind owes allegiance only to the God who created all humanity—the God of Israel, now the God of the Christians—and not to the gods of Rome, whom Justin denounced as demons. Justin turned Genesis 6, which tells of the fall of the angels, into an indictment of the Roman emperors and their gods; for these dignitaries were, Justin said, none other than the demon offspring of the fallen angels.

About twenty years after Justin had been beheaded for refusing to worship the Roman gods, Clement of Alexandria took the statement that God had created humanity in his image as evidence of human equality—and as an indictment of the imperial cult. From such beginnings, in open defiance of the totalitarian Roman state,

and often met with brutal violence, Christians forged the basis for what would become, centuries later, the western ideas of freedom and of the infinite value of each human life.

Clement realized, too, that certain inquiring and restless Christians saw in the Genesis story not only sexual and political implications but disturbing philosophical and religious ones as well. How could an all-powerful God have created the world "good" when we find in it so much suffering? Whence came the serpent? Why did God begrudge Adam and Eve the knowledge that even he admitted would make them "like one of us" (Genesis 3:22)? Such questions, and the underlying one, *unde malum* ("Whence is evil?"), were, the Christian writer Tertullian said, "the questions that make people heretics."

In Chapter 3 I explore how some of these followers of Jesus, often called gnostics, read the story of Adam and Eve in ways that dismayed and outraged orthodox Christians. For gnostic Christians declared that the story, taken literally, made no sense; thus they themselves set out to read it symbolically, often allegorically. The most radical gnostics turned the story upside down and told it, in effect, from the serpent's point of view: some said he was "wiser" than all the other animals and so tried desperately to persuade Adam and Eve to partake of the tree of knowledge, defying their jealous and hostile creator; this wise serpent, some dared say, was a manifestation of Christ himself! Other gnostics read the story of Adam and Eve as an allegory of religious experience, as relating the discovery of the authentic spiritual self (Eve) hidden within the soul (Adam). The gnostic author of the *Interpretation of the Soul* saw Eve as representing the alienated soul seeking spiritual union; the author of *Thunder: Perfect Mind* saw her as the divine energy underlying all existence, human and divine. Gnostic Christians, who disagreed with one another on almost everything else, agreed that this naïve story hid profound truths about human nature, and they vied with one another to come up with ingenious and imaginative interpretations of its deeper meaning.

Leaders of the church who called themselves orthodox (literally, "straight-thinking") Christians denounced such interpretations and accused gnostics of projecting their own bizarre fantasies upon the text. Above all, they said, gnostic Christians deny the primary reality of the Genesis account—namely, that it depicts humanity created morally free and entrusted with free will. Gnostic Christians, who denied that the human will has the power to prevent error and

suffering, also denied, in effect, that baptism fully delivers us from sin and suffering and restores our moral freedom, and for this reason, among others, the gnostics were expelled by the leaders of the church and consigned to oblivion.

As the Christian movement increasingly gained converts throughout Roman society during the third and fourth centuries, some of the most ardent Christians insisted that to realize the greatest freedom one must "renounce the world" and choose poverty and celibacy. For certain Christians, celibacy was a way of rejecting Roman social life. In Genesis 1–3, where Jews—and many Christians, for that matter—traditionally saw God's endorsement of marriage and procreation, ascetic Christians saw the opposite: Adam and Eve were virgins in Paradise and should have remained so; as Gregory of Nyssa explained, God could have arranged for the human race to "multiply" in completely nonsexual ways, as angels do. But when one Roman monk, Jovinian, although himself celibate, tried to prove from the Scriptures that celibate Christians were no holier than their married sisters and brothers, Jerome, Ambrose, and Augustine, three future saints of the church, attacked him, while Pope Siricius of Rome denounced and excommunicated Jovinian for his "heresy." In Chapter 4 I explore what motivated men—and especially women—to embrace that ascetic life; and what kinds of freedom its advocates did indeed find in choosing celibacy.

From these explorations I came to see that for nearly the first four hundred years of our era, Christians regarded *freedom* as the primary message of Genesis 1–3—freedom in its many forms, including free will, freedom from demonic powers, freedom from social and sexual obligations, freedom from tyrannical government and from fate; and self-mastery as the source of such freedom. With Augustine, as I show in Chapter 5, this message changed. In the late fourth century, Augustine was living in an entirely different Christian world—one that Justin and his contemporaries could hardly have imagined—for Christianity was no longer a dissident sect. The Christian movement, having been oppressed and persecuted by Rome for some three hundred years, over several generations, with Constantine's conversion in 313, came into imperial favor and, throughout the later fourth century, consolidated its new position as the official religion of the empire. Christian bishops, once targets for arrest, torture, and execution, now received tax exemptions, gifts from the imperial treasury, prestige, and even influence at court; their churches gained new wealth, power, and prominence. Some

Christians, who once defiantly proclaimed their freedom against their persecutors, now found that their old rhetoric—and even their traditional understanding of human nature and its relation to social and political order—no longer applied to this new circumstance, which made them allies of the emperor. In a world in which Christians not only were free to follow their faith but were officially encouraged to do so, Augustine came to read the story of Adam and Eve very differently than had the majority of his Jewish and Christian predecessors. What they had read for centuries as a story of human freedom became, in his hands, a story of human bondage. Most Jews and Christians had agreed that God gave humankind in creation the gift of moral freedom, and that Adam's misuse of it brought death upon his progeny. But Augustine went further: Adam's sin not only caused our mortality but cost us our moral freedom, irreversibly corrupted our experience of sexuality (which Augustine tended to identify with original sin), and made us incapable of genuine political freedom. Furthermore, Augustine read back into Paul's letters his own teaching of the moral impotence of the human will,[4] along with his sexualized interpretation of sin.

Augustine's theory of original sin not only proved politically expedient, since it persuaded many of his contemporaries that human beings universally need external government—which meant, in their case, both a Christian state and an imperially supported church—but also offered an analysis of human nature that became, for better and worse, the heritage of all subsequent generations of western Christians and the major influence on their psychological and political thinking. Even today, many people, Catholics and Protestants alike, regard the story of Adam and Eve as virtually synonymous with original sin. During Augustine's own lifetime, as we shall see, various Christians objected to his radical theory, and others bitterly contested it; but within the next few generations, Christians who held to more traditional views of human freedom were themselves condemned as heretics.

Augustine spent the last twelve years of his life battling for his interpretation of Genesis against a young Christian bishop, Julian of Eclanum, who attacked and criticized his theory of original sin not only as an abrupt departure from orthodox Christian thought but as Manichaean heresy, the very heresy that Augustine had once admired and later attacked. When Julian challenged Augustine to define what is "nature"—human nature and nature in general—Augustine replied that mortality and sexual desire are not "natural";

both, he insists, entered into human experience only to punish Adam's sin. Chapter 6 considers this debate on the nature of nature and suggests ways in which Augustine's views—antinatural and even preposterous as they will appear to many readers—nevertheless became deeply rooted in our cultural attitudes toward suffering and death.

One of my colleagues, misunderstanding the viewpoint presented here and in my previous book, *The Gnostic Gospels,* has objected that religious ideas cannot be reduced to practical (or, in his words, political) agendas. On this I wholeheartedly agree with him. I am not saying that religious ideas are nothing but a cover for political motives, as if, for example, Christians in the fourth century first chose to join forces with the Roman state and then adopted the doctrine of original sin to justify their new political direction. Instead, I intend to show that religious insights and moral choices, in actual experience, coincide with practical ones. Scholars and theologians may separate them theoretically, but at the cost of distorting our understanding: in our actual experience—as in that of Christians in the first four centuries—moral choices often are political choices. An act of religious affirmation is always, in some sense, a practical and consequential act.

Some readers may ask, "Are you saying, then, that biblical interpretation is nothing but projection? Is *exegesis* (what one reads out of the text) merely *eisegesis* (reading into the text)?" Certainly not; but anyone concerned with the history of hermeneutics confronts the question of interpretation, a question biblical interpreters share with lawyers who debate the meaning of the Constitution, with psychiatrists as they reflect upon their interpretation of case histories, and with anthropologists and historians who ponder their data. What I am thinking of is what the anthropologist Foucault calls "the politics of truth"—that is, that what each of us perceives and acts upon as true has much to do with our situation, social, political, cultural, religious, or philosophical.

Those who are unfamiliar with biblical interpretation or cynical about it may assume that the controversies and diverging interpretations described here merely confirm what they have suspected all along: that biblical interpretation is no more than ideology under a different name. Yet those who seriously confront the Bible will realize that genuine interpretation has always required that the reader actively and imaginatively engage the texts. Through the process of interpretation, the reader's living experience comes to be

woven into ancient texts, so that what was "dead letter" again comes to life.

What I intend to show in this book is how certain ideas—in particular, ideas concerning sexuality, moral freedom, and human value—took their definitive form during the first four centuries as interpretations of the Genesis creation stories, and how they have continued to affect our culture and everyone in it, Christian or not, ever since.