

THREADS OF FALLENNESS ACCORDING TO THE FATHERS OF THE FIRST FOUR CENTURIES

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This paper is not about Augustine. Far too often have the early Fathers been read as a mere preparation for Augustine, as the sources of his mature formulation of ‘original sin’.¹ They are seen as the connection between Scripture and Augustine, the thread connecting the two, preparing the way for him and leading up to him. We read them as the one rope, maybe composed of various strands, yet rolled tightly together to provide a strong cord for Augustine with which he can tie up, bind, and chain the human condition. Yet, does that thread really hold? Is it not unravelling at every seam when we take a closer look at the early Fathers? Is it the right consistency for the leash to which Augustine connects our

¹ We tend to read our own concepts and categories back into the early Fathers, often ignoring their contexts and essential concerns. Thus, we attempt to find ‘original sin’ in the Fathers by selecting isolated proof texts and discovering what they may or may not claim regarding a problem that did not really pose itself to the first three or four centuries of the Church. This is what, for example, seems to happen in N P Williams’ *The Ideas of the Fall and of Original Sin: A Historical and Critical Study* (London: Longmans, Green and Co Ltd, 1927). He adopts an interpretation of religious temperament from William James (‘once-born’ versus ‘twice-born’) and imposes these categories on the early Fathers in a most unhappy fashion (see, for example, p 169). Another instance of his reading *into* the early Fathers is his strenuous defence of the Vincentian Canon in light of the clear admission that nothing like original sin or even a ‘fall-theory’ is to be found in the Apostolic Fathers (ibid, 178-188). To the later Fathers, Williams consistently applies certain pre-established categories and questions which in my estimation lead to, or at least enable, the distorted results of his findings (ibid, 168-169; applied throughout, e.g. 246). As I disagree with Williams on almost every page of his treatment, I will leave it at these general remarks and not argue with his particular treatments of individual Fathers (ibid, 165-314).

While we can obviously not approach the Fathers in a vacuum or ever completely divest ourselves of our own presuppositions and concerns, it seems to me that it would be more profitable to listen to their essential visions and emphases and extrapolate within that context what they might have had to say about our topic, had they been questioned about it. Thus, this paper will not be an accumulation of isolated references regarding some rudimentary or preparatory notion of ‘original sin’, but I will instead attempt to outline several of the early Fathers’ presentations on the human condition and attempt to arrive at a sense of what they might have held to be most essential parameters about the topic with which we are concerned. See Jacques Liébaert who voices this concern and then attempts to articulate what he regards as the Father’s essential concerns. Jacques Liébaert, ‘La tradition Patristique jusqu’au Ve siècle’, in: Paul Guilluy, *La Culpabilité Fondamentale: Péché originel et anthropologie moderne* (Lille: Éditions J Duculot, 1975), 35-43. See also an article by Gerald Bray who attempts to set a context for the manner in which the early Fathers might have seen the question of sin and the Fall. Gerald Bray, ‘Original Sin in Patristic Thought’, *Churchman* 108 (1994), 1:37ff. David Weaver provides an overview analysis of the exegesis of Rom. 5:12 in Patristic Thought. Unfortunately, however, he relies heavily on secondary sources (mostly Rondet, Tennant, and Pelikan’s *The Christian Tradition*). David Weaver, ‘From Paul to Augustine: Romans 5:12 in Early Christian Exegesis’, *St. Vladimir’s Theological Quarterly* 27 (1983), 187-206.

condition? Is the rope strong enough to serve as the hangman's noose, which he fastens around the neck of the human creature? This paper does not attempt to answer that question. It does not wish to read Augustine back into the early Fathers, as difficult as that may be, nor does it wish to prepare the way for him.²

The early Fathers do not all pull at the same strand. The rope is torn and fragmented at many places. In fact, there is no single, monolithic stance about the nature of Adam, the first sin, its results, or much else connected with the topic in the early Fathers. They differ about sin's consequences, its universality, and its nature. They have various opinions on the historicity of Adam and on the condition of the pre-Adamic state.³ The only thing they are agreed upon is that there was indeed a first sin, but they already disagree about who committed it.⁴ So instead of finding the one common thread weaving through all the Fathers, the one cord with which to tie them all together, let us unravel the knot by following a few of the different strands, a few of the ways of handling that rope that connects us to Adam or defines our human condition. The strands, with which

² Within the narrow confines of this paper, I am obviously not able to articulate every early Father's doctrine of sin or even that of most. For a more detailed and thorough treatment, see: Julius Gross, *Entstehungsgeschichte des Erbsündendogmas: Von der Bibel bis Augustinus* (München: Ernst Reinhardt Verlag, 1960), 69-255; F R Tennant, *The Sources of the Doctrines of the Fall and Original Sin* (New York: Schocken Books, 1903), 273-345; or Henri Rondet, *Original Sin: The Patristic and Theological Background*, trans. Cajetan Finegan (New York: Alba House, 1972), 25-100. Apart from Gross's singularly weak and confusing treatment of Athanasius, it provides a good and well-argued introduction to most of the early Fathers. Admittedly, however, Gross is as dogmatic in his constant rejection of the Tridentine formulations as is Williams in his endorsement of the doctrine. Tennant takes more space to examine and articulate the differences in various Fathers' conceptions of the state in which Adam was before he fell, a subject closely related to the topic under examination (especially if one wishes to see it in light of medieval developments), but to which I have not been able to accord much space except for a few passing references. Rondet seems by far the most impartial of the four and provides the most context for his quotations from the Fathers.

Obviously, I also had to make a selection in this paper regarding which Fathers to include. I have decided to deal with the most significant Fathers up to and including the Cappadocians, which in a sense appear as the culmination of their period. With Augustine we enter into another period with different concerns. Hieronymus, Ambrose, and Theodore of Mopsuestia are thus not included, as they are almost contemporary with Augustine and seem to share his concerns. All quotations from the Fathers (unless otherwise indicated) refer to: *Ante-Nicene Fathers*, ed. Alexander Roberts and James Donaldson (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson Publishers, Inc, 1994) [for quotations from Clement of Rome, Papias, Polycarp, *Shepherd of Hermas*, *Epistle of Diognetus*, Justin, Tatian, Ignatius, Irenaeus, Clement of Alexandria, Tertullian, Hippolytus, Athenagoras, Theophilus, Origen, Cyprian, Novatian, Gregory Thaumaturgus, and Methodius], or to: *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers*, Second Series, ed Philip Schaff and Henry Wace (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson Publishers, Inc, 1994) [for Athanasius, Hilary, Cyril, Basil, Gregory of Nyssa, and Gregory Nazianzen]. In each case, the volume, page number, and column (a or b) for the English translation of these particular editions are indicated in parentheses.

³ This becomes an important issue later on. The earliest Fathers are generally oblivious to its relationship to any developed doctrine of sin and salvation. Only later (e.g. in the Cappadocians) do they engage in speculations about the pre-Adamic state. Herbert Haag, in summarising contemporary catechetical teaching regarding the doctrine of 'Erbsünde', points out the priority of the issue for the formulation of original sin. Herbert Haag, *Biblische Schöpfunglehre und kirchliche Erbsündenlehre* in: *Stuttgarter Bibelstudien* 10 (Stuttgart: Verlag Katholisches Bibelwerk, 1967).

⁴ See Liébaert, 'Tradition Patristique', 35, who accounts for this diversity.

we are concerned, are not always entirely disconnected, yet they are of different colour and consistency. They may interweave at times, yet the pattern traced is multifaceted and diverse. We will find ourselves first in the fetters of Irenaeus, then traverse Tertullian's dividing line. We shall trace Origen's elastic band and the umbilical cord of Methodius. We will balance the tightrope with Athanasius and pick up the threads of unravelling embroidery in the Cappadocians. Let these six strands, then, stand as representative of the early Fathers.⁵

IRENÆUS: SIN AND SATAN

Irenaeus' strand is held tightly in the teeth of the serpent. The association of sin and the devil or demons is indeed an early one. Many of the first Fathers have a strongly expressed demonology. Justin Martyr's writings are drenched with references to the devil (and demons) attempting to draw us onto their side.⁶ He already asserts that the power of the serpent occasioned the transgression of Adam.⁷ Satan 'fell with a great overthrow, because he deceived Eve'.⁸ Irenaeus, however, is the first extended treatment that connects the devil to the Adamic story. He spends three lengthy books outlining various Gnostic heresies and finally begins to set forth the true faith. He does so by engaging in a long comparison of the first and second Adam in order to show that Christ recapitulated every single step of the original creation: 'For as by one man's disobedience sin entered and death obtained [a place] through sin; so also by the obedience of one man, righteousness having been introduced, shall cause life to fructify in those persons who in times past were dead'.⁹ Against Marcion who attempts to separate creation and redemption, Irenaeus wants to show that the two are intricately connected, derive from the same God and serve the same purpose and end. Thus, he likens the second to the first Adam, in order to replace the first, or human Adam, with the true Adam, Christ.¹⁰ He engages in a similar

⁵ I am here using these six Fathers as representative of themes that are evident in the early writings overall, as I seek to indicate in the references to other Fathers throughout the paper. Thus, none of these themes are exclusively found in any of the six Fathers, nor does any of them commit himself solely to this theme alone. They rather constitute what appears to me the predominant symbol in their writings.

⁶ Justin, *First Apology* xiv (1:167a). For a detailed analysis of Justin's demonology and its relation to his doctrine of (the beginning of) sin, see Sarah E. Peterson's article 'The Fall and Misogyny in Justin Martyr and Clement of Alexandria' in: *Society and Original Sin: Ecumenical Essays on the Impact of the Fall*, ed. Durwood Foster and Paul Mojzes (New York: Paragon House, 1985), 38-42.

⁷ Justin, *Dialogue with Trypho* xciv (1:246b).

⁸ *Ibid.*, cxxiv (1:262a).

⁹ Irenaeus, *Against Heresies* 3.21.10 (1:454a). For a very instructive treatment of Irenaeus, see: Jaroslav Pelikan, *The Shape of Death: Life, Death, and Immortality in the Early Fathers* (London: Macmillan and Co Ltd, 1962), 101-118.

¹⁰ Gross, and to some extent also Tennant, usually also examine the various notions and degrees of solidarity of the whole human race (with Adam), which finds a diverse and often confused treatment in the Fathers (one cannot actually even call it a 'treatment'; in most cases some type of solidarity or individuality are simply assumed and rarely explicitly articulated). It went beyond the narrow confines of this paper to give that topic diligent attention unless it had direct bearing on the argument, in which case it is obviously noted.

parallel, likening Mary to Eve: ‘Adam became the beginning of those who die, and thus also it was that the knot of Eve’s disobedience was loosed by the obedience of Mary. For what the virgin Eve had bound fast through unbelief, this did the virgin Mary set free through faith’.¹¹ As Christ was born an infant of a virgin, Adam was still an infant and Eve a virgin.¹² As Christ was tempted, Adam was tempted; where the devil triumphed, Christ now triumphs. Christ recapitulates every step of Adam’s story and leads it on to its rightful end where it was supposed to go in the first place. Hippolytus will later engage in many similar parallels. He maintains that Christ was weak and carnal as we are through the weakness of the flesh.¹³ He passed through every state of humiliation in our feeble and weak nature and clothed himself with our infirmity, thus recovering for us what we had lost.¹⁴

Irenaeus, however, employs this context in order to analyse what happened in the garden. Adam and Eve did not only tie themselves in a knot. In fact, they are not really responsible for the bonds now holding us. Adam was still a small child, not yet mature, still weak.¹⁵ The devil not only tempted, but utterly deceived him, and thus carries the responsibility for what happened.¹⁶ The chains of Satan now hold us; even those who have not sinned like Adam are under his rule. The human condition is fettered by the shackles of imprisonment, for which at least Irenaeus does not really hold them responsible. He is careful to point out, that only the serpent was cursed not Adam, because what happened was really the devil’s fault.¹⁷ He contrasts Adam with Cain, showing that Cain committed a real sin because it was his free choice and he knew what he was doing, while Adam was merely deceived and beguiled.¹⁸ The serpent was the ‘prime mover in the guilty deed’.¹⁹ Yet, in consequence of Adam and Eve’s giving in to the serpent, humanity is now under the rule of the devil.²⁰ From that rule, Christ comes to free us. He wages war and crushes the enemy who held Adam captive.²¹ The fall is actually considered a blessing in disguise because it renders us more grateful for the gift of immortality.²²

¹¹ Irenaeus, *Against Heresies* 3.22.4 (1:455b). This parallel is already present in Justin in a rudimentary fashion. Justin, *Dialogue with Trypho* c (1:249a).

¹² Irenaeus, *Against Heresies* 3.22.4 (1:455a).

¹³ Hippolytus, *Fragments* iii (5:238a).

¹⁴ Idem, ‘Against the Heresy of one Noetus’, 17-18 (5:230a).

¹⁵ ‘Man as visualized by Irenaeus is, on the contrary, a young being, looking into the future; the evils—even sins—of life are but growing pains. Paradise, in a way, is less in the past than in the future. The history of man is not that of a laborious ascent after a vertical fall, but a providential progress towards a future that is full of promise.’ Rondet, *Original Sin*, 37-38.

¹⁶ Ibid, 3.23.1-2 (1:456a).

¹⁷ Ibid, 3.23.3 (1:456b).

¹⁸ Ibid, 3.23.4-5 (1:456b-457a).

¹⁹ Ibid, 3.23.5 (1:457a).

²⁰ Ibid, 3.23.2 (1:456a).

²¹ Ibid, 3.23.7 (1:457b).

²² Ibid, 3.20.2 (1:450a).

Though few of the Fathers make the devil solely responsible for the beginning of sin, many of them insist similarly to Irenaeus that humanity was deceived by the devil and is now under his rule. Already Clement of Rome suggests that death entered the world through envy, which is later considered the primary motive for Satan's action.²³ The *Epistle to Diognetius* asserts that 'through the fraud of the serpent Adam and Eve were stripped naked' which it interprets as a loss of knowledge.²⁴ The epistles of Ignatius repeatedly refer to Satan's urging to sin, leading humans into captivity or deceiving Adam.²⁵ The *Epistle of Barnabas* sees transgression as committed by Eve 'through the means of the serpent'.²⁶ Tatian emphasises the fall of the powerful one and his demons.²⁷ Theophilus and Gregory Nazianzen agree with Irenaeus that Adam was merely an infant in the garden and as yet unable to receive knowledge.²⁸ For Theophilus, Satan is the true author of evil; sin does not begin until Cain.²⁹ Athenagoras references the deceit of demons who incite us to evil.³⁰ Clement of Alexandria sees Satan drawing us onto his side from early childhood.³¹ The devil works mischief and attempts to enslave us.³² Hippolytus employs similar strong language for the devil.³³ Satan also figures prominently in Origen's version of the fall. He argues that the serpent deceived and instigated Adam and Eve, seduced Eve and was the cause of their transgression.³⁴ The envy of the devil toward God's creation of the first human and consequent attempt to destroy humanity is emphasised by Tertullian,³⁵ Methodius,³⁶ Athanasius,³⁷ Cyril,³⁸ Gregory of Nyssa³⁹ and Gregory Nazianzen.⁴⁰ Irenaeus' strand of the story thus becomes a fetter, shackles, a bond with which he ties us, while simultaneously assuring us that Christ has untied the bond, broken the shackles, destroyed the fetters.

²³ Clement of Rome, 'First Epistle of Clement' iv (1:6a).

²⁴ *Epistle to Diognetius* xii (1:30a).

²⁵ Ignatius, 'Epistle to the Ephesians' xiii, xvii (1:55, 56), Idem, 'Epistle to the Magnesians' x (1:71).

²⁶ *Epistle of Barnabas* xii (1:145a).

²⁷ Tatian, *Address to the Greeks* vii, xx (2:68a; 2:74a).

²⁸ Theophilus, *To Autolycus* xxv (2:104b); Gregory Nazianzen, 'On the Theophany' xii (7:348b).

²⁹ Theophilus, *To Autolycus* xxix (2:105b).

³⁰ Athenagoras, *A Plea for the Christians* xxvii (2:143b).

³¹ Clement of Alexandria, *Exhortation to the Heathens* i (2:173b).

³² Idem, *Stromata* 2.13 (2:360b).

³³ Hippolytus, *Fragments from Commentaries* 6.1, 6.18 (5:191b, 5:192b).

³⁴ Origen, *De Principiis* 3.2.1 (4:328a-b).

³⁵ Tertullian, *Of Patience* v (3:709b).

³⁶ Methodius, *From the Discourse on the Resurrection* vi (6:365b).

³⁷ Athanasius, *De Incarnatione Verbi Dei* 5.2 (4:38b).

³⁸ Cyril of Jerusalem, *Catechetical Lectures* 12.5 (7:73b).

³⁹ Gregory of Nyssa, *The Great Catechism* vi (5:480b).

⁴⁰ Gregory Nazianzen, 'Second Oration on Easter' xxviii (7:433b).

TERTULLIAN: SIN AND BAPTISM

Tertullian's thread in many ways traces that of Irenaeus. He also emphasises the bonds of the devil who has ruined humankind and overthrown our nature.⁴¹ He argues that 'the devil wrestled with and crushed to death, the first human beings'.⁴² Satan attempts to carry us away and corrupt the entire creation.⁴³ The first man was entrapped into breaking the commandment and is now tainted with death.⁴⁴ In fact, for Tertullian, baptism is not so much a cleansing of sin only, but a renunciation of the devil and his powers.⁴⁵ It is a rejection of the bondage of Satan and a taking on of the bondage of Christ. Thus, his strand becomes a dividing line that marks the transferral from one domain of power to the other. Baptism constitutes that crucial moment of traversing the line. It is a moving over from the domain of Satan to the reign of Christ.⁴⁶ That this remained an important aspect of baptismal liturgy can be seen beautifully in Cyril of Jerusalem's homilies on baptism.⁴⁷ Tertullian sees demons at work in many public spaces, in the pollution of places, in the dedication of children to the demons.⁴⁸ The born child is innocent⁴⁹ (that of a believer even holy),⁵⁰ yet demons are present at birth and soon attempt to 'entrap the soul'.⁵¹

However, for Tertullian, we are never under a necessity to sin, only under a necessity to remain holy.⁵² Much has been made of Tertullian's traducianism.⁵³ However, he argues repeatedly that neither the spirit of God nor that of the devil is naturally implanted in human souls at birth and that thus, 'the soul must evidently exist apart and alone'.⁵⁴ In his *Apology* he praises the soul who is 'by nature Christian'.⁵⁵ In some sense, the soul has indeed been derived from Adam as its root and is since propagated (a stance Origen and many others will later reject).⁵⁶ Adam is the mould and fountainhead of the human race.⁵⁷ Yet, Tertullian repeatedly asserts rather strongly the innocence of children.⁵⁸ A delay

⁴¹ Tertullian, *Apology* xxii (3:36b); Idem, , *De Spectaculis* ii (3:80b).

⁴² Idem, *De Spectaculis* xviii (3:87b).

⁴³ Idem, *De Corona* vi (3:96b).

⁴⁴ Idem, *The Soul's Testimony* iii (3:177a).

⁴⁵ Idem, *De Corona* iii (3:94b).

⁴⁶ Idem, *De Spectaculis* iv (3:81b).

⁴⁷ Cyril of Jerusalem, *Catechetical Lectures*.

⁴⁸ Tertullian, *De Spectaculis* viii (3:83b).

⁴⁹ Idem, *De Anima* lvi (3:233a).

⁵⁰ Ibid, xxxix (3:220a).

⁵¹ Ibid, xxxix (3:219b).

⁵² Idem, *De Corona* xi (3:100b).

⁵³ For a standard explication of Tertullian's traducianism and supposedly consequent development of a doctrine of original sin, see Tennant, *Sources*, 328-335. For an even more thorough treatment of his thought on the soul, see Rondet, *Original Sin*, 55-60.

⁵⁴ Tertullian, *De Anima* xi (3:191b).

⁵⁵ Idem, *Apology* xvii (3:32a).

⁵⁶ Idem, *De Anima* xix (3:200a).

⁵⁷ Ibid, xx (3:201b).

⁵⁸ Ibid, xxiv (3: 205a) and references above.

of baptism is to be preferred as the innocent period of life is not in need of remission of sins.⁵⁹ The evil of sin that was developed in Adam ‘must not be accounted a natural disposition’. It is only incidental to his nature, not ‘material in him’.⁶⁰ He rejects the idea that a germ of evil could be an integral part of a person’s constitution.⁶¹ Only actions of the flesh are censored, not its substance.⁶² Flesh is not per se sinful but has dignity.⁶³ We share in Adam’s transgression in that we participate in his death.⁶⁴ Yet, though death entered the world through Adam, we are responsible for our own actions.⁶⁵ The soul is punished for individual sins only.⁶⁶

This is seen most clearly in Tertullian’s statements concerning Christ’s nature. There is no difference in substance between Adam’s flesh and Christ’s spirit.⁶⁷ Christ received from Adam his very flesh, ‘the same flesh as that whose nature in man is sinful. In the flesh, therefore, we say that sin has been abolished, because in Christ that same flesh is maintained without sin, which in man was not maintained without sin’.⁶⁸ Christ put on our flesh, made it his own and thus made it sinless.⁶⁹ Christ would have been unable to communicate with us, if he had not shared our emotions and affections.⁷⁰ For Tertullian, ‘it was necessary that Christ should come forth for the salvation of man, in that condition of flesh into which man had entered ever since his condemnation’.⁷¹ Tertullian is incensed by any suggestion that the devil should ‘be understood to be stronger for injuring man,

⁵⁹ Idem, *On Baptism* xviii (3: 678a). For a relatively concise summary of the practice of infant baptism in the early Church (that judges infant baptism as an early and wide-spread practice), see S. Trooster, *Evolution and the Doctrine of Original Sin*, trans John A. TerHaar (New York: Newman Press, 1965), 90-111. His consequent link of infant baptism and original sin appears a rather shaky ground for the doctrine, as even a proven practice of the baptism of young children and infants does not yet establish that this baptism was indeed meant to be for ‘the forgiveness of sins’. In fact, the almost universal affirmation of the innocence of children contradicts this explicitly. It seems to me that we must instead recover some of the other ancient theological aspects of baptism that we appear to have since lost, such as a renunciation of evil powers and other bonding forces, a dedication to God, a becoming part of the people of God, and chrismation or initiation to holiness of life which all seem far more positive and theocentric than our standard interpretation (which seems to make one aspect of the original meaning exclusive). See also an interesting note in Bray’s article who claims that the Greek Fathers considered forgiveness of sins the result of adult baptism and the gift of life the result of infant baptism. Bray, ‘Patristic Thought’, 43. Unfortunately, he gives no reference for this distinction.

⁶⁰ Tertullian, *De Anima* xxi (3:201b).

⁶¹ Ibid, xxi (3:202a).

⁶² Idem, *On the Resurrection of the Flesh* x (3:552b).

⁶³ Idem, *De Anima* xl (3:220b); Idem, *On the Resurrection of the Flesh* xv, xviii (3:555b, 557b).

⁶⁴ Idem, *On the Resurrection of the Flesh* xlvi (3:581-2).

⁶⁵ Idem, *Against Marcion* 2.6 (3:302b).

⁶⁶ Idem, *On the Resurrection of the Flesh* xvii (3:557a).

⁶⁷ Idem, *On the Flesh of Christ* viii (3:528b).

⁶⁸ Ibid, xvi (3:535b).

⁶⁹ Ibid, vxi (3:536a).

⁷⁰ Idem, *Against Marcion* 2.27 (3:318a).

⁷¹ Idem, *On the Flesh of Christ* vxii (3:536b).

ruining him wholly'.⁷² Whatever had been destroyed by Satan, is wholly saved in Christ.

Only an evil *deed* deserves to be called sin.⁷³ The repentance leading up to baptism is for committed sins and after repentance one is to live a holy life.⁷⁴ A second repentance, after baptism has been undergone, is possible only because the devil so strongly attempts to subvert our faith and is often successful.⁷⁵ Yet, as Adam, our fountainhead, was restored by repentance, we are to be washed in baptism and then remain clean.⁷⁶ We are defiled by sins and must be cleansed in the waters of baptism.⁷⁷ Confession and baptism thus make 'satisfaction for our former sins'.⁷⁸ As, according to Tertullian, sin is friendship with the devil, baptism implies both a rejection of sin and a complete renunciation of the devil.⁷⁹ Baptism marks that dividing line between one sphere of loyalty and another. The devil is overwhelmed in the water.⁸⁰ After baptism sin ought to be a sheer impossibility because it clearly implies a return to the devil's side. Baptism seals and confirms our faith.⁸¹

For Tertullian, baptism is fundamental in freeing us from sin and entering us into a holy life. One who departs from perfect purity deserves no longer to be called a Christian. This theme was already evident in the *Shepherd of Hermas*⁸² and in Justin Martyr⁸³ and becomes even more prominent after Tertullian. Hippolytus argues that baptism works deification and endows humans with immortality.⁸⁴ Cyprian explains that it washes the stains of former years away.⁸⁵ It remits committed sins.⁸⁶ He exhorts the catechumens on the verge of baptism: 'Let each acknowledge his own sins'⁸⁷ and argues that 'everyone is held fast in his own sins, nor can one become guilty for another'.⁸⁸ Novatian affirms that in baptism

⁷² Idem, *On the Resurrection of the Flesh* xxxiv (3:569b).

⁷³ Idem, *On Repentance* ii (3:658b).

⁷⁴ Ibid, ii, v (3:658b, 660).

⁷⁵ Ibid, vii (3:663a).

⁷⁶ Ibid, xii (3:666b).

⁷⁷ Idem, *On Baptism* iv (3:671a).

⁷⁸ Ibid, xx (3:679a).

⁷⁹ Idem, *On Repentance* v (3:661a).

⁸⁰ Idem, *On Baptism* ix (3:673b).

⁸¹ Idem, *On Repentance* vi (3:662a). In another context Tertullian mentions four aspects of baptism: deliverance from death, remission of sins, regeneration, and bestowal of the Holy Spirit. Idem, *Against Marcion* 1.28.2 (3:293b).

⁸² E.g. *Pastor of Hermas* 2.2 (2:11b).

⁸³ E.g. Justin *First Apology* lxi (1:183b).

⁸⁴ Hippolytus, *Discourse on the Holy Theophany* 8 (5:237a).

⁸⁵ Cyprian, *Epistles* I.5 (5:276b)

⁸⁶ Ibid, LXIX-LXXV (5:375-402).

⁸⁷ Ibid, VII.7 (5:287a).

⁸⁸ Ibid, LI.27 (5:334b). There is, indeed, one reference in Cyprian that asserts something like original sin in infants and is universally quoted in support for the doctrine. In a letter to Fidus, Cyprian argues for infant baptism with the rationale that 'how much rather ought we to shrink from hindering an infant, who, being lately born, has not sinned, except that, being born after the flesh according to Adam, he has

the ‘flesh is raised up and returns to salvation, by being recalled to the condition of innocence’.⁸⁹ Mortality is what is put off. Gregory of Nyssa comments on baptism that ‘we do bring back, by royal grace, him who bears the scars of sin, and has grown old in evil habits, to the innocence of the babe. For as the child new-born is free from accusations and from penalties, so too the child of regeneration has nothing for which to answer, being released by royal bounty from accountability’.⁹⁰ Basil remarks that in baptism our enmity dies to God.⁹¹ The imagery of baptism as dying and being raised reflects our putting off the Adamic death and being quickened to life.⁹² Cyril compares the putting off of garments and consequent nakedness in baptism with Christ’s carrying the garments of the old man and putting them off on the cross.⁹³

Baptism thus becomes a powerful imagery for the boundary line that divides the old life from the new. Tertullian’s thread has described sin as that which keeps us outside the sphere of Christ. The waters of baptism allow us to join his side. We must make sure that we remain on Christ’s side of the rope and do not allow ourselves to be pulled back into sin. Effort and strength of will is required for traversing the dividing line.

Let us now examine a cord, that although of a texture totally unlike that of Tertullian, emphasises that aspect of our condition: our ability to choose.

ORIGEN: SIN AND FREE WILL

Free will is a thread that is woven through most, if not all, of the early Fathers. Origen’s strand of this kind is the strongest and the most elastic. For Origen, humans are said to have sinned from the time they are made capable of understanding and knowledge, ‘when the reason implanted within has suggested to them the difference between good and evil, and after they have already begun to know what evil is, they are made liable to sin, if they commit it’.⁹⁴ All

contracted the contagion of the ancient death at its earliest birth, who approaches the more easily on this very account to the reception of the forgiveness of sins--that to him are remitted, not his own sins, but the sins of another’. Cyprian, *Epistles* LVIII.5 (5:354b). From Augustine onward this has been quoted as firm support for the doctrine of the eternal damnation of unbaptised infants and hereditary original sin. It is, however, the only reference to anything of the kind in Cyprian who usually strongly advocates free will and repeatedly asserts the innocence of children in other contexts without speaking of their being stained. It seems to me rather slender evidence on which to base an entire doctrine, especially in light of the other statements quoted in the text above, of which many more examples could be found. Even regarding this one quote, Gross argues convincingly that the ‘sins of another’ that are attributed to infants in this context refer to the generic results of Adam’s sin, like death, and an inclination to weakness or bad desires. Cyprian regards baptism not just as remission of sins but as entrance into the church and thus advocates infant baptism. Gross, *Entstehungsgeschichte*, 122f.

⁸⁹ Novatian, *Treatise Concerning the Trinity* x (5:620a).

⁹⁰ Gregory of Nyssa, *On the Baptism of Christ* (5:519a).

⁹¹ Basil, *On the Spirit* 14.31 (8:20a).

⁹² *Ibid*, 15.35 (8:22a).

⁹³ Cyril of Jerusalem, *Catechetical Lectures* XX.2 (7:147a).

⁹⁴ Origen, *De Principiis* 1.3.6 (4:254a).

creatures are capable of choice and even of re-learning praiseworthy behaviour, including the devil.⁹⁵ No one is by nature either pure in essence or polluted.⁹⁶ It lies entirely 'within ourselves and our own actions to possess either happiness or holiness; or by sloth and negligence to fall from happiness into wickedness and ruin'.⁹⁷ He maintains that 'a soul is always in possession of free-will, as well when it is in the body as when it is without it; and freedom of will is always directed to good or evil'.⁹⁸ These fundamental assertions which he repeats in various versions lead to his extremely fascinating speculations regarding creation, fall, and redemption.

⁹⁵ Ibid, 1.5.1ff (4:256f).

⁹⁶ Ibid, 1.5.5 (4:260a).

⁹⁷ Ibid, 1.5.5 (4:260a).

⁹⁸ Ibid, 3.4.5 (4:337a).

Origen⁹⁹ treats the Genesis story either entirely allegorically or as representative of humans as such, Adam merely standing for what ‘is common to all’.¹⁰⁰

⁹⁹ Williams and many others have divided their treatment of Origen into two periods in which he is supposed to have held two distinct and contradictory opinions about sin. They thus distinguish between his Alexandrian and his Caesarean period and claim that Origen’s encounter with infant baptism led to his affirmation of an ‘Augustinian’ version of original sin. Apart from the anachronism of the label, I find this schizophrenic treatment of Origen misguided and not clearly demonstrable by the sources. For the classic presentation of Origen’s supposed views, see Williams, *Ideas of the Fall*, 209-231. For a more balanced treatment of Origen, see Rondet, *Original Sin*, 70-84. For a detailed argument and a defence of his rejection of any notion of original sin, see Gross, *Entstehungsgeschichte*, 99-109. At the end of his study of the sources, Gross argues: ‘Die Sündhaftigkeit aller Menschen unter Einschluß der Kleinkinder ist für Origenes eine durch die Schrift und die Praxis der Kindertaufe garantierte Tatsache. Seine beiden Versuche, diese Tatsache zu erklären, lassen sich nicht harmonisieren. Sicher ist, daß keiner von beiden mit einer Vererbung der Ursünde das geringste zu tun hat’. [The sinfulness of all humankind including small children is for Origen a fact guaranteed by both Scripture and the practice of infant baptism. His two attempts to explain this fact cannot be harmonised. What is sure, is that neither of them has anything at all to do with a hereditary notion of original sin.], *ibid*, 107. Tennant attributes the first articulation of this theory of Origen’s development and encounter with infant baptism in Caesarea, which led to his subsequent change of views, to Dr. Bigg’s *Christian Platonists of Alexandria* and its dissemination to Prof Harnack. Tennant, *Sources*, 299.

This, however, seems a faulty argument if one later puts much stake (as is usually done in the argument) on Origen’s avowal of infant baptism as *a universal practice* of the Church. If he first came in contact with infant baptism in Caesarea (after having already taught in Alexandria, talked to students from all areas of Christendom and himself having travelled widely), he could hardly then describe it as a universal practice. Either the practice was not universal (and the statement is a later interpolation by Rufinus who himself often admits to amending Origen’s text in light of (Western) Church practice and belief; see his introduction as translator of *De Principiis*) or infant baptism was indeed a universal practice and Origen did *not* first encounter the practice in Caesarea. In the latter case, he must clearly have been aware of the practice already in Alexandria where he formulated his strongest doctrines of free will and personal responsibility and it can thus not have affected those views significantly. In either case, the argument that seeks to make infant baptism a starting point for Origen to develop an ‘Augustinian’ notion of original sin is not based on valid reasoning.

Furthermore, the texts themselves do not seem able to carry the weight that is put upon them. The text, to which one is usually referred, stems from Origen’s homilies on Leviticus, specifically from an explanation attempting to elucidate why mothers have to undergo a period of purification after the birth of a child. Apart from the questionable exegesis (at least in light of today’s scholarship), one should read the short paragraph in the context of the entire homily which strongly affirms free will. Origen also reminds us in the same context of the infant Christ who is brought to the temple for purification. He argues that Christ shares a certain stain with us. Origen, *Homilies on Leviticus 1-16*, trans. Gary Wayne Barkley (Washington: The Catholic University of America Press, 1990), Homily VIII, 153-175. For a closer examination of Origen’s use of the term ‘sordes’ and its connotations in his work, see Tennant, *Sources*, 300-303, and Gross, *Entstehungsgeschichte*, 105-107, for two opposing interpretations. See Rondet for an excellent selection of most of the relevant passages from Origen’s commentaries on Genesis, Leviticus, John, Luke, and Romans.

Most of the works of Origen now extant, especially his commentaries on Scripture, only survive in a Latin translation by Rufinus of Aquileia. For a concise treatment of Rufinus’ reliability as a translator, see the introduction by Ronald Heine in Origen, *The Fathers of the Church: Homilies on Genesis and Exodus*, trans. Ronald E. Heine (Washington: Catholic University of America Press, 1981), 27-39. He generally defends Rufinus against accusations of forgery. In what sense that also applies to the above passages on infant baptism, however, remains questionable.

¹⁰⁰ The fall story does not even seem important enough to deserve mention in his homilies on Genesis. Apparently Abraham’s marrying Ketura and Isaac’s digging of wells has more relevance for Christian faith than Genesis 3. Origen, *Homilies on Genesis*, in *The Fathers of the Church: Homilies on Genesis*

Origen's version of the fall happens before the creation of this present world.¹⁰¹ He maintains as fundamental that every creature was created with free will and made a choice for good or evil. Those who chose good became angels, those who chose evil became demons. Humans are those souls who ended up suspended halfway between angels and devils and they have the capacity to become either by the further choices they make.¹⁰² The differences in this world are due to the free choices of souls in either this world or a prior one. Angels and devils fight for our loyalty but it is quite within our reach to 'cast away from us wicked suggestions and resist the vile inducements and to do nothing that is at all deserving of blame'.¹⁰³ In each succeeding world, the free wills have the opportunity to return again to God and finally all will do so, including Satan.¹⁰⁴ The condition of all rational creatures is that of an elastic band, originating from God, pulling away from him, bouncing back, pulling away again, but ultimately always returning to its origin.

Although various aspects of Origen's elastic view of creation and redemption was condemned as heretical, all the early Fathers resonate his emphasis on free will. Already Ignatius stresses that human nature can by its own choice belong either to God or to the devil.¹⁰⁵ Justin argues that 'unless the human race has the power of avoiding evil and choosing good by free choice, they are not accountable for their actions, of whatever kind they be'.¹⁰⁶ It is the nature of everything created 'to be capable of vice and virtue'.¹⁰⁷ Athenagoras and Theophilus maintain the same in almost identical words.¹⁰⁸ Irenaeus declares us free and responsible agents.¹⁰⁹ Tatian finds the wicked man 'depraved through his own fault'. yet still able to reject wickedness.¹¹⁰ Clement of Alexandria not only points out human free choice,¹¹¹ but asserts that the true Christian Gnostic makes virtue such a habit that he 'never falls into sins'.¹¹² We live under Adam's sin by similarity only.¹¹³

and *Exodus*, trans. Ronald E. Heine (Washington: Catholic University of America Press, 1981). He goes to great lengths to explain away God's hardening of Pharaoh's heart or the sin of the Fathers being punished until the third generation. Origen, *Homilies on Exodus*, *ibid*, Homily IV, 261-263, and Homily VIII, 328-333.

¹⁰¹ For a more detailed treatment of Origen's teaching, see Pelikan, *The Shape of Death*, 77-97.

¹⁰² Origen, *De Principiis* 1.8.4 (4:266-7).

¹⁰³ *Ibid*, 3.2.4 (4:332a).

¹⁰⁴ *Ibid*, 4.1 (4:380-382).

¹⁰⁵ Ignatius, 'Epistle to the Magnesians' v (1:61).

¹⁰⁶ Justin, *First Apology* xliii (1:177a).

¹⁰⁷ *Idem*, *Second Apology* vii (1:190b).

¹⁰⁸ Theophilus, *To Autolytus* xi (2:114b); Athenagoras, *A Plea for the Christians* xxiv (2:142a).

¹⁰⁹ Irenaeus, *Against Heresies* 4.39.1-4 (1:522b-523).

¹¹⁰ Tatian, *Address to the Greeks* vii (2:67b).

¹¹¹ E.g., Clement of Alexandria, *Stromata* 7.2 (2:526a).

¹¹² *Ibid*, 7.7 (2:536a; 544b). For a more detailed discussion of Clement's view on the fall, see Peterson, who regards free will as an important aspect of Clement's thought on this subject. Peterson, 'Fall and Misogyny', 42-48.

¹¹³ Clement of Alexandria, *Fragments* 2 (2:573b). Clement specifically argues against a transmission of guilt, otherwise Christ would have inherited the same guilt. *Idem*, *Stromata* 3.27 (2:400b-401a).

Hippolytus argues, 'But man, from the fact of his possessing a capacity of self-determination, brings forth what is evil, that is, accidentally; which evil is not consummated except you actually commit some piece of wickedness...man possesses the capacity of self-determination, inasmuch as he is able to will and not to will, and is endued with the power to do both'.¹¹⁴ Methodius maintains that the human being 'is so tempered as possessing free-will, and not by nature evil...he who lives according to the nature which belongs to him, in no way sins'.¹¹⁵ He quotes Paul from Romans 7, 'I am carnal, sold under sin' and interprets it as meaning, 'But I being carnal, and being placed between good and evil as a voluntary agent, am so that I may have it in my power to choose what I will'.¹¹⁶ Basil admonishes us, 'Evil is not a living animated essence; it is the condition of the soul opposed to virtue, developed in the careless on account of their falling away from good. Do not then go beyond yourself to seek for evil, and imagine that there is an original nature of wickedness. Each of us, let us acknowledge it, is the first author of our own vice...You are master of your actions. Do not look for the guiding cause beyond yourself, but recognise that evil, rightly so called, has no other origin than our voluntary falls'.¹¹⁷ Virtue and vice are entirely a matter of choice.¹¹⁸ Gregory Nazianzen affirms the same.¹¹⁹

Thus, although the particular colour of Origen's elastic band was relegated outside the orthodoxy of the Christian cord, its elasticity was retained. His strand of the story is separated and isolated in some respects, yet very much part of the overall embroidery in others.

Let us move on to another solitary strand with a most fascinating texture, the umbilical cord of Methodius.

METHODIUS: SIN AND SEX

Methodius' cord was woven in interaction with and response to Origen's band, often in purposeful distinction and refutation of his. Considering our particular topic, however, his cord is a unique and interesting one of its own. Its similarity or explicit opposition to Origen is not always immediately apparent, nor of particular concern for our topic. Despite strong ascetic tendencies in the Fathers overall, Methodius is the one who ties up the human condition with its umbilical cord, its generation in sexual intercourse and its holiness likened to virginity.

¹¹⁴ Hippolytus, *The Refutation of all Heresies* 10.29 (5:151b-152b).

¹¹⁵ Methodius, *The Banquet of the Ten Virgins* 3.16 (6:343b).

¹¹⁶ Idem, *From the Discourse on the Resurrection* 2.1 (6:371b).

¹¹⁷ Basil, *The Hexaemeron* 2.5 (8:62a).

¹¹⁸ Ibid, 6.7 (8:86a).

¹¹⁹ We are 'to make the good even our own, not only because sown in our nature, but because cultivated by our own choice, and by the motions of our will, free to act in either direction', Gregory Nazianzen, 'In Defence of His Flight to Pontus' 2.17 (7:208b). In a later sermon he affirms a believer: 'but by moving reason in yourself and by kindling the spark of good by your free will, you made yourself a eunuch, and acquired such a habit of virtue that impulse to vice became almost an impossibility with you', idem, 'On the Words of the Gospel' 37.21 (7:344a).

Similar to Irenaeus and others, Methodius sees humanity involved in a process of growth. The beginning of the human race was child-like and has only now come of age into greater reason and enlightenment.¹²⁰ In former times, humanity was not able to attain perfection, which consists in the state of virginity, and thus marriage was given.¹²¹ The move in OT times from polygamy to monogamy is further evidence of this slow growth toward perfection and sexual maturity.¹²²

Methodius almost entirely collapses the common Adam/Christ parallel. Adam is likened to the Son of God. Christ lives in him and remakes him.¹²³ The Evil One is overcome by no other than the one he had originally deceived. Condemnation can only be destroyed if the very same man on whom it was originally pronounced is re-fashioned anew.¹²⁴ The first man was made out of moist clay and thus not hardened enough to withstand temptation. Thus, this very clay is refashioned and hardened in the virgin's womb, so that Christ can recover the immortality for humanity which Adam lost.¹²⁵ This reflection on the connection between Adam and Christ serves as an argument for virginity in which Adam and Eve are regarded as images of Christ and the Church.¹²⁶ The corruption (that is, mortality)¹²⁷ which Adam incurred is likened to a violent river of passions, which is stopped only by the anchor of virginity.¹²⁸ Sin becomes progressively worse after the fall, consequently more virgins are needed to stem this tide of Satanic influence.¹²⁹ Virginity is the only help against corruption, more powerful than the law. Virginity is the only thing that the devil has not been able to imitate and use for his purposes.¹³⁰ Methodius repeatedly assures us that children are born innocent into the world, are undefiled during childhood, and will not sin if they maintain their virginity.¹³¹ The lust of the flesh and the reason of the soul fight for our loyalty, but we are free to (and should) choose virtue over vice.¹³² Greatest is he who has enormous sexual temptations and yet overcomes them and remains chaste.¹³³ As Christ is constantly regarded as a great example of chastity, by extrapolation we can assume that he had enormous sexual temptation also.

¹²⁰ Methodius, *The Banquet of the Ten Virgins* 1.2 (6:311b).

¹²¹ Ibid, 1.4 (6:312b).

¹²² Ibid, 1.3 (6:312a).

¹²³ Ibid, 3.4 (6:318a).

¹²⁴ Ibid, 3.6 (6:318b-319a).

¹²⁵ Ibid, 3.5 (6:318a-b).

¹²⁶ Ibid, 3.8 (6:319b-320a).

¹²⁷ The Greek Fathers often use the term *phthora*, which is usually translated as 'corruption'. It does not have our connotations of moral corruption, however, but refers to the difference between us and God, between human corruption and divine immortality. For a more detailed interpretation of the meaning of *phthora*, see Liébaert, 'Tradition Patristique', 54-55.

¹²⁸ Methodius, *The Banquet of the Ten Virgins* 4.2 (6: 323b).

¹²⁹ Ibid, 7.6 (6:333b). Most Fathers, in fact, observe a gradual growth of sin after the fall.

¹³⁰ Ibid, 10.4 (6:349b).

¹³¹ Ibid, 2.4-5 (6:315a); 5.3-4 (6:326b-327a).

¹³² Ibid, 8.17 (6:343b); Idem, *Concerning Free-Will* (6:362b).

¹³³ Idem, *The Banquet of the Ten Virgins* 11.3 (6:353b-355).

Nothing is evil by nature, only when we practice evil can we be called evil by the consequences of our actions.¹³⁴ Once we have started sinning, however, roots of sin continue to sprout forth even after baptism. Thus, our body must be destroyed after death to entirely dispense with any shoots of sin still present.¹³⁵ Human mortality was given after the fall for this purpose. Physical death removes any imagination of evil that might be tied up with our physical nature, which does not hinder us, however, from living a virtuous life.¹³⁶ The serpent infuses sexual thoughts in us; thus God has given us death so that any temptation to sin and to carnal lust might be destroyed.¹³⁷ Sin dwells in our body through lust.¹³⁸ Virginitly is compared to Platonic love and contrasted with the *Phaedo*. Chastity dries up our moisture and allows us to fly heavenward.¹³⁹ Sin, then, is not transmitted by the umbilical cord, yet likened to it. The one without such a cord, who never produces children, is the one most free from sin.

The body or sexual propagation itself regarded as evil is condemned by many Fathers as an entirely Gnostic stance. Irenaeus rejects the Gnostic thought that materiality and the body as evil could be a result of the fall.¹⁴⁰ Hippolytus recounts a Gnostic (Justinian) myth about Eden and the serpent, in which sex is connected with evil and causes an 'originating principle of evil' in humans.¹⁴¹ He rejects this myth as the most vile and horrible that he has ever heard.¹⁴² Cyril repeatedly reminds us that the body or our members are not sinful and never a cause of sin: 'There is nothing polluted in the human frame...none of the members of the body as formed from the beginning is polluted'.¹⁴³ Origen is convinced that the nature of the body is not impure and does not possess vice.¹⁴⁴

The only Fathers who clearly pick up Methodius' theme are the Cappadocians. Gregory of Nyssa, especially, will see human procreation, any passions, and even the creation of the woman as a consequence of the fall, because the mortality incurred by Adam made a propagation of the race necessary.¹⁴⁵ As we have already mentioned human mortality repeatedly, let us move on to examine that topic in greater detail.

¹³⁴ Idem, *Concerning Free-Will* (6:360b).

¹³⁵ Idem, *From the Discourse on the Resurrection* I.4-5 (6:364b).

¹³⁶ Ibid, I.10 (6:370b).

¹³⁷ Ibid, II.2-3 (6:372a-b).

¹³⁸ Ibid, II.3 (6:372bb-373a).

¹³⁹ Idem, *The Banquet of the Ten Virgins* 7.1-3 (6:334b-336a). The entire dialogue, patterned on Plato's *Symposium*, heavily relies on Platonic imagery and shares with him a certain devaluation of the body. Yet in other contexts, Methodius usually argues against such a negative view of corporeality.

¹⁴⁰ Irenaeus, *Against Heresies* 1.30.9 (1:356b).

¹⁴¹ Hippolytus, *The Refutation of All Heresies* 5.21-23 (5:70-73).

¹⁴² It seems, in fact, that the only clearly articulated doctrine of hereditary or natural sin was that of various Gnostic heresies. Gross appears to suggest as much. Gross, *Entstehungsgeschichte*, 74-75.

¹⁴³ Cyril of Jerusalem, *Catechetical Lectures* XII.26 (7:79a).

¹⁴⁴ Origen, *Against Celsus* 3.42 (4:481a).

¹⁴⁵ Gregory of Nyssa, *On the Making of Man* 17.1-5, 22.4 (5:406-407, 412a).

ATHANASIUS: SIN AND DEATH

Death as a consequence of the first sin appears early on in the Fathers and is often mentioned.¹⁴⁶ Almost all the Fathers somehow connect human mortality with Adam's fall. Already Ignatius regards the Eucharist as a 'medicine of immortality, an antidote against dying, a cleansing remedy that drives away evil'.¹⁴⁷ Justin claims that 'becoming like Adam, we work out death for ourselves'.¹⁴⁸ Corruption, that is death, has become inherent in our nature and thus must be destroyed by Christ.¹⁴⁹ Irenaeus comments on our mortal flesh that needs the antidote of life.¹⁵⁰ Like Methodius, Gregory Nazianzen and others, however, he regards death as an act of compassion on God's part because it sets an end to sin.¹⁵¹ According to Clement of Alexandria, Adam exchanged his immortality for a mortal life, but apparently not even our death is implied in Adam's sentence.¹⁵² Cyprian argues: 'we are all tied and bound with the chain of this sentence, until, death being expunged, we depart from this life'.¹⁵³ According to Methodius, Adam suffered a terrible fall, which reduced him to a state of death.¹⁵⁴ Tatian and Theophilus both emphasise that Adam was able to choose between mortality and immortality and because of his transgression became mortal and finite.¹⁵⁵ Salvation, then, becomes a return to immortality. Cyril cites Adam's sin as the cause of universal death in the manner of an unquestioned notion, which is firmly established.¹⁵⁶

We waited for Athanasius, however, for the most powerful portrayal of the connection of death with the human condition. For Athanasius, humanity upon its creation was in a precarious dance on a tightrope. Created out of nothing, humans are always on the verge of dissolving back into nothingness. As creatures, their nature is weak and entirely dependent on God for their very existence. Adam was created to contemplate God. When he first looked away, his nakedness was evidence of lack of knowledge.¹⁵⁷ Evil is nothingness, a mere aberration, the absence of all that is good, including existence.¹⁵⁸ When the first human transgressed, he made a step off the tightrope into the abyss of

¹⁴⁶ Pelikan's treatment of this topic is most instructive. He considers the teachings regarding death and immortality in Tatian, Clement of Alexandria, Cyprian, Origen, and Irenaeus. Pelikan, *The Shape of Death*.

¹⁴⁷ Ignatius, 'Epistle to the Ephesians' xx (1:57-58).

¹⁴⁸ Justin, *Dialogue with Trypho* cxxiv (1:262a).

¹⁴⁹ Idem, *Fragments* xi (1:301b).

¹⁵⁰ Irenaeus, *Against Heresies* 3.19.1 (1:448b).

¹⁵¹ Ibid, 3.23.7 (1: 457b); Methodius *From the Discourse on the Resurrection* I.1-5 (6:364). Gregory Nazianzen, 'On the Theophany' 38.12 (7:348b).

¹⁵² Clement of Alexandria, *Stomata* 2.19 (2:369a); Idem, *Fragments* 12.1 (2:584b).

¹⁵³ Cyprian, *Treatises* 9.11 (5:487a).

¹⁵⁴ Methodius, *The Banquet of the Ten Virgins* 3.6 (6:318b).

¹⁵⁵ Tatian, *Address to the Greeks* xi, xiii (2:69b, 70a). Theophilus, *To Autolytus* 2.27 (2:105a).

¹⁵⁶ Cyril of Jerusalem, *Catechetical Lectures* 13.2 (7:82a).

¹⁵⁷ Athanasius, *Contra Gentes* 3.3-4 (4:5b).

¹⁵⁸ Ibid, 6.1-5 (4: 6b).

annihilation. Since then, with every evil choice, humanity has moved closer and closer to its own dissolution.¹⁵⁹ Athanasius asserts: ‘Death had the mastery over them as king. For transgression of the commandment was turning them back to their natural state, so that just as they had their being out of nothing, so also, as might be expected, they might look for corruption into nothing in the course of time’.¹⁶⁰ Every evil thought empties the mind further of anything of substance (i.e. God) and becomes crowded with nothingness. Athanasius does maintain that our soul can still grasp the likeness of God, that we can still return to him by filling our minds again with contemplation and pure, simple thoughts and thus stay our dissolution into corruption.¹⁶¹ He reminds us that ‘in the beginning wickedness did not exist. Nor indeed does it exist even now in those who are holy, nor does it in any way belong to their nature. But men later on began to contrive it, and to elaborate it to their own hurt’.¹⁶² Yet, humanity seems to drift further and further into the abyss of darkness. Death gains more and more power, as evil increases.

Christ comes to prevent the human creation from returning to nothing, making it strong and able to stand with God, endowing it with immortality and allowing it to participate in God. He condescends to our corruption, takes on a body of our kind, and endures death for us. ‘Therefore he put on a body, that He might find death in the body and blot it out’.¹⁶³ Hilary, his contemporary, shares these sentiments with Athanasius. He argues, ‘For [Christ] took upon Him *the flesh in which we have sinned* that by wearing our flesh He might forgive sins; a flesh which He shares with us by wearing it, not by sinning in it. He blotted out through death the sentence of death’.¹⁶⁴ According to Athanasius, through his assumption of the human body, Christ recreates and sanctifies our flesh: ‘And thus He, the incorruptible Son of God, being conjoined with all by a like nature, naturally clothed all with incorruption, by the promise of the resurrection’.¹⁶⁵ Although we were originally created perfect and capable of immortality, Christ assumes our imperfect body with all its affections in order to restore it to perfection and immortality and to rid it of affections.¹⁶⁶ Christ became ‘flesh’ for us, so that we can become ‘word’ as he is.¹⁶⁷ He did not just remedy our infirmities but carried them in his flesh.¹⁶⁸

¹⁵⁹ Ibid, 8.2-4 (4:8a).

¹⁶⁰ Idem, *De Incarnatione Verbi Dei* 4.4 (4:38b).

¹⁶¹ Idem, *Contra Gentes* 34.2 (4:22a); Idem, *De Incarnatione Verbi Dei* 4.5-6 (4:38b); 12.5 (4:43a).

¹⁶² Idem, *Contra Gentes* 2.1 (4:4b-5a).

¹⁶³ Idem, *De Incarnatione Verbi Dei* 44.6 (4:60b).

¹⁶⁴ Hilary *De Trinitate* 1.13 (9: 44a); emphasis mine.

¹⁶⁵ Athanasius *De Incarnatione Verbi Dei* 9.2 (4: 41a).

¹⁶⁶ Idem, *Four Discourses Against the Arians* 2.21.66 (4: 384b).

¹⁶⁷ Ibid, 2.21.59-61, 3.26.33 (4: 380-81, 412a).

¹⁶⁸ Ibid, 3.26.31 (4: 411a).

Christ 'cleared the air' of Satan and his cohorts¹⁶⁹ that attempt to push us off the rope and he teaches us the firm step necessary to walk on it. Now all of creation is touched and endowed with the knowledge of God. Christ abolishes death and in him the human creature has already participated in resurrection and exaltation.¹⁷⁰ As far as Adam's influence of death has reached, Christ's impact of life and resurrection reaches even further. Athanasius argues, 'Because all men being lost according to the transgression of Adam, His flesh before all others was saved and liberated, as being the Word's body; and henceforth we, becoming incorporate with it, are saved after its pattern'.¹⁷¹ Christ has assumed our fallen flesh and sanctified it: 'The word having become man and having appropriated what pertains to the flesh, no longer do these things touch the body, because of the Word who has come in it, but they are destroyed by Him, and henceforth men no longer remain sinners and dead according to their proper affections, but having risen according to the Word's power, they abide ever immortal and incorruptible'.¹⁷² The salvation worked by the man Christ enables us to climb back onto the tightrope and walk it with great assurance and firm step. No longer is the tightrope a symbol of the threat of our very existence, but as we join the divine dance we move on the rope with as much grace as the God in whose life we participate.

¹⁶⁹ Idem, *De Incarnatione Verbi Dei* 25.6 (4: 50a).

¹⁷⁰ Idem, *Four Discourses Against the Arians* 2.21.61 (4: 381b).

¹⁷¹ Ibid, 2.21.61 (4: 381b).

¹⁷² Ibid, 3.26.33 (4: 411b-412a).

THE CAPPADOCIANS: SIN AND THE IMAGE OF GOD

The Cappadocians are in many ways close to Athanasius, pulling at the same strand, concerned with many similar questions and fighting against the same dangers. They place more emphasis, however, on the image of God, stitched and traced upon the human being in creation. Many Fathers, in fact, quote the verses from Genesis to support that humankind is made in the image of God and we can even find some references that in some manner the fall impacted that image. Irenaeus already suggests that we lost the image and likeness of God in the fall, although he does not elaborate that remark.¹⁷³ Tertullian accuses the devil of despoiling the divine image.¹⁷⁴ Origen claims that we are made in the image of God and through a life of perfection and works reach the likeness of God.¹⁷⁵ He does not see us in any way more disadvantaged than Adam in that respect. In fact, he assures us that it is impossible for a nature fashioned in the divine image to have its features altogether obliterated and to assume others.¹⁷⁶ Cyprian mentions that Adam had lost the divine likeness by sin.¹⁷⁷ Athanasius had already hinted at the image of God disappearing and being in a process of dissolution.¹⁷⁸ The Cappadocians, however, are the first to speak at more length about the impact of the fall on that image. For them, the thread which originally embroidered the divine image in the human soul has been unravelling ever since that first transgression.

Gregory of Nyssa compares our fall to a rusted image, which is difficult to make out, or to a man who has fallen into mud and is so besmeared with it that even his friends do not recognize him.¹⁷⁹ This may suggest that our fall was so grievous that we are reduced to complete incapacity. Gregory argues, however, that reason tells us that we must wash off the dirt and let the buried beauty of the soul shine forth. This can be accomplished by human effort.¹⁸⁰ The predominant feature of our nature is free will and the ability for virtue.¹⁸¹ Indeed, in Moses and similar holy examples, the image of God was retained in its purity.¹⁸²

At times, Gregory will identify the image of God not with something particular in each individual person, but with humanity as a whole.¹⁸³ Everything in our lives that is painful and miserable is removed from the likeness of God.¹⁸⁴ Only our

¹⁷³ Irenaeus, *Against Heresies* 3.18.1 (1:446a).

¹⁷⁴ Tertullian, *Against the Valentinians* ii (3:504b).

¹⁷⁵ Origen, *De Principiis* 3.4.1 (4:344b).

¹⁷⁶ Idem, *Against Celsus* 4.83 (4:534b).

¹⁷⁷ Cyprian, *Treatises* 9.5 (5:485b).

¹⁷⁸ Athanasius, *De Incarnatione Verbi Dei* 6.1 (4:39a).

¹⁷⁹ Gregory of Nyssa, *On Virginity* xii (5:357b-358a).

¹⁸⁰ Ibid, xii (5:358a).

¹⁸¹ Ibid, xii (5:357a).

¹⁸² Idem, *On the Making of Man* 18.8 (5:408b).

¹⁸³ Ibid, 16.17, 22.3 (5:406a-b, 411b).

¹⁸⁴ Ibid, 20.5 (5:410b).

better attributes belong to the image of God. Our faculty of reason and thought is what ‘bears the stamp of the divine character’.¹⁸⁵ Evil is like a contagious disease which we catch and which disfigures us, rendering us ‘unnatural’. At another point, Gregory likens the human soul to a rope that in the course of its life becomes covered with clay. To achieve immortality it must be pulled through a tiny hole, big enough only for the rope itself. In God’s pulling the rope to himself, all the clay that has collected around the soul’s rope throughout life is scraped off, so that his image in us is again uncovered. This painful process is the anguish of purgatory.¹⁸⁶

Gregory Nazianzen also regards the divine image as still present in us, yet covered with filth.¹⁸⁷ It is ‘blurred and spoilt by wickedness’¹⁸⁸ and must be cleansed by baptism.¹⁸⁹ He reminds us that the law of sin still wars against the law of the spirit attempting to destroy the royal image in us.¹⁹⁰ We must guard this divine image through striving after virtue.¹⁹¹ For both Gregories, apparently, the pattern traced upon us in creation is still present, the pricks of the needles still in us, yet the thread has unravelled and must be embroidered anew. What, then, do these holes represent? And how can the stitches of the image be restored?

The results of the fall for the human condition are, similar to Athanasius and many others, mortality, to which the Cappadocians often add the weaknesses of human nature, such as the capacity to feel pain, passions, lust, and suffering. Gregory especially interprets the coats of skin, with which Adam was clothed after his transgression, with ‘sexual intercourse, conception, parturition, impurities, suckling, feeding, evacuation, gradual growth to full size, prime of life, old age, disease, and death’.¹⁹² This they employ in their careful distinctions between the divine and the human natures in Christ. Christ was human in that he shared in our condition of mortality, passions, sufferings, and growth. Christ was divine in that he was immutable, immortal, impassable, did not feel. Both sides of the equation are maintained and argued most strenuously.

Gregory Nazianzen points out in every circumstance possible (whether a Christmas sermon or a funeral oration), that Christ became utterly like us and took upon himself our nature, so that we could through him again participate in the divine image. We thus partake of both Adams, as does Christ. Gregory elucidates how ‘for my sake He was called a curse, who destroyed my curse, and sin who taketh away the sin of the world, and became the new Adam to take the place of the old, just as he makes my disobedience his own...as long then as I am

¹⁸⁵ Ibid, 18.5 (5:408b); Idem, *On the Soul and the Resurrection* (5:442a).

¹⁸⁶ Idem, *On the Soul and the Resurrection* (5:451).

¹⁸⁷ Gregory Nazianzen, ‘On His Father’s Silence’ 16.15 (7:252b).

¹⁸⁸ Ibid, 16.8 (7:250a).

¹⁸⁹ Idem, ‘Oration on Holy Baptism’ 40.32 (7:371b).

¹⁹⁰ Idem, ‘In Defence of His Flight to Pontus’ 2.91 (7:222b).

¹⁹¹ Idem, ‘Against the Arians’ 33.12 (7:332a).

¹⁹² Gregory of Nyssa, *On the Soul and the Resurrection* (5:465).

disobedient and rebellious...so long Christ also is called disobedient on my account'.¹⁹³ Christ is called 'monstrous and vile names' for us, he 'goes to sleep, in order that He may bless sleep also; perhaps He is tired that He may hallow weariness also; perhaps He weeps that He may make tears blessed'.¹⁹⁴ Hilary echoes similar sentiments: 'He who suffered all things after the manner of man... spoke after the manner of man; and He bore the infirmities and took on Him the sins of men and approached God in prayer with the humility proper to men...He underwent all things that are the lot of man, was born under all the conditions of man's infirmity'.¹⁹⁵ Both Hilary and Gregory maintain that in creation Christ imparted the better nature, but now he partakes of the worse.¹⁹⁶ Christ assumes fallen humanity and sanctifies it.¹⁹⁷ Thus, the holes that the torn embroidery has left, the holes of suffering, ageing, mortality, are wounds Christ shares with us. As the divine image is re-created in him, it is also stitched upon us, restored with silken thread and glorious colour.

CONCLUSION

How, then, are we to combine these various strands? Can we wind them together to a rope, tie them into a strong cord? What shall that rope look like? What common thread do we find among the Fathers? Let me attempt four general observations.¹⁹⁸

1) Although the Fathers are not entirely agreed upon the nature, circumstances, and consequences of Adam's fall, they do point out various effects it has had on the human condition. Most common among these is the tyranny of Satan and human mortality, sometimes coupled with human suffering, disease, and other frailties. There is no precedence in the Fathers for declaring all of humanity guilty for Adam's sin or even remotely responsible for it. Though sin may now be a universal occurrence, the Fathers seem to agree with Clement of Alexandria's assertion that 'each man is cramped by the cords of his own sin'.¹⁹⁹

2) Almost all of the Fathers are extremely emphatic about the Christian's call to a holy life, maintain throughout that we have a free will to choose between virtue and vice, and insist that we are to choose virtue.²⁰⁰ Whether advocating an extremely ascetic or a socially compassionate lifestyle, the Fathers admonish us

¹⁹³ Gregory Nazianzen, 'Fourth Theological Oration' 5 (7:311a).

¹⁹⁴ Idem, 'On the Words of the Gospel' 37.1-2 (7:338a-b).

¹⁹⁵ Hilary, *Homilies on the Psalms* 103 (104).7-8 (9:245a-b).

¹⁹⁶ Gregory Nazianzen, 'On the Theophany' 38.13 (7:349b).

¹⁹⁷ Idem, 'The Second Oration on Easter' 95.22 (7:431a).

¹⁹⁸ For more specific conclusions, see Liébaert, 'Tradition Patristique', 55.

¹⁹⁹ Clement of Alexandria, *Fragments* 9.1 (2:582a).

²⁰⁰ Gross regards this as the primary commonality of all the early Fathers. Gross, *Entstehungsgeschichte*, 255. Pelikan, however, attributes this strong emphasis on free will to the cultural environment that was heavily influenced by Stoic and Gnostic notions of fate. Jaroslav Pelikan, *The Emergence of the Catholic Tradition (100-600)*, Vol I of *The Christian Tradition: A History of the Development of Doctrine* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1971), 280-282.

that we are to live a radically changed life that is defined by our mutual love and concrete, practical life of holiness. Any doctrine of original sin, then, however conceived, cannot invalidate that fundamental assertion, if we want to be true to the Fathers. Human nature is called to and able through the Spirit to live a life of holiness and Christlikeness. Connected to this is their almost unanimous belief that children are born innocent and are free to choose in which way to walk. Ignatius, Irenaeus, Athenagoras, Clement of Alexandria, Tertullian repeatedly, Hippolytus, Cyprian, Methodius, Gregory of Nyssa, Gregory Nazianzen, Gregory Thaumaturgus, Hilary of Poitiers, Cyril of Jerusalem—all of these assert this explicitly.²⁰¹

3) The Fathers agree that regardless of whatever sin might be and in whatever bondage we might be held in consequence of Adam's fall, however defined, from that bondage and condition *Christ has set us free*. This freedom is universal, available to all, given now, and far superior to anything we might have incurred from Adam. Adam's fall might have had consequences on many or even all people, yet Christ's death and resurrection had greater and longer-lasting consequences for even more people. The Fathers are concerned with the *second* Adam, they speak of the first only to outline and elucidate the greatness of the second, who in their minds is really the first, foremost, last and only important one. As Gregory of Nyssa says, 'the nature of good, when compared with the measure of wickedness is incalculably superabundant'.²⁰² Anything we might want to say about 'original sin' in remaining true to the early Fathers, can never invalidate or minimise the effect or the extent of the salvation we have received in Christ.

4) Finally, the Fathers are all agreed upon the fact that, whatever our human condition is right now, after the fall, however one might want to define and speak of our nature, *that is the nature that Christ has assumed*, that very post-Adamic nature he shares with us.²⁰³ Christ assumes, saves, and sanctifies our humanity *as it is right now, after the fall*. Christ's human nature is weak and prone to death like ours; he was fully and utterly human, just like us. He did not sin, not because he had a different nature, but as a human being under identical conditions and circumstances. Christ lives under the same curse that we do, with

²⁰¹ Ignatius, 'Epistle to the Philadelphians' vi (1:83b); Irenaeus, *Against Heresies* 4.28.3 (1:502a); Athenagoras, *The Resurrection of the Dead* xiv (2:156b); Clement of Alexandria *Stromata* 4.12, 4.25 (2:424a, 439a); Tertullian *A Treatise on the Soul* xxiv, xxxviii, lvi (3:205a, 218b-219a, 233a); Idem, *On Baptism* xviii (3:678a); Hippolytus, 'On Susanna' (5:191b); Cyprian, *Epistles* LV.6 (5:349a); Methodius, *Banquet of the Ten Virgins* 2.2, 2.4-5 (6:314a, 315); Hilary of Poitiers, *De Trinitate* 1.2, 4.19 (9:40b, 104b); Gregory Thaumaturgus, *Oration and Panegyric Addressed to Origen* iii (6:24a); Cyril of Jerusalem *Catechetical Lectures* 4.19 (7: 23b); Gregory of Nyssa *On Infants' Early Deaths*; Gregory Nazianzen, 'Oration on Holy Baptism' 40.17, 28 (7:365b, 370b). I am not aware of any exceptions, but there are obviously Fathers who make no statement on the subject at all.

²⁰² Gregory of Nyssa, *On the Making of Man* 21.3 (5:411a).

²⁰³ A significant theological point that is conspicuously absent from almost all secondary treatments of the topic.

the same 'fallen' humanity. Whatever that term might mean, it can never be a term that separates Christ's humanity from ours. Only if he completely shares our human condition, the Fathers insist, is he able to save us from it.

Thus, we might hope that the cord that we weave out of all the different strands of early Christianity would not be one that is placed around our necks, ready to abandon us to the dangling rope of the gallows, but would be a rope tied around us and Christ, connecting us to him, like the rope that holds all fellow mountaineers to the one who climbs ahead, who has already mastered the final cliff and stands at the top of the mountain, holding onto the rope and pulling us up to himself.