

OLD TESTAMENT PROOF-TEXTS FOR ORIGINAL SIN

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In the *Manual* of the Church of the Nazarene, the articles of faith are supported these days by some biblical references. Article V, 'Sin, Original and Personal', lists five Old Testament and seven New Testament references as the biblical basis for the doctrine. Since my colleague Dwight Swanson has already dealt with the two Genesis ones, I wish for starters to investigate the three remaining OT texts to see whether they validate our doctrinal formulation directly. Failing that, we can ask whether they contain implications, which point in that direction. Should that not be the case either, we will be driven to ask whether the biblical texts in question point in a different direction. If theological dogmas are to remain true to scripture, then new exegetical findings may necessitate corresponding doctrinal adjustment.

It should be added that the proof-texts selected are not unique to the Nazarene tradition. In Britain a standard evangelical book on doctrine¹ also lists proof-texts in support of its theological affirmations. For Original Sin, they are virtually identical with the Nazarene ones, but slightly more numerous. In the section that we are considering, there are two extra ones from the Psalms. This serves to remind us that the Nazarene doctrine of sin, unlike its doctrine of sanctification, stands in the Western mainstream of thought.

The texts before us are drawn from the Prophets, the Psalmists and the Sages. But before we launch into them, it is perhaps advisable to say a word or two more about the Torah, the foundation document from which the whole of the rest of the Old Testament takes its bearings. The task of constructing a Torah theology contains in miniature all the problems of biblical theology as a whole. Dwight Swanson's paper engaged predominantly with the Primeval Narratives of Genesis 1-11, which feature God's covenantal relationship with the whole human race. Genesis 12-50 contains the Patriarchal Narratives, which portray the covenantal relationship with the individual ancestors of the nation of Israel. Then finally we have the books of Moses from Exodus to Deuteronomy, built around the divine deliverance of the Israelites from slavery in Egypt, the corporate covenant at Sinai and the preparation in the wilderness of a holy people, fit to occupy a holy land under the lordship of a holy God. For polemical purposes later writers in the Bible will refer back for support either to God's original purposes in creation or to their modification after the Fall, either to the Abrahamic promises or to the

¹ T C Hammond, *In Understanding Be Men: A Handbook of Christian Doctrine*, revised D F Wright (London: IVP, 6th edition 1968), 81.

laws of Moses. In which of these four places do we find a normative account of God's will for humanity? If you have ever tried to map out a Biblical theology of marriage, for example, you will see precisely how tricky the issues are from the very start.

Most subsequent theologies of original sin have stressed two common factors: its universality and its transmission by heredity. Thus the Nazarene article of faith refers to it as 'an inherited propensity to actual sin'. Putting it another way, the whole human race is sinful and we are so from birth. That is the proposition that we can test against the evidence of scripture, beginning with the rest of the Torah.

THE REST OF THE TORAH

Throughout the rest of the Torah and the whole Old Testament there is unequivocal evidence of two classes of people on God's earth—the righteous and the wicked. The family tree of the righteous was cut off temporarily by the murder of Abel and restored through Seth. The family tree of the wicked grows from Cain onwards. From time to time there is movement between the two groups, as the righteous fall into sin or the wicked repent. Alongside the chosen line, there is a steady sprinkling of other people, the righteous pagans, who bless the people of God and thereby incur divine blessing, just as God promised in Gen. 12:3—Melchisedek, Jethro, Rahab, Ruth and many more.

The people of God exist in unbroken continuity from the Primeval Narratives onwards, never shrinking to less than one family, that of Noah. Babies are born into the people of God and do not have to cross barriers to enter. Circumcision for male babies on the eighth day is not an entrance-requirement but a ratification of their existing status. If it were an entrance-requirement, then female babies, who are not circumcised, must be automatically excluded. Rather it signifies the extension of the covenant-relationship into the next generation of the covenant-people.

Neither is circumcision an act of purification. According to Leviticus 12, after childbirth it is mothers who have to be purified, not their babies. The implicit rationale behind this appears to be ritual defilement caused by the loss of blood during childbirth. Hence the mother's length of purification is twice as long, if she has a baby girl than if she has a baby boy. Presumably the future menstruation of the girl, when she reaches puberty, is already being factored in.²

² Commentators differ in their opinions on this: 'More probably the longer period reflects a respect for (and fear of?) the power and mystery of female fertility,' P J Budd, *Leviticus (New Century Bible)* (London: Marshall Pickering, 1996), 186. 'The difference may reside primarily in the lower social standing of women in ancient Israel,' J E Hartley, *Leviticus (Word Biblical Commentary 4)* (Dallas, Texas: Word Books, 1992), 168. I personally find R K Harrison's older suggestion regarding 'the female child's future menstrual functions' still the most persuasive, *Leviticus (Tyndale Old Testament Commentaries)* (Leicester: IVP, 1980), 135.

In all of the Torah legislation concerning birth and child-rearing, there is not a single injunction calling on parents to bring their children to repentance. Prevention is better than cure. Parents are to steep their children in the ways of Torah, according to the *Shema* (Deut 6:4-9). There is no suggestion whatsoever that the spiritual legacy bequeathed by Adam to his posterity has made living righteously an absolute non-starter. On the contrary, as Moses brings his résumé of the Law to a close in Deut 30:11-14, he reminds his people that it is neither too hard nor too far off, but because it is in their mouth and heart, Torah is eminently do-able. The fact that they seem unlikely to keep it is unequivocally their fault, rather than Adam's. The list of blessings for obedience and curses for disobedience near the end of Deuteronomy sets before people a clear choice. There are two possible paths through life and two possible outcomes. However, the brevity of the blessings compared with the length of the curses is a clear indication of which outcome is more likely.

In the Prologue to John's Gospel the writer exalts the incarnate logos by disparaging the Torah: 'For the law was given through Moses; grace and truth came through Jesus Christ' (Jn 1:17). Paul does likewise in Galatians and in Romans, where again law and grace are set over against one another. However, one is forced to ask whether either author is even attempting to be fair to Torah as originally given or whether they are seeking to score debating points off contemporary opponents who have refracted Torah through their own traditions and who have failed to see the immeasurable superiority of Christ.

If we remove our NT spectacles for a moment and read the Torah in its own terms, we can hardly miss the fact that it is shot through with divine grace from beginning to end. Instead of executing the original sinners as promised, God's seeks them and clothes them. Instead of executing Cain, God protects him. It is God rather than Abraham who invokes a death curse on himself, if he breaks covenant (Genesis 15). It is God who supplies a ram as a sacrifice instead of Isaac. It is God who sustains his people with manna and quails in the wilderness and ensures that their clothes don't wear out in forty years. And so on and so on. Grace upon grace throughout the Torah.

Throughout the Torah too there are righteous people. Life on earth is not characterised by universal wickedness. So much is clear from the text of the Bible. But Torah itself does not provide a theological explanation of this surprising phenomenon. Are children born innocent rather than depraved? Or is an innate propensity to selfishness and sinfulness offset by the grace of God constantly extended to an undeserving human race and mediated through the network of family relationships and the teaching of Torah? Perhaps we can carry these questions forward as we move into the Prophets.

THE WITNESS OF THE PROPHETS

In sampling the Prophets we shall consider firstly the text which is listed most frequently as a proof-text for the doctrine of Original Sin, that is to say *Jeremiah 17:9*. This reads: ‘The heart is devious above all else; it is perverse—who can understand it?’ At face value this looks a pretty persuasive piece of evidence on Augustine’s side. However, in context is Jeremiah making generalisations about anthropology or indicting Israel for her sin? Despite the apparent universality of the reference in verse 9, there are actually two categories of people in the chapter. Jeremiah pronounces a curse on the self-reliant wicked in verses 5-6 and in verses 7-8 blessings on those who trust in the Lord. Among whom would he classify himself, one wonders. Is the spiritual condition of these Judeans hopelessly depraved? Well, no, actually. In the following chapter the whole point of Jeremiah’s object-lesson at the potter’s house is the call from YHWH for them to turn from their ways and allow him to reshape their destiny. Later in the book there are the chapters predicting restoration, at the heart of which is the prophecy of the new covenant whereby YHWH will write his law on their hearts. So, far from describing all people at all times in all places, *Jeremiah 17:9* turns out to be describing one part of one nation at one particular point in its history.

Another prophetic text, which is used to illustrate the universality of sinfulness is *Isaiah 53:6*, which reads: ‘All we like sheep have gone astray; we have all turned to our own way, and the LORD has laid on him the iniquity of us all.’ Augustinian thinking would place the overwhelming portion of blame for our straying on Adam, but Isaiah seems to indicate that each of us must shoulder full responsibility for our own wilfulness.

In the prophets as a whole the impression conveyed is that *idolatry, rather than heredity*, is the key to human sinfulness. The recurrent warning in Deuteronomy is against going after other gods, when the Israelites colonise the Promised Land. The recurrent indictment in the prophets is that the people have indeed gone after other gods deliberately and persistently. Their other sins of social injustice, sexual immorality and such like are really a by-product of the breakdown in covenant-loyalty to God. YHWH has done all that a loving husband could do, but his spiritual wife, Israel, has been guilty of wilful infidelity time without number. From time to time YHWH demands a courtcase in which he can lay the charges against Israel, and it is made abundantly clear that Israel is without excuse. What both saddens and angers God is precisely the fact that sin is not a necessity; it is a free choice.

THE WITNESS OF THE PSALMISTS

In the Psalms the star text on this topic is *Psalms 51:5*, in which the psalmist declares: ‘Indeed, I was born guilty, a sinner when my mother conceived me.’ Once again on the face of it this is an unanswerable proof of original sin, and that is precisely how so many older commentators have taken it. A classic example is found in Calvin’s comments:

He (David) now proceeds farther than the mere acknowledgement of one or of many sins, confessing that he brought nothing but sin with him into the world, and that his nature was entirely depraved...The passage affords a striking testimony in proof of original sin entailed by Adam upon the whole human family...the Bible, both in this and other places, clearly asserts that we are born in sin, and that it exists within us as a disease fixed in our nature...It was therefore a gross error in Pelagius to deny that sin was hereditary, descending in the human family by contagion.³

The Augustinian tradition of a physical transmission of hereditary sin had always made great capital from this verse.⁴ Initially the emphasis was on the defiling

³ J Calvin, *Commentaries, Vol V, Psalms 36-92* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1979), 290-291.

⁴ Older commentators on the Psalms tend to read Psalm 51 with Augustinian spectacles but this tendency decreases with the passing of time. Here is a chronological sampling:

‘A genuine penitent will hide nothing of his state; he sees and bewails not only the acts of sin which he has committed, but the disposition that led to these acts. He deplores, not only the transgression, but the carnal mind, which is enmity against God. The light that shines into his soul shows him the very source whence transgression proceeds; he sees his fallen nature, as well as his sinful life; he asks pardon for his transgressions, and he asks washing and cleansing for his inward defilement. Notwithstanding all that Grotius and others have said to the contrary, I believe David to speak here of what is commonly called original sin; the propensity to evil which every man brings into the world with him, and which is the fruitful source whence all transgression proceeds.’ Adam Clarke, *Clarke’s Commentary, Vol III*, (London: William Tegg, n.d.), 385.

C A Briggs interprets this as a penitential prayer of the congregation in the time of Nehemiah, declaring that it is ‘not referring to the iniquity of the parent, or to an iniquitous condition of the infant when brought forth; implying the doctrine of original sin, transmitted from Adam and Eve in accordance with Traducianism, or imputed to the child as created as part of a sinful race, according to Creationism. I myself hold to the speculative dogma of Traducianism, but I must say that neither of these doctrines has any support whatever in the OT...’, *The Book of Psalms (International Critical Commentary)* (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1907), 6-7.

‘This means neither that conception is in itself impure and sinful—which would be an idea absolutely alien to Old Testament ways of thinking—nor that the worshipper was supposed to be the result of an illegitimate, sinful attachment; the saying implies no doctrine of “original sin”; it is the strongest possible expression on the part of the author of the consciousness that as a weak and frail man he has never been without sin—from his very birth he has given offence in some thing or other.’ S Mowinckel, *The Psalms in Israel’s Worship, Vol II* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1962), 14.

‘It is the tragedy of man that he is born into a world full of sin. The environment in which a child grows up is already saturated with sin and temptation; and when the child learns to distinguish between good and evil he discovers already in himself a natural tendency of his will that is at variance with the will of God...No longer does he see only particular transgressions; rather, all particular sins point back to that demonic disposition of self-willed humanity addicted to self-glorification which is naturally

nature of *sexual intercourse*, but it went beyond this eventually. Augustine himself had focussed more on the concupiscence or inordinate desire of the husband in the act of procreation contaminating the soul of the newly-conceived child. Another strand of teaching had developed down through the years which demonised male *semen* as the carrier of original sin. Thus we have Aquinas's appalling statement that, 'Through the defect of bodily semen, the generative force transmits original sin together with human nature.'⁵ Luther is clearly attuned to this notion. In a sermon on Psalm 51 in 1533 he states:

For this is what Scripture says about our conception and birth ... 'Behold, I was begotten of sinful seed, and in sin my mother conceived me'. That is, my mother contributed nothing but sinful flesh and blood. And my father, and what he did there, was also not pure. So both did the same thing through evil desire and impure nature. I am thus conceived of such flesh and blood. For this reason there can be nothing pure in me.⁶

Ten years earlier in another sermon, Luther is speaking about the Virgin Birth enabling a child to be born without sin, and he adds, '...if it could still happen that a woman could conceive without male seed, that birth would also be pure'.⁷

How conceivable is it that the psalmist, be it David himself or someone writing about him, is stigmatising either the sexual desire or the male semen of his father as the cause of his own subsequent sin? Such notions seem more congenial to the world of Greek philosophy, where some exalted the spiritual by depreciating the material, than to the section of the Hebrew Bible which includes Song of Songs.

What exegetical insights can help form a contemporary understanding of this famous verse? Firstly, we need to affirm in the light of the psalm as a whole that the author is seeking to incriminate, rather than to exonerate, himself. He is not trying to create an alibi or draw attention to mitigating circumstances. He is

ingrained in its own nature and threatens to lead it at any time into temptation...' A Weiser, *The Psalms* (London: SCM, 1962), 405.

'All men have a congenital tendency toward evil; this doctrine finds expression in Gen 8:21; 1 Kgs 8:46; Job 4:17; 14:4; 15:14; 25:4; Prov 20:9.' M Dahood, *Psalms II (Anchor Bible)* (Garden City, New York: Doubleday, 1968), 4.

'It is doubtful whether this verse actually teaches a doctrine of original sin, although it may have prepared the way for such a doctrine. It alludes, more likely, to the universality of sin.' A A Anderson, *The Book of Psalms, Vol 1 (New Century Bible)* (London: Marshall, Morgan & Scott: 1972), 395.

'One should probably not see in this any doctrine of inherited sin. The Hebrew Scriptures do not teach a doctrine of inherited sin, though they do argue that one generation could have visited upon it the penalties of the sins of an earlier generation...' J H Hayes, *Understanding the Psalms* (Valley Forge: Judson Press, 1976), 84.

⁵ From Aquinas's 'Treatise on Evil', cited and translated by H Blocher, *Original Sin: Illuminating the Riddle (New Studies in Biblical Theology No.5)* (Leicester: Apollos, 1997), 112.

⁶ Cited as footnote 25 in B Lohse, *Martin Luther's Theology: Its Historical and Systematic Development* (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1999), 253.

⁷ Also cited in footnote 25.

trying to say, albeit poetically, that he is as guilty as hell, and in dire need of divine forgiveness.

Secondly, in the light of the psalms as a whole, we need to recognise the kind of literature we are facing. To read it as propositional truth in a theology textbook is to misdiagnose its literary genre and therefore to misread it. All good exegesis is scrupulous about the conventions of any given literary genre. A person who is thinking of buying a cat as a pet does not turn to *Old Possum's Book of Practical Cats* by T S Eliot for enlightenment on the needs of the average moggy, any more than one watches Tarzan films for an understanding of the ecology of rainforests. Psalm 51 belongs to a literary genre we call penitential psalms. It is a confession of sin, not a discussion of it. Confession of pent-up guilt, by its very nature, is likely to have something of the nature of a bursting dam about it. Emotional outbursts are not necessarily conveyed in measured statements. Most of us in our younger days have probably poured out pent-up anger and frustration in phrases such as 'I hate you', 'I could kill you for doing that', 'If I catch you ever again taking my things without asking I'll knock your block off'. We probably didn't hate, wouldn't have killed and refrained from knocking blocks off or punching lights out, but we wanted our antagonist to get the message that we were really upset. And that is why our choice of words went up a notch or two above normal reality.

Which brings us to the next exegetical consideration. Throughout the Bible we are dealing with specifically Jewish literature, and a salient feature of Jewish self-expression is hyperbole, exaggeration for the sake of effect, the rhetorical flourish. The teaching of Jesus is chockfull of the stuff. Can we really have a plank in our own eye, while we are trying to extract a speck from someone else's? Can we literally strain a gnat from what we are about to drink and then swallow a camel? Of course not. This is a hyperbolic use of language. The self-recrimination of the psalmist in Psalm 51 is of a piece with the Apostle Paul's self-designation as the least of the apostles or the chief of sinners, because he had persecuted the church. Both wish to maximise the awfulness of what they did previously and both exaggerate, in order to make their point. We as readers can take their general point without really believing that the foetus that was to become the psalmist was horrendously evil or that Paul was a worse sinner than Herod or Judas, Stalin or Pol Pot.

The most obvious evidence that the literal claims of psalms must be taken with a pinch of salt lies in the psalms of lament, in which the writer badmouths his enemies and exalts his own virtues. Thus in Psalm 26:1 we have the same or another psalmist demanding: 'Vindicate me, O Lord, for I have walked in my integrity' (NRSV) or as the old RSV puts it 'for I have led a blameless life'. Is this also to be taken at face value and used as a theological building-block for some doctrine of original righteousness? Of course not! We recognise it for what it is—the product of a quite different situation and of a different emotional state.

The righteous sufferer is outraged by the prosperity of the wicked. He contrasts his virtue with their vice and pleads for justice. In his sense of grievance over manifest injustice, he clearly inflates his own merits. Just like the author of Psalm 51:5, who exaggerates his own wickedness.

Moving on to *Psalm 58:3*, we find unrighteousness pressed back beyond childhood as far as birth. In this oft-quoted verse the psalmist asserts that 'The wicked go astray from the womb; they err from their birth, speaking lies'. However, it should be noted who is being described. By no stretch of the imagination does the writer accuse himself thus. No, indeed. The psalm as a whole is one long outburst against the wicked. To go astray from birth is therefore not seen as a universal norm but as palpable evidence of the gross wickedness of the psalmist's persecutors. It is worthy of comment precisely because it is *not* the normal thing for ordinary people.

Another favourite psalm among theologians is *Psalm 14*, which condemns the foolish atheist and states that 'there is no one who does good'. Difficult to be more comprehensive than that. However, mention of the fool alerts us to the possibility of this being a wisdom-psalm. In the thought-world of Biblical wisdom, the path of folly and the path of wisdom are the two alternatives set before the simple and naïve as they face life. Sure enough, there's the other group too in Psalm 14. In contrast with the corrupt fools of verses 1-3 we have 'my people' in verse 4, who are said to be the victims of the evildoers. Other synonyms for them are 'the company of the righteous' in verse 5 and 'the poor' in verse 6. In fact the psalm ends with a wish that YHWH would come and deliver his people from the wicked. So, instead of the whole earth being comprised of depraved fools, the earth is made up of a majority of the godless who oppress the godly righteous poor.

That brings us on then to *Psalm 143:2*, which says,

Do not enter not into judgement with your servant;
for no one living is righteous before you.

The psalm as a whole is a personal lament by one who designates himself as the servant of YHWH (vv2, 12). He is in deadly trouble at the hands of his enemies (v3) and cries to God for help (v1). 'Like an attacked vassal appealing to his overlord, he seeks vindication at God's hands, which in turn will prove a vindication of God's own pledges and power.' So writes Leslie Allen in his *Word Biblical Commentary*.⁸ Verse 2 lies between the two key verses as a disclaimer. The psalmist is appealing for help from the LORD, not on the basis of desert, but of need. He does not want God to stop and evaluate whether he merits help; he wants help and he wants it fast. In the rest of the psalm the psalmist displays a

⁸ L C Allen, *Psalms 101-150 (Word Biblical Commentary 21)* (Waco, Texas; Word Books, 1983), 285.

humble, dependent and teachable spirit, epitomised by his cry to God—‘Teach me to do your will, for you are my God!’ (v10).

Yet again a proof-text fails to prove what it is chosen to prove, when it is read properly in context.

THE WITNESS OF THE SAGES

Our glance at OT wisdom-literature begins with Ecclesiastes. The work of this rather jaundiced philosopher adopts a very sceptical view of human nature, as of virtually every other subject—‘I have seen everything that is done under the sun; and behold, all is vanity and a striving after wind’ (Eccl 1:14). Thesis after thesis is set up, then undermined, and especially the principle of automatic retributive justice.

This then sets the context for the saying that: ‘Surely there is not a righteous man on earth who does good and never sins’ (Eccl 7:20). Before this can be used to underpin a pessimistic view of human nature, one must reckon firstly with the fact that virtually every affirmation in the book is undermined somewhere else, so why should the reader give this undue weight and credibility? Secondly, the author clearly acknowledges the existence of groups of people whom he would label righteous (unhappy though they may be).⁹ Thirdly, in verse 29 of the very same chapter he says that ‘God made human beings straightforward, but they have devised many schemes’. Graham Ogden’s comment on this verse is that ‘...the OT has a very optimistic view of humanity in essence. There is no trace of the doctrine of ‘original sin’ such as developed in Paul and especially in some of the Reformers’.¹⁰ The universality of human depravity cannot therefore be regarded as clearly established from the writings of Qoheleth.

But what of *Job 15:14-16*, cited in so many sources as underpinning its explanation of original sin? These verses deny the possibility of humans being righteous or clean before God and they are spoken by Eliphaz, the first of Job’s comforters. They say:

What are mortals, that they can be clean?
Or those born of woman, that they can be righteous?
God puts no trust even in his holy ones,
and the heavens are not clean in his sight;
How much less one who is abominable and corrupt,
one who drinks iniquity like water!

⁹ ‘Qohelet does not deny the presence of the righteous. There are righteous people, but these righteous people are not consistently good. They do sin, at least occasionally.’ T Longman III, *The Book of Ecclesiastes (New International Commentary on the Old Testament)* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998), 199.

¹⁰ G Ogden, *Qoheleth* (Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1987), 124.

His theology is thoroughly orthodox. It could come from a textbook on Deuteronomy or Proverbs, representing the most traditional, conservative and unquestioning wing of the Israelite wisdom tradition.¹¹ God is just. He promises blessings for the obedient and curses for the disobedient. Therefore, people get their just deserts in this life. If they suffer, it is because they deserve to.

Eliphaz's first speech in Job 4-5 sets out his stall, albeit in a fairly conciliatory manner. The impossibility of living righteously is affirmed on the strength of a hair-raising testimony from a spiritually-ambiguous nocturnal spirit-visitor.¹² His second speech in chapter 15 is less patient and far more condemnatory of Job. His third and final speech in chapter 22 again asserts God's lofty indifference to the human condition:

Is it any pleasure to the Almighty if you are righteous,
or is it gain to him if you make your ways blameless? (22:3)

There are several huge exegetical problems involved in making Eliphaz's opinion normative for a Christian doctrine of human sinfulness:

1. The narrator repudiates it in his opening description of Job as blameless and upright (1:1).
2. God repudiates it in his description of his servant Job as blameless and upright (2:3).
3. The whole dialectical tension of the book collapses, if Job is sinful and does indeed deserve his suffering.
4. God repudiates Eliphaz's theological opinions at the end, when he tells him point blank: 'you have not spoken of me what is right, as my servant Job has' (42:7). God then tells Eliphaz to offer a burnt offering and to ask Job to pray that God will not deal with him according to his folly.

To say the least, therefore, Job 15:14 is not a very solid exegetical brick with which to construct doctrine! Not only does it not support an Augustinian pessimism concerning human nature; by the way its theology is repudiated in the book of Job as a whole it is prime evidence for the opposing theological camp. Theologians who claimed it as Biblical support for their views might just as well have claimed the words of the devil tempting Jesus in the wilderness as biblical. Just because words and ideas are to be found in the Bible does not mean that they represent the teaching of scripture. Proof-texting without regard for the context in

¹¹ 'Eliphaz's experience is wholly of a piece with traditional wisdom. He has sold his soul to tradition, and has so ensured that he will never have any experience that runs counter to it...' D J A Clines, *Job 1-20 (Word Biblical Commentary 17)* (Dallas, Texas: Word Books, 1989), 355.

¹² 'Unlike the classical prophets, who heard the Word of the Lord with all their faculties alert, Eliphaz's experience is more like that of Balaam (Nu. 24:15f). The author has succeeded in creating a very spooky atmosphere.' F I Andersen, *Job (Tyndale Old Testament Commentaries)* (Leicester: IVP, 1976), 113.

which the texts are placed is shown yet again to be a foolish and misleading exercise.

CONCLUSION

Following on from the earlier paper on Genesis, we have just looked at eight OT verses which allegedly provide the biblical basis for an Augustinian doctrine of Original Sin. In every single case the verse in question turns out to mean something other than what is claimed for it. The literature in which these verses are embedded not only fails to provide explicit aid and comfort. It fails even to imply such a doctrine and actually points in other directions entirely.

There can be little doubt overall that the Old Testament does not paint a picture of universal depravity but portrays humanity as divided into two camps, the righteous and the wicked. It teaches that everyone, regardless of race or culture, is faced by a choice between walking the path of wisdom or the path of folly. Those born into the covenant can and do choose between covenant-faithfulness to YHWH and going after other gods, but most choose the latter and they are personally culpable for that choice.

Adam and Eve and the decisions they made just do not feature in the rest of the OT. There are clear allusions to a paradisaic state in some of the eschatological imagery of the prophets, but we look in vain for any explicit harking-back to the Fall, such as we find in many subsequent references to the Exodus, to Sinai, and to Israel's sins in the wilderness. The legacy from the past that people must reckon with is not any hypothetical hereditary evil, but rather divine judgement on later generations for the sins of their fathers and the priceless positive legacy of a covenantal relationship with Almighty God mediated through faithfulness to Torah. There is virtually no speculative thinking about human nature, depraved or otherwise. There is, however, the clearest possible emphasis on the importance of godly nurture:

Proverbs 22:6

Train children in the right way,
and when old, they will not stray.

Deuteronomy 6:4-9, the golden text of the whole Old Testament:

Hear, O Israel: The Lord is our God, the Lord alone. You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your might. Keep these words that I am commanding you today in your heart. Recite them to your children and talk about them when you are at home and when you are away, when you lie down and when you rise. Bind them as a sign on your hand, fix them as an emblem on your forehead, and write them on the doorposts of your house and on your gates.

One unresolved question, as we leave the Old Testament, is whether the life and teaching of Jesus, and the interpretation of his person and work in the New Testament, supply a biblical rationale for the doctrine of Original Sin, which is lacking earlier. Another must surely be to what extent Augustinian theologians have arrived at doctrinal formulae through systematising the exegetical findings of scripture. This particular study has left this particular reader with the uneasy feeling that scripture may have been quarried in order to buttress opinions formed by other means.¹³

The final monitory word regarding this or any other doctrine undergirded by proof texts is left with the late Barnabas Lindars:

...the Bible remains a primary reference-point and source of proof texts. But these must be chosen responsibly, with care to determine the meaning of the text and to respect the context. Many false applications of scripture in the past were due to ignorance. Today as a result of critical scholarship there is less excuse for this.¹⁴

¹³ The following opinion was expressed in the *Times Literary Supplement* and cited by Reinhold Niebuhr: 'The doctrine of original sin is the only empirically verifiable doctrine of the Christian faith,' *Man's Nature and His Communities* (New York: Scribner's, 1965), 24. If the proof texts are as wide of the mark as my contextual reading of them suggests, perhaps it would be truer to say that the doctrine of original sin is empirically generated, rather than empirically verified.

¹⁴ B Lindars, 'Proof Texts' in R J Coggins & J L Houlden (eds), *A Dictionary of Biblical Interpretation* (London: SCM, 1990), 554-555. His article contrasts the proof-texting of the pre-Reformation and post-Reformation Church. Contextual understanding was hindered in the former by the assumption 'that scripture and the church's tradition of faith and practice are always in agreement when rightly understood.' In the latter those who place supreme reliance on the Bible as inspired Word of God 'easily deceive themselves into thinking that they have divine warrant for what are arbitrarily chosen interpretations based on a sectarian position.' It seems virtually self-evident, given the antiquity of the Augustinian doctrine of Original Sin, that contemporary proof-texting on this subject is pre-Reformation in its roots. That does not make it any more acceptable, however!