

## The Story of the Fall in Christian Tradition: Doctrinal Development, Gender Hierarchy, and Modern Reinterpretations

قصة الهبوط في التراث المسيحي: التطور العقدي، والهرمية الجندرية، وإعادة القراءة في الدراسات الحديثة

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# The Story of the Fall in Christian Tradition: Doctrinal Development, Gender Hierarchy, and Modern Reinterpretations

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☆ *Dr. Abdul Basit Quresh*

## Abstract

This study examines the development and diversity of interpretations of the Genesis Fall narrative within the Christian tradition, tracing theological, mystical, and cultural perspectives from the early church to the modern era. Beginning with Eastern Orthodox and Greek patristic readings, the Fall is presented as a disruption of humanity's progression toward divine union, with Christ and Mary as the New *Ādam* and New Eve. Medieval mystical and allegorical interpretations reframed the narrative as an inward spiritual drama, while scholastic theology, notably in Thomas Aquinas, preserved Augustine's doctrine of original sin within a philosophical framework that upheld gender hierarchy. The Western tradition also embedded the Fall within Marian typology, linking Eve's disobedience with Mary's salvific obedience. In the Reformation, Augustine's theological legacy was adapted by Luther and Calvin, who reinforced the hierarchical subordination of women as a post-lapsarian reality. Modern feminist theologians and biblical scholars have challenged these gendered readings, offering alternative interpretations that stress mutual culpability and the theological agency of Eve. Literary treatments, from Milton to contemporary fiction, have further expanded the symbolic resonance of the Eden story. Collectively, these interpretations reveal the Fall as both a doctrinal cornerstone of Christian anthropology and a versatile narrative shaping theological, ecclesiastical, and cultural attitudes toward human nature and gender across centuries.

**Keywords:** Fall of *Ādam* and Eve, Christian Tradition, Augustine, John Calvin, Original Sin

## Introduction

Within the Christian tradition, the story of creation cannot be separated from the narrative of the fall of Adam and Eve. Genesis 2–3 presents not only the divine act of bringing humanity into existence but also the first act of disobedience that shaped the theological trajectory of sin, redemption, and human destiny. The narrative of the fall has thus become a cornerstone for Christian anthropology, soteriology, and moral theology, serving as the foundation for doctrines such as original sin and the need for salvation through Christ.

Early Church Fathers, particularly Augustine of Hippo, interpreted the fall as a universal turning point in human history, where the sin of the first parents transmitted corruption to all of humanity. This interpretation gave rise to the doctrine of original sin, which deeply

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influenced Western Christianity and framed human existence as marked by guilt and the need for divine grace. Medieval scholastics like Thomas Aquinas refined these ideas, integrating Aristotelian philosophy into the theological understanding of the fall, while Reformers such as Martin Luther and John Calvin emphasized humanity's total depravity as a consequence of Adam's disobedience.

At the same time, the fall narrative has had significant implications for questions of gender and hierarchy. Eve's role in the transgression was frequently emphasized in patristic and medieval commentaries, often portraying women as morally weaker and more susceptible to temptation. Such interpretations have had lasting effects on Christian social and theological attitudes toward women. In contrast, modern scholarship, including feminist theology, has sought to re-examine the story of the fall, highlighting alternative readings that resist patriarchal distortions and stress the shared responsibility of Adam and Eve in human disobedience.

This article therefore examines the fall of Adam and Eve in the Christian tradition, tracing its biblical foundations, theological interpretations, and historical consequences. It will explore how this narrative has been employed to construct doctrines of sin and redemption, while also assessing the enduring debates surrounding gender, morality, and divine justice in relation to the fall.

### Section One: The Story of the Fall in Christian Tradition

In the Christian tradition, the narrative of the Fall, as recorded in *Genesis* 3:1–6, centers on the dialogue between the serpent and Eve concerning the fruit of the forbidden tree. Within this framework, Eve is often cast in the role of *tempter*, *deceiver*, and *seducer* of *Ādam*—a portrayal that has profoundly shaped theological and cultural perceptions of women.<sup>1</sup> The emphasis placed on her initiative in partaking of the fruit and subsequently offering it to *Ādam* has, in many traditional interpretations, become emblematic of an inherent female moral weakness.<sup>2</sup>

Patristic and later medieval exegesis frequently perpetuated this reading, portraying the exile of *Ādam* and Eve from Eden as a direct consequence of Eve's disobedience.<sup>3</sup> In this interpretive tradition, the "fallenness" of humanity was often rhetorically tethered to the feminine, thereby reinforcing the notion of woman as the originator of sin and moral corruption.<sup>4</sup> This association, in turn, became a theological rationale for diminishing the status of women relative to men, both in ecclesiastical structures and in broader Christian society.<sup>5</sup>

#### 1.1- Eastern Orthodox and Greek Patristic Perspectives

The Christian interpretation of the Fall, while often associated with the dominant Augustinian and later Reformation readings, has developed across a wide spectrum of theological, mystical, and cultural traditions. In the Eastern Orthodox heritage, the Fall is understood less as the juridical inheritance of guilt and more as a tragic disruption in humanity's journey

<sup>1</sup> Augustine, *The Literal Meaning of Genesis*, trans. John Hammond Taylor (New York: Newman Press, 1982), 11:30–32.

<sup>2</sup> Tertullian, *On the Apparel of Women*, in *Ante-Nicene Fathers*, vol. 4, ed. Alexander Roberts and James Donaldson (Buffalo: Christian Literature Publishing Co., 1885), 1.1.

<sup>3</sup> Ambrose, *Paradise*, trans. John J. Savage (New York: Newman Press, 1961), 12.58–60.

<sup>4</sup> Caroline Walker Bynum, *Holy Feast and Holy Fast: The Religious Significance of Food to Medieval Women* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1987), 35–37.

<sup>5</sup> Alcuin Blamires, *The Case for Women in Medieval Culture* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1997), 21–24.

toward *theosis*—union with God. Irenaeus of Lyons, in *Against Heresies*, describes *Ādam* and Eve as spiritually immature beings who grasped prematurely at divine knowledge. For John Chrysostom, both were culpable, yet their punishment was corrective rather than purely retributive. In this perspective, Christ is portrayed as the “New *Ādam*” and Mary as the “New Eve,” whose obedience undoes the disobedience of the first pair.

### 1.2- Medieval Mystical and Allegorical Interpretations

The narrative has also left a deep imprint on literature and culture. John Milton’s *Paradise Lost* (1667) amplifies Eve’s role, depicting her as both noble and tragically susceptible to deception, while granting her moments of theological insight and moral reflection.<sup>6</sup> Modern authors often use Eden as a metaphor for innocence lost, the dangers of unrestrained knowledge, or humanity’s enduring longing for a return to paradise.<sup>7</sup> Thus, across the centuries, the story of the Fall has served not only as a doctrinal foundation for Christian views of sin and redemption but also as a powerful symbolic framework for exploring human nature, freedom, and the complexities of gender relations.<sup>8</sup>

### 1.3-Scholastic Theology and Thomas Aquinas

The concept of Original Sin, as developed most notably by Augustine of Hippo, further solidified Eve’s role as the symbolic initiator of human depravity. In *De Genesi ad Litteram* and *Confessions*, Augustine argues that through Eve’s disobedience the entire human race inherited a corrupted will and a proclivity toward sin.<sup>9</sup> By linking the inheritance of sin directly to her act of transgression, Augustine’s theological framework endowed the Fall narrative with a lasting gendered moral lesson—one that frequently framed women as spiritually and morally suspect.<sup>10</sup> His interpretation shaped medieval theology, sermons, and ecclesiastical practice, reinforcing hierarchies of male authority and female subordination.

### 1.4- Reformation Interpretations by Luther and Calvin

In later centuries, Reformers such as Martin Luther and John Calvin upheld variations of this interpretation, albeit within their respective theological systems. Luther emphasized Eve’s deception as a paradigm of weakness and the necessity of female submission within the household order,<sup>11</sup> while Calvin integrated Augustine’s doctrine into his broader theology of divine sovereignty and human depravity, maintaining that Eve’s fall confirmed women’s subjection as part of God’s ordained order.<sup>12</sup> These readings ensured the persistence of Eve’s negative legacy within Protestant thought and its continued influence on Western Christian gender norms.

<sup>6</sup> John Milton, *Paradise Lost*, ed. Alastair Fowler (London: Longman, 2007), Book IX, lines 730–799.

<sup>7</sup> Regina Schwartz, *Remembering and Repeating: On Milton’s Theology and Politics* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1993), 87–90.

<sup>8</sup> Christina Rossetti, *Goblin Market and Other Poems* (London: Macmillan, 1862), esp. 15–22; William Blake, *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1975), 23–26.

<sup>9</sup> Augustine, *De Genesi ad Litteram*, trans. J. H. Taylor (New York: Newman Press, 1982), 11.42; Augustine, *Confessions*, trans. Henry Chadwick (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1991), 7.21.

<sup>10</sup> Elizabeth A. Clark, *Women in the Early Church* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 1990), 47–53.

<sup>11</sup> Martin Luther, *Lectures on Genesis: Chapters 1–5*, ed. Jaroslav Pelikan (St. Louis: Concordia, 1958), 154–160.

<sup>12</sup> John Calvin, *Commentary on Genesis*, trans. John King (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1948), 172–176.

This enduring symbolic association between womanhood and sinfulness contributed to a long-standing ecclesial and cultural pattern: the legitimization of patriarchal authority as divinely sanctioned, and the constraining of women's roles within both religious and social spheres.<sup>14</sup> The story of the Fall, therefore, functioned not merely as a doctrinal cornerstone concerning human nature and salvation history, but also as a powerful mythic structure shaping Christian attitudes toward gender for centuries.<sup>15</sup>

### 1.5-Modern Feminist Challenges to Gendered Readings

In the modern era, feminist theologians and biblical scholars have sought to dismantle the gendered blame historically attached to the Fall. Figures such as Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza and Phyllis Trible argue that Genesis 3 neither identifies Eve as the singular cause of sin nor establishes a divine mandate for female subordination; rather, these notions are later theological accretions imposed by patristic and medieval interpreters.<sup>16</sup> Trible, through close rhetorical and literary analysis, emphasizes that the text portrays Eve as an active interlocutor, engaging the serpent in theological reasoning, thereby displaying intellectual and moral agency. *Adam*, by contrast, appears passive—accepting the fruit without reflection—suggesting that the biblical narrative itself resists the traditional gendered dichotomy of rational man and culpable woman.<sup>17</sup> Schüssler Fiorenza similarly contends that the doctrine of Eve's guilt was a hermeneutical strategy designed to solidify patriarchal authority by projecting female disobedience as archetypal.<sup>18</sup> This re-reading opens space for understanding Genesis 3 not as a timeless condemnation of women, but as a contested site where theology and power converged to shape enduring structures of gender hierarchy.

### Section Two: The Augustinian Interpretation of the Relationship between *Adam* and Eve

#### 2.1- Theological Anthropology and Original Innocence

Augustine's approach to the relationship between *Adam* and Eve in the state of original innocence is framed by a theological anthropology that regards them as neither mortal in the strict sense nor yet immortal in an absolute sense. They were created with a **dignified unity with God**, possessing the possibility of death but safeguarded from it so long as they remained obedient.<sup>19</sup> In this pre-lapsarian state, procreation was envisaged as a rational and

<sup>13</sup> Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza (b. 1938) is a Romanian-born Catholic feminist theologian and biblical scholar. She is the Krister Stendahl Professor Emerita of Divinity at Harvard Divinity School and a pioneering figure in feminist theology and biblical interpretation. Her influential works, including *In Memory of Her: A Feminist Theological Reconstruction of Christian Origins* (New York: Crossroad, 1983), challenge patriarchal readings of Scripture and advocate for the recovery of women's roles in early Christianity. Fiorenza has been widely recognized for her contributions to feminist biblical hermeneutics and for advancing the concept of the "ekklesia of women" as a critical theological paradigm.

<sup>14</sup> Kari Elisabeth Børresen, *Subordination and Equivalence: The Nature and Role of Woman in Augustine and Thomas Aquinas* (Washington, DC: University Press of America, 1981), 37–44.

<sup>15</sup> Caroline Walker Bynum, *Holy Feast and Holy Fast: The Religious Significance of Food to Medieval Women* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1987), 191–195.

<sup>16</sup> Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, *In Memory of Her: A Feminist Theological Reconstruction of Christian Origins* (New York: Crossroad, 1983), 32–35.

<sup>17</sup> Phyllis Trible, *God and the Rhetoric of Sexuality* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1978), 110–12.

<sup>18</sup> Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, *Bread Not Stone: The Challenge of Feminist Biblical Interpretation* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1984), 53–56.

<sup>19</sup> Augustine, *The City of God*, trans. Henry Bettenson (London: Penguin Classics, 2003), XIII.20, 517–518.

ordered act, entirely free from *concupiscent* (disordered desire). Sexual union, according to Augustine, would have been governed by the will and reason, untainted by lust, and aimed solely at the propagation of the human race.<sup>20</sup> Eve's role in this vision bore a typological resemblance to the Virgin Mary, in that she was associated with the idea of virginal parturition, though without the supernatural element unique to Mary.<sup>21</sup>

## 2.2- Pre-Lapsarian Relationship and Sexual Union

For Augustine, conjugal relations before the Fall would have been entirely subject to rational control, a harmonious expression of obedience to God's creative order. Sexuality itself was not sinful but was intended to serve the propagation of humankind without the intrusion of passion or lust.

This view highlights the distance between Augustine's idealized vision of Eden and the reality of post-lapsarian desire, where concupiscence comes to dominate human sexuality. Thus, the Fall not only corrupted the will but also disordered the body, introducing lust into the conjugal act.

## 2.3- Eve's Vulnerability and *Ādam's* Responsibility in the Fall

In Augustine's reading of Genesis, the drama of the Fall is inseparably tied to the creation of Eve and to what he interprets as her particular vulnerability to deception. He regards her as more easily persuaded by the serpent, not because of malice, but because of what he describes as a weaker rational constitution and an unsteady will.<sup>22</sup> *Ādam*, on the other hand, is said to have fallen in a different manner: fully aware of the command, yet swayed by his affection for his companion, he chose to follow her voice rather than exercise the authority entrusted to him by God.<sup>23</sup> For Augustine, this reversal—man yielding to woman—was itself a sign of disorder, a visible mark of the disruption caused by sin.

## 2.4- *Imago Dei* and Gender Hierarchy

Underlying this narrative is a broader anthropology in which Augustine differentiates the roles of the sexes in relation to the *imago Dei*. Man, as the "glory of God," bears the divine image directly and fully, whereas woman, as the "glory of man," does so only in relation to him.<sup>24</sup> Thus, woman's participation in the image of God is construed as derivative and complementary, dependent on the man's rational and social vocation within the order of creation. This hierarchy, framed as theological necessity rather than cultural custom, positioned the male as ruler and the female as helper, with obedience and maternity defining her sphere.<sup>25</sup> In this way, Augustine not only formulated a doctrine of original sin but also transmitted a gendered vision of human nature that would influence both ecclesial teaching and cultural attitudes for centuries.<sup>26</sup>

<sup>20</sup> Augustine, *On the Good of Marriage (De Bono Coniugali)*, trans. C. L. Cornish, in *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers*, First Series, vol. 3, ed. Philip Schaff (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1994), 401–403.

<sup>21</sup> Augustine, *On the Literal Meaning of Genesis (De Genesi ad Litteram)*, trans. John Hammond Taylor, 2 vols. (New York: Newman Press, 1982), II.25, 151–153.

<sup>22</sup> Augustine, *On the Trinity (De Trinitate)*, trans. Edmund Hill, O.P., *The Works of Saint Augustine*, vol. I/5 (Brooklyn, NY: New City Press, 1991), XII.7.10, 329–330.

<sup>23</sup> Augustine, *The Literal Meaning of Genesis (De Genesi ad Litteram)*, trans. John Hammond Taylor, 2 vols. (New York: Newman Press, 1982), XI.42, 463–464.

<sup>24</sup> Augustine, *On the Trinity*, XII.10.15, 333–334.

<sup>25</sup> Augustine, *The City of God*, XIV.11, 574–576.

<sup>26</sup> Kari Elisabeth Børresen, *Subordination and Equivalence*, 48–52.

## 2.5- Corruption of *Liberum Arbitrium* and Divine Grace

In Augustine's theological system, one of the most decisive outcomes of the Fall was the corruption of *liberum arbitrium*—the human capacity for free choice. Whereas *Ādam* and Eve had originally possessed the ability to will obedience to God, sin introduced a radical disorder that bound the human will to *amor sui*, the pursuit of self and self-interest.<sup>27</sup> In this state, humanity became incapable of returning to God through its own power; genuine obedience required an external aid that Augustine identified as *gratia Dei* (divine grace).<sup>28</sup> Grace, for him, was not merely assistance but a transformative power that reoriented the will, enabling it to love God rather than the self.

## 2.6- Divine Election and the Role of Virginity

Yet Augustine's soteriology carried a sharp exclusivity: this grace was not universally given but distributed according to God's inscrutable counsel. Only those predestined by divine election received the gift of saving grace, while others were left to the just consequences of sin.<sup>29</sup> This conviction laid the groundwork for later doctrines such as the *servitus voluntatis* (bondage of the will) and the theology of predestination, which found fuller articulation in medieval scholasticism and Reformation thought.<sup>30</sup> Far from being an abstract speculation, Augustine's teaching shaped Western Christianity's persistent tension between divine sovereignty and human freedom, influencing figures as diverse as Thomas Aquinas, Martin Luther, and John Calvin.<sup>31</sup>

In Augustine's theological framework, the notion of freedom is marked by a striking paradox: human beings retain the *facultas volendi* (the natural faculty of willing), yet their moral disposition has been irreversibly inclined toward sin apart from divine intervention.<sup>32</sup> This anthropology directly shapes his understanding of the *Ādam* –Eve relationship, in which gendered hierarchy is not merely a cultural arrangement but a theological reality distorted by the Fall.<sup>33</sup> Thus, Augustine's vision becomes foundational not only for his soteriology but also for Western Christian constructions of gender, authority, and the very condition of humanity.

Within this schema, the doctrine of divine election—what Augustine terms a “*parva sed sine causa electio*” (“little but causeless election”)—extends universally to men and women in principle, but is situated within a hierarchy that preserves their distinct roles.<sup>34</sup> Election is manifested not by inherent human strength but by a divinely enabled reorientation of the will: the elect freely choose God over *amor sui* (self-love), ordering their lives toward the

<sup>27</sup> Augustine, *On the Free Choice of the Will (De Libero Arbitrio)*, trans. Thomas Williams (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1993), II.19, 66–67.

<sup>28</sup> Augustine, *Enchiridion on Faith, Hope, and Love*, trans. Henry Bettenson (London: SCM Press, 1955), XXIX.111, 88–89.

<sup>29</sup> Augustine, *On the Predestination of the Saints*, in *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers*, First Series, vol. 5, ed. Philip Schaff (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1994), XVII.34, 502–503.

<sup>30</sup> Augustine, *The City of God*, V.9–10, 208–211.

<sup>31</sup> Alister E. McGrath, *Iustitia Dei: A History of the Christian Doctrine of Justification*, 3rd ed. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), 34–42.

<sup>32</sup> Augustine, *On the Free Choice of the Will*, II.19, 66–67.

<sup>33</sup> Augustine, *Literal Commentary on Genesis (De Genesi ad Litteram)*, in *The Works of Saint Augustine*, ed. John E. Rotelle, trans. J.H. Taylor (New York: New City Press, 1982), XI.42, 191–192.

<sup>34</sup> Augustine, *On the Predestination of the Saints*, in *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers*, First Series, vol. 5, ed. Philip Schaff (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1994), XVII.34, 502–503.

*summum bonum* (highest good) rather than the fragmented desires of fallen selfhood.<sup>35</sup> This decisive turn is possible only through the operation of grace, which liberates the will from bondage and restores its true capacity for communion with God.<sup>36</sup>

A key manifestation of divine grace, according to Augustine, lies in the voluntary choice of virginity or *continentia sexualis* (here understood as chastity and continence). This vocation, for him, is not simply a denial of earthly bonds but a symbolic anticipation of the eschatological order, when—as the Gospel affirms—“there will be neither marriage nor giving in marriage” (Matt. 22:30).<sup>37</sup> While Augustine consistently acknowledges that marriage and procreation were instituted by God and fully legitimate in the state of original innocence, he nonetheless situates virginity at a higher level in the present, fallen age.<sup>38</sup> Within his eschatological vision—particularly in light of what he perceives as the approaching consummation of history—the deliberate renunciation of conjugal life becomes a clearer reflection of the redeemed existence that awaits believers in the heavenly kingdom.<sup>39</sup>

## 2.7- Theological Basis for Female Subordination

Nevertheless, Augustine does not reject marriage outright; he regards it as a genuine path to holiness when practiced with fidelity and oriented toward God’s will.<sup>40</sup> In the case of women, however, Augustine’s anthropology and theology maintain a structural subordination that even divine grace does not erase. Whether married or committed to sexual continence, a woman remains subject to the hierarchical order established at creation. According to Augustine, this order is not merely a consequence of sin, but is rooted in the original act of divine creation, in which man was given a position of headship and woman a derivative role. Her subordination, reinforced by the punishment that followed her act of disobedience in Eden, is for Augustine a divinely instituted reality. Grace may sanctify her person and elevate her to salvation, but it does not, in his theological schema, dissolve the ontological and social hierarchy between male and female.

Thus, Augustine’s teaching reflects a complex interplay between soteriological equality—where both sexes are equally capable of receiving divine election—and a persistent patriarchal anthropology that grounds female subordination in the very fabric of creation. This tension would exercise a formative influence on subsequent Christian thought, shaping theological, ecclesiastical, and social attitudes toward women for centuries.

## Section Three: Luther’s Interpretation of the Fall

### 3.1- The Fall as a Distortion of Divine Wisdom

Martin Luther interprets the Fall of *Adam* and Eve as a pivotal distortion of human nature, one that reaches beyond external behavior to affect the very essence of humanity. For Luther, the root of the transgression lies in the abandonment of divine wisdom and reliance upon self-will. In setting aside God’s explicit command, *Adam* and Eve exchanged the harmony of their original state for a condition of disorder, in which the human heart became marked by

<sup>35</sup> Augustine, *Enchiridion on Faith, Hope, and Love*, trans. Henry Bettenson (London: SCM Press, 1955), XXIX.111, 88–89.

<sup>36</sup> R.A. Markus, *Saeculum: History and Society in the Theology of St. Augustine* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1970), 94–101.

<sup>37</sup> Augustine, *De sancta virginitate* (On Holy Virginity), in *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers*, First Series, vol. 3, trans. Philip Schaff (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1994), 243.

<sup>38</sup> Augustine, *De bono coniugali* (On the Good of Marriage), in *The Works of Saint Augustine*, Part I, vol. 9, ed. John E. Rotelle, trans. Ray Kearney (Hyde Park, NY: New City Press, 1999), 33–34.

<sup>39</sup> Augustine, *De sancta virginitate*, NPNF 1.3, 250.

<sup>40</sup> Augustine, *City of God*, 14.22, trans. Henry Bettenson (London: Penguin, 2003), 593.

falsehood and stripped of holiness.<sup>41</sup> This corruption was not limited to an act of disobedience but resulted in an ontological shift: human beings, who were created righteous, lost the capacity to live in perfect conformity to God.<sup>42</sup>

### 3.2-Spiritual and Material Consequences of the Fall

The divine judgments pronounced in Genesis 3 are thus interpreted not merely as arbitrary punishments but as necessary consequences of this fractured condition.

- \* To *Adam* was assigned the burden of relentless toil, a visible reminder that the created order itself had been subjected to futility.
- \* To Eve was delivered a twofold judgment: the pain of childbirth and subjection to her husband's authority.<sup>43</sup>

Luther underscores that this subjection is not to be regarded as a temporary discipline or social arrangement but as a continuing feature of the post-lapsarian reality. For him, the disruption of the original partnership between man and woman is emblematic of humanity's wider alienation from God and the inversion of created harmony.<sup>44</sup>

### 3.3- Divine Judgments in Genesis 3 and Eve's Subjection

The divine judgments pronounced in Genesis 3 are thus interpreted not merely as arbitrary punishments but as necessary consequences of this fractured condition.<sup>45</sup> To *Adam* was assigned the burden of relentless toil, a visible reminder that the created order itself had been subjected to futility. To Eve was delivered a twofold judgment: the pain of childbirth and subjection to her husband's authority.<sup>46</sup> Luther underscores that this subjection is not to be regarded as a temporary discipline or social arrangement but as a continuing feature of the post-lapsarian reality.<sup>47</sup> For him, the disruption of the original partnership between man and woman is emblematic of humanity's wider alienation from God and the inversion of created harmony.

### 3.4- Luther's Gender Hierarchy and Patriarchal Anthropology

Luther's reflections on gender after the Fall are shaped by this reading of Genesis. While he does not deny the goodness of marriage—as one of God's ordained estates—he interprets the hierarchical ordering of male and female as both a judgment and a divine ordinance.<sup>48</sup> Eve's subjection becomes for Luther a lasting testimony of sin's consequences, a structural element of the human condition that persists until the final redemption. In this way, Luther's theology reinforces a theological anthropology in which woman, though equally a recipient of salvation in Christ, occupies a derivative role in the social and domestic spheres.<sup>49</sup> Such an interpretation demonstrates both Luther's continuity with patristic traditions, particularly Augustine, and his departure from them. Whereas Augustine emphasized

<sup>41</sup> Martin Luther, *Lectures on Genesis: Chapters 1–5*, in *Luther's Works*, vol. 1, ed. Jaroslav Pelikan (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1958), 152.

<sup>42</sup> *Ibid.*, 155–56.

<sup>43</sup> *Ibid.*, 160–62.

<sup>44</sup> Scott H. Hendrix, *Luther and the Papacy: Stages in a Reformation Conflict* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1981), 45–47.

<sup>45</sup> Luther, *Lectures on Genesis 1–5*, LW 1:170–72.

<sup>46</sup> *Ibid.*, 196–97.

<sup>47</sup> *Ibid.*, 201–202.

<sup>48</sup> Martin Luther, *Lectures on Genesis: Chapters 6–14*, in *Luther's Works*, vol. 2, ed. Jaroslav Pelikan (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1960), 98–99.

<sup>49</sup> Susan C. Karant-Nunn and Merry E. Wiesner-Hanks, *Luther on Women: A Sourcebook* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 37–40.

concupiscence and the corruption of sexual desire, Luther saw the essence of sin in the will's rebellion and lack of trust. Both, however, converge in identifying female subordination as a central outcome of the Fall—one that, in their view, bore divine sanction and continued relevance in Christian society.<sup>50</sup>

### 3.5- Shared Culpability of Ādam and Eve

Within this interpretive framework, Luther presents Eve as the one who first succumbed to the serpent's deception, a detail he regards as consistent with her greater susceptibility to persuasion.<sup>51</sup> Ādam, however, is not portrayed as innocent or merely passive. Luther insists that Ādam's sin lay in his conscious decision to comply with Eve's suggestion, not out of ignorance but out of a misplaced desire to please her.<sup>52</sup> In this sense, Ādam's fault was not deception but weakness of will, an abdication of his God-given responsibility to uphold the divine command.<sup>53</sup>

Yet Luther is careful to stress that both bear equal culpability before God. Eve erred by yielding to temptation, while Ādam erred by consenting against better knowledge.<sup>54</sup> Both, therefore, abandoned the divine word in favor of their own inclination, and in doing so they jointly shattered the trust that bound humanity to God.<sup>55</sup> This act of collective disobedience becomes, in Luther's theology, the archetype of all sin: a willful turning away from God's word toward self-reliance.

### 3.6- Cosmic Consequences and the Role of Divine Grace

The consequences of this joint rebellion were cosmic in scope. Humanity forfeited not only the immediate blessedness of Eden but also the capacity for unbroken fellowship with God.<sup>56</sup> In Luther's reading, the Fall explains the universal condition of sin, the pervasiveness of corruption in every generation, and the futility of human effort to recover the lost state by natural means.<sup>57</sup> Only through divine grace, revealed supremely in Christ, can the ruptured relationship be healed and the joy of Eden restored in anticipation of the eschatological renewal.<sup>58</sup>

## Section Four: Calvin's Interpretation of the Fall

### 4.1- Sequence of Temptation and Shared Responsibility

John Calvin's interpretation of the Fall runs closely parallel to that of Martin Luther, particularly regarding the sequence of temptation and the shared responsibility of Ādam and Eve.<sup>59</sup> Like Luther, Calvin underscores that the serpent approached Eve first, discerning in her a comparative weakness—whether of judgment, constancy, or discernment—that

<sup>50</sup> Heiko A. Oberman, *Luther: Man Between God and the Devil* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1989), 189–191.

<sup>51</sup> Martin Luther, *Lectures on Genesis: Chapters 1–5*, in *Luther's Works*, vol. 1, ed. Jaroslav Pelikan (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1958), 151–52.

<sup>52</sup> *Ibid.*, 154.

<sup>53</sup> *Ibid.*, 156–57.

<sup>54</sup> *Ibid.*, 160.

<sup>55</sup> Scott H. Hendrix, *Luther and the Papacy: Stages in a Reformation Conflict* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1981), 46.

<sup>56</sup> Luther, *Lectures on Genesis 1–5*, LW 1:170–71.

<sup>57</sup> *Ibid.*, 175–77.

<sup>58</sup> Heiko A. Oberman, *Luther: Man Between God and the Devil* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1989), 191–92.

<sup>59</sup> John Calvin, *Commentaries on the First Book of Moses Called Genesis*, trans. John King (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1948), 1:154–55.

rendered her more vulnerable to deception.<sup>60</sup> *Ādam*, by contrast, sinned not through ignorance but through deliberate consent, choosing to follow his wife rather than the divine word.<sup>61</sup> Nevertheless, Calvin insists that the theological weight of the transgression was identical for both: each abandoned God's explicit command, and thus both stand equally guilty before divine justice.<sup>62</sup>

#### 4.2- Eve's Punishment and Reaffirmation of Creational Hierarchy

Where Calvin diverges from Luther is in his stronger emphasis on the consequences of the Fall as a confirmation and reinforcement of the hierarchical structure of creation. In his commentary on Genesis 3:16, Calvin argues that Eve's punishment embodies a "twofold judgment": the increase of pain in childbearing and her subjection to her husband.<sup>63</sup> This subjection, however, is not portrayed merely as a penalty imposed after sin, but as the reaffirmation of a divinely instituted order that Eve had transgressed by assuming a leadership role in persuading *Ādam*.<sup>64</sup> For Calvin, her failure thus represented a double rebellion: disobedience to God and a violation of the authority of man.<sup>65</sup>

#### 4.3- Theological Basis for Male Headship

On this basis, Calvin extends the hierarchical implications further than Luther. He maintains that the subordination of women is not only a remedial measure but also a permanent ordinance grounded in creation and reaffirmed in redemption.<sup>66</sup> Consequently, if a woman resists her husband's authority, Calvin allows that the husband may enforce her obedience—though always "with moderation," so that discipline does not devolve into cruelty.<sup>67</sup> In this sense, the Fall both revealed and entrenched the necessity of gendered hierarchy: men and women are equally culpable before God in sin, but their roles within the family and the church remain asymmetrical, reflecting what Calvin regarded as the natural and divinely sanctioned order of creation.<sup>10</sup>

#### 4.4- Integration of the Fall with Social Order

Calvin's exposition thus weaves together theological anthropology and social order: the Fall confirms the necessity of male headship, both as a corrective to the disorder introduced by sin and as a reaffirmation of the creational hierarchy.<sup>68</sup> While he insists that men and women alike bear equal responsibility for original sin, his reading ensures that the post-lapsarian world remains structured along patriarchal lines—a framework he regards as both divinely sanctioned and indispensable for the preservation of order in the household, the church, and the wider civic community. For Calvin, the punishment of Eve therefore serves not only as a reminder of human rebellion but also as a paradigmatic illustration of the way divine providence restores harmony through the reassertion of hierarchical order.<sup>69</sup>

### Section Five: Islamic Counter-Narrative to the Christian Fall Tradition

<sup>60</sup> Ibid., 1:155.

<sup>61</sup> Ibid., 1:156.

<sup>62</sup> Ibid., 1:160.

<sup>63</sup> Ibid., 1:171.

<sup>64</sup> Ibid., 1:172.

<sup>65</sup> Barbara Pitkin, "Calvin on Eve, Women, and the Church," *Church History* 68, no. 3 (1999): 540–42.

<sup>66</sup> Calvin, *Commentary on Genesis*, 1:172–73

<sup>67</sup> John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, ed. John T. McNeill, trans. Ford Lewis Battles (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1960), 2.2.23.

<sup>68</sup> John Calvin, *Commentaries on the First Book of Moses Called Genesis*, trans. John King (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1948), 1:171–72.

<sup>69</sup> Barbara Pitkin, "Calvin on Eve, Women, and the Church," *Church History* 68, no. 3 (1999): 540–42.

The Christian theological tradition, especially as articulated by **Augustine, Luther, and Calvin**, has historically read the Fall narrative in a way that reinforces three interconnected doctrines: the **inheritance of Original Sin**, the **gendered assignment of blame**, and the **permanent subordination of women**. Islamic theology, rooted in the Qur'ānic account, challenges each of these assertions, presenting a distinct and theologically coherent alternative.

### 5.1- Rejection of Original Sin and Inherited Guilt

One of the most foundational points of divergence between Islamic theology and traditional Christian doctrine lies in the rejection of the concept of Original Sin. In much of Christian theology—especially as articulated by Augustine—*Ādam* and Eve's act of disobedience in Eden is seen not merely as a personal transgression, but as the origin of a hereditary corruption of human nature. This doctrine posits that the guilt and sinful nature resulting from the Fall are transmitted to all human beings at birth, leaving humanity inherently depraved and in need of divine grace through Christ's atonement.<sup>70</sup>

Islamic theology, however, rejects both the notion of inherited guilt and the idea that human nature is intrinsically corrupt. While *Ādam* and *Hawwā'* (Eve) did indeed disobey Allah by eating from the forbidden tree, the Qur'ān presents their error as entirely personal and not transmitted to their descendants. Instead, the narrative emphasizes divine mercy and the immediacy of repentance:

*"Then Ādam received words from his Lord, and He turned to him in mercy. Indeed, it is He who is the Accepting of repentance, the Merciful." (Qur'ān 2:37)<sup>71</sup>*

This account frames the Fall not as an irreversible rupture in the moral fabric of humanity, but as an instructive episode demonstrating God's readiness to forgive sincere repentance. Every human being, according to Islam, is born upon the *fiṭrah*—a state of innate purity, moral responsibility, and natural inclination toward truth—unburdened by ancestral sin. This principle is reinforced by the Qur'ānic assertion:

*"No soul bears the burden of another." (Qur'ān 6:164)<sup>72</sup>*

Thus, in Islamic thought, sin is neither ontologically inherited nor legally transferable; accountability is strictly individual. This distinction profoundly shapes the Islamic conception of human nature as intrinsically good and spiritually capable, in contrast to the dominant Christian portrayal of humanity as inherently flawed and dependent upon a salvific act for redemption. By removing the inherited stain of sin, Islam frames the human journey as a direct, unmediated moral relationship with God, where each person has the potential to seek forgiveness and attain righteousness without the necessity of a vicarious atonement.<sup>73</sup>

<sup>70</sup> Augustine, *On the Merits and Forgiveness of Sins, and on the Baptism of Infants*, in *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers*, vol. 5, ed. Philip Schaff (Buffalo, NY: Christian Literature Publishing Co., 1887), 24–30.

<sup>71</sup> The Qur'ān, 2:37. Translations used here are adapted from Saheeh International, *The Qur'an: English Meanings* (Riyadh: Dar Abul-Qasim, 1997).

<sup>72</sup> The Qur'ān, 6:164. See also 17:15; 35:18; 39:7; 53:38 for similar formulations. Translation adapted from Saheeh International, *The Qur'an: English Meanings* (Riyadh: Dar Abul-Qasim, 1997).

<sup>73</sup> Fazlur Rahman, *Major Themes of the Qur'an* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2009), 29–35; Toshihiko Izutsu, *Ethico-Religious Concepts in the Qur'ān* (Montreal: McGill University Press, 1966), 223–28.

## 5.2- Mutual Temptation and Shared Responsibility

In much of traditional Christian exegesis—shaped heavily by the writings of Augustine and reinforced by later Reformers such as Martin Luther and John Calvin—Eve is frequently cast as the primary instigator of humanity’s fall. This portrayal often frames her as morally weaker, more susceptible to deception, and thus directly responsible for leading *Ādam* into sin.<sup>74</sup> Such a reading has historically reinforced a theological anthropology that regards women as spiritually and intellectually inferior, forming one of the deep-seated roots of gender-based hierarchy in Christian thought.<sup>75</sup>

The Qur’ānic account, however, decisively departs from this gendered narrative. It attributes the act of disobedience equally to both *Ādam* and *Hawwā’*, removing any suggestion of unilateral culpability:

“So he [Satan] whispered to both of them to reveal to them what was hidden of their shame... And he swore to them, ‘Indeed, I am to you among the sincere advisors.’ So he made them fall, through deception; and when they tasted of the tree, their shame became apparent to them.” (Qur’ān 7:20–22)<sup>76</sup>

Here, Satan’s temptation is addressed jointly to both, and the subsequent transgression is portrayed as a mutual moral lapse, not the moral failure of one sex over the other. The narrative’s linguistic symmetry—employing dual pronouns throughout—emphasizes shared agency, shared responsibility, and shared consequences.<sup>77</sup>

By framing the Fall as a collaborative act of disobedience, the Qur’ān removes any theological foundation for female moral inferiority. This directly undercuts the doctrinal justifications that have historically supported patriarchal structures in Christian theology.<sup>78</sup> Instead, the Islamic perspective situates men and women as equal moral agents before God, equally capable of both obedience and error, and equally entitled to repentance and divine mercy.

In doing so, the Qur’ānic account not only reframes the Eden narrative but also establishes a hermeneutical safeguard against misogynistic interpretations—making gender-based subordination a matter of cultural practice rather than divine ordinance.<sup>79</sup>

## 5.3- No Gender-Based Subordination as Divine Punishment

In Augustinian and Calvinist theology, Genesis 3:16—“Your desire will be for your husband, and he will rule over you”—has often been interpreted as a divinely ordained consequence of Eve’s disobedience, rendering her and all women thereafter subject to male authority.<sup>80</sup> This reading transforms a post-lapsarian condition into a permanent theological mandate,

<sup>74</sup> Augustine, *The City of God*, trans. Henry Bettenson (London: Penguin, 2003), 13.14–15.

<sup>75</sup> John Calvin, *Commentary on Genesis*, trans. John King (Edinburgh: Calvin Translation Society, 1847), 2:3–6; Martin Luther, *Lectures on Genesis: Chapters 1–5*, ed. Jaroslav Pelikan (St. Louis: Concordia, 1958)

<sup>76</sup> The Qur’ān, 7:20–22. Translation adapted from Saheeh International, *The Qur’an: English Meanings* (Riyadh: Dar Abul-Qasim, 1997).

<sup>77</sup> Amina Wadud, *Qur’an and Woman: Rereading the Sacred Text from a Woman’s Perspective* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999), 18–20.

<sup>78</sup> Phyllis Trible, *God and the Rhetoric of Sexuality*, 72–75.

<sup>79</sup> Asma Barlas, “Believing Women” in Islam: Unreading Patriarchal Interpretations of the Qur’an (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2002), 133–39.

<sup>80</sup> Augustine, *The City of God*, 14.11–13.

becoming one of the most influential biblical justifications for patriarchal social structures in Christian history.<sup>81</sup>

Islam, however, rejects the premise that gender hierarchy is a form of divine retribution for the events in Eden. Nowhere in the Qur'ānic narrative of the Fall is there a corresponding decree subordinating woman to man.<sup>82</sup> Instead, the Qur'ān affirms the intrinsic spiritual equality of all human beings, grounding worth and honor exclusively in piety:

“Indeed, the most noble of you in the sight of Allah is the most righteous of you.” (Qur'ān 49:13)<sup>83</sup>

While Islamic jurisprudence (*fiqh*) does recognize differentiated roles and responsibilities for men and women in certain social and familial contexts, these distinctions are framed as functional and complementary rather than as punitive. They derive from considerations of social order and mutual obligation, not from any divine condemnation of one gender. Crucially, these differences do not affect access to divine reward or spiritual standing before God:

*“Whoever does righteousness, whether male or female, while being a believer—We will surely cause them to live a good life, and We will surely give them their reward according to the best of what they used to do.”*  
(Qur'ān 16:97)<sup>84</sup>

By avoiding the theological entrenchment of gender-based subordination as a divinely mandated punishment, the Islamic view preserves moral parity and equal spiritual agency between the sexes.<sup>85</sup> This stands in marked contrast to strands of Christian thought in which the Fall narrative has served as a theological charter for male dominance, shaping ecclesiastical authority, social customs, and even legal norms for centuries.<sup>86</sup>

In sum, the Qur'ānic account transforms the Eden story from a gendered indictment into a universal moral lesson, ensuring that divine justice operates on the basis of individual accountability and piety, not inherited guilt or gendered penalty.

### Conclusion

The narrative of the Fall in Genesis has served as a theological touchstone throughout Christian history, shaping doctrines of sin, salvation, human nature, and gender relations. From the Eastern Orthodox emphasis on humanity's disrupted journey toward divine union, to the Augustinian framing of the Fall as the loss of free will and the entrance of concupiscence, the story has been read in ways that reflect both doctrinal priorities and cultural assumptions. Reformation thinkers such as Luther and Calvin preserved much of Augustine's anthropology while reinforcing the hierarchical subordination of women as divinely sanctioned in the postlapsarian order. Medieval mysticism and scholasticism offered nuanced reinterpretations—sometimes softening gendered blame—yet generally upheld the creational hierarchy of male headship.

<sup>81</sup> John Calvin, *Commentaries on the First Book of Moses Called Genesis* 1:175–77.

<sup>82</sup> Fakhr al-Dīn al-Rāzī, *Mafātīḥ al-Ghayb* (Beirut: Dār Iḥyā' al-Turāth al-'Arabī, 1990), 12:189–90, on Qur'ān 7:20–23

<sup>83</sup> Translation adapted from Saheeh International, *The Qur'an: English Meanings* (Riyadh: Dar Abul-Qasim, 1997).

<sup>84</sup> Translation adapted from Saheeh International, *The Qur'an: English Meanings* (Riyadh: Dar Abul-Qasim, 1997).

<sup>85</sup> Amina Wadud, *Qur'an and Woman*, 31–35.

<sup>86</sup> Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, *In Memory of Her: A Feminist Theological Reconstruction of Christian Origins* (New York: Crossroad, 1983), 33–38.

In modern scholarship, particularly within feminist theology, the narrative has been re-examined with the aim of disentangling biblical text from later patriarchal interpretations, thereby reclaiming Eve's role as one of moral and theological agency rather than inherent inferiority. Literary adaptations from Milton to contemporary writers have further expanded the symbolic and existential dimensions of the Eden story, ensuring its continued relevance as a metaphor for innocence, temptation, freedom, and loss. Ultimately, the enduring adaptability of the Fall narrative underscores its dual function as both a foundational Christian doctrinal resource and a flexible cultural myth capable of speaking to shifting theological and social concerns across the centuries.



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