

Daniel H. Spencer. *Forsaking the Fall: Original Sin and the Possibility of a Nonlapsarian Christianity*. Routledge, 2023. xii + 203 pp. £125.00 (hbk); £39.99 (pbk).

Denis Alexander
Emeritus Director of The Faraday Institute for Science and Religion,
Emeritus Fellow of St. Edmund's College, Cambridge University

The main thesis of *Forsaking the Fall* is that the biblical evidence in support of the traditional understanding of the Fall in Christian theology is weak and that the doctrine can be forsaken without subverting orthodox Christian belief. The author pursues his argument systematically in a series of carefully presented steps, culminating in an appeal to evolutionary biology to explain the sinful nature of humanity without, it is suggested, any need to appeal to a historical Fall.

There is a wide range of understandings amongst theologians about what precisely is meant by terms such as 'Original Sin' and 'the Fall.' The author spends chapter 1 helpfully mapping out the historical territory in this respect, highlighting the point that although Augustine's perspective is the first that comes to mind when the terms 'Fall' and 'Original Sin' are mentioned, there are several other ways in which the terms have been understood over the centuries, stretching from Irenaeus of Lyons and Gregory of Nyssa through to Thomas Aquinas and the Reformers.

Chapter 2 then focuses on the interpretation of Genesis 2–3 in relation to the doctrine of the 'Fall of Man.' The author argues that rather than the "ruling motif" of the narrative being sin or insubordination, the story "has principally to do with the two related themes of *knowledge* and *immortality*" (45). In support of his argument, Spencer focuses on the two trees in the narrative and what they represent, in conversation with Dietrich Bonhoeffer, Gerhard von Rad, and Claus Westermann. Adam is created mortal, receiving the breath of life in Genesis 2:7, the same breath of life that the animals are described as having in Genesis 7:21–22. Spencer sees the tree of life as symbolising personal immortality and "humanity's existentially fuelled quest to attain it" (49), a claim resonating with Genesis 3:22–23, which provides the reason for their expulsion from the garden: Eating from the tree of life would render them immortal. Concerning the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, the author supports the rendering of James Barr that it refers to "the power of rational and especially ethical discrimination" (57), suggesting that eating of the tree does not represent an attempt to "[declare] their independence from their creator" (quoting John Walton, 57). The author therefore argues that "Gen 2–3 deals primarily with the *hominization* of humankind, with the progression of the human species from an earlier, thoroughly affective existence to a state in which it becomes the more rational, morally responsible and self-determining animal we recognize today" (59). This "loss of innocence and definite step away from the purely animal life, bears heavy natural consequences: there will be pain in childbearing and frustrated relationships" (60). "Man has indeed become like God in knowing good and evil, but this

fact signals not an end but a beginning” (60). The author then goes on to highlight the future true godliness that becomes available in Christ.

Spencer is well aware how different his interpretation of Genesis 2–3 looks to the Apostle Paul in Romans 5, and therefore devotes the whole of chapter 3 to discussing this key biblical chapter. The author argues that some doctrine of Original Sin is almost certainly present in Romans 5, following in particular the commentary of Douglas Moo, but then goes on to propose that because the passage in question is mainly concerned with Christology and soteriology, “St. Paul’s personal opinions apropos the nature of the first sin are, plausibly, largely irrelevant” (68). Here the idea is that we should make a distinction between the key theological points that a biblical writer is claiming and the utilisation of a story or account to make theological or pastoral points when it is not necessary to believe the details of the story itself for the theological claims to be true. Jude verse 9 is proposed as an example of this approach where we read that the archangel Michael, “contending with the devil, was disputing about the body of Moses.” As another example, the author reflects on Galatians 4:21–31 where Paul reworks the text of Genesis 21:1–10 “to declare that Hagar and Sarah are to be understood as figures for the Sinaitic covenant and the older Abrahamic covenant now fulfilled in Christ, respectively” (80).

Part II of the book focuses on whether we can retain Christian orthodoxy without a doctrine of original sin. This leads to an extensive discussion in chapter 4 of the various biblical meanings of sin. In the Old Testament we have *chata* which means “to miss” or “to miss a goal or way.” This may involve a basic moral infringement, an act that breaks an explicit divine command or law, or a failure to follow God more generally (95). In the New Testament we have both *adikia* and *hamartia*, the latter being most favoured by the translators of the LXX as a translation of *chata*. Overall *adikia* and cognates are found around 70 times, but *hamartia* and cognates around 270 times (100). *Hamartia* has the main meaning of “missing the mark,” but has a range of meanings broader than the Hebrew *chata*, which include sin as an “enslaving cosmic power,” sin as wrongdoing or transgression, sin as opposition to God, and other nuances besides.

Given that the author wishes to defend a nonlapsarian position, the dilemma is now the question as to where sin comes from. For this, Spencer draws in chapter 5 upon F. R. Tennant’s 1902 publication *The Origin and Propagation of Sin*, seeking to support the argument that the “established passions” that arise from human evolutionary history clash with the “newly discovered moral law, only recently arisen in the age-long process of biological evolution” (116). “Reason dawns, conscience emerges: only now may the ‘race long struggle of flesh with spirit’ truly begin” (the embedded quote comes from Tennant, 116). There then follows a fairly technical philosophical discussion on whether this renders God ultimately responsible for sin in light of the free will objection, the author ultimately concluding that God did indeed create a being for whom sin is inevitable, supporting his argument by referring to the “good” of Genesis 1 as meaning “*valuable or functional according to God’s design*” (128, emphasis in original).

Like dominoes falling, a nonlapsarian position not only raises questions about where sin comes from, but also about the Christian doctrine of salvation (ch. 6). If sin is no longer an “alien invader that affects all people” then, many suggest, “the biblical ideas of atonement and propitiation become seriously threatened” (134), accompanied by a trivializing of sin, treating it as merely a “functional problem.” In response the author suggests that a “deeply ontological” account of ingrained human sinfulness might arise from the evolutionary process, and proposes that the concept of *theosis* or deification provides a possible way forward. So “the Christian who doubts the reality of the Fall and Original Sin suffers no

soteriological want of necessity” (135). Thinking about evolution, it is recalled that for Tennant “the theological term *sin* refers to ‘the survival or misuse of habits and tendencies that were incidental to an earlier stage of [evolutionary] development” (135). Therefore, “Original Sin may be unnecessary for contemporary theological reflection, but an ‘original sinfulness’ is, as Alan Richardson once said, more or less ‘an empirical description of human nature” (139).

Chapter 6 then proceeds to expound the participatory model of the atonement suggested by Tim Bayne and Greg Restall. In their thinking, the remission of sin is primarily a matter of identity; they argue that “if the sinner is the ‘old person’, and the old person died with Christ on the cross, then there is no one who ought to be regarded as guilty for their sin. The moral debt we owe to God is not punished or forgiven, nor is satisfaction or reparation made for it. Instead it is dealt with by changing the identity of the sinner: in the sense that matters, the person who is in the wrong before God no longer exists” (quoting from Bayne and Restall 2009, 140). Spencer is quick to point out that the Bible contains a variety of “mutually complementary theories of Christ’s saving work,” but prefers the participatory model as it appears to fit well with the postlapsarian position being presented. Thus “Christ’s atoning work consists largely in the abolition of sin in the Christian through the latter’s imitative, sacramental, and ecclesial participation in Christ’s life, death, and resurrection” (146).

Building on this soteriological perspective, the author then explains further the Christian aspiration to be a partaker of the divine nature as a soteriological concept that “has in recent centuries proven quite controversial . . . and has been, in the West at least, repeatedly called into serious question” (142). Spencer attempts to address such concerns by outlining the prevailing Eastern Orthodox idea of deification, which “follows Gregory Palamas in making a crucial distinction between the divine essence and energies” (142). “Our deified humanity is still humanity just as Christ’s was and is. But it is more than mere, ordinary humanity. It is humanity energized, empowered, and transformed within the divine presence” (145). But equally the author is well aware that the Eastern tradition is no more nonlapsarian than the West, realizing that he is extracting one aspect of Eastern Orthodoxy, namely *theosis*, in order to support his thesis, arguing that the new divine life in Christ experienced by Christians provides a good fit with the participatory model of the atonement.

A final brief chapter 7 entitled “On Orthodoxy,” plus an even briefer conclusion, completes the book. The author wishes to make the claim that his nonlapsarian position is consistent with orthodoxy. However, this raises the question as to what exactly one means by orthodoxy. His engagement with the work of N. T. Wright leads to his claim that “a theological project is orthodox—that is, authentically Christian—just to the extent that it is ontologically committed to a *specific* rendition of biblical narrative grammar,” one in which “genuine historical knowledge” is central (159).

This overview of Spencer’s thesis is hopefully sufficient to give at least a flavour of the general directions taken in the attempt to support a nonlapsarian position. The author is thorough in his engagement, with extensive discussion of many alternative views, and seeks to leave no stone unturned in addressing the various nuances of his arguments, plus the objections they naturally raise, within the constraints of a relatively short volume that started life as a PhD thesis.

Three particular points come to mind that might render the overall thesis a little less persuasive. If we view the early chapters of Genesis as ‘theological essays,’ the term favored by the late Kenneth Bailey, it remains important that we sit and read them as a story, as an overall narrative. Yes, as John Walton often reminds us, the chapters are not written to us,

but for us. We need therefore to place them within their ancient Near Eastern context and grapple with the theological meanings of individual verses, as the author helpfully does in the present volume. But equally we cannot forget the *toledot* structure of Genesis as a whole, structured according to 11 *toledots*, each one introducing a specific family history. The very first *toledot* introduced in Genesis 2:4 as “This is the account of the heavens and the earth when they were created” might at first not sound like an introduction to a family history at all, but as we read on, we find that it is, with an exposition of how humankind should practice the reality of being made in the image of God, with marriage as a key relationship that makes families even possible—as expounded further by the ten *toledots* that follow. The first *toledot* introduces the first family.

It is important that we do not miss the wood for the trees as we continue to read the Genesis narrative. For any reader, in any culture and at any time, it is hard to avoid the ‘before and after’ emphasis in the account. In Genesis 2:7, ‘the Adam’ is created mortal, utterly dependent on God’s breath of life for his very existence, just like the animals. The definite article in front of Adam, found all the way through to Genesis 4:25, reminds us that he is the archetypal man, not in this context a personal name, as Hebrew does not use the definite article in front of personal names. God places the Man in Eden, from where rivers flow, giving him the task of working and caring for the earth (Gen. 2:10–15). The Adam hears the command from God that he can eat from any trees from the garden, clearly including the tree of life, but on the day he eats of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, he will surely die (Gen. 2:17). The text centres on relationships. Clearly the Adam has a relationship with God: There are commands; there is speech; but that kind of relationship cannot exist with the animals (Gen. 2:20). So in a vivid dream or vision, the Adam is sliced down the middle and the woman is formed from one half to be his wife, “bone of my bones and flesh of my flesh” (Gen. 2:21–23), interpreted by Jesus Himself as the root of marriage (Matt. 19:4–6). The man and his wife felt no shame—they were in active fellowship with God, hearing His commands and obeying them (Gen. 2:25). But then they disobey God and eat of the forbidden fruit, but do not drop dead on the day, but instead hide from God, covering their naked shame, blaming each other for their disobedience (Gen. 3:1–6). Clearly the relationship with God has been broken, for God calls out to them, but they hide from God in their nakedness (Gen. 3:8–15). The serpent is cursed and the ground is cursed likewise (Gen. 3:14 and 17). Humankind becomes alienated from God, from each other, and from the very important roles that they played in the ancient Near Eastern culture of that time: increased pain in childbearing for the Woman and work that became painful toil for the Adam, with the implication that previously it had been a joy by contrast (Gen. 3:16–19). The archetypal Man and the archetypal Woman were banished from Eden, barred from entering by the flaming sword, so that they could no longer reach the tree of life and become immortal (Gen. 3:22–24).

By summarising the story in this way, painted hundreds of times down the centuries, it is very difficult to avoid a ‘before’ and ‘after’ interpretation, one in which revelation of God’s purposes and disobedience to God’s command play a central role. There may be differing interpretations for certain parts of the story, as Spencer makes clear, but punishment for disobeying God does seem to be an important part of the narrative. The author remarks that the first use of the Hebrew word for sin does not appear until Genesis 4:7 when God warns Cain about the dangers of *chata*. But if one looks at the author’s own various understandings of sin drawn from Old Testament texts, clearly “actions forbidden by the commandment of the Lord” (96) can readily be applied to the disobedient actions of the Adam and Eve, even though the word *chata* is not specifically used in this context.

So in the ‘before’ we have the archetypal humans in fellowship with God practicing what it means to be made in His image, enjoying (by implication) the fruits of the tree of life, but then in the ‘after’ we have a rupture in that relationship: nakedness, shame, alienation entering key human identities and relationships, and separation from the life and wisdom of God as represented by the tree of life. Relationships cannot be broken unless there is a relationship that exists in the first place. As the Psalmist comments: “Surely I was sinful at birth, sinful from the time my mother conceived me” (Ps. 51:5).

No wonder that the Apostle Paul took Genesis 2 and 3 as being central to his argument in Romans 5:12–21, which raises a second point where the author’s claims appear to stretch beyond the data. Spencer makes the very valid point that there are some New Testament passages (albeit not many) where the writer employs a story to make a theological point that remains valid independently of the truth or otherwise of the story. Hopefully agriculturalists will not become stuck on the question as to whether the mustard seed is really the smallest seed (it is not) and thereby miss the main point of Jesus’s parable that the Kingdom of God starts very small and gets big (Mk. 4:30–32). But in Romans 5, Paul is making theological points that represent an exposition of a well-known Genesis narrative. And if one takes the overall narrative of Genesis 2–3 as normally read, as outlined above, then there seems to be no need to cast off his account of the first Adam, integrated with the last Adam, as merely Paul’s “personal opinion.” There is a distinct difference between utilising an extra-biblical story or cultural example of the day to make a theological point, and those many situations where an Old Testament passage is actually being expounded and interpreted by a New Testament author.

The third aspect of the author’s thesis that fails to convince is the attempt to draw upon evolution as providing an answer to the question of “where sin comes from,” and here I comment as an evolutionary biologist. In this context it seems to me somewhat curious that the author draws mainly upon F. R. Tennant’s 1904 book *The Origin and Propagation of Sin*, given that there are many other more recent attempts to make moves in a similar direction. In one well-known example, the philosopher Michael Ruse attempts to show in his book *Taking Darwin Seriously* (1986) that evolution generates a universally valid morality, but the attempt to validate such a position failed to convince (Alexander 2001, ch. 11). In similar fashion, the present author appears to suggest that in the evolutionary process a ‘moral law’ emerged which then moved humans on to some higher plain. Not only that, but the author reflects on the fact that “standard human emotions” such as pride contribute to reproductive success, therefore emerging as an adaptive advantage, and so have no moral implications (136). There appears to be an attempt here to circumnavigate the Humean is/ought distinction, but I think the attempt fails to convince. Certainly evolution delivers rational humans who possess free will and therefore can be held morally responsible, coupled with natures in which the passions play an important role in human behaviours. But this is not what sin means. When Jesus drove the money-changers out of the temple and overturned their tables, he certainly demonstrated plenty of passion, yet without sin (Mk. 11:15). Sin involves what we do with our passions, not the passions themselves, and we need to know what God’s will is before we can disobey it.

When it comes to soteriology, it is repentance and faith in Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of sins that is required, central to Peter’s preaching on the Day of Pentecost (Acts 2:38). Yes, that will lead to participation in the identity of Christ for the repentant sinner, but it is repentance for sin that comes first.

It turns out that there is no need for postlapsarianism, but that is because there can be understandings of the ‘before’ and ‘after’ that are different from those suggested by the

present author, understandings in which the healing and restoration of relationship with God plays a central role. So the dominoes do not need to fall, and those who might be interested in one of the many books that argue for alternative positions that stay committed to mainstream science are referred to Alexander (2014).

References

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