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²⁰ See, e.g., Gal 5¹¹.

²¹ See, e.g., Samuel Sandmel, *Anti-Semitism in the New Testament?* (Philadelphia [1978]), 99: 'It was the Jews, whether in Judea or in the Greek world, who had caused the troubles for the blameless and faithful Christians'.

²² Note that Timothy, unlike Titus, is associated with Paul in the salutations of some of the Pauline letters.

The Myth of Man's 'Fall' — A Reappraisal

BY THE REVEREND JOHN BAKER,
LLANDUDNO

MYTHS are an essential part of religion because they deal in the most practical way with certain invisible, and otherwise inexpressible factors. They are a kind of extract or essence of the basic experiences of mankind, a symbolic summing-up of an attitude or vague apprehension regarding gods or spiritual forces, the origin of life or of evil, the mystery of sex and procreation, or the destiny of man beyond death.

Man cannot be silent in the presence of these great questions, yet he cannot claim to say, 'This is what happened; this is the explanation', unless he can express it in a form which satisfies the imagination of his fellow-men.

The great mysteries of life, the unanswered questions, have never failed to find some creative mind, even in the most primitive societies, clever enough to create a story — what the Greeks called a *mythos* — imaginatively stating the elements of the 'mystery' and offering a tentative explanation. This story — the myth — would be recited or chanted or ritually acted, and so provide an emotionally satisfying expression of, and participation in, the mystery.

With deepening experience, and intellectual development, these myths were adapted and altered, or sometimes discarded in favour of more satisfactory interpretations. We see this process at work when we compare the Genesis creation story in the Bible with the Babylonian myths from which it was derived, or the way in which the great Greek dramatists dealt with the myths of their forefathers.

Sometimes, also, by a strange twist of interpretation, the basic meaning of a myth can be distorted, and lead to quite momentous results in later generations. Our contention is that such a misinterpretation took place in the Christian church, when it accepted the account of the creation of the world and

the story of the Garden of Eden in the early chapters of Genesis and formulated the doctrine known as the 'Fall of Man'. We must therefore re-examine the Genesis account.

Several issues are woven into the story, each one arising from a mystery, questions which man could not answer except in the form of myths. These questions are familiar, and we shall do no more than enumerate them. Why do women have to bear such pain and difficulty in childbirth? Why do men have to work so hard in order to exist? Why is the serpent so different from other creatures — and so hated? Why does man have to die? Above all, why — and how — did evil come into the world, when life would be so much happier without it?

In addition to these questions, however, the story has other depths which reveal the subtlety of the human mind, and we shall now consider two of these deeper issues, namely the relationship of knowledge to good and evil, and man's power of choice.

Genesis deals with two forbidden trees; the tree of life, or immortality, and the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. In the early part of the account only the latter is mentioned in the prohibition. Whether this is intentional we do not know, though there is a hint in the later part of the story that the fruit and the tree of life had no attraction until its secret had been revealed by the enlightenment provided by the fruit of the tree of knowledge (Gen 3²²). The thought of death, apparently, in that idyllic state of innocence, would not otherwise occur to Adam and Eve. It was for this reason that the serpent concentrated on the tree of knowledge. In fact, this is the more interesting of the two trees, since desire for long life or immortality is a much simpler and more easily understood wish on man's part. On the other hand, the questions revolving around the tree of the knowledge of good and evil are more subtle and far-reaching.

One element is perhaps the most primitive, and the most familiar, namely the belief that there are some things that the gods do not want man to possess — that they want to keep for themselves. Man's awareness of the difference between himself and the gods easily ran, in primitive times, in the direction of *possessions*, rather than in subtle distinctions of theology or philosophy. Thus the gods possessed fire, and had no intention of sharing it with man, until Prometheus ventured, and brought the sacred flame down to earth. So in the Genesis myth, immortality and knowledge are the two vital prerogatives of God, and they are forbidden to man.

The possession of immortal life is the ultimate and most simple distinction between God and man, and while man might yearn for the elimination of death, necessity has made him come to terms with his own finite existence on earth. But knowledge? That is

ent. Why should man believe in the first place that the gods do not wish him to eat of the tree of knowledge?

Here again we may be at the primitive level, originally reflecting man's fear of the unknown, fear of the innovator, the heretic, the prophet, the reformer, the inventor, the proposer of new ideas. Yet this attitude is not exclusively primitive, in view of the longing today for a more innocent age, the feeling that if only we had never discovered the scientific expertise that has become such a threat, mankind would be much happier. Would it not have been better, they say, if man had never (metaphorically) eaten of the tree of knowledge, and had remained in the bliss of ignorance and innocence? The myth has some relevance even today, at that level.

There is, however, more to it than fear of the novel, or the unknown. What is particularly significant in the myth is that it is not merely knowledge that is involved, but *knowledge of good and evil*. This leads us back to the prohibition. Why? Can it be because its possession would lead to *danger* — danger that it might destroy innocence and imperil happiness? If so, how? Surely, *knowledge in itself cannot endanger life or happiness*? Perhaps not, but *knowledge of good and evil*? There is implied in this a further element, namely *power*. If that kind of knowledge bestows power, a totally new factor has entered the situation, and the myth is *now concerned not merely with the knowledge of good and evil, but with the power to do good and evil*.

Now we have a fuller understanding of the serpent's 'temptation'. It is a question of the use of knowledge which gives power. The situation of the myth now contains these factors: the relationship of man to God; the relationship of knowledge to power; the relationship of power to good and evil. And over them all is the warning sign — Danger! — the prohibition.

Before the entry of the serpent there is a harmonious relationship between Adam and Eve and God. In the calm and plenty of the Garden no question of need or doubt arises. Most important of all, Adam and Eve are in a state of absolute acceptance, of innocence, and the *possibility of choice* has never arisen.

What the serpent achieves is to pose an alternative to innocence, to introduce the possibility of *choice*. The theological doctrine of the Fall argues that the serpent's (i.e., Satan's) aim was to alienate man from God. Within the setting of the myth, however, all that it could do was to offer an alternative to innocence, without necessarily causing a rift between man and God.

On this basis the story of Adam and Eve takes on a different significance. What happens there is not a

'Fall', but an *awakening*, and the so-called 'alienation' or separation of man and God is really a form of *freedom, necessary to man's full development*. Man should have knowledge and choice and power, if he is to be fully man.

When looked at without the bias of later theology, the myth is seen to be the story of man's inevitable spiritual development, out of dependence, out of innocence and total security, into the world of reality and moral choice. It describes the loss of one kind of harmony — a childlike identity with God — but what it does *not* point out is the possibility of another kind of harmony between man and God, based not on an unconscious innocence, an identity of man with God (similar to that of animals with nature), but a harmony arising from choice, i.e., the adult, self-conscious man choosing without compulsion the will of God in perfect freedom, and doing this even in the face of temptation and stress.

Thus the story of the Garden portrays, not man's Fall, but man's liberation, his entry into full adulthood, possessed not of unconscious goodness and incorruptible innocence, but of the power of choice — i.e., 'the knowledge of good and evil'.

This, indeed, is the basic theme of the Bible, and as the story unfolds we see this liberated man as he struggles towards a life of chosen, accepted responsibility.

The myth of the Garden of Eden provides the scenario and the opening set for the dynamic drama of man which is played throughout the Bible. For the Bible deals with man as we know him — fallible and vulnerable, yet capable of great things. It portrays man rebelling against God, claiming God's prerogatives one moment, and then giving himself totally in obedience to God's will, and yearning for his company.

The essential ingredients are not all present in the story of the Garden, but the framework is there, and the final condition of man's future success, or 'salvation', is made plain, namely that now that man has claimed knowledge for himself, and the power that goes with it, he must learn to use that power under God's guidance, and for that he must choose to find, of his own free will, a new harmony with God.

What of the later Christian doctrine of the 'Fall'? This was based on man's 'disobedience' of God's command, but with a complete lack of understanding on the part of the early theologians of the nature of that disobedience. They did not consider the alternative — the state of innocence, or else they were so enamoured of that alternative that they failed to understand its true nature. The myth really concerns man's choice of free-will, as opposed to the blissful innocence of the un-free robot. From time to time man has wished that he could recover that state of innocence — the Golden Age. But there is no way

back. Man cannot be other than man.

In those conditions, the choice cannot be called 'sin', nor can the result be called 'Fall'. The true story of man's fall, the theologian determined to find it, can only begin with the sin of Cain: the power to do an evil deed.

Eve, and then Adam, are trying to recover the experience, when confronted with the choice between blissful ignorance in the state of innocence and the frightening, exciting possession of knowledge of good and evil, with its great possibilities. In itself the choice cannot be called 'sin', it is not a 'Fall'. It contains within it the possibility of good, but in the myth Adam and Eve, after partaking of the fruit, show the possibilities that follow from the choice itself is essential for there to be a choice of 'good or evil', in moral values, is it only as a result of making an choice that it can be any conception of a so-called 'sin'. Such a doctrine could have many meanings in individual experience, and no physical or moral entail.

Christian theology therefore offers a different interpretation if it is to retain any meaning, and Eve, whether symbolically or literally, must realize that what they are in is not a state they should have remained in a state of innocence without the capacity of moral choice, different from the one we know. God did not wish man to be free, but to choose his own future, and accept responsibility for his choices. The myth of the Garden of Eden shows man *did* choose the way of free will, and the danger of choosing to do evil, because of the possibilities of cooperation with God for his purposes — the prospect of a life of freedom and glory, not shame.

Thus the central issue in the myth is not *choice*, not 'Fall'. The only possibility of man could be said to 'fall' would be to be free, but in afterwards choosing to do evil, which took place not in the Garden of Eden, but of Cain. And this choice is even in the continued myth of Cain, who bore the mark, the mark of Cain. Abel did not make the wrong choice, he was involved in the 'Fall'. The capacity for free possession of every person, and the alternatives which face man, are not evil.

All this reveals how dangerous is the theory of man, or a religious doctrine, without fully analysing its content.

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When looked at without the bias of later theology, the myth is seen to be the story of man's inevitable spiritual development, out of dependence, out of innocence and total security, into the world of reality and moral choice. It describes the loss of one kind of harmony — a childlike identity with God — but what it does *not* point out is the possibility of another kind of harmony between man and God, based not on an unconscious innocence, an identity of man with God (similar to that of animals with nature), but a harmony arising from choice, i.e., the adult, self-conscious man choosing without compulsion the will of God in perfect freedom, and doing this even in the face of temptation and stress.

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The essential ingredients are not all present in the story of the Garden, but the framework is there, and the final condition of man's future success, or 'salvation', is made plain, namely that now that man has claimed knowledge for himself, and the power that goes with it, he must learn to use that power under God's guidance, and for that he must choose to find, of his own free will, a new harmony with God.

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back. Man cannot be other than what he is — free man.

In those conditions, the choice of freedom cannot be called 'sin', nor can the resultant state be called a 'Fall'. The true story of man's Fall could, for a theologian determined to find it in the Bible record, only begin with the sin of Cain, who exercised his power to do an evil deed.

Eve, and then Adam, are type figures of man's experience, when confronted with the choice between blissful ignorance in the idyllic Garden, and the frightening, exciting possession of the knowledge of good and evil, with its great but dangerous possibilities. In itself the choice is not evil, therefore it is not a 'Fall'. It contains within it the possibility of sin, but in the myth Adam and Eve do not commit sin, after partaking of the fruit. It is left to Cain to show the possibilities that follow the choice. The choice itself is essential for there to be any meaning in 'good or evil', in moral values, in responsibility, and it is only as a result of making an evil choice that there can be any conception of a so-called 'Fall'. Any truth such a doctrine could have must then lie in man's individual experience, and not in any inevitable physical or moral entail.

Christian theology therefore needs some re-interpretation if it is to retain any reference to Adam and Eve, whether symbolically or literally. If the literalists wish to maintain their traditional view they must realize that what they are saying is that man should have remained in a state of innocence, without the capacity of moral choice, a creature very different from the one we know. They are saying that God did not wish man to be free, with the ability to choose his own future, and accepting responsibility for his choices. The myth of the Garden is saying that *man did choose the way of freedom, in spite of the danger of choosing to do evil, because there were also possibilities of cooperation with God and sharing in his purposes — the prospect of glory as well as shame.*

Thus the central issue in the myth of the Garden is *choice*, not 'Fall'. The only possible sense in which man could be said to 'fall' would be not in choosing to be free, but in afterwards choosing evil rather than good — which took place not in the account of Adam and Eve, but of Cain. And this choice remains open, even in the continued myth of Cain. It was only Cain who bore the mark, the mark of his personal 'fall'. Abel did not make the wrong choice, nor was he involved in the 'Fall'. The capacity to choose is the free possession of every person, and each one is faced with the alternatives which faced Cain — good or evil.

All this reveals how dangerous it is to construct a theory of man, or a religious doctrine, upon a myth, without fully analysing its content.