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Three Philosophers in Paradise: Kant, Tillich and Ricoeur Interpret and Respond to Genesis 3

Bernhard Lang

ABSTRACT: The story of the first sin, committed by Adam and Eve in paradise, has not only attracted the attention of biblical scholars. Philosophers have also shown much interest in the story. Study of the relevant work of Kant, Tillich and Ricoeur reveals two opposing ways of philosophically reading the biblical story and similar myths about the fate of the first human beings. According to the first way of reading, best represented by Kant and his followers, including Schiller, the fall was a fortunate event, one that set humanity on the path of development and progress. According to the second, represented by Tillich and Ricoeur, it was a tragic event, but one that had its merits, for it allowed humans to develop their own potentialities. Freedom was obtained at the cost of being estranged from humankind's divine ground of being.

Key words: Immanuel Kant, Paul Tillich, Paul Ricoeur, fall, original sin, paradise, philosophy, Genesis 3

Is Leviticus a subject for polite conversation? Or the prophet Habakkuk? When people sit together and the conversation floats freely, biblical passages rarely come up for discussion. In the late nineteenth century, the German *Alttestamentler* Karl Budde apparently tested his companions in conversation by bringing up neither Leviticus nor Habakkuk but the more familiar subject of Adam and Eve in paradise. Upon raising the subject, Budde reports, intelligent men and women would respond with enthusiasm, frequently offering their own and sometimes astonishing interpretations.¹ Everyone had something to say.

Today, despite having less biblical literacy than would have been expected of intelligent people in the 1880s, most people are still familiar with the primordial couple, God's prohibition regarding one of the trees in paradise, and the eventual eating of its fruit, followed by God's punishment. You don't have to tell the story. People still know it, and they are often reminded of it in advertising, as documented in a book entitled *Admen and Eve: The Bible in Contemporary Advertising*.² But unlike in Budde's time – the last years of the Prusso-German monarchy – people are now less ready to offer their own interpretations of the Genesis story. So when I began to explore it, I decided to switch from living conversation partners to dead ones. I selected three of my favourite philosophers – Immanuel Kant, Paul Tillich, and Paul Ricoeur. I searched their work for interpretations of the Genesis story – with astonishing results.

¹ “Sooft man sich mit denkenden Menschen in ein Gespräch über die Paradiesgeschichte einlässt, wird man stets neuen, höchst eigenartig durchgebildeten Auffassungen derselben begegnen.” (Just talk about the paradise story with intelligent persons, and they will come up with ever new interpretations, elaborated in most unusual ways.) Karl Budde, *Die biblische Urgeschichte* (Gießen: J. Ricker, 1883), p. 74.

² Katie B. Edwards, *Admen and Eve: The Bible in Contemporary Advertising* (The Bible in the Modern World, 48; Sheffield: Sheffield Phoenix Press, 2012).

Human progress began in paradise: an eighteenth-century idea, exemplified by Immanuel Kant (1724–1804)

In the eighteenth century, the age of the Enlightenment, philosophers were not generally interested in the Bible. For them, everything biblical represented the pre-modern, pre-rational culture from which they sought to escape. It stood for everything they resented: priestly authority, credulity, and irrationality. The seeming irrationality of the Bible was most evident for them in the paradise story, where one detail intrigued and irritated them deeply: Adam's and Eve's eating of the mysterious fruit from the tree of knowledge. Knowledge, for Enlightenment thinkers, was of course a good thing, something to be aspired to; so rather than blaming the first human couple for their transgression of the divine commandment, they approved of the act, and they did so with enthusiasm.

An early example is Johann Gottfried Herder, though he approves of Eve's eating of the fruit only in private correspondence, in a letter dating from April 1768.³ Although Herder's reference to the matter is very brief, we can sense the idea that crossed his mind: could it be that eating fruit from the tree of knowledge was not an unfortunate and tragic event, as supposed by traditional Christian theology, but rather a fortunate event – the first step in the long history of human reason? Herder's passage reads like a personal memo of an idea he wished to elaborate later; but apart from this letter, there is no trace of this idea in Herder's work, and it seems that he later abandoned it.

Immanuel Kant at the dinner table

Kant provides further evidence, and we will try to eavesdrop when the subject was discussed at his dinner table. Kant, as is well known, loved to dine almost every day in the company of two to five guests who came to his home at 1 o'clock, and left by 3 or 4. Kant never married. He led the life of a loner, but he did not want to miss the company of others. So on normal weekdays, Kant would spend a few hours in the afternoon at table, in a circle of men and (more rarely, it seems) women from the uppermost echelon of Königsberg society. Contemporaries consistently describe Kant not just as the pedant (that he certainly was), but also as a master of conversation, table talk and innocent gallantry.⁴ As a raconteur, he could entertain his guests with anecdotes for hours.

One day, the theme of Adam and Eve was made the subject of conversation. At least one woman must have been present, and among the guests were two former students of Kant's – Theodor von Hippel (1741–1796, mayor of Königsberg) and, from the

³ Johann Gottfried Herder, *Briefe. Gesamtausgabe*, ed. by Wilhelm Dobbek and G. Arnold (Weimar: Böhlau, 1977), vol. 1, p. 98. The following is an English translation of the rather sketchy passage: "I am frustrated by the philosophical and dogmatic allegories of our time, invented to identify the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. Indeed, what is it? It represents the risk that man took upon himself in order to exceed his limits for the sake of gaining knowledge, consuming strange fruit, imitating other creatures, enhancing reason. Man is to become the place where all instincts, faculties and [appreciation of] various kinds of pleasures accumulate. Shedding the likeness to animals, man, endowed with knowledge, becomes like God, etc."

⁴ Actual table talk subjects are collected in Rudolf Malter (ed.), *Immanuel Kant in Rede und Gespräch* (Hamburg: Meiner, 1990); see there no. 1 for a general description of Kant as a host, no. 331 for a description of how Kant organised his days, and no. 520 for a typical account of the table talk on one particular day.

Königsberg police department, Christian Friedrich Jensch (d. 1802). With a little dose of imagination and the licence usually granted to novelists, we can reconstruct at least fragments of the conversation. Here is a summary, given by Hippel (who included it in one of his anonymously published books) who may have been informed by Jensch:⁵

The paradise story is a hieroglyph that must be deciphered, and the best interpretation is the one that considers Eve, rather than Adam, as the story's true heroine. Originally, the two were like children – beings exclusively guided by animal instincts, and not yet by the faculty of reason. It was Eve who grew out of childhood first. She had realised that she was held in chains – the chains of the animal instinct that prevented human reason from developing. But she triumphantly broke the chains, and we should honour this event by giving reason no other name than that of Eve. Having reached maturity, Eve took care of Adam, who was still a child. But she managed to wake him up to knowledge. All of this constituted a real revolution. Like all revolutions in history, this primary one was inevitably marked by affliction, confusion, and distress. Actually, all important innovations in human history are conceived with passion and born through the pangs of labour. But eventually, people calm down, and reason prevails. The biblical text informs us that Eve eventually had to obey Adam and accept him as her lord. But this reversal must have happened much later. Originally, she was far superior to Adam. So let us drink the health of Eve – and of the fair sex!

Everyone was pleased with this interpretation. It would make a fine subject of a learned disputation of theological, legal, medical and philosophical interest, Kant, or perhaps Hippel, suggested. It could also be the subject of a fine essay to be published in a moral magazine that people read for betterment. In the end, however, Kant feels that the interpretation is incomplete. In order to make it work, one must get rid of the serpent. He admits to having no idea why the serpent all of a sudden appears and, despite being an uninvited guest, gives advice to Eve.

This much we know about the conversation. It found its way into print in a book written by Hippel, a book entitled *Über die bürgerliche Verbesserung der Weiber* (On the Improvement of Women in Public Life, 1792). A former student and now one of Kant's closest friends, Hippel was a man who could make fun of everything, including himself. He made a secret of his literary career, and I wonder whether the philosopher knew about the anonymous publications of his friend. Hippel anonymously published a number of satirical books, and in some of these, we find passages in which he discusses subjects also dealt with in Kant's serious writings. Unlike Kant, however, Hippel writes about

⁵ What follows paraphrases a passage found in Theodor Gottlieb von Hippel, *Über die bürgerliche Verbesserung der Weiber* [1792], ed. by Ralph-Rainer Wuthenow (Frankfurt: Syndikat, 1977), pp. 24–25. There is no indication in this text that it reflects Kantian table talk; this is merely my (B.L.'s) assumption. The assumption is not far-fetched, however. According to Wuthenow, Hippel seems to have acted as the participant spy and the secret note-taker whenever his friends discussed anything. One of his chief informants may have been Jensch who, after Hippel's death, claimed authorship for much of Hippel's book; see Wuthenow, in Hippel, *Über die bürgerliche Verbesserung der Weiber*, p. 262. We may add that the Hippel passage on paradise also includes a somewhat concealed feature of Kant's attitude towards women: unlike Hippel, who felt that women were as bright as men, Kant felt that they were, and should stay, experts on food and cooking – and in the Genesis story, Eve actually appears as the food specialist. On Kant's attitude toward women, see Malter (ed.), *Immanuel Kant in Rede und Gespräch*, nos. 228 and 259.

them with humour and an inimitable lightness of touch. It seems, however, that this lightness was not just his own, but also that of his host. This is why it seems to me that what we read about Adam and Eve in Hippel's book actually reflects what the master may have said in conversation.

Kant's published thoughts on the paradise story

Thus far, and somewhat conjecturally, Kant's conversational and not-so-serious comments on the paradise story. We are lucky enough to have his published opinion on Adam and Eve as well. Kant wrote a short essay entitled "Mutmaßlicher Anfang der Menschengeschichte" (Conjectural Beginnings of Human History), and it was published in a magazine devoted to the dissemination of Enlightenment ideas, the *Berlinische Monatsschrift*, where it appeared in the January 1786 issue.⁶ The author refrains from making a historical and exegetical study of Genesis 3, but instead offers, as he explains, an imaginative "pleasure trip" (*eine Lustreise*) through early human history. This history develops in four stages, each of which leads further beyond man's original animality. Here are Kant's stages:

- At the animal stage – stage zero on Kant's counting – humans were completely subject to their natural instincts; nature was their master, and they were its slaves. Instinct (rather than God) told them not to eat certain fruits.
- A new stage – stage one – was reached when humans decided to disobey their instinctive appetite by enlarging their culinary repertoire. They discovered the freedom to choose between various forms of diet.
- With the advent of primitive clothing – fig leaves – humans discovered that the sexual instinct could be manipulated and actually enhanced by hiding bodily charms. Here we can see the first application of the power of reason over inherent instinct. This is stage two.
- The story of divine punishment represents the cares and afflictions that develop as soon as the human mind has acquired the faculty of anticipating the future: stage three.
- The fourth and final stage is represented by the use of animal skins as garments. At this point in the story humans assume full control of nature. They use nature for their own purposes, and think of all things natural as being at their free disposal.

All of this is very serious, and much less fun than the table talk that we have reconstructed. The term "instinct" is common to the two interpretations of Genesis 3, and the two share the general idea of the first sin as a positive step in humankind's mental development. As indicated in the table talk, this interpretation must neglect the figure of the serpent; accordingly, the serpent does not figure in Kant's essay. In true Enlightenment fashion, Kant rationalises the mysterious speaking serpent into an animal whose consumption of a certain fruit the paradise dwellers may have witnessed and subsequently imitated.

⁶ Immanuel Kant, "Mutmaßlicher Anfang der Menschengeschichte", in idem, *Kants Werke* (Akademie-Textausgabe; Berlin: de Gruyter, 1968), vol. 8, pp. 107–124. English translation: Kant, "Conjectural Beginning of Human History", translated by Emil L. Fackenheim, in Kant, *On History*, ed. by Lewis White Beck (New York: Macmillan, 1988), pp. 53–68. A study of this text is Wolfgang Düsing, "Die Interpretation des Sündenfalls bei Herder, Kant und Schiller", in Brigitte Poschmann (ed.), *Bückeburger Gespräche über Johann Gottfried Herder 1988*, Rinteln: Bösendahl 1989, pp. 227–244.

This looks as if Kant had a completely positive view of human nature and human development. But this was not the case. In order to avoid what he considered misconceived optimism, Kant introduced a negative note: while it is true that humankind as a whole makes progress toward ever greater good, the discovery of reason was also the origin of evil. Set free from nature, individuals were quick to develop vices and to promote evil. In the history of eighteenth-century thought, Kant is remembered as the great critic of Enlightenment optimism: humans have an evil side, and one must not underestimate it. The human soul has two conflicting inclinations: one toward the good, and the other toward evil and destruction. Philosophy must of course support the inclination toward the good, and Kant's famous categorical imperative arises here: "Act only on that principle through which you can at the same time will that it become a universal law." Or, more prosaically and less nuanced: Act according to the Golden Rule – treat others the way you wish to be treated by them.

Kant's essay did not go unnoticed by his contemporaries. One of its early readers, the historian and poet Friedrich Schiller (1759–1805), responded with enthusiasm. He used Kant's essay as a source for a lecture entitled *Some Thoughts on the First Human Society, Following the Guiding Thread of the Mosaic Documents* (written in 1789, published 1790). He rewrote Kant's stilted prose, and, by recreating it in language that is at times almost lyrical, made it into a poetic manifesto. Listen to this:

No sooner had man's reason proven its first powers, than Nature expelled him from her caring arms. Or, more correctly, piqued by an impulse of which he was hardly capable, and not comprehending what he did at this great moment, he single-handedly broke loose from his guiding instincts. With his still weak power of reason, and accompanied at a distance by instinct, he threw himself into the wild play of life. He set out on the dangerous path to moral freedom. If therefore, we change that voice of God in Eden, which forbade him to eat of the Tree of Knowledge, into the voice of instinct, which sought to pull him back from this tree, then his supposed disobedience to that divine order is nothing other than – a falling away from instinct, and thus the first declaration of independence, the first daring deed of reason, the very beginning of man's moral being. True: the failure of man to heed instinct did bring moral evil into being, but only in order to make the moral good possible. That falling away is without question the most fortunate, and indeed the greatest, event in the history of humankind. Human freedom can be traced from this very moment – when the foundation of human morality was laid.⁷

As Kant stated prosaically, the biblical story portrays the step that led man from being under the care of Nature, who acts as a guardian, to freedom and independence. In Schiller's more poetic version, the notion of freedom figures much more prominently than in Kant's original text. Freedom was not only the watchword of the French Revolution; the idea of freedom had already inspired Schiller for many years. In fact, the author of the stage plays *Die Räuber* (The Robbers, 1781) and *Don Karlos* (1787) was a leading voice of the "storm and stress" movement in German literature, a movement that

⁷ Friedrich Schiller, "Etwas über die erste Menschengesellschaft nach dem Leitfaden der mosaichen Urkunde", in *Thalia* 3, no. 11 (1790), pp. 3–29, quotation pp. 5–6. This is the first edition; the text can be found in any recent German edition of Schiller's works. An English translation, by Anita Gallagher, is included in Friedrich Schiller, *Poet of Freedom* (Washington, D.C.: The Schiller Institute, 2011), vol. 4, pp. 219–240.

celebrated human independence and rejected authoritarianism wherever it was met – in families as well as in absolutist princely regimes.

This is not to say that Schiller merely rephrased Kant's essay. He also introduced novel ideas. One of these is the notion that two levels of meaning are implied in the biblical story of the fall. At the surface level, the story speaks of a negative event, of disobedience, sin, guilt, and punishment. But deeper insight into the matter reveals a deeper level of meaning, one that speaks of the acquisition of freedom and autonomy. The two levels of meaning coexist and are both acknowledged as legitimate. "The folk teacher," Schiller writes, "is entirely right to describe this event as the Fall of the first man [...] because man became from an innocent creature, a guilty one; from a perfect pupil of nature, an imperfect moral being; from a fortunate instrument, an unfortunate artist."⁸ However, the philosopher is no less right "to call it a giant step of humankind, because humankind went from being a slave of the natural instinct to a freely-acting creature; from an automaton to a moral being, and with this step he first mounted the ladder that would lead him, after a lapse of many thousands of years, to self-control."⁹ The folk-teacher is the theologian and Christian preacher, whereas the philosopher belongs to the intellectual élite and represents the Enlightenment. But the two were somehow reconciled in a time that allowed for, or even required, the enlightened individual to have a "double religion" (*religio duplex*): one inherited from the ancestors, standing in continuity with the Christian tradition, and believed in by the population at large; and one philosophical, indebted to the critical tradition established by the Enlightenment thinkers, understood only by the educated elite, and often kept secret for fear of being censured.¹⁰ The philosophical perspective, dear to Schiller and his enlightened readers, was meant to transcend the parochialism of traditional readings of the Genesis story. In Schiller's view, the universal philosophical religion could peacefully coexist with more traditional notions, allowing both to flourish and furnish insights.

According to Kant and Schiller, as according to traditional Christian doctrine, the biblical story of Adam and Eve echoes what happened in the remote past, at the very beginning of human history. But the Bible fails to tell us the whole story. Concentrating on Adam and Eve's disobedience, it fails to address the philosophical side of the matter, and so it is the philosopher's task to make up for this failure. While the Bible focuses on the negative side, the philosopher has a positive message – the message of progress and freedom.

Human sinfulness: twentieth-century reconsiderations of the paradise story, exemplified by Paul Tillich (1886–1965) and Paul Ricoeur (1913–2005)

After the Second World War, when the Cold War froze relations between the democratic West and the socialist East, existence in the modern world was widely felt to be problematic. In the West, existentialism reigned. People suffered from a feeling of loss or emptiness, described by the motto *bonjour tristesse*. The modern world, experts argued, was losing contact with its ancient cultural roots, especially with its life-affirming religious heritage. In the secular world of the West, so it was believed, the task of leading our culture back to its roots was not incumbent primarily on theologians who had narrowly defined ecclesiastical or denominational agendas. The task of reviving a sense

⁸ Schiller, "Etwas über die erste Menschengesellschaft", p. 6.

⁹ Schiller, "Etwas über die erste Menschengesellschaft", pp. 6–7.

¹⁰ Jan Assmann, *Religio duplex. Ägyptische Mysterien und europäische Aufklärung* (Berlin: Verlag der Weltreligionen, 2010).

of the sacred and an appetite for myth and symbol fell to psychologists, historians of religion, and philosophers who were enlisted to defend and explain the values upon which democratic society was based. *Homo religiosus*, not *bonjour tristesse*, was their watchword. The enterprise turned out to be a success, even producing bestsellers that were available at railway-station bookstalls. Carl Gustav Jung and Mircea Eliade became popular authors. They were joined by Paul Tillich and Paul Ricoeur. All of these thinkers were indebted to those schools of European thought that distanced themselves from the Enlightenment – especially the schools of German Idealism and Romanticism. As idealists and romantics, but also as Christians, Tillich and Ricoeur sought to be realistic about evil, sin, human anxiety and *tristesse* – not least to mobilise religious resources to inspire what Tillich terms “the courage to be”.

Paul Tillich

Born and educated in Germany before the First World War, Tillich lost his chair of Lutheran theology at the university of Frankfurt due to his conflict with National Socialism. He left Germany for the United States, where he taught from 1933. As is well known, he ranks as one of the most creative and most influential theologians of the twentieth century. In the 1950s, he emerged as a widely-read philosophical theologian who, in the age of existentialism – the age of Heidegger and Sartre – explained and defended Christianity as a valid, and possibly unsurpassable, answer to humankind’s existential questions. Without philosophical analysis, he argued, the Christian answers cannot be understood properly. Much of Tillich’s thought is rooted in classical European philosophy exemplified by thinkers such as Kant, Hegel, and Kierkegaard. His favourite authority is Schelling whose philosophy developed out of Romanticism.

With contemporary thinkers such as Eliade Tillich shared a passion for elucidating biblical symbols for modern men and women. The book in which Tillich explains the meaning of the story of Adam and Eve is volume 1 of his *Systematic Theology*, published in 1951. In his discussion of the biblical paradise story, Tillich does not indicate the authors upon whom he draws; but they are known: the philosopher Friedrich Wilhelm Joseph Schelling (1775–1854), on whom he wrote his doctoral thesis, and the theologian Julius Müller (1801–1878).

For these authors, the Genesis story is about the human disposition to sin. But the origin of this sinfulness is not actually revealed by the biblical myth; it remains concealed. Schelling, in an essay entitled *Philosophical Investigations into the Essence of Human Freedom* (1809), seeks to elucidate the matter. Sin presupposes freedom to act in a sinful way. Its sense of freedom leads the soul to break away from the divine ground in which it was originally formed. This is what Christian tradition calls “the fall”, a term that is used to describe both the sin committed in paradise, and the subsequent banishment from Eden. This fall, however, is not to be understood as an event that happened in the distant past; rather, it happens all the time, in all creatures.¹¹ Schelling’s thought made a great impact upon Julius Müller, the Protestant theologian who wrote the most important book on sin

¹¹ Friedrich W.J. Schelling, *Philosophical Investigations into the Essence of Human Freedom*. Translated by Jeffrey Love and Johannes Schmidt (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2006). Schelling’s book, first published as *Philosophische Untersuchungen über das Wesen der Freiheit* (1809), was the subject of Tillich’s doctoral thesis. For a summary of Schelling’s book, see Paul Tillich, *Perspectives on 19th and 20th Century Protestant Theology* (London: SCM Press, 1967), pp. 148–149.

published in the nineteenth century, a book that earned him the sobriquet “Sünden-Müller” (sin-Müller). In *The Christian Doctrine of Sin*, Müller also presents his own philosophical interpretation of the biblical story. Unlike earlier commentators, he feels unable to find the doctrine of the loss of the original human state in the biblical account:

The narrative does not necessarily imply the transformation of the first man from a state of perfect purity and freedom from any sinful disposition or bias into a state of dominant sinfulness, but it certainly does most clearly teach that the depravity of man, however it may have originated, has its foundation in himself.¹²

There was, in other words, no falling away from original purity.

The knowledge that Adam and Eve obtained by eating of the forbidden fruit is represented as the knowledge of their own nakedness (Gen 3,7), and this [...] rather implies a newly-awakened consciousness of a previously existing want, than the entrance of depravity into a sphere of pure existence.¹³ – There is really nothing in the narrative obliging us to consider the fall as the primary beginning of sin in the strict sense of the word.¹⁴

“The depravity of man, however it may have originated”: Müller does not leave it there. He is eager to find a rational account for the depravity of the human being. He states that Scripture is of no help in this respect, for it simply presupposes human depravity. So the speculative theologian is called for, and he has something to offer. He reconstructs the process of the creation of the human being in three stages. First, the soul is created in the mind of God – stage one. Then the soul enters into a place or state that may be termed a spiritual paradise – stage two. In this non-temporal state, the human soul is free to make decisions concerning itself, and the decision is made to turn away from God and God’s will. Müller refers to this mysterious non-temporal state as “the dark abyss whence all human personalities who come into the world arise – with the single exception of the world’s Saviour.”¹⁵ The final, third stage is that of the soul’s entrance into the material world as we know it, the world of time and space.

As can be seen from this summary, Müller is more interested in sinfulness as the human predicament than in sin as it is commonly understood – as the actual infringement of a moral law. In the twentieth century, Paul Tillich restated Müller’s view of human sinfulness. Tillich accepts the fact that the biblical story is a myth, and if we want to speak meaningfully about that to which the myth points, we have to use philosophical language. Thus it must be recognized that there never was a time of perfection, a time “before the fall” of Adam and Eve in paradise. Philosophically speaking, creation and fall, though separated in the biblical story, actually coincide. According to Tillich, God’s creation of humankind finds its consummation, paradoxically, in the fall, i.e. in the first

¹² Julius Müller, *The Christian Doctrine of Sin*. Translated by William Urwick (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1868), vol. 2, p. 349.

¹³ Müller, *The Christian Doctrine of Sin*, vol. 2, pp. 349–350.

¹⁴ Müller, *The Christian Doctrine of Sin*, vol. 2, p. 385.

¹⁵ Müller, *The Christian Doctrine of Sin*, vol. 2, p. 380. For the notion of an atemporal state, Müller is indebted to Friedrich Schleiermacher, *Der christliche Glaube*. Ed. by Rolf Schäfer (Berlin: de Gruyter, 2008), p. 455 (§ 72,6: “eine unzeitliche, überall und immer der menschlichen Natur anhaftende Ursündlichkeit” – a non-temporal original sinfulness, everywhere and always inherent in human nature).

sin and in the ensuing separation of creator and creature.¹⁶ The biblical story reflects the factual estrangement between God and creature. This estrangement is a consequence of the act of separation – the separation of the finite human being from its infinite creative ground of being. This separation led to human freedom. According to Tillich, this process gave us a tragic ontological structure. He calls it tragic, because it has, unavoidably, a negative side – estrangement from God. At this point one may invoke a definition of the tragic given by the German philosopher Max Scheler (1874–1928).¹⁷ According to him, the tragic usually involves a contradiction or paradox: one moral value may not be realized without the destruction of another, equally noble moral value. According to Scheler, the most tragic scenario involves a hero who, by the very act of realizing a moral value, annihilates himself. Applied to the biblical story, this means: the first human couple cannot realize its freedom without losing union with God. This is the kind of scenario that Tillich seems to have in mind when speaking of the tragic dimension of the biblical narrative.

Besides referring to the biblical myth, Tillich invokes a second myth that he apparently prefers to the biblical story of Adam and Eve, because it does not include the notion of an original happy state: the myth of the transcendent fall of the souls as found in Plato and Origen.¹⁸ Although known for his use of abstract philosophical language, Tillich is also known for his interest in mythology. According to him, biblical and other mythology can help us visualize and understand the human situation. Tillich's reference to Plato and Origen is very brief; yet it seems worthwhile to tell the stories with which these ancient thinkers explained and visualized their view of the human predicament.

The Platonic myth in question can be found in the dialogue *Phaedrus*, where Socrates tells the following story:

Before being born, the soul's abode is in heaven, close to the gods, which also means close to the vision of truth. In a chariot drawn by two winged horses, the soul as winged charioteer participates in the celestial procession of the gods. One of the horses is good-natured, and the other, bad. The malevolent horse has a tendency to break out of the harmonious procession and drag the chariot down to earth. As a result, the soul descends from heaven. Arriving on earth, it is incarnated into a body, where it no longer remembers what it saw in heaven. However, upon seeing beautiful objects, the soul is reminded of its heavenly home, an experience that results in a nostalgic longing to return there.¹⁹ – Commentators generally point out that the charioteer represents reason, while the two horses stand for the passions. So, strictly speaking, the charioteer and the horses, taken together, constitute the soul or human person. Plato, to whom we owe the story, elsewhere speaks of three parts of the human soul – the rational, the hot-blooded and the one related to physical pleasures. Accordingly, the deficient quality of one of the horses

¹⁶ Paul Tillich, *Systematic Theology* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1951), vol. 1, pp. 254–256.

¹⁷ Max Scheler, “Zum Phänomen des Tragischen”, in idem, *Vom Umsturz der Werte* (Gesammelte Werke, vol. 3, 3rd ed.; Bern: Francke, 1955), pp. 149–169. An English translation by B. Stambler, entitled “On the Tragic”, can be found in: *Tragedy: Modern Essays on Criticism*, ed. by Laurence Michel and Richard B. Sewall (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice Hall, 1963), pp. 27–44.

¹⁸ Paul Tillich, *Systematic Theology* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1957), vol. 2, p. 37.

¹⁹ Plato, *Phaedrus* 246 A–250 A.

implies an original defect within the human soul. In Plato's myth, the malevolent black horse seems to represent the deficient part of the soul – that which Plato related to physical pleasures.

Origen (ca. 185–253 C.E.), known for his Platonizing theology, was the first Christian theologian to be interested in this myth. He made it part of his vision of human existence that he explained in his systematic exposition of Christian theology. Origen begins his work with a chapter on what happened before the first human souls descended from the spiritual to the material world, a subject not mentioned in the Bible.²⁰ In Origen's cosmology, all rational minds – which later became angels, demons, or humans – existed prior to the creation of the physical universe. Each of the minds exercised its individual free choice to contemplate God lovingly and in unbroken union with one another. Eventually, almost all employed their freedom of choice to move away from contemplative union with God, and some fell into the material world to incur the consequences of rejecting or forgetting God. Origen compares the fallen soul to a doctor who loses interest in and neglects his work, causing his technical knowledge and skills gradually to fade from his memory.

Unlike the biblical story of Adam and Eve, this myth, especially in Plato's version, lacks a moralistic message. It emphasizes the tragic nature of the fall, much to the liking of Tillich. Although striving to control the passions, the rational part of the human soul is ultimately unable to assert this control; as a result, the human soul descends into the material world, a world far removed from the gods. Although Tillich mentions Plato's and Origen's mythology only briefly, he clearly sees it as supplying powerful symbols of tragic weakness that one should not neglect when considering human origins. Tillich, like Origen, Schelling and Julius Müller, thinks of the fall primarily as an unavoidable, tragic event, though one that at the same time set humankind on the path to freedom.

Paul Ricoeur

The French philosopher Paul Ricoeur taught at the Sorbonne in Paris (1957–1966) and later, like Tillich, at the Divinity School of the University of Chicago (1971–1991). Unlike most of his philosophical contemporaries, Paul Ricoeur considered himself a Christian, in fact a Protestant believer and member of the Reformed church. He often engaged in dialogue with biblical scholars. His most pronounced biblical reading can be found in his book *La Symbolique du mal* (The Symbolism of Evil, 1960).²¹

Humans, Ricoeur claims, rely on myths, and myths relating to evil are the most conspicuous case. “If there is one human experience ruled by myth, it is certainly that of evil.”²² When thinking of evil, even modern men and women immediately associate its presence in the world with myth, most often with the notion of divine punishment. This takes us back to the biblical story of paradise lost: the story of God's commandment not

²⁰ Origen, *Peri archôn* 1–3. The summary is based on Elizabeth A. Dively Lauro, “Fall, The”, in John Anthony McGuckin (ed.), *The Westminster Handbook to Origen* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2004), pp. 100–101.

²¹ Paul Ricoeur, *The Symbolism of Evil*. Translated by Emerson Buchanan (Boston: Beacon Press, 1969). This work is supplemented by Ricoeur, “Evil”, in Lindsay Jones (ed.), *Encyclopedia of Religion*, 2nd ed. (Farmington Hills, Mich., 2005), vol. 5, pp. 2897–2904.

²² Ricoeur, “Evil”, p. 2897.

to partake of the fruit of one of the trees, the wise serpent's encouragement to transgression, and the eventual punishment that banishes the primordial couple from the garden of Eden. In his analysis of the biblical story, Ricoeur comments on the underlying historical experience, on the meaning of the myth, and on its function.

The biblical story, the philosopher explains, must be read against ancient Israel's *historical experience*. That experience is one of political disaster, epitomised by the inability of the state to withstand the pressure of the Assyrian and Babylonian empires. This inability led to the demise first of northern Israel, and then to that of the Judean monarchy. It also led to the Babylonian exile, i.e. the deportation of a large number of Judeans to Babylonia. Finally, it led to the asking of questions. How to account for our bad luck? People cannot live without some form of explanation of what happens to them. The biblical prophets traced their contemporaries' experience of evil to the people's disobedience to the divine commandments. The sinfulness of the Israelites is the central theme of the prophets. According to them, the Israelites are sinners and have to repent – they have to turn away from their sins. Accordingly, the twin notion of sinfulness and penitence describes the essential experience of the Jewish people in Old Testament times. But “sin”, as understood by the prophets, was only a vague kind of explanation. What the prophets failed to do, according to Ricoeur, was to offer a more general interpretation of sinfulness. This was accomplished by the story of paradise lost in the book of Genesis, a story that Ricoeur terms *the Adamic myth*.

The second point, *the interpretation of the myth*, takes up most of the space in Ricoeur's book, for he considers the elucidation of the myth by a set of rational concepts to be the philosopher's main task. For Ricoeur, the Adamic myth originated, and serves, as an interpretation of the prophetic accusation of the Israelites. The biblical story, according to our philosopher, “universalizes the penitential experience of the Jewish people” by theorizing it in the form of myth.²³ The Adamic myth universalizes the Israelite proneness to sin by saying: look, inclination to sin is not just characteristic of the Israelites; it belongs indeed to human nature. To be human means to be a sinner. This sinfulness, however, cannot be blamed fully on humans, symbolized by their common ancestors Adam and Eve. In the mysterious demonic figure of the serpent, sin is already there, before Adam and Eve commit it. Humans are evil, but they are evil only in the second place. In the first place – in mythological parlance: originally – they are good. So there is a sort of consolation or exoneration implied in the Adamic myth.

According to Ricoeur, in creating the Adamic myth, the Israelites strove against the easy moralism that traces all evil back to humans and human action. Another biblical document of this battle against a simplistic moral vision of the universe is the book of Job. Both in Job and in the Adamic myth the ancient Israelites come close to the notion, left largely unexpressed and unexplored in the Bible, that God could have an evil side and be the ultimate cause of evil. That this notion is actually present in biblical thought is evident from the book of Isaiah, in a self-presentation of God quoted by Ricoeur: “I form light and create darkness, I make well-being and create calamity, I am the Lord who does all these things.”²⁴

Although speaking of the possibility of considering God himself as the originator of evil, Ricoeur does not present this as the actual message of the Adamic myth. On the contrary,

²³ Ricoeur, “Evil”, p. 2900.

²⁴ Isa 45:7, quoted in Ricoeur, “Evil”, p. 2899.

the Adamic myth avoids this thought by presenting the formation of man in two stages: first, Adam and Eve are created, and as a second step, sin makes its appearance. Nevertheless, since sinfulness is not completely blamed on the first human couple, the notion of the capacity of God for evil is not ruled out. But at this point, the biblical myth remains incomplete; it does not have an answer.

As a consequence, one is sent back from the level of interpretation to the level of myth, for answers can come only from myth. An answer of sorts comes from a mythological complex developed outside Israel: the tragic mythology of the ancient Greeks, a mythology based on the notions of an evil deity and predestination to evil. This mythology, Ricoeur explains, can be considered a necessary supplement to the Adamic myth of the Hebrews.

A central aspect of Greek tragedy, according to Ricoeur, is epitomized by the myth of Prometheus as staged by Aeschylus in his drama *Prometheus Bound*. On the orders of Zeus, Prometheus is transported to a far-away place at the northern edge of the earth, where he is chained to a rock. Several gods and goddesses visit the suffering god, and from their dialogue we learn the reason for Prometheus' punishment: Zeus's rule is tyrannical, and the tyrant resents the fact that Prometheus has helped humanity by teaching them the main branches of culture – time reckoning, domestication of animals, agriculture, and writing. This myth shows the malevolent nature of Zeus, the tyrannical god who brings evil upon gods and humankind alike. In other Greek tragedies this theme is taken up by presenting Zeus as the deity that plans a bad end for the hero. A hero's tragic flaw (as Aristotle calls it) is some defect that helps to bring him to ruin, because the spectacle of completely undeserved suffering would be merely depressing. In general, this flaw is *hubris*, i.e. self-elevation, the opposite of humility.

Ricoeur treats the tragic mythology of the Greeks and the Adamic myth of the Hebrews as belonging to a single mythological universe. The two myths may be compared to the two sides of a coin. Imagine a coin that depicts Adam and Eve, complete with tree and serpent, on one side, and Prometheus, chained to a rock, on the other. The Adamic myth, the obverse, is always secretly accompanied by the tragic myth on its reverse side. This concealed aspect has long been known to theologians who hint at it when using the expression *Deus absconditus*, the hidden God whose dealings are beyond human understanding.²⁵ So in the end, the two myths supplement each other, with the Hebrew myth stressing the freedom of man to act, and the Greek myth highlighting the constraints placed by Zeus on human freedom. Although not conceptualized but merely implied, the notion of freedom plays a crucial role in the two mythologies.

Finally, a word on *the function of the paradise myth*. On this point, upon which Ricoeur is vague, can be discerned and explained on the basis of a passage in Eliade's *Myth of the Eternal Return*: certain mythical perspectives on ancient Israelite history, Eliade muses, could be seen as “the artificial construction of a Jewish minority for whom it seemed impossible to come to terms with the historical reality of their fate; seeking consolation at any price, they took refuge in the dreamy world of myth and wishful thinking.”²⁶ As I read Ricoeur on the Adamic myth, this is exactly how he feels about it. The difference here between Ricoeur and Eliade is minimal – Ricoeur believes in the power that the

²⁵ The expression derives from the Latin version of the book of Isaiah: *Vere tu es deus absconditus* – “verily, thou art a hidden God” (Isa 45:15).

²⁶ Mircea Eliade, *Le mythe de l'éternel retour* (Paris: Gallimard, 1969), p. 53.

Adamic myth had for the biblical people, whereas Eliade thinks that this was the case only for a Jewish minority, whereas true biblical thinking could never be mythical. On this point, Eliade represented what in the 1950s and 1960s was the consensus position in biblical scholarship; meanwhile, the exegetical consensus has changed, and most scholars would agree with Ricoeur that mythical thinking was never far from the mind of the biblical authors. Accordingly, we may indeed consider the paradise story a myth or, as Ricoeur often calls it, a symbol.

Symbols, for Ricoeur, are carriers of meaning, an idea Ricoeur inherited from Karl Jaspers, in whose philosophy he took much interest. According to Jaspers, philosophy depends upon symbols: “Thought is present in symbols. Symbols are never without thought. They inspire thinking that, as the thinking of the symbol, never reaches an end, because thought is transcended by the symbol.”²⁷ Ricoeur has condensed the words of Jaspers into the famous dictum: *Le symbole donne à penser*.²⁸ Myth is food for thought or, to use another expression, myth makes you think. Or, in Ricoeur’s own paraphrase, “myth offers a privileged framework of thought”.²⁹

Conclusion

From our reading of the work of Ricoeur, Tillich and Kant, the following conclusions emerge:

1) For the three philosophers, the biblical paradise story does not enjoy the canonical status that was accorded to this story by traditional Christian theology. Having the status of an ancient myth, it is on par with other mythologies of the ancient world. The reflections offered by Ricoeur, Tillich and Kant presuppose and echo the Enlightenment criticism of the Bible. The philosophers are convinced that Genesis 3 is a symbol, and we could refer to Ricoeur’s dictum *Le symbole donne à penser*. Symbols such as the paradise story carry some important message, a message that can be decoded. Of this fact, Tillich and Ricoeur – and to a lesser extent Kant – are convinced. More generally, their argument implies that meaning is not free floating. It is always embodied in some kind of medium, and myths – along with poetry, novels and films – are good examples.

2) The biblical paradise story, understood as a symbol, leads two of our philosophers – Tillich and Ricoeur – to an exploration of other, contrasting or supplementary mythologies: those of the ancient Greeks. According to our thinkers, once you begin to interpret the Bible, you are entering a wider universe of symbolism, one in which no cultural boundaries exist. An individual myth, read in isolation, can tell you only part of a more comprehensive story.

²⁷ Karl Jaspers, *Von der Wahrheit* (Munich: Piper, 1991), p. 1038; the original edition was published in 1947.

²⁸ Ricoeur, *The Symbolism of Evil*, p. 352 translates “the symbol gives rise to thought”, and it is in this form that the dictum has become a well-known aphorism. It seems to echo not only the thought of Jaspers but also a passage in Kant’s *Critique of Judgment* where the author speaks of “Vorstellung der Einbildungskraft, die viel zu denken veranlasst, ohne dass ihr doch irgendein bestimmter Gedanke, d.i. Begriff, adäquat sein kann” – a representation of the imagination that occasions much thought, but which cannot be captured adequately by one single definite concept; see Immanuel Kant, *Critik der Urtheilskraft*, 3rd ed. (Berlin: Lagarde 1799), 192–193.

²⁹ Ricoeur, “Evil”, p. 2898.

3) Whereas the biblical story, on the conventional reading, represents the story of the first human sin, the three philosophers are not satisfied with this reading. They agree that there must be more to the story. Our analysis has revealed two opposing ways of philosophically reading the biblical story and similar myths about the fate of the first human beings. According to the first way of reading, best represented by Kant and his followers, including Schiller, the fall was a fortunate event, one that set humanity on the path of development and progress.³⁰ According to the second, represented by Tillich and Ricoeur, it was a tragic event, but one that had its merits, for it allowed humans to develop their own potentialities. Freedom was obtained at the cost of being estranged from their divine ground of being.

It is not fair, I think, to place the two interpretations side by side and ask which one would be preferable and more in line with philosophical rationality. Both, I think, should be given a fair hearing, and indeed, each has a specific message. Kant represents an optimistic view of early human history, while Tillich and Ricoeur, more interested in the dark side of human existence, its tragic freedom, speak as existentialists who warn us of the exaggerated optimism expressed in the Enlightenment philosophy of progress in human history. Both interpretations agree in that they see the fall as occasioned by and leading to human freedom. Accordingly, it may be appropriate to abandon traditional notions of “original sin” and “hereditary sin,” replacing them by a new terminology that highlights a different aspect. Why not speak of “original freedom”? This slogan may sum up the message our three philosophers found in Genesis 3.

4) These philosophical readings are markedly different from both traditional theological and modern exegetical interpretations of the biblical paradise story. The differences are due to the agendas of the various readers. “Why is our life so miserable?” Those who asked this question in biblical times seem to have told the story of Adam and Eve to give an answer. Christian theologians read the story of Adam and Eve mainly as a story that sought to answer the question, “why are humans prone to committing sins?” The philosophers approached the biblical story with yet another question: “how can we account for human freedom, a freedom that also allows us to commit evil acts?” To find an answer to this question is not an easy task. There is no straightforward answer, but at least elements of conceptual answers emerge from the interpretation of symbols.

5) There seems to be an important difference between exegetical and philosophical readings of the Bible. Biblical scholars generally wish to find out what a text or a story meant for those who wrote or told it to its original, ancient audience. Philosophers, by contrast, are less inclined to study the Bible historically; they use the Bible as a source that may help them to shed light on the human situation. They want to think with and on the basis of the Bible – and this may indeed be well worth trying.

³⁰ The idea survives in the work of Erich Fromm: “Man creates himself in the historical process which began with his first act of freedom – the freedom of disobedience – to say ‘no’. This ‘corruption’ lies in the very nature of human existence.” However, “this is not the story of the ‘fall’ of man but of his awakening, and thus, of the beginning of his rise”. Erich Fromm, *You Shall Be as Gods: A Radical Interpretation of the Old Testament and Its Tradition* (London: Cape, 1967), pp. 88 and 71.