

*No man sins for someone else.
—Baba Metzia, 8.*

What does Christianity say about why we sin?

“Many Jews believe that God will accept reparation [for sin] in the form of Torah study, prayer, fasting, and a renewed commitment to obey the Law of Moses. This is the path of teshuvah—returning. But Christianity teaches that this...is not really an “eye for an eye” kind of justice. And even if it were, Christianity teaches that teshuvah is humanly impossible. ...sin has caused a fundamental change in us, and that fundamental change means the evil impulse will always have the upper hand. The foundation of the doctrine of original sin is not that I inherited Adam’s guilt, as is sometimes inaccurately said, but more precisely that I inherited his condition.” (TGAM)

Consider Paul’s analysis of the situation in **Ro 7:18-25**. Note that earlier in that chapter Paul uses past tense verbs to describe being convicted of sin through the Law, and being “released” from the Law’s condemnation through the Spirit, so we know Paul’s salvation happened before he reached the condition described above (see verses 6 & 7). Then in verses 18-25 Paul switches to present tense verbs, so we know he is writing about his current condition as a follower of Jesus. (See also **John 8:28-36** where Jesus speaks in similar language about the nature of sin, and prophesies the solution.)

The Jewish response. There are two main arguments against original sin among Rabbinic Jews...

“I often hear strong counter arguments at Chever Torah. The Christian doctrine is too hard, placing me in a lose-lose position with my sinfulness preprogrammed rather than under my control. Or it is too easy, offering a justification for sinful behavior as a kind of inherited condition rather than a conscious choice.” (TGAM)

- ▶ How does *teshuvah*—Judaism’s form of reparation for sin—differ from Jesus’ death on the cross? (Hint: remember the Torah’s definition of justice—the *lex talionis*—and see **Lv 17:11** and **Ro 5:15-19**)
- ✓ Jesus’ death is actual “life for life” (complete justice); the Jewish path of *teshuvah* is not.
- ✓ *Teshuvah* relies on the imperfect (unclean/profane) efforts of a person still immersed in sin—the entire holiness code of Leviticus demonstrates that this is impossible. Only God can provide the perfect (clean/holy) restitution of a sinless person (Jesus) for the damage sin caused.

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- ▶ In Romans 7, how do verses 20 and 23 compare to the Jewish doctrine of the *yetzer ha-ra* (evil impulse)?
 - ✓ Paul does describe something we might call an “evil impulse,” but unlike the *yetzer ha-ra*, which can be resisted simply by choosing to be good, Paul describes it as something beyond choice. It is a separate thing that is “living in me,” and as something that “wages war” on his mind it makes him “a prisoner of the law of sin.”
- ▶ In the same chapter, how do verses 18 and 19 compare to the concept of the *yetzer tov* (good impulse), which Jews believe can be chosen freely?
 - ✓ If being good is a choice, Paul says he “cannot carry it out” (v 18) and “what I do is not the good I want to do” (v 19). This is a picture of a man for whose “good impulse” is completely overpowered by the impulse to choose evil.
 - ✓ Note also that Paul believes he must be “rescued” (v 24) which implies his sinfulness is something he cannot escape on his own.
- ▶ Why might Jews believe the doctrine of original sin is dangerous, even corrupt? (Hint: remember God’s response to those who said He was not just in **Eze 18:25-29**, and see **Ro 6:1**)
 - ✓ Too hard: It may lead to claims that God is not just, since we can say, “I am being held accountable for a situation I did not freely choose, and which I cannot escape.”
 - ✓ Too easy: Some may say, “Since I was born a slave to sin, I might as well sin.” Or: “Since I am saved from sin by God’s grace alone, there is no reason to try to be good.”
- ▶ If some uses a truth to justify wrong conclusions, does that make the truth untrue? (Hint: consider the sin of legalism and the truth of the Ten Commandments in light of this question.)
 - ✓ No. If that were true, legalism would make the Ten Commandments untrue, for example.
- ▶ What should be our ultimate basis for determining if a theological doctrine is true? (Hint: see **2 Tim 3:16** and **Mt 7:15-16**)
 - ✓ Always evaluate theological doctrine in terms of the rest of the Bible, and by the results, or “fruit” of the teaching.

Is there evidence of “original sin” in the Hebrew Scriptures?

1. The prophets spoke of sinfulness as a spiritual condition. Note the word “*yetzer*” in this verse, which is a commentary on idolatry:

Of what value is an idol, since a man [yetzer] has carved it? Or an image that teaches lies? For he who makes it trusts in his own creation; he makes idols that cannot speak. (Habakkuk 2:18)

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AN HONEST QUESTION!

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- ▶ What can be learned about the nature of sin from Habakkuk's use of the word *yetzer* in 2:18?
- ✓ The idolater in this verse does not *have* an evil inclination, he *is* the evil inclination.

2. Inheriting Adam's spiritual condition. Read **Ge 5:1-3** in light of this quote:

"Three times the Torah has already said Adam was created in God's image and likeness. That idea is one of the reasons Christians believe God loves us in spite of our sin. But here the Torah uses those words a fourth time in a new way..." (TGAM)

Note that the Hebrew when the Bible says he created Adam in God's "image" and "likeness" is identical to the Hebrew used to describe Adam having Seth in Adam's "image" and "likeness."

- ▶ At the time of Seth's birth, was Adam living in perfect harmony with God, in the Garden, in the cool of the day? (Hint: **Ge 3:17-24**)
- ✓ At the time of Seth's birth, Adam remained outside the Garden, under the curse of sin.
- ▶ What is the significance of Seth being made in Adam's "likeness" and "image"?
- ✓ It means Seth inherited Adam's cursed condition. By extension then, Seth's descendants inherited the same curse.
- ▶ Are you living under the same curse as Adam today? If we assume that God is perfectly just (as we must if we believe the *Shema*), what does this tell us about our spiritual condition?
- ✓ We must share Adam's spiritual condition, since we share the curse that results from it (we toil, we die).

3. Punishment and guilt for one man's spiritual condition spreading to others. In **Lv 4:3** the Hebrew scriptures speak of a priest's sin "bringing guilt on all the people." Also, see **Joshua 7** and note the following...

"In the story of the Passover, the firstborn offspring of all the Egyptians are killed because of the stubborn refusal of one man—the Pharaoh—to obey God. Something very similar happens again after Joshua takes over as leader of Israel, when just one man, Achan, keeps the spoils of war in violation of God's will, yet all of Israel is held accountable upon pain of death."

- ▶ Why would a priest's sin "bring guilt on the people"? (Hint: see Hebrews 9:9, 13 & 14)
- ✓ Just as the offerings of the Mosaic priesthood foreshadowed Jesus' single sacrifice that saves all who will accept it, so the sins of the Mosaic priests symbolized Adam's single sin that cursed all humanity.

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AN HONEST QUESTION!**

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4. “Original sin” in reverse—the Jewish doctrine of the *zekhut avot*, or “merits of the fathers” There are several sources of the idea that one man’s righteousness can be credited across the generations. See **1 Ki 11:10–13** and **2 Ki 19:29–34** for example. And note the following...

“...Isaac, the son of Abraham, has had considerable trouble in the land God promised to his father. Again and again he encamps in that arid country and digs water wells, only to have outsiders come along and falsely claim the wells as theirs.... Finally he reaches a place where no one comes to steal the fruits of his labor. There, God pronounces this blessing:

I am the God of your father Abraham. Do not be afraid, for I am with you; I will bless you and will increase the number of your descendants for the sake of my servant Abraham. (Ge 26:24) NIV

“...This is found throughout the Hebrew Scriptures. For example, when King Solomon’s punishment for idolatry is postponed, and when King Hezekiah’s reign is prolonged in the face of an apparently invincible enemy, these divine actions are undertaken for the sake of David who was long dead in both cases.” (TGAM)

- ▶ What is the connection between the Jewish doctrine of the *zekhut avot*, and the Christian doctrine of “original sin”?
- ✓ “If Isaac can inherit special dispensation due to God’s blessing on his dead father, it seems to me just as likely that one could inherit the reverse. In other words, if a blessing can flow across the generations, why not a curse? To me it makes no sense to believe in one without the other. Instead, it seems more likely that *zekhut avot* and original sin are two branches of the same stream.” (TGAM)
- ✓ See this example of *zekhut avot* in the New Testament: **Gal 3:14**.

5. Symbolic connections between sin and the cycle of birth and death. This connection is seen in the Hebrew scriptures’ teachings on birth...

“Men become unclean because of a discharge of semen, and woman because of their menstrual flow. [Lv 15:18-19] In another place the Torah says a Hebrew mother must bring a sin offering after giving birth.... [Lv 12:6] Pain in childbirth is part of Eve’s curse for the original sin, and God chose to symbolize his covenant with Abraham and all his male descendants with circumcision, an act that leaves a permanent scar on the male reproductive organ. (The Hebrew word for “circumcise” was also chosen by the Psalmist to mean “broken,” “blunted,” and “cut off.”) [Ps 58:7, Ps 118:10–12.] This scarred part of a male Israelite priest’s anatomy had to be covered at all times at the tabernacle upon the altar steps, lest he “incur guilt and die.” [Ex 28:42–43, Ex 20:26.] Yet Adam was created in God’s perfect image, with no scars and nothing to hide until after the Fall....” (TGAM)

GOD LOVES
AN HONEST QUESTION!

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And it is seen at death, because whoever touches a dead animal is unclean (**Lv 11:39**), whoever touches a dead human body is unclean (**Nu 19:11**), and...

“According to the Torah, simply entering a tent where a person has died makes one unclean. Even open containers within the tent (and presumably their contents) become unclean because of the death that occurred nearby. [Numbers 19:14–15]” (TGAM)

- ▶ What difficulty is presented for the Jewish view of moral neutrality at birth by the fact that a woman to bring a sin offering after giving birth and a new mother be “unclean,” and Eve’s curse for the original sin was pain in childbirth?
 - ✓ “...a new mother’s uncleanness [could] come from her part in bringing another sin-addicted soul into the world...”
 - ✓ Possibly her sin offering symbolized the guilt of passing sinfulness on to the next generation.
 - ✓ Also, since a woman’s pain in childbirth is unnatural according to Genesis, it may be intended to remind us that the pain of our death is also unnatural.
- ▶ What might be symbolized by circumcision and the fact that it must be covered by priests at the altar?
 - ✓ Adam’s flawed spiritual condition is passed from generation to generation through the reproductive act.
 - ✓ “...the priest—representing all the people—had something to hide, just as the fallen Adam did...”
- ▶ Why does (almost) all contact with dead bodies render an Israelite “unclean”?
 - ✓ The curse of death is the direct result of sin, and so like sin, death and everything associated with death is profane.
- ▶ What insights can be gained from the fact that priests touching the dead bodies of sacrificed animals are not rendered “unclean”? (On the contrary: they must first be clean to touch them.)
 - ✓ The sacrifices symbolized the ultimate defeat of death (in Jesus’ sacrifice on the cross) and thus a return to “sinlessness” and holiness.

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