

ORIGINAL SIN

Different Versions of Original Sin

- * *Original Sin 1.* The phrase “original sin” is not found in Scripture, but most people affirm something akin to it. They believe that Adam and Eve committed *the* original sin. In so doing, they brought death upon all their descendants. All humans are born into that sin insofar as we will die on account of it. All will die even if they don’t personally sin (as in the case of infant mortality). All who are born of the flesh inherit the wages of sin from Adam, which is death (Rom 6:23). We also inherit the sin nature in that we are all disposed to sin and succumb to it (Eph 2:2). All have sinned and fall short of God’s glory (Rom 3:23). Any who claim not to have sinned are self-deceived (1 John 1:8-10). Few people deny this understanding of “original sin,” but the Augustinian version, to which many subscribe, means more than this.
- * *Original Sin 2.* According to Augustine and his theological heirs, the doctrine of original sin entails that sin itself is transmitted through intercourse such that a newborn is guilty of sin and is a sinner as much as Adam, having inherited Adam’s sin.

History of the Doctrine of Original Sin

- * Scholars disagree about when the more narrow doctrine of original sin began. Proponents obviously think it comes from Scripture. They also trace it back as far as Irenaeus. Yet the classic prooftexts paint an ambiguous picture. Disclaimer: I have not read all the writings of all these authors, so I cannot account for their full life’s work, but only the excerpts that people most frequently cite when claiming that certain people support this doctrine.

Irenaeus (late 2nd cent.)

- * Irenaeus points out that just like the virgin Eve and her man Adam led the whole human race into sin, so the virgin Mary bore the man Jesus who rescues us all from sin. All humanity has inherited the sin of Adam in this way (*Against Heresies* 5.19). Irenaeus gives no details on biological transmission of sin. His focus seems to be more on the consequence of sin, which is death. This is Original Sin 1.

Tertullian (c. 200)

- * Tertullian agrees that all bear the sin of Adam and continue to transmit it. His sin was the original sin and we participate in it when we sin, which we all do. We have his same nature and fall into the same trap. But Tertullian didn’t apply this to children. He recommended not baptizing them until they were able to “come to Christ” and put faith in him and when they had actual sins that needed to be remitted in baptism. (*On Baptism* XVIII). This again would be Original Sin 1.

Origen (early-mid 3rd cent.)

- * Origen espoused a version of original sin that goes back to preexistent human souls surrounding God’s throne who fell from it and were thus born into a fallen lot in proportion to the degree they had fallen. Only Jesus did not fall in this way. This is neither Original Sin 1 nor Original Sin 2, but is perhaps the first version to link sin to infants before their birth.

Cyprian (mid 3rd cent.)

* Cyprian promoted infant baptism as Christian circumcision. This is a tenuous connection for our purposes because circumcision had nothing to do with the remission of sin. He attributed sin to infants on the basis of Ps 51:5 (see below) and spoke of it being passed on through intercourse. This is the closest precursor to Augustine's doctrine of original sin. The classic Cyprian quote, however, is not entirely clear:

“How much rather ought we to shrink from hindering an infant, who, being lately born, has not sinned, except in that, being born after the flesh according to Adam, he has contracted the contagion of the ancient death at its earliest birth, who approaches more easily on this very account to the reception of the forgiveness of sins—that to him are remitted, not his own sins, but the sins of another?” (Letter 58:5)

In this passage, death is the contagion that is inherited through birth. Nonetheless, Cyprian goes on to discuss how Adam's sin is remitted when an infant is baptized and not the infant's own sin. What is not clear is whether the infant has taken ownership of Adam's sin and so receives death or whether, being human, the infant is death-bound on account of Adam's sin and stands in need of baptism to forgive Adam's sin which is the cause of all human death.

Passages Used to Support Original Sin

- Gen 8:21 The intentions of the human heart are evil from youth (cf. 6:5)
* But this mentions “youth,” not conception or infancy
- Job 15:14-16 What is man that he should be clean; one who is born of a woman that he should be righteous?
* But, this is Eliphaz speaking and the phrase “one born of a woman” is another way of saying “a man/human” and is not about newborns.
- Ps 14:2-3; 53:3 The Lord looks down from heaven on the children of man, all have turned aside and become corrupt, there is none who does good, not even one
* But the phrase “children of man” is a Hebrew way of saying “human,” and this declaration follows the phrase, “all have turned aside and become corrupt”; this psalm isn't about newborns.
- Ps 51:5 “I was born guilty, a sinner when my mother conceived me”
* But in this song the author seems to be speaking poetically/figuratively as if to say, “I've been a bad person for a very, very long time” – in the previous verse David says, “Against, you, you alone, have I sinned,” as if to say “I've sinned really badly against you” and not to deny that he also sinned against Uriah and Bathsheba.
- Ps 58:3 “The wicked go astray from the womb”
* But the verse continues to say, “they err from birth, speaking lies.” This doesn't appear to be literal, since newborns don't speak lies, and Scripture says elsewhere they don't even know right from wrong until later in life (Isa 7:15-16)
* Also see v. 10. This psalm, like many wisdom poems, contrasts two types of people—the wicked and the righteous—so v. 3 is not talking about *all* people but wicked people, and v. 10 makes clear that other people are righteous.
- Prov 22:15 “Folly is bound up in the heart of a boy; the rod of discipline drives it far away.”
* Doesn't refer to an infant; folly is the topic and discipline is the cure.

- Eccl 9:3 “The hearts of all are full of evil.”
* Doesn’t clearly address the issue of infants
- Rom 3:10-18 There is none righteous, not one.
* But then it goes on to discuss how all have turned aside, there is nothing about inborn sinfulness
- Rom 5:12 Sin came into the world through one man and death with sin, so death spread to all because all have sinned
* Augustine read this in Latin, where it says “Wherefore as by one man sin entered into this world and by sin death: and so death passed upon all men, *in whom all have sinned.*” (vulgate.org)
* But death spread precisely because “all have sinned,” not because people bear children. Also cf. 5:18, which says that by the righteousness of one came justification to all men, though Augustine does advocate salvation of all men
- 1 Cor 15:21-22 As death came through a human, so resurrection to new life comes through a human; as in Adam all die, so in Christ all will be made alive.
* But the focus is on death vs. life, not sin vs. righteousness; and the verse says that Adam is the cause behind the *death* of all, not the sin of all.
- Eph 2:1-3 We were by nature children of wrath like the rest of humankind.
* But this is preface in vv. 1-2 with statements that we were dead “though the trespasses in which we live,” following the course of the world, the ruler of the power of the air, and the spirit at work among the disobedient who live a life that follows the desires of the flesh and mind. Plus, the phrase “children of wrath” describes not the infantile state of believers, but the life we lived before our conversions.
- 1 John 1:8-10 “If we say that we have no sin, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us”
* But this parallels v. 10, which says “If we say that we have not sinned, we make him a liar, and his word is not in us.” So “having sin” appears to be a result of “having sinned” – there is nothing about being born.

Passages Used to Limit the Scope of Original Sin [Preface with Gen 3; 5:24; 6:9; 9:6]

- Gen 8:21 The intentions of the human heart are evil from youth
* Thought it doesn’t say birth, it doesn’t exclude birth
- Deut 24:16 Children shall not be put to death for the fathers; everyone shall be put to death for their own sin
* This passage is speaking about when humans are authorized to take life.
- 2 Chron 25:4 Quotes and applies Deut 24:16
- Job 1:21 Naked I came out of my mother’s womb and naked I will return there.
* This passage says nothing about original sin, but it demonstrates that language of “mother’s womb” can be used metaphorically, since Job cannot literally mean that people return to their mother’s womb.
- Job 31:18 From youth Job took care of orphans, from his mother’s womb he guided widows.
* Like Job 1:21, this passage shows how a passage might refer to a mother’s womb without meaning it literally.
- Job 33:4 God makes us and gives us life.
* This passage does not talk about original sin but represents several passages that indicate that God made humans to be what they are (e.g., 119:73).

Similarly, Ps 139:13 says that God formed the psalmist in his mother's womb. This should caution us not to reduce human formation to a merely human endeavor. It raises the question as to whether God would knit us together sinfully, though it doesn't answer it. God works intimately with sinful beings after their birth, why not after their conception?

- Ps 14:2-3; 53:3 The Lord looks down from heaven on the children of man, all have turned aside and become corrupt, there is none who does good, not even one.
* Though this song suggests that humans corrupt themselves, this could simply refer to the fact that humans embrace their sinful-from-birth nature and choose to do evil things.
- Eccl 7:29 God made man upright, but they have sought out schemes.
* Though this passage acknowledges that God made humans upright and that we do things contrary to that nature, it doesn't rule out the possibility that we possess a sinful nature prior to we choose to do evil personally.
- Isa 7:15-16 By a certain age, children learn good and evil.
* But this is just a stage in our awareness, not a stage when we acquire sin
- Isa 66:3-4 People choose their own sinful ways.
* Doesn't mean that we were not born into sin
- Ezek 18:1-30 All souls are God's, the father and the son, the soul who sins shall die...
(esp. 2-4, 20, 30) ...The son shall not suffer for the iniquity of the father...
...Everyone will be judged according to their own ways
* Applies Deut 24:16 pretty extensively, but not in the context of capital punishment alone. This is a substantial chapter to reckon with.
- Matt 18:3 Those who wish to enter the kingdom must change and become like children.
* But verse 4 makes clear this has to do with humility not sinlessness.
- Rom 1:26 Humans exchange the natural (moral) for the unnatural (immoral)
* This suggests that what is natural to humans is what God wills and that certain humans choose to do what is unnatural instead; this should balance out Eph 2:1-3, which refers to humans as "by nature" creatures of wrath.
- Rom 2:14-15 The law of God is written on all people's hearts such that some people obey it by nature.
* Another passage to balance out the notion that humans were born purely sinful, but it doesn't rule out that we were born at least partially sinful
- Rom 7:9-11 "I was once alive apart from the law, but when the commandment came, sin revived and I died...Sin, seizing an opportunity in the commandment, deceived me and through it killed me."
* This passage places our "death" due of sin to a moment after birth. But this could be interpreted as a description of the specific role that the law plays in our sin and death. It doesn't give the whole story of sin in the life of a person.
- Jas 1:15 Speaks of the sin that gives birth to death as being born out of our own desires
* This account of sin is different from that offered by original sin, but it can be interpreted as simply how sin functions in our lives after we are born and doesn't rule out how Adam's sin is passed along to all humans.
- Jude 10 People corrupt themselves by what they know by nature.
* Another passage about humans playing a role in corrupting themselves away from what they were made to be by nature