

FOUNDATIONS OF

EVANGELICAL THEOLOGY

AGAINST GOD AND NATURE

THE DOCTRINE OF SIN



THOMAS H.
MCCALL

JOHN S. FEINBERG, GENERAL EDITOR

“Thomas McCall proves himself a knowledgeable, reliable, and congenial guide to the sad subject of human sin. Here you will find a vigorous and invigorating loyalty to, and defense of, the orthodox Christian tradition. McCall’s argument is firmly rooted in the biblical storyline, well conversant with the history of discussion, and philosophically careful. He shows respect to the various branches of Christianity, offering advice on how they can refine and improve their positions on issues where they differ from one another, and he strengthens their confidence in the large swaths of agreement between them. You can tell as well that McCall, the serious scholar, also loves God and his people, and wants us to aspire to holiness.”

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David S. Dockery, President, Trinity Evangelical Divinity School

“No area of Christian theology is more obscure, complex, confused, and convoluted than the doctrine of sin. It is therefore splendid to have such a clear, thorough, erudite, and comprehensive examination of the doctrine by Thomas McCall. Beginning with Scripture, McCall takes into account the varying approaches within the great central tradition of the church, not only on sin as action but also the knotty problems of original sin and fallenness, and helps us to wrestle with the issues in the light of the gospel. This is a tour de force.”

Thomas A. Noble, Professor of Theology, Nazarene Theological Seminary; Senior Research Fellow, Nazarene Theological College, Manchester, United Kingdom

“McCall has given us a work for which to give thanks. His study of the oft-overlooked topic of sin is both intensive and extensive. Reaching from a thorough examination of sin in the Bible, through the contributions of systematics, to the implications of modern science, he has explored the dimensions of this foundational topic with great erudition, but also with sensitivity and restraint. He expounds the various positions in such thorny topics as original sin in depth and with clear insight. He treats all positions fairly and sympathetically and offers measured conclusions. All who want to become informed on this topic will need to turn to this book.”

John Oswalt, author, *Called to Be Holy* and *The NIV Application Commentary: Isaiah*

“In an age when speaking of sin has become unfashionable and even evangelical churches shy away from corporate practices of confession in their liturgies, McCall offers a much-needed, comprehensive treatment of the doctrine of sin. Firmly grounded in Scripture but also drawing on the breadth and depth of the theological tradition from the Patristics to today, he weaves together a rich and varied tapestry of thought on the topic. Throughout he offers measured, fair evaluation of competing viewpoints, pointing out the biblical and theological strengths and weaknesses and defending his own position in a clear, scholarly way. This book is an excellent contribution to the literature on sin.”

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“McCall boldly takes on the challenge of explicating and defending the unfashionable doctrine of sin, armed with a command of the rich resources of biblical, systematic, and historical theology, as well as the virtue of analytic clarity of argument. The result is a robust, fair, and illuminating treatment of this dark and difficult doctrine that will be a valuable resource for Christians of all traditions.”

Jerry L. Walls, Scholar in Residence and Professor of Philosophy, Houston Baptist University

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AGAINST GOD AND NATURE

THE DOCTRINE OF SIN



THOMAS H.
MCCALL

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In Memory of Robert E. Whitaker (d. 2010)
I want a principle within.

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Why another series of works on evangelical systematic theology? This is an especially appropriate question in light of the fact that evangelicals are fully committed to an inspired and inerrant Bible as their final authority for faith and practice. But since neither God nor the Bible change, why is there a need to redo evangelical systematic theology?

Systematic theology is not divine revelation. Theologizing of any sort is a human conceptual enterprise. Thinking that it is equal to biblical revelation misunderstands the nature of both Scripture and theology! Insofar as our theology contains propositions that accurately reflect Scripture or match the world and are consistent with the Bible (in cases where the propositions do not come *per se* from Scripture), our theology is biblically based and correct. But even if all the propositions of a systematic theology are true, that theology would still not be equivalent to biblical revelation! It is still a human conceptualization of God and his relation to the world.

Although this may disturb some who see theology as nothing more than doing careful exegesis over a series of passages, and others who see it as nothing more than biblical theology, those methods of doing theology do not somehow produce a theology that is equivalent to biblical revelation either. Exegesis is a human conceptual enterprise, and so is biblical theology. All the theological disciplines involve human intellectual participation. But human intellect is finite, and hence there is always room for revision of systematic theology as knowledge increases. Though God and his word do not change, human understanding of his revelation can grow, and our theologies should be reworked to reflect those advances in understanding.

Another reason for evangelicals to rework their theology is the nature of systematic theology as opposed to other theological disciplines. For example, whereas the task of biblical theology is more to describe biblical teaching on whatever topics Scripture addresses, systematics should make a special point to relate its conclusions to the issues of one's day. This does not mean that the systematician ignores the topics biblical writers address. Nor does it mean that theologians should warp Scripture to address issues it never intended to address. Rather it suggests that in addition to expounding what biblical writers teach, the theologian should attempt to take those biblical teachings (along with the biblical mind-set) and apply them to issues that are especially confronting the church in the theologian's own day. For example, 150 years ago, an evangelical

theologian doing work on the doctrine of man would likely have discussed issues such as the creation of man and the constituent parts of man's being. Such a theology might even have included a discussion about human institutions such as marriage, noting in general the respective roles of husbands and wives in marriage. However, it is dubious that there would have been any lengthy discussion with various viewpoints about the respective roles of men and women in marriage, in society, and in the church. But at our point in history and in light of the feminist movement and the issues it has raised even among many conservative Christians, it would be foolish to write a theology of man (or, should we say, a "theology of humanity") without a thorough discussion of the issue of the roles of men and women in society, the home, and the church.

Because systematic theology attempts to address itself not only to the timeless issues presented in Scripture but also to the current issues of one's day and culture, each theology will to some extent need to be redone in each generation. Biblical truth does not change from generation to generation, but the issues that confront the church do. A theology that was adequate for a different era and different culture may simply not speak to key issues in a given culture at a given time. Hence, in this series we are reworking evangelical systematic theology, though we do so with the understanding that in future generations there will be room for a revision of theology again.

How, then, do the contributors to this series understand the nature of systematic theology? Systematic theology as done from an evangelical Christian perspective involves study of the person, works, and relationships of God. As evangelicals committed to the full inspiration, inerrancy, and final authority of Scripture, we demand that whatever appears in a systematic theology correspond to the way things are and must not contradict any claim taught in Scripture. Holy Writ is the touchstone of our theology, but we do not limit the source material for systematics to Scripture alone. Hence, whatever information from history, science, philosophy, and the like is relevant to our understanding of God and his relation to our world is fair game for systematics. Depending on the specific interests and expertise of the contributors to this series, their respective volumes will reflect interaction with one or more of these disciplines.

What is the rationale for appealing to other sources than Scripture and other disciplines than the biblical ones? Since God created the universe, there is revelation of God not only in Scripture but in the created order as well. There are many disciplines that study our world, just as does theology. But since the world studied by the nontheological disciplines is the world created by God, any data and conclusions in the so-called secular disciplines that accurately reflect the real world are also relevant to our understanding of the God who made that world. Hence, in a general sense, since all of creation is God's work, noth-

ing is outside the realm of theology. The so-called secular disciplines need to be thought of in a theological context, because they are reflecting on the universe God created, just as is the theologian. And, of course, there are many claims in the nontheological disciplines that are generally accepted as true (although this does not mean that every claim in nontheological disciplines is true, or that we are in a position with respect to every proposition to know whether it is true or false). Since this is so, and since all disciplines are in one way or another reflecting on our universe, a universe made by God, any true statement in any discipline should in some way be informative for our understanding of God and his relation to our world. Hence, we have felt it appropriate to incorporate data from outside the Bible in our theological formulations.

As to the specific design of this series, our intention is to address all areas of evangelical theology with a special emphasis on key issues in each area. While other series may be more like a history of doctrine, this series purposes to incorporate insights from Scripture, historical theology, philosophy, etc., in order to produce an up-to-date work in systematic theology. Though all contributors to the series are thoroughly evangelical in their theology, embracing the historical orthodox doctrines of the church, the series as a whole is not meant to be slanted in the direction of one form of evangelical theology. Nonetheless, most of the writers come from a Reformed perspective. Alternate evangelical and nonevangelical options, however, are discussed.

As to style and intended audience, this series is meant to rest on the very best of scholarship while at the same time being understandable to the beginner in theology as well as to the academic theologian. With that in mind, contributors are writing in a clear style, taking care to define whatever technical terms they use.

Finally, we believe that systematic theology is not just for the understanding. It must apply to life, and it must be lived. As Paul wrote to Timothy, God has given divine revelation for many purposes, including ones that necessitate doing theology, but the ultimate reason for giving revelation and for theologians doing theology is that the people of God may be fitted for every good work (2 Tim. 3:16–17). In light of the need for theology to connect to life, each of the contributors not only formulates doctrines but also explains how those doctrines practically apply to everyday living.

It is our sincerest hope that the work we have done in this series will first glorify and please God, and, secondly, instruct and edify the people of God. May God be pleased to use this series to those ends, and may he richly bless you as you read the fruits of our labors.

John S. Feinberg
General Editor

The psalmist asked, “What is man, that thou art mindful of him?” (Ps. 8:4 KJV). This question is a deep cry of the human heart, one that has found eloquent expression in countless mumbled prayers and many great works of literature. Famously, Shakespeare’s Hamlet exclaims: “What a piece of work is a man! how noble in reason! how infinite in faculties! in form and moving, how express and admirable! in action, how like an angel! in apprehension, how like a god! The beauty of the world! the paragon of animals! and yet to me, what is this quintessence of dust?”¹ But Hamlet soon follows this question with another (this time for Ophelia): “Get thee to a nunnery, why wouldst thou be a breeder of sinners? I am myself indifferent honest, but yet I could accuse me of such things that it were better my mother had not borne me: I am very proud, revengeful, ambitious, with more offenses at my beck than I have thoughts to put them in, imagination to give them shape, or time to act them in. What should such fellows as I do, crawling between earth and heaven? We are arrant knaves, all; believe none of us.”² The study of sin addresses such issues. It explores some of the deepest mysteries of human existence, and it does so from the vantage point and with the resources of Christian theology. It eventually leads us from Hamlet’s haunting question to Lady Macbeth’s chilling wail as she is unable to escape her guilt while scrubbing at the indelible bloodstains on her hands: “Out, damned spot! Out, I say!”³ The study of sin leads us there, but it does not leave us there. Instead, it brings us to a recognition of our desperate need of divine grace, and it points us ahead to the beauty and hope of the Christian gospel.

The study of sin has done this for me, but I have not done such study alone. I owe a debt of gratitude to many colleagues and friends. My colleague and series editor John S. Feinberg has offered much encouragement and has exhibited great patience. Bill Deckard of Crossway has been an excellent editor. Numerous student assistants have provided wonderful help; here special thanks are due to Dr. Stephen B. Smith, Dr. Ray Degenkolb, Jesse Wilson, Felipe do Vale, and Drew Everhart. I am grateful to the Board of Regents of Trinity Evangelical Divinity School for sabbatical leaves.

I cannot adequately express my gratitude, appreciation, and love for my

¹ William Shakespeare, *Hamlet*, II.ii.

² Shakespeare, *Hamlet*, III.i.

³ Shakespeare, *Macbeth*, Vi.

children Cole, Josiah, Madelyn, and Isaac. Life with them—and hope for them—make me want to hate sin with a holy hatred and long for the establishment of justice and righteousness in our world. And I cannot even begin to properly give thanks to my wife, Jenny, whose unfailing love for me makes me ever more hungry for holiness.

I dedicate this book in memoriam to a mentor who lived with steadfast integrity: Dr. Robert E. Whitaker (d. 2010). *I want a principle within.*

A B B R E V I A T I O N S

AB	Anchor Bible
CD	Karl Barth, <i>Church Dogmatics</i> , ed. G. W. Bromiley and T. F. Torrance, 14 vols. Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1956–1975
EDBT	<i>Evangelical Dictionary of Biblical Theology</i> . Edited by Walter A. Elwell. Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 1996
FPhilos	<i>Faith and Philosophy</i>
JournRT	<i>Journal of Reformed Theology</i>
NICNT	New International Commentary on the New Testament
NICOT	New International Commentary on the Old Testament
NIDNTTE	<i>New International Dictionary of New Testament Theology and Exegesis</i> , 2nd ed. Edited by Colin Brown. 4 vols. Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2014
NIDOTTE	<i>New International Dictionary of Old Testament Theology and Exegesis</i> . Edited by Willem A. VanGemeren. 5 vols. Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1997
NPNF ¹	<i>Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers</i> , Series 1. Edited by Philip Schaff. 1886–1889. 14 vols. Reprint, Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1994
NPNF ²	<i>Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers</i> , Series 2. Edited by Philip Schaff. 1886–1889. 14 vols. Reprint, Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1994
PG	Patrologia Graeca. Edited by Jacques-Paul Migne. 162 vols. Paris, 1857–1886
PL	Patrologia Latina. Edited by Jacques-Paul Migne. 217 vols. Paris. 1844–1864
SJT	<i>Scottish Journal of Theology</i>
ST	<i>Summa Theologica</i>
ThTo	<i>Theology Today</i>
TJ	<i>Trinity Journal</i>
TOTL	The Old Testament Library
WesTJ	<i>Wesleyan Theological Journal</i>
WBC	Word Biblical Commentary

INTRODUCTION

Sin is whatever is opposed to God's will, as that will reflects God's holy character and as that will is expressed by God's commands. Sin is fundamentally opposed to nature and reason, and it is ultimately opposed to God. The results of sin are truly catastrophic—sin wreaks havoc on our relationships with God, one another, and the rest of creation. It is universal in human history and manifests itself in various cultural expressions. It wrecks human lives, and it leaves us broken and vulnerable. It also leaves us needing grace and longing for redemption.

I. THE STUDY OF SIN

And yet we commonly find ways to downplay, deny, or ignore the reality of sin. The words of Walter Rauschenbusch remain relevant and convicting: "We have been neglecting the doctrine of sin in our theology."¹ As Martin Luther King Jr. puts it, "In the modern world, we hate to hear this word 'sin'"—and this despite the sobering realization of the fact that sin is "one of the basic facts of the universe" and is "set forth on almost every page of the Bible."²

So how do we know sin? The answers may seem obvious, but the sober truth is that the very existence of sin (as a religious category and theological doctrine) is sometimes denied. Moreover, the Christians who do believe in the reality and gravity of sin often disagree over different understandings of the doctrine itself. So what sense can be made of it? How can we know it?

On one hand, it seems that sin can be known merely from observation of human existence.³ Sin is sometimes said to be "the only empirically verifiable doctrine of the Christian faith"—and this statement is often accompanied

¹ Walter Rauschenbusch, *Christianizing the Social Order* (New York: Macmillan, 1914), 126.

² Martin Luther King Jr., "Man's Sin and God's Grace," in *The Papers of Martin Luther King Jr., Vol. 6: Advocate of the Social Gospel*, ed. Clayborne Carson (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2007), 382.

³ For a version of this view that proceeds without reference to sin in relation to God, see Mary Midgley, *Wickedness: A Philosophical Essay* (New York: Routledge, 2001), esp. 6–7.

by the assumption that it clearly *is* empirically verifiable.⁴ As King expresses the point, “we just need to look around a little, that’s all, and we discover it everywhere.”⁵ Sin can be known through the study of human existence and experience; we learn of sin through social and intellectual history, through psychology and sociology—and we learn of it by introspection. There is much to be said for this approach, for it is intuitive to many people not merely that unfortunate things happen but that many things are wrong—*morally wrong*—with our world. Moreover, witness to the depravity of humanity can be found in many religious and philosophical traditions. For instance, an ancient Sumerian inscription tells us that “never has a sinless child been born to its mother.”⁶ The Chinese philosopher Xunzi claims that all people “are born with feelings of hate and dislike in them. . . . Thus, if people follow with their inborn dispositions and obey their nature, they are sure to come to struggle and contention, turn to disrupting social divisions and order, and end up becoming violent. . . . it is clear that people’s nature is bad, and their goodness is a matter of deliberate effort.”⁷ The evidence is clear enough that even Karl Barth, when commenting on Romans 3, will say that “[t]he whole course of history pronounces this judgment against itself. . . . If all the great outstanding figures in history . . . were asked their opinion, would one of them assert that men were good, or even capable of good? Is the doctrine of original sin merely one doctrine among many? Is it not rather . . . THE Doctrine which emerges from all honest study of history?”⁸ On this approach, much can be known about sin apart from divine revelation; “even those who do not know that Jesus Christ is Lord know sin.”⁹

On the other hand, many theologians argue forcefully that we cannot really know sin apart from divine revelation.¹⁰ As William H. Willimon says, “We have no means of being cognizant of sin without the grace of God.”¹¹ For Christians, knowing sin *as sin* “is derivative of and dependent on what Chris-

⁴Reinhold Niebuhr, *Man’s Nature and His Communities* (New York: Scribner, 1965), 24, cited in Ted Peters, *Sin: Radical Evil in Soul and Society* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1994), 326.

⁵King, “Man’s Sin and God’s Grace,” 383.

⁶“Sumerian Wisdom Text,” trans. S. N. Kramer, in *Ancient Near Eastern Texts Related to the Old Testament*, ed. James B. Pritchard, 3rd ed. (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1969), 590. I owe this reference to an unpublished paper by Neil Arner.

⁷Xunzi, *Xunzi: The Complete Text*, trans. Eric L. Hutton (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2014), 248–249. I owe this reference to an unpublished paper by Neil Arner.

⁸Karl Barth, *The Epistle to the Romans*, trans. Edwyn C. Hoskyns, 6th ed. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1968), 87.

⁹William H. Willimon, *Sinning Like a Christian: A New Look at the Seven Deadly Sins* (Nashville: Abingdon, 2005), xiii. See also Willimon, “A Peculiarly Christian Account of Sin,” *ThTo* (1993): 220–228.

¹⁰And many, many more theologians will argue that we do not have an *adequate* understanding of sin apart from grace. Thus Martin Luther’s famous *Smalcald Articles* say that original sin has “caused such a deep, evil corruption of nature that reason does not comprehend it; rather, it must be believed on the basis of the revelation in the Scriptures” (cited in Robert Kolb, “The Lutheran Doctrine of Original Sin,” in *Adam, the Fall, and Original Sin: Theological, Biblical, and Scientific Perspectives*, ed. Hans Madueme and Michael Reeves [Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2014], 109).

¹¹Willimon, *Sinning Like a Christian*, xii.

tians know about God as revealed in Christ.”¹² Barth articulates a thunderous statement of this view:

As the opposition of man to God, his neighbour, and himself, sin is more than a relative and limited conflict which works itself out only in himself and which can therefore be known in the self-consciousness and self-understanding which he can have of himself. As the one who commits sin man is himself totally and radically compromised. Where there is a true knowledge of sin, it can be only as an element in the knowledge of God, of revelation, and therefore of faith, for which he cannot in any way prepare himself. Man is corrupt even in his self-understanding, even in the knowledge of his corruption. He cannot see, therefore, beyond the inner conflict and its purely relative compass. He can never really see his sin, and himself as the man of sin. He cannot turn to a true knowledge of his corruption, but only evade it. God and His revelation and faith are all needed if he is to realise the accusation and judgment and condemnation under which he stands, and the transgression and ensuing need in which he exists.¹³

Barth is certain that accurate self-diagnosis is impossible. Willimon concurs: “The only means of understanding our sin with appropriate seriousness and without despair is our knowledge of a God who manages to be both gracious and truthful. . . . Only through the story of the cross of Christ do we see the utter depth and seriousness of our sin.”¹⁴

There seems to be a further problem. If sin is what the Bible says it is and does what the Bible says it does, then it is “deceitful” and causes *blindness* (Jer. 17:9; cf. John 12:40; Heb. 3:13; 1 John 2:11). As Ian McFarland points out, “Because sin is something of which everyone is guilty all the time, the very capacity to know it and name it is vitiated by human beings’ status as sinners. It follows that human beings can know the depth of their sin only as it is forgiven—and thus only as it is made known to us by the one who forgives. . . . the concept only has meaning from *within* the context of Christian belief.”¹⁵

But Barth also raises another concern; this is the worry that our attempts at such self-diagnosis are not only impossible but are also idolatrous. As he puts it,

Nor is it clear how it can be otherwise than that a doctrine of sin which precedes Christology and is independent of it should consciously or unconsciously, directly or indirectly, move in the direction of [idolatry]. To affirm evil as such it is forced to have an independent standard of good and evil and to apply that standard. But independently of Christology what standard can

¹² Willimon, *Sinning Like a Christian*, xiii.

¹³ Karl Barth, CD, IV/2, 379.

¹⁴ Willimon, *Sinning Like a Christian*, xiv.

¹⁵ Ian McFarland, *In Adam's Fall: A Meditation on the Christian Doctrine of Original Sin* (Malden, MA: Wiley-Blackwell, 2010), 21, emphasis original.

there be other than a normative concept constructed either from philosophical or biblical materials or a combination of the two?¹⁶

Accordingly, when we so much as try to understand sin apart from God and his revelation in Christ, we thereby do so with reference to a moral compass that has some kind of independent authority. But, for Barth, there can be no such moral authority independent of God and his revelation in Christ, and therefore such an effort is impossible. And, so the criticism goes, since any such supposed moral authority would be an autonomous entity standing in judgment apart from God, it would be an idol. The upshot of this is plain: the very effort to understand sin apart from God's revelatory and salvific action can itself be an act of sin. Such an effort is itself doomed to failure—and it only deepens the problem.

One interesting way of approaching the doctrine of sin is exemplified in the evangelical theologies of Jonathan Edwards (1703–1758) and John Wesley (1703–1791). For all their sharp disagreements over disputed matters of doctrinal importance, they held a great deal in common theologically—and nowhere more clearly than with respect to the doctrine of sin. The work of Edwards on the doctrine of sin is well known; what is not as well known is the parallel work being done across the Atlantic by the evangelist and itinerant minister John Wesley. Wesley's work, which predates that of Edwards by less than a year, shares several fascinating features with the more famous treatise written by his American contemporary.¹⁷ The fact that they have theological disagreements is well known, and their reputations for debate are well deserved.¹⁸ But with respect to their doctrines of sin, the agreement is both considerable and important; and where there are disagreements, they do not run along the predictable "Calvinist vs. Arminian" lines—if anything, Wesley is arguably in closer continuity with the confessional Reformed tradition than is Edwards. For while Wesley defends the treatment of hamartiology in the Westminster Confession of Faith (1646)—even down to the details of the federalist account of imputation—Edwards is more willing to diverge in creative ways.¹⁹ Interest-

¹⁶ Barth, *CD*, IV/1, 365.

¹⁷ Andrew C. Russell reports that the books were published "within a three-month time period" ("Polemical Solidarity: John Wesley and Jonathan Edwards Confront John Taylor on Original Sin," *WesTJ* [2012]: 73).

¹⁸ Their *positions* are opposed on various points, but often not directly. Edwards does not address Wesley directly and scarcely shows awareness of him. He does make positive mention of Wesley along with George Whitefield and the other "New Methodists" (Jonathan Edwards, *Sermons and Discourses*, The Works of Jonathan Edwards, vol. 22, ed. Harry S. Stout and Nathan O. Hatch, [New Haven, CT: Yale University Press], 108; I thank Doug Sweeney for this reference). Wesley's stance toward Edwards will vary from appreciative (he provided an abridged version of Edwards's *Religious Affections* for the Methodist revivals) to adversarial (e.g., with respect to Edwards's determinism). See John Wesley, "Thoughts upon Necessity," in *Works of John Wesley*, vol. 10 (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, n.d.), 463–467. But for all their disagreements, Wesley refers to Edwards as, "That great man, President Edwards, of New England" ("A Thought on Necessity," *Works of John Wesley*, vol. 10, 475).

¹⁹ On Edwards's doctrine of sin, see Oliver D. Crisp, *Jonathan Edwards and the Metaphysics of Sin* (Aldershot, UK: Ashgate, 2014). This is not the only area where the assumption that Edwards is the exemplar of orthodox Reformed theology is questionable. See Oliver D. Crisp, "Jacob Arminius and Jonathan Edwards on Creation," in *Reconsider-*

ingly, not only do they write at the same time, but both are exercised to defend the historic Christian doctrine of original sin from attacks on various fronts. Both are concerned to combat the “latitudinarian” and “deist” denials of original sin—indeed, both respond directly and extensively to John Taylor’s work.²⁰ Both are concerned to account for the reality of sin’s enslaving power *and* to account for the responsibility of the human sinner.

Wesley begins his treatise on the doctrine of original sin with what amounts to a phenomenology of religion. In “Part One” of what is a long and demanding work, he argues from observations of human history and society. This notably includes reliance on Christian Scripture, and he places special emphasis on the antediluvian verdict: “The LORD saw that the wickedness of man was great in the earth, and that every intention of the thoughts of his heart was only evil continually” (Gen. 6:5). But while Wesley’s work here appeals to the Bible, it extends far beyond biblical sources to include ancient Near Eastern and Greco-Roman literature as well. Here Wesley points out how even the most “civilized” peoples tolerated and sometimes even applauded all manner of personal and social sins (including not only exploitation of various subjugated peoples but also sexual malfeasance and savagery as well as abortion and infanticide). He moves from this to an account of contemporary “paganism” and “heathenism,” and here he gives a sweeping survey of social practices in Africa, Asia, and the Americas (as he understands them). He notes that across the world we see “gluttons, drunkards, thieves, dissemblers, and liars” who are “implacable” and “unmerciful.”²¹ Looking across contemporary Muslim cultures, he notes their “gross” and “horrible notion of God” as well as the widespread proclivity toward violence against all who might disagree with them.²²

Turning his focus to “the Christian world,” Wesley criticizes Orthodox cultures for their ignorance and superstition.²³ Meanwhile, he is convinced that many Roman Catholics are actually deists (rather than orthodox Christians),

ing *Arminius: Beyond the Reformed and Wesleyan Divide*, ed. Keith D. Stanglin, Mark G. Bilby, and Mark Mann (Nashville: Abingdon, 2014), 91–112. On “federalism,” see chapter 4 in this present volume.

²⁰ Interestingly, while Edwards refers to Taylor’s doctrine as “Arminian” theology, Wesley (who surely counts as an “Arminian” if anyone does) attacks the same doctrine and even the same book! In a letter to Augustus Toplady, Wesley says of Taylor (Edwards’s “Arminian”) that “I verily believe that no single person since Mahomet has given such a wound to Christianity as Dr. Taylor” (cited in Thomas C. Oden, *John Wesley’s Scriptural Christianity: A Plain Exposition of His Teaching on Christian Doctrine* [Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1994], 159; and in Michael J. McClymond and Gerald R. McDermott, *The Theology of Jonathan Edwards* [Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012], 347n26).

See John Taylor, *The Christian Doctrine of Original Sin Proposed to Free and Candid Examination* (London: 1740). Taylor engages in lengthy and detailed (even appealing to the use of Hiphil) exegesis (e.g., 46–47) of important biblical passages, and he denies that there is either guilt (e.g., 99) or “depravity of nature” (e.g., 103) communicated from Adam to his progeny. He also denies that Adam was a type or figure of Christ (e.g., 46), and he concludes that Adam’s sin impacted humanity only by bringing *temporal* sorrow and *physical* death (e.g., 30, 35, 46).

²¹ John Wesley, “Original Sin,” in *The Bicentennial Edition of the Works of John Wesley, Volume 12: Doctrinal and Controversial Treatises I*, ed. Richard P. Heitzenrater, Frank Baker, and Randy L. Maddox (Nashville: Abingdon, 2012), 180.

²² Wesley, “Original Sin,” 186.

²³ Wesley, “Original Sin,” 187.

and he points to both the prevalence of individual crimes (e.g., murder) and the potency of institutionalized corruption and violence in the Inquisition and the wars of religion against the Protestants that have plagued Europe.²⁴ But while he is sharply critical of “heathens,” Muslims, and Roman Catholics, Wesley saves special invective for Protestant cultures. He exempts no group or class from his scathing critique: it is not merely the undereducated or economically suppressed strata of society who engage in willful and heinous sin; to the contrary, all manner of evildoing is all too evident within the highest echelons. Drawing upon recent historical work, he concludes that the “last century” is only

a heap of conspiracies, rebellions, murders, massacres; the very worst effects that avarice, faction, hypocrisy, perfidiousness, cruelty, rage, madness, hatred, envy, lust, malice, and ambition could produce. . . . How many villains have been exalted to the highest places of trust, power, dignity, and profit! By what method have great numbers in all countries procured titles of honor and vast estates? Perjury, oppression, subordination, fraud, panderism were some of the most excusable. For many owed their greatness to sodomy or incest: others, to the prostituting of their own wives or daughters: others, to the betraying of their country or their prince; more, to the perverting of justice to destroy the innocent.²⁵

And this, Wesley is convinced, is the state of “Christian” and even Protestant peoples too.

Wesley concludes that the universal misery of humanity is both the source and the result of the sin that plagues humanity. Thus “sin is the baleful source of affliction; and consequently, the flood of miseries which covers the face of the earth . . . is demonstrative proof of the overflowing of ungodliness in every nation under heaven.”²⁶ Wesley then turns to “Part Two,” his “Scriptural Method of Accounting” for this universal depravity. He works through two distinct sets of scriptural texts: those that directly prove the doctrine of original sin, and those that illustrate it. Especially important here is Matthew 15:19: “For out of the heart come evil thoughts, murder, adultery, sexual immorality, theft, false witness, slander.” He also shows how the doctrine of sin is integrally related to other major points of Christian doctrine, and thus how a proper understanding of it is vital to a proper understanding of the gospel itself.

Jonathan Edwards proceeds along similar lines. Also arguing directly against John Taylor, he begins with observations about the human condition and then moves to a biblically grounded theological understanding of that condition. In “Part One,” he draws upon “observation” and “experience” to

²⁴ Wesley, “Original Sin,” 187–190.

²⁵ Wesley, “Original Sin,” 191 (citing Jonathan Swift’s *Gulliver’s Travels*).

²⁶ Wesley, “Original Sin,” 211.

present “Evidences from Facts and Events.” These “observations” demonstrate the following: first, that “All mankind do constantly, in all Ages, without fail in any Instance, run into that moral evil which is in effect their own utter and eternal Perdition,” that from this it follows that “all mankind are under the influence of a prevailing effectual tendency in their Nature to that Sin and Wickedness,” and that this depravity is a “propensity to sin *immediately, continually, and progressively*.”²⁷

After laying out these depressing lines of evidence, Edwards addresses what he takes to be common “evasions,” and he argues that universal mortality proves the doctrine of original sin. He then turns to Scripture to offer a theological account of this depraved human condition, and only after this does he turn to address objections to the doctrine (and it is only here that Edwards engages in his speculative metaphysics).

While certainly not endorsing all their judgments (e.g., about other cultures and religions), and without following them in the details of their proposals (with respect to both exegesis of particular texts and metaphysical speculation), I think that there is much that is right about the general approaches of Wesley and Edwards. They are correct to point out that “general revelation” shows us that something is desperately wrong with humans in their current condition; we know that *something* is seriously wrong from common human experience.²⁸ And they are absolutely right to insist that we can come to an adequate understanding of just *what* has gone wrong only in light of God’s “special revelation” (as this comes reliably through the truthfulness of Holy Scripture and ultimately in the Truth that is incarnate as Jesus Christ).²⁹ For although we find that recognition of the *reality* of sin is unavoidable, given observation of human experience, and although we can learn much *about* sin by study of that human experience, we cannot have an adequate understanding of it precisely *as sin* apart from divine revelation and the theological reflection that is made possible by that revelation.³⁰

II. SOURCES FOR THE STUDY OF SIN

Evidence of sin is splashed across the pages of human history. Tendencies toward sinful behavior are embedded deep within the human psyche. The stark

²⁷ Jonathan Edwards, *The Works of Jonathan Edwards*, vol. 3, *Original Sin*, ed. Clyde A. Holbrook (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1970), viii.

²⁸ Furthermore, as we shall see, recent work in social and moral psychology serves to reinforce these intuitions. Indeed, some of this work also offers insights into the perversity and deceptiveness of human sinfulness.

²⁹ Such an approach is broadly traditional, yet it still finds resonance with more recent “apocalyptic” approaches to biblical and systematic theology. For instance, Douglas Campbell admits that “insights from nature and creation are to be welcomed” in the theological task so long as any such claims made “in terms of natural theology [are] subject to christological revision” (“Douglas Campbell’s Response to Warren J. Smith,” in *Beyond Old and New Perspectives on Paul: Reflections on the Work of Douglas Campbell*, ed. Chris Tilling [Eugene, OR: Cascade, 2014], 95).

³⁰ See the similar point made by Peter J. Gentry and Stephen J. Wellum, *Kingdom through Covenant: A Biblical-Theological Understanding of the Covenants* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2012), 624–625.

reality of sin's consequences is portrayed, in penetrating, vivid, and powerful ways, in the text of sacred Scripture. Sin is everywhere; the manifestations are legion, and the effects are both deep and pervasive. Sin is also both evasive and sinister, and it is not easy for us to come to grips with it. So how are we to study it?

In this volume we approach the theological task with the conviction that Scripture is finally normative and supremely authoritative in theology. We learn about sin precisely *as sin* from the biblical revelation; without the Bible we might know that something is wrong with the human condition, but we would not know it accurately *as sin*. As the inspired and authoritative witness to God's self-disclosure, as this culminates in Christ and the Holy Spirit, the Bible is properly understood as revelation (in the appropriate sense) and is the "norming norm" (*norma normans*) that is the final authority in all matters of theology. As such, it informs, guides, and corrects our theological endeavors. As Oliver D. Crisp puts it, the Bible is the "final arbiter of matters theological for Christians as the particular place in which God reveals himself to his people" and the "first-order authority in all matters of Christian doctrine."³¹ Accordingly, in this study we seek to learn about sin from its depiction in the Bible. As an exercise in "canonical-theological" interpretation of Scripture, we take Scripture in its canonical form and interpret it to learn about God and all things as they relate to God.³² More specifically, we appreciate the literary and theological unity of the Bible, and Scripture guides and norms our understanding of what sin is in relation to God.

Of course the Bible is never interpreted in a conceptual vacuum, and the broad Christian tradition is vitally important for the study of sin. While this tradition is a doctrinal source and authority that is subordinate to and ruled by Holy Scripture (the *norma normata*), nonetheless it is a functional and valued authority in theology. When we ignore the history of doctrine, we very often merely reinvent the doctrinal wheel. Indeed, sometimes we do not even succeed in getting a wheel that is round. What William J. Abraham diagnoses as "doctrinal amnesia" is an all-too-common malady in much contemporary theology and church life—too often, contemporary Christians have neglected or forgotten the insights and lessons for which previous generations paid so dearly.³³ Sometimes the neglect is unintentional and benign; at other times,

³¹ Oliver D. Crisp, *God Incarnate: Explorations in Christology* (New York: T&T Clark, 2009), 17.

³² This is not to discount the place of other (e.g., historical-critical) approaches to the study of the Bible.

³³ William J. Abraham, *Waking from Doctrinal Amnesia: The Healing of Doctrine in the United Methodist Church* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1995). What Abraham says about his denomination applies more broadly. Sometimes, neglect of historic Christian teaching on sin shows up in surprising places. For instance, John V. Fesko's generally well-informed and helpful work on the theology of the Westminster Standards does not include any sustained reflection on the doctrine of sin in the Westminster Confession and Catechisms—indeed, the index to the book lists sin on only one page! See John V. Fesko, *The Theology of the Westminster Standards: Historical Context and Theological Insights* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2014), 222.

however, the rejection of the insights of the Christian tradition is more akin to what Thomas C. Oden refers to as “modern chauvinism.”³⁴ This is the assumption—an assumption that is sometimes hegemonic in “liberal” or “progressive” and “conservative” circles alike—that whatever is newest is best, and whatever is older is likely mistaken or confused. In this study of the doctrine of sin, we will work hard to avoid the temptation to ignore or forget the lessons that may be learned from the Christian tradition. In an effort to draw from the rich resources of historic Christian doctrine, we will listen carefully to the important creeds and councils of the church. And we shall also listen attentively and respectfully to major theologians of the Patristic, medieval, Reformation/post-Reformation periods (as well as modern theologians).

As a work of systematic theology, this study of the doctrine of sin seeks to incorporate insights from other relevant disciplines as well. Accordingly, we learn what we can from other areas of inquiry; in particular, we benefit from both the questions raised and (at least in some cases) the answers or partial answers given by history, sociology, anthropology, and social and moral psychology. In addition, philosophy plays a minor but important role in this work. The role it plays is “ministerial” rather than “magisterial”; in other words, it works to assist rather than to dominate theology.³⁵ It is simply indispensable in helping us understand not only the challenges to the doctrine of sin (from the proponents of heresy and from secularists alike) but also the doctrinal formulations of the tradition’s major theologians. And the conceptual tools offered to us by logic and metaphysics can help us in understanding and articulating the doctrine today.³⁶

I deal with many topics in the pages that follow, and I am aware that many of these issues deserve book-length treatment in their own right, and that, while some of the topics have received such treatment, more work awaits. Where I have not treated an issue exhaustively, I only hope that I have said things that are true and helpful, and that perhaps I have pointed further research in the right direction. Moreover, I am aware that I engage with a wide range of texts and concepts, and I am further aware that I do so without the expertise of the specialists who work in the various disciplines and sub-disciplines. As D. Stephen Long notes, “many scholars work their entire vocation to make a contribution to a minute historical or theological aspect” of important texts and figures. Long is correct; scholars work for decades to

³⁴ Thomas C. Oden, *Requiem: A Lament in Three Movements* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1995), 118.

³⁵ See Kevin J. Vanhoozer, “Christ and Concept: Doing Theology and the ‘Ministry’ of Philosophy,” in *Doing Theology in Today’s World: Essays in Honor of Kenneth S. Kantzer*, ed. John D. Woodbridge and Thomas McComiskey (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1991), 99–145.

³⁶ See further Thomas H. McCall, *An Invitation to Analytic Christian Theology* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2015).

gain a better understanding of, say, the worship practices of Israel as depicted in the Prophets and as compared to their ancient Near Eastern neighbors; the proper interpretation of the first chapter of Paul's letter to the Romans; the Manichaean background to Augustine's hamartiology; or the relevance of psychological studies of narcissism. Long is also right that the systematic theologian is impoverished without the work of such specialists. As he says, "[W]e need this kind of scholarship."³⁷ I interact with the relevant primary sources and, at least as far as I am able, with the work of the specialists in the various disciplines and sub-disciplines, and I do so gratefully. With Long, however, I do so with a keen awareness of the limitations that come with being a "generalist": these include "dangers of not understanding the nuances of a specific discipline from the inside, misrepresenting it, and thus forcing its insights into a framework that is so alien to it that those who practice it no longer discover what they practice in its representation."³⁸ I am aware that I may well make mistakes that the specialists to whose work I am so deeply indebted will see. If so, then I welcome correction. At the same time, however, I am confident that the main lines of the teaching offered here are both true and salutary.

III. THE SHAPE OF THIS STUDY

We will begin our study of sin with a survey of the depiction of sin and its consequences in Scripture. This overview will set us up for more extended examinations and analyses of important doctrinal issues. This initial overview is important for several reasons. First, and most importantly, work on the doctrine of sin in systematic theology should be grounded in how the Bible portrays sin and in what the Bible actually says about sin. Accordingly, this volume begins with a summary of sin as it is portrayed in the Old and New Testaments of Christian Scripture. Second, despite the flowering of biblical theology as a discipline over the past few decades, the doctrine of sin has received remarkably little attention.³⁹ While I am keenly aware that there is a great deal more that could be said about any of the texts mentioned or issues discussed, I am also convinced that we need to see how the doctrine of sin matters to the ca-

³⁷D. Stephen Long, *The Perfectly Simple Triune God: Aquinas and His Legacy* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2016), xii.

³⁸Long, *Perfectly Simple Triune God*, xii.

³⁹So, for instance, the doctrine of sin is not even important enough in Georg Strecker's work to warrant a single mention in the subject index of his massive tome (Georg Strecker, *Theology of the New Testament*, ed. Friedrich Wilhelm Horn, trans. M. Eugene Boring [Louisville: Westminster/John Knox, 2000], 740–748). The eight-hundred-page volume by Peter J. Gentry and Stephen J. Wellum is better, but it mentions sin on only five pages; see the index entry for "sin" in Gentry and Wellum, *Kingdom through Covenant*, 821. Thomas Schreiner's book of biblical theology mentions sin exactly one time in a volume of seven hundred pages (at least if the index is to be trusted); see Thomas R. Schreiner, *The King in His Beauty: A Biblical Theology of the Old and New Testaments* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2013), 713. There are some notable exceptions, of course, perhaps chief of which is Mark J. Boda, *A Severe Mercy: Sin and Its Remedy in the Old Testament* (Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 2009). Boda, however, focuses entirely on the OT and thus does not trace important thematic elements through the entire biblical canon.

nonical story line of Scripture. Thus we begin with an overview of the biblical depiction of sin.

This initial overview will set us up for closer analyses of several important doctrinal issues. Chapter 3 explores “The Origin of Sin,” and here we look closely not only at the mystery of the origin of human sin but also at the even more perplexing mystery of the origin of angelic sin. Chapter 4 addresses “The Doctrine of Original Sin,” and the problematic nature of the relation of the first humans and their primal sin to the rest of humanity is examined in detail. Chapter 5 turns attention from original sin to sins of action, from Adam and his relation to us to our own sinful behaviors and inclinations. After working to clear away some unfortunate but common misconceptions about “The Sin Nature,” I argue that sin should be properly understood as against nature, against reason, and—always and ultimately—against God. I then explore several important but often overlooked distinctions (e.g., greater and lesser sins, mortal and venial sins, individual and corporate sins). In chapter 6, we take a closer look at the results of sin. Here attention is given to the debilitating impact of sin, and lessons are drawn from the perennial struggles with Pelagianism. The impact of guilt and shame, the meaning of “total depravity,” and the proper understanding of death as “The Wages of Sin” are examined. Finally, the judgment and wrath of God are seen in relation to both the character of God and the reality of sin. Chapter 7 looks at the relationship between sin and grace; here attention is focused on sin and divine providence, sin and prevenient grace, and sin and saving grace (including not only justification but also regeneration and sanctification). Chapter 8 draws some conclusions from the study as a whole, and an Appendix analyzes issues and challenges related to “The Original Sinners” (the historicity of Adam and Eve).

IV. APPROACHING THE STUDY OF SIN: THE APPROPRIATE POSTURE

While the study of sin is so extensive as to be intimidating, the gravity of the subject is almost overwhelming. To study sin is not only to look across the vast landscape of human history but also to be confronted by the mirror of Scripture—and to be reminded again of the depths of human depravity. To study sin theologically is to come to a deeper understanding of oneself—to truly know sin is to know the sinner introspectively.

But it is not only that. We can begin to understand sin rightly only in relation to God—and thus to know sin better is to know God better. To better understand sin is to better understand the justice, righteousness, and holiness of God. And to better understand sin is to better understand the glorious mercy of the triune God whose nature is holy love. Perhaps, then, it is appropriate to begin with this prayer of St. Anselm:

O Lord our God,
Grant us grace to desire you with our whole heart;
that desiring you,
we may seek and find you;
and finding you we may love you;
and loving you we may hate those sins from which you have redeemed us;
for the sake of Jesus Christ. Amen.⁴⁰

⁴⁰ Quoted in Andrew Davison, Andrew Nunn, and Toby Wright, eds., *Lift Up Your Hearts: Prayers for Anglicans* (London: SPCK, 2010).

SIN ACCORDING TO SCRIPTURE: A FIRST LOOK

I. INTRODUCTION

For any recognizably Christian understanding of reality, the centrality of the sheer, unalterable, majestic, holy love of God is unavoidable. The holiness of the triune God is unmistakable in Scripture—and the blazing brilliance of God’s holiness shines into and exposes human life for what it really is. And what human life is—more properly, what it has become, what we have made of it—is anything but a reflection of God’s own spotless purity and boundless love. When seen as a properly *theological* category, sin is revealed as the perversion, the twisting, the ruin, of humanity. And however skilled we may become at denial or avoidance (as we shall see, these are some of the very results of sin), God is too good to leave us in our delusion. Instead, we get the sober truth: “All have sinned and fall short of the glory of God” (Rom. 3:23). “None is righteous” (v. 10). “The wages of sin is death” (6:23).

II. BIBLICAL VOCABULARY

The wide range of biblical terms for sin testifies both to the importance of the concept in Scripture and to the difficulty involved in tight or neat definitions or descriptions of sin. We shall begin with a brief overview of some of the most common biblical terms for sin. While these terms are sometimes used synonymously (or with significant semantic overlap), they each make an important contribution to our recognition and understanding of sin.¹ An initial overview of these basic biblical data will aid our broader study of the doctrine of sin.

¹It is important to keep in mind the distinction between *words* and *concepts*, and to remember that various words can convey the same concept.

A. Major Old Testament Terms for Sin

The terms that appear with greatest frequency in the OT to refer to sin are *ḥaṭṭā't*, *peša'*, *'āwōn*, *reša'*, and *ra'*.²

HĀṬĀ', *HATṬĀ'*, *HATṬĀ'T* (חטא)

Ḥaṭṭā't is the most general term. Not surprisingly, it often appears in English translations simply as “sin.” But more basically, it means to deviate; to “miss the mark.” In some of its more than two hundred uses in the OT, it is used in a strictly literal and what we might call “horizontal” or nontheological sense. For instance, in Judges 20:16 we read of the seven hundred marksmen who could sling stones “and not miss.” But *ḥaṭṭā't* is often used to speak of moral failure, and here it can refer to the whole gamut of human erring. Sometimes it is used with reference to those who fail unintentionally (e.g., Lev. 4:13–14), while at other points it is used to describe those who in arrogance *try* to miss the mark.

Primarily, though, it simply expresses the fact: the target has been missed. As such, of course, it presupposes the idea of a target. There is a goal, a target, a mark. And the most basic point is this: the target has been missed. Sin is a failure to reach what was intended. As such, sin has an undeniably objective quality to it. Biblically, it cannot be reduced to a mere psychological sense of disapproval; it is not merely subjective. To fall short, to miss the mark, is to sin. Whether or not the sinner feels bad about it is rather beside the point. The mark, the target, the goal, the expectation or standard was there—and it was missed.

But a word of caution is in order here. Frank admission of the objectivity of sin—we are guilty of transgression whether or not we recognize it or admit it, whether we feel badly about it or not—should not lead us to overlook the volitional element that is often highlighted in the use of these terms. Understanding sin as “missing the mark” might encourage a view of sin as primarily unintentional. We sometimes picture someone such as a basketball player who, despite his complete concentration and best efforts, still misses the free throw when the game is on the line. The player surely missed the mark, but not for lack of intention or effort. Accordingly, we might be tempted to think that sin is primarily to be understood as something that we intend to avoid but just cannot quite escape. In other words, despite our best and unwavering intentions to do the right thing, we nonetheless fail.

²In addition to the standard lexicons, for helpful studies see Alex Luc, “חטא,” in *NIDOTTE*, 2:87–93; and Richard E. Averbeck, “חטא,” in *NIDOTTE*, 2:93–103; Elmer A. Martens, “Sin, Guilt,” in *Dictionary of the Old Testament: Pentateuch*, ed. T. Desmond Alexander and David W. Baker (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2002), 765–769; P. Jensen, “Sin,” in *Dictionary of the Old Testament: Historical Books*, ed. Bill T. Arnold and H. G. M. Williamson (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2005), 900–901; Mark J. Boda, “Sin, Sinners,” in *Dictionary of the Old Testament: Prophets*, ed., Mark J. Boda and J. Gordon McConville (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2012), 713–714.

This could encourage a rather lax attitude toward sin, but nothing could be further from the biblical truth. The terms *ḥāṭā'* and *ḥaṭṭā't* indeed do show the objective nature of sin, but the most common usages of the terms show that there is an important volitional element often involved. As Ryder Smith says, "[T]he hundreds of examples of the word's *moral* use require that the wicked man 'misses the right mark *because he chooses* to aim at a wrong one' and 'misses the right path *because he deliberately* follows a wrong one'—that is, there is no question of an innocent mistake or of the merely negative idea of 'failure.'"³ Or as Millard Erickson puts it, the word suggests "not merely failure, but a decision to fail, a voluntary and culpable mistake."⁴

'*Āwōn* (עוֹן)

The volitional element is seen much more clearly and emphasized even more strongly in the biblical language that speaks of perversion. In the OT, '*āwōn* is more focused on the personal causes—and effects—of sin. Often appearing in English translations as "iniquity" or "guilt," the word connotes twistedness, and the basic idea is one of perversion.⁵

Directly in contrast to what is straight, upright, well-formed, and healthy, sin is what is morally misshapen, crippled, broken, misleading, and crooked. Again, this presupposes something that is right, well-formed, and healthy, and it paints a picture of sin as the twisting or perversion of that rightness and health. But the emphasis in this case clearly falls upon personal engagement. It is not as if the sinful person merely suffers the effects of (someone else's) sin; rather it is the sinner who willfully chooses that which ultimately will warp and twist him to the core of his being.

The sinful actions (of *ḥāṭā'*, *ḥaṭṭā't*) come from an inner twistedness or perversion ('*āwōn*). '*Āwōn* occurs repeatedly in Isaiah 59:2–7, and this passage illustrates vividly the nature of this perversion and its effects:

[But] your iniquities have made a separation
between you and your God,
and your sins have hidden his face from you
so that he does not hear.
For your hands are defiled with blood
and your fingers with iniquity;
your lips have spoken lies;
your tongue mutters wickedness.
No one enters suit justly;
no one goes to law honestly;

³Ryder Smith, *The Biblical Doctrine of Sin and the Ways of God with Sinners* (London: Epworth, 1953), 17.

⁴Millard Erickson, *Christian Theology*, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 1998), 586.

⁵I owe this observation to conversations with John Oswalt.

they rely on empty pleas, they speak lies,
 they conceive mischief and give birth to iniquity.
 They hatch adders' eggs;
 they weave the spider's web;
 he who eats their eggs dies,
 and from one that is crushed a viper is hatched.
 Their webs will not serve as clothing;
 men will not cover themselves with what they make.
 Their works are works of iniquity,
 and deeds of violence are in their hands.
 Their feet run to evil,
 and they are swift to shed innocent blood;
 their thoughts are thoughts of iniquity;
 desolation and destruction are in their highways.

This is a perversion that reaches and poisons everything.

The Hebrew term *'āwel* is similar, and it is often translated “wickedness,” “injustice,” or “unrighteousness.” This word often expresses the idea of twistedness or perversion with great force. It is the opposite of justice and righteousness. More precisely, it is the opposite of the justice and righteousness of *God*, who is the standard of righteousness and justice. As Deuteronomy 32:4 says of God, God is to be understood as “the Rock, his work is perfect, for all his ways are justice. A God of faithfulness and without iniquity, just and upright is he.” To be sinful is to pervert those standards, to twist them for our own purposes.

PEŠA' (פֶּשַׁע)

More directly volitional yet is the language of rebellion. The Hebrew word *pāša'* expresses this idea, and the usages of it in the OT do so poignantly. Synonyms are *mārad* (which carries political overtones) and *bāgad* (which connotes personal treachery). What we see here is a violation of trust; here we have personal rebellion against a sovereign and betrayal of a trusting parent. This rebellion is intentional; it is done directly *to* the other party and in full (or at least adequate) awareness of the nature of the act. As rebels commit treason against “the house of David” (e.g., 1 Kings 12:19), so also humans rebel against their Creator and Lord when they commit sinful actions.

So sin is rebellion, but it is not rebellion against some abstract standard or distant moral code. No, it is rebellion against God. It is treason against the good governance of the Sovereign, and it is betrayal of the trusting love of the Father. As Isaiah 1:2 puts it, “Children have I reared and brought up, but they have rebelled against me” (cf. Matt. 10:21 and Mark 13:12). Anthony Thiselton

observes that “Children who rebel against their parents undertake a wilful act that *results in a broken relationship*.”⁶

REŠA' (רשע)

The Hebrew word *reša'* (and its cognates) points to the wickedness and resulting guilt of sin.⁷ To commit acts of wickedness is to do the opposite of what is right, and in the Hiphil (causative) form of *hirsā'a* it means “to condemn” or “to pronounce guilty.”⁸ What it means to be a sinner is this: it is to commit acts of wrongdoing, and it is to be recognized and pronounced guilty for those actions. It is the refusal to reverence, worship, obey, and glorify God as the one who is holy and as the one who as such is the standard of holiness. It is the rejection of God—it is the refusal to accept God’s standards of holiness and his personal and transforming relational presence.

RA' (רע)

The term *ra'* is a general term for evil. It encompasses both what is now sometimes referred to as “natural evil” and “moral evil” or sin. But often it is used powerfully to refer to the affections and actions—and the results of those actions—of sinful people. As Jensen observes, “[T]he refrain in Judges and 1–2 Kings, ‘doing evil in the sight of the Lord,’ emphasizes the ultimate reference point for the narrator’s evaluation. Since the Lord’s will for Israel’s moral and religious behavior is revealed in the law and freshly applied by the prophets, the word often describes Israel’s failure to hear and obey.”⁹

B. Important New Testament Terms for Sin

Among the many words used in the NT with reference to sin, several stand out as especially important.¹⁰ These include *hamartia*, *anomia*, *parabasis*, *paraptōma*, *asebeia*, and *adikia*.

⁶ Anthony C. Thiselton, *The Hermeneutics of Doctrine* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2007), 267, emphasis original.

⁷ Forms of *rsb* are also translated in the Septuagint as *anomia* (e.g., 1 Sam. 24:13–14) and *adikia* (e.g., Ex. 2:13).

⁸ See Martens, “Sin, Guilt,” 767.

⁹ Jensen, “Sin,” 900.

¹⁰ For helpful overviews, see E. P. Sanders, “Sin, Sinners (New Testament),” *Anchor Bible Dictionary*, ed. David Noel Freedman, 6 vols. (New York: Doubleday, 1992), 6:40–47; Leon Morris, “Sin, Guilt,” in *Dictionary of Paul and His Letters*, ed. Gerald F. Hawthorne, Ralph P. Martin, and Daniel G. Reid (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 1993), 877–881; Stanley E. Porter, “Sin, Wickedness,” in *Dictionary of the Later New Testament and Its Developments*, ed. Ralph P. Martin and Peter H. Davids (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 1997), 1095–1098; M. F. Bird, “Sin, Sinner,” in *Dictionary of Jesus and the Gospels*, ed. Joel Green, Scot McKnight, and I. Howard Marshall (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1992), 863–869.

HAMARTIA (ἁμαρτία) AND *HAMARTANŌ* (ἁμαρτανῶ)

This word (and its cognates), commonly translated simply as “sin,” is often used as a rendering of *ḥaṭṭā’* (and cognates) in the Septuagint.¹¹ Moises Silva observes that the “NT writers never use the term with a concrete/physical meaning (“fail to hit a target”) or even with the sense “error, failure in judgment.”¹² Instead, the uses of the term are distinctly religious and moral in nature: “rebellion, corruption, violation, trespassing, disobedience, etc.”¹³

ANOMIA (ἀνομία)

We read in 1 John 3:4 that sin (*hamartian*) is “lawlessness” (*anomia*). Sin is the “transgression of the law” (KJV); it is violation of what God has commanded. Sin is doing what God has proscribed, and it is failing to do what he has prescribed. It is opposition to the law of God, and as Smith says, “when-*ever anomia* is used, the concepts of law and judgment are present, and, in the characteristic and more numerous instances, the reference is . . . to anything and everything that any man knows that God has commanded.”¹⁴ Indeed, it includes not only discrete acts of lawlessness but also “a frame of mind” that revels in its rebellion.¹⁵

PARABASIS (παραβάσις) AND *PARABAINŌ* (παραβαίνω)

This term denotes transgression; overstepping proper boundaries. It is used in the Septuagint to refer to the act of stepping outside of God’s prescribed boundaries (e.g., Ex. 32:8), of stepping outside the vows of marriage (e.g., Num. 5:12, 19–20, 29), and other actions of culpable neglect or deliberate malfeasance.¹⁶ Notably, it is used “especially” of breaking the covenant (e.g., Josh. 7:11; Ezek. 16:59; 17:15–19; 44:7; Hos. 6:7; 8:1).¹⁷ In the NT, the term is used to refer to “transgression” of God’s will and ways.

PARAPTŌMA (παραπτώμα)

This term is similar to the previous one in that it also refers to the crossing of God-ordained boundaries. But it is often a stronger term than *parabasis*, for it

¹¹ See the discussion in Erickson, *Christian Theology*, 587.

¹² Moises Silva, “ἁμαρτάνω,” *NIDNTTE*, 1:258–259.

¹³ Silva, “ἁμαρτάνω,” 259.

¹⁴ Smith, *Biblical Doctrine of Sin*, 145.

¹⁵ Walter Bauer, William Arndt, F. Wilbur Gingrich, and Frederick W. Danker, *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1979), 71.

¹⁶ See Silva, “παραβαίνω,” *NIDNTTE*, 3:606.

¹⁷ Silva, “παραβαίνω,” 606.

is used to emphasize the willful nature of the transgression, and it can refer to a “habit of wrongdoing” that is an “offense against God.”¹⁸

ADIKIA (ἀδικία)

The Septuagint often translates *‘āwōn* with *adikia* (“unrighteousness”), and after *hamartia* this becomes the most common NT word for sin. The semantic domain of this word is that of the law court; it concerns judicial decisions. But it cannot be limited to merely forensic statements, for it concerns not only the legal status of the wrongdoer (as wrongdoer) but also the behavior and character of the one who commits the acts of sin. Thus it refers to injustice and wickedness. The adjective *adikos* “is used several times as the precise antonym of *dikaios*” (“righteous” or “just”).¹⁹ It is in contrast to the righteousness of God’s people (e.g., 1 Cor. 6:1), and it is directly opposed to the righteousness of God. As Silva explains, “the criterion for determining what counts as *adikia* is the righteousness of God, which discloses human unrighteousness (Rom. 3:5, 26; 9:14).”²⁰

ASEBEIA (ἀσεβεία)

The use of *asebeia* reinforces the irreducibly and profoundly *theological* or God-ward orientation of the concept of sin: sin is impiety and *godlessness*. Sin is the deliberate rejection of God and God’s ways. And it unleashes all manner of evil in the world: *ungodliness* causes *unrighteousness* (Rom. 1:18), and from this follows “all manner of unrighteousness, evil, covetousness, malice” that produces “envy, murder, strife, deceit, maliciousness” (Rom. 1:29). Such people are “gossips, slanderers, haters of God, insolent, haughty, boastful, inventors of evil, disobedient to parents, foolish, faithless, heartless, ruthless” (Rom. 1:29–31).

III. A BIBLICAL THEOLOGICAL OVERVIEW

A survey of the major terms takes us only so far, and indeed an overreliance on the “meanings of terms” can be misleading.²¹ As Anthony Thiselton observes, the differences between these terms is “pronounced” but not “clear-cut, depending on context.”²² Mark J. Boda notes some problematic aspects of a “theology-by-word-study approach” when he says that “[t]he problem with this [method] was not only the fallacious practice of etymologizing and the unhealthy consideration of words apart from their linguistic context but,

¹⁸ Thiselton, *Hermeneutics of Doctrine*, 269.

¹⁹ Silva, “ἀδικέω,” *NIDNTTE*, 1:158.

²⁰ Silva, “ἀδικέω,” 158.

²¹ See D. A. Carson, *Exegetical Fallacies*, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 1996), 27–64.

²² Thiselton, *Hermeneutics of Doctrine*, 266.

more importantly, the inappropriate equation of biblical word and theological theme.”²³ So while a review of the terms used for sin is helpful, it serves only as a beginning point. To see the biblical portrayal of sin, we need to see it within the broad biblical story. For as Jay Sklar points out, “sin is central to the Bible’s story.”²⁴ To help us catch a glimpse of that, in this section I offer an initial overview of that story. What follows is far from exhaustive, but it serves both to provide a “big picture” and to set the stage for closer examination and more focused discussion of important issues.

A. Sin in the Beginnings

The creation account itself hints at the possibility (though *not* the necessity) of sin (Gen. 2:16–17). And we get no farther than the opening verses of the next chapter before we see the temptation of the first humans (3:1–7). Created by the hand of God, and enlivened by nothing less than God’s own breath (or Spirit) (2:7), the first humans are placed within a setting of *shalom*.²⁵ Adam and Eve enjoy a harmonious relationship with the rest of creation, they delight in each other, and they share fellowship and trusting communion with their Creator. Things are as they should be; they are as God intended them to be. But Eve first listens to the questioning suggestions of the tempter, and Adam then listens to Eve. They reach for, and take, what God has commanded them to leave alone. The consequences are immediate and nothing short of devastating. Shame immediately settles upon Adam and Eve, and they are fearful (3:7–10). Adam and Eve immediately find themselves estranged and alienated from the rest of creation. Instead of a creation of *shalom*, they now find themselves facing hardship and suffering in their daily lives and in their future (vv. 16–19). They are alienated from each other (v. 12). Most importantly, they are estranged from their Maker.

The biblical story of “the fall” (as it has come to be called in subsequent theology) is as simple and straightforward as it is short. Yet this account is crucial for understanding the biblical drama. It portrays the situation before the fall, it assumes human responsibility for the actions that could have been avoided, and it shows us that the consequences of sin reach into every area and relationship of life. Everything—the integrity of the first human persons, their mutual relations, their relationship to their environment, and ultimately their relation to their Creator—is fundamentally wrecked by what they have done. As Sklar observes, “Genesis 3 has outlined an understanding of sin that will be

²³ Mark J. Boda, *A Severe Mercy: Sin and Its Remedy in the Old Testament* (Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 2007), 6.

²⁴ Jay Sklar, “Pentateuch,” in *T&T Clark Companion to the Doctrine of Sin*, ed. Keith L. Johnson and David Lauber (New York: Bloomsbury T&T Clark, 2016), 3.

²⁵ See Cornelius Plantinga Jr., *Not the Way It’s Supposed to Be: A Breviary of Sin* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1994).

filled in as the biblical story progresses. In its basic contours, sin is disobedience to God, destructive in its results (in our relationship with the Lord, one another, and the world), associated with an evil power who desires humanity's harm, and calls forth both God's justice in punishing it and his mercy in forgiving it—with the promise that he will see to its ultimate defeat."²⁶ Above all, the "opening acts" of Scripture show us that sin is fundamentally *against God*, and that these devastating consequences are the direct result of the rupture of relationship between human creatures and the Lord who made them.

As the story unfolds in Genesis, we see illustrated both the universal spread and the vicious character of sin. No sooner do we get outside of Eden (in the canonical narrative) before the oldest son of Adam and Eve murders his younger brother (Gen. 4:1–10). As Daniel Doriani observes, "In Cain's sin we have an early hint of the virulence and intractability of sin. . . . While sin was external to Adam and Eve, it appears to spring up spontaneously from within Cain; it is a wild force in him, which he ought to master lest it devour him" (v. 7).²⁷ Sin progresses throughout the nascent human race; not only is there vice and violence, now there is also pride for those evil actions (vv. 23–24). As the human race extends, so also does the reach and depth of perversion and depravity. By the time we come to Genesis 6, the Lord sees that "the wickedness of man was great in the earth, and that every intention of the thoughts of his heart was only evil continually" (6:5). Although Noah is "righteous" and "blameless" (v. 9), we find that "the earth was corrupt in God's sight, and the earth was filled with violence" (v. 11). God sends a flood to cleanse the earth (7:1–8:14), and he again gives warnings about sin and its consequences as he makes a covenant with Noah and his family after the flood (9:1–17). But it does not take long (in the canonical narrative) before we see the heights of human arrogance as the humans attempt to build a tower to heaven *for their own honor and glory* (11:1–4). Here we see the reach and spread of sin; it encompasses "the whole earth" (11:1). We also see the depth and ridiculousness of sin—these sinful people actually think that they can gain glory for themselves by building such a tower, and they are too blinded to see their own foolishness.

Genesis 12 marks an important and pivotal shift in the biblical narrative. Where ruin has come to all the world through the sin of one man (cf. Rom. 5:12–21), so also the divine plan of redemption begins a great reversal with one man as God makes a covenant with Abram, calls him to be the father of "a great nation," and tells him that "in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed" (Gen. 12:1–3). Abram believes God, takes him at his word, and follows him. As he believes God's promise, God "credits" that belief to him

²⁶ Sklar, "Pentateuch," 10.

²⁷ Daniel Doriani, "Sin," in *EDBT*, 736.

“as righteousness” (cf. 15:6 NIV). And so the progress of redemption begins to roll forward, as God chooses a man, through whom he will make a nation, and from which nation will come *the promised Savior* of all the world. Yet as the story unfolds in Genesis, we find ample evidence that sin impacts Abram and his family as well. Abram lies—twice—about his own wife (apparently he is more willing to risk losing her to the Egyptians and Abimelech than he is to stand true with her) (12:10–20; 20:1–17). His son Isaac is a gift of grace, but he apparently learns the family values well, for he too lies about his wife (Gen. 26:1–10).²⁸ Abram is soon estranged from Lot, who moves close to Sodom (13:10–13). Warfare ensues, and Abram is caught in a web of violence as he is forced to rescue his nephew (14:1–16). Abram and Sarai fail to trust God, and they pull their servant Hagar into sexual servitude to Abram. When Hagar has a child, she finds herself mistreated by Sarai (16:1–15). The sin of nearby Sodom and Gomorrah (which includes both sexual sin and other forms of injustice and oppression against the poor) is so extensive and grave that not even ten righteous people can be found there (18:16–33).²⁹ The men of Sodom try to rape their visitors, and judgment follows (19:1–28). Lot escapes, but only to commit incest with his own daughters (19:30–38).

When Isaac reaches old age, his younger son Jacob swindles his older son Esau, and estrangement follows swiftly as Esau seeks revenge upon Jacob (27:1–28:22). Jacob himself is taken advantage of by a dishonest family member (29:1–30). The conflict continues between the members of the extended family, until Jacob finally runs away from his father-in-law—with the situation being further complicated by the presence of idolatry (ch. 31). Jacob is so convinced of his own abilities and control that he even resists God’s blessing to the point that he “wrestles” with God (32:22–32). The story of Jacob’s family continues with the rape of his daughter, deceitfulness and intrigue, and nothing short of mass murder (ch. 34).

Jacob’s son Joseph is sold by his envious brothers into slavery, and his brothers tell their father that he died an accidental death (ch. 37). The story becomes, if anything, even more sordid, as Judah becomes sexually involved with his daughter-in-law (who has disguised herself as a cultic prostitute) (ch. 38). The descendants of Abraham live among sinful, treacherous, debauched, and violent people—and they act little or no better. And when Joseph (now a highly placed official in Egypt) is finally reunited with his brothers, he calms their fears by summarizing what has been a powerful theme all throughout the sickening saga: “you meant evil against me, but God meant it for good” (50:20).

²⁸ Claus Westermann notes that Isaac’s very name (“laughter”) signifies the graciousness of God’s gift. See Westermann, *Genesis: An Introduction*, trans. John J. Scullion, SJ (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1992), 177.

²⁹ For helpful discussion, see Victor P. Hamilton, *The Book of Genesis: Chapters 18–50*, NICOT (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1995), 20–21.

Boda notes that “the book of Genesis provides a description of the fundamental cause and universal extent of human sinfulness”; it is clear that human sin “spoils the idyllic conditions of the garden created by God for fellowship with humanity. Having broken God’s command, humans experience shame, divine judgment, and estrangement as they are banished from the garden.” Thus, “throughout Genesis 1–11, sin is described as violating God’s command (chaps. 2–3), disobeying God’s creation mandate to fill the earth (Genesis 11) and exercise dominion (Genesis 3), seeking to become like God (Genesis 3) and murdering (Genesis 4, 9:46).”³⁰ Boda also notes that Genesis “links the remedy of this dilemma to the emergence of Israel within the world,” for “[t]hrough Israel, God will bring blessing to all nations, which includes the return to fellowship with God, enjoyment of his creational blessings, and fulfillment of his creational mandate.”³¹

Exodus opens with the descendants of Israel living in Egypt. They are slaves, and this condition is seen typologically in Scripture as representative of the consequences of sin. The situation is so dire that the Egyptian ruler orders the mass murder of all young male Hebrew children (Ex. 1:15–22).³² The violence is so pervasive that even Moses is drawn into it (2:11–15). God promises that he will deliver Israel, and as he begins to take decisive action to liberate Israel we hear echoes of the Abrahamic covenant: Israel is God’s “firstborn son” (4:22). The plagues that God unleashes upon the Egyptians are meant to discredit the gods of Egypt, and thereby to warn the people of idolatry as well as rescue them from it. As God rescues his people from oppression and bondage and leads them forward, he provides them with detailed and meticulous instructions for avoiding sinful action that will place them in the peril of God’s own wrath.

The Decalogue (Ex. 20:1–17; Deut. 5:1–21), and the law more generally, is a revelation of God’s will and thereby a precious gift from him (Lev. 18:1–5).³³ It is a gift provided for both Israelite and foreigner (e.g., Lev. 22:17f.; 24:10f.).³⁴ Here it is especially important to note several features about the purpose of the law and the relationship of God’s people to that law. First, we need to see that the law is given within the context of God’s active deliverance of his people. More specifically, it is given within the framework of the covenant that God has made with his people. Second, we need to understand what the law

³⁰ Boda, *Severe Mercy*, 32, cf. 117.

³¹ Boda, *Severe Mercy*, 32, 34.

³² For insightful discussion of “Pharaoh’s sinister logic,” see William H. C. Propp, *Exodus 1–18: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary*, AB (New York: Doubleday, 1999), 141–142.

³³ The fact that the law demands utter allegiance is underscored by Nobuyoshi Kiuchi, *Leviticus*, Apollos Old Testament Commentary 3 (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2007), 332.

³⁴ As John E. Hartley notes, the “alien who lived in Israel had the opportunity to worship Yahweh as his God. . . . He did not have to adhere to a higher standard nor were any concessions made for him” (*Leviticus*, WBC [Dallas: Word, 1992], 361).

(understood within the covenantal framework) was intended to teach: it was intended to teach both the holiness of God and the sinfulness of the naive and overconfident sinner.³⁵ Third, it is vitally important to understand that the law was given to prepare sinners for the reception of grace.³⁶ More specifically, with the law and its condemnation comes divine provision of atonement (e.g., Lev. 22:32f.; 26:40f.).

The story of sin in the history of Israel is, in many ways, an ugly and even awful one. Israel promises that they will be faithful and loyal to Yahweh, repeatedly saying that they will “be obedient” to “all the words that the LORD has spoken” (Ex. 24:3–8). And almost immediately they are committing treason against God by making a golden calf to worship (32:1–4).³⁷ In doing so, they have “broken the first commandment and violated the covenant at its core.”³⁸ When Moses confronts them, he emphasizes that they have “sinned a great sin” (v. 30), and they dare not presume upon God’s forgiveness.³⁹ Instead, they must destroy the idol, and then drink it (as powder in their water) so that it could be removed from them as the filthy waste that it is.⁴⁰ As the story proceeds, we see that this incident is indicative of a general trend, for Israel repeats this sin again and again.

Sin takes many forms and has many manifestations. Idolatry, irreverence, disrespect (of fellow humans, and especially of parents), murder, adultery, theft, dishonesty, covetousness, and injustice—in all of their manifestations—are typical of the “vice lists” of the Pentateuch (e.g., Ex. 20:1–23:33). Sins are both individual (with provision made for atonement for that person) and social or corporate (with provision made for atonement for all) (e.g., Lev. 4:13–21). Sins may be committed unintentionally as well as intentionally or volitionally, and the person or group that sins unintentionally is also said to be guilty (e.g., Lev. 4:1–35; 5:14–19; Num. 15:22–29). Sin covers the whole scope of human activity and behavior. It covers economic and political activities. It impacts and twists social activities. It perverts and skews familial relationships—and sexual sins (of various kinds) are particularly proscribed by God’s law. Sin goes far beneath our actions themselves, however, for it is portrayed in the law as something that infects our “affections” as well (e.g., “covetousness”).

³⁵ John N. Oswalt, *Called to Be Holy: A Biblical Perspective* (Napanee, IN: Evangel, 1999).

³⁶ Theologically, we would want to affirm as well that there are other “uses” of the law (e.g., to restrain sinfulness).

³⁷ Terence E. Fretheim observes that the scene in Exodus 32 is “Genesis 3 all over again” (*Exodus, Interpretation: A Biblical Commentary for Teaching and Preaching* [Louisville: John Knox, 1991], 279). On this point see also J. Gerald Janzen, *Exodus*, Westminster Bible Companion (Louisville: Westminster/John Knox, 1997), 226–227.

³⁸ Thus Thomas Joseph White, OP, *Exodus*, Brazos Theological Commentary on the Bible (Grand Rapids, MI: Brazos, 2016), 266.

³⁹ The caution against presumption is seen in Moses’s use of “perhaps” (*ulay*) here. See the helpful discussion by Victor P. Hamilton, *Exodus: An Exegetical Commentary* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2011), 553–555.

⁴⁰ See the discussion of Douglas K. Stuart, *The New International Commentary, Volume 2: Exodus* (Nashville: Broadman & Holman, 2006), 677–678.

Sin is not abstract; sins are said to be against other human persons. But sins are ultimately against God; even the importance of the command to keep the Sabbath holy is based on the holiness of God and his sanctification of his people (e.g., Ex. 31:13). Sin is ultimately against God, and in this light we can note that it often takes two characteristic forms that are closely related: *rebellion* and *unbelief* (e.g., Deut. 1:26–46). Unbelief is evidenced by the complaining and “grumbling” of the people of God (e.g., Num. 14:2, 26–38; 16:41; Ex. 14:11; 17:3). Rebellion is seen very vividly in the idolatry against which God’s people are so often warned (e.g., Lev. 19:4; 26:1–2; Deut. 4:15–21; 6:14–15; 7:5, 25–26; 8:19–20; 11:16–17; 12:1–7; 13:12–18; 16:21–22; 17:2–7; 27:15; 29:17–28; 31:16–18). Rebellion and unbelief are portrayed as being at the root of many sins, and they are closely linked: “So I spoke to you, and you would not listen; but you rebelled against the command of the LORD . . .” (Deut. 1:43).

The consequences or results of sin are utterly devastating. Sin wreaks havoc at the “horizontal” level—it breaks families and shatters entire communities (e.g., Num. 5:1–31; 25:1–9). In particular, the poor and the oppressed suffer for the sins of the community; this is so serious that God pronounces uncompromising judgment: “Cursed be anyone who perverts the justice due to the sojourner, the fatherless, and the widow” (Deut. 27:19; cf. 15:7–11; 16:19). But it does even more devastation “vertically,” for it brings those who are sinners under the judgment and wrath of God. God promises that he will use Israel’s own enemies to chastise and discipline her; just as he has used Israel to punish the other nations for their iniquities (cf. Gen. 15:16; Deut. 7:17–26), so also he will use the pagan peoples to chastise Israel (Deut. 28:15–68). Again and again we are told, in no uncertain terms, that sin places us under the wrath of God (e.g., Num. 11:1–10, 33–34; 12:9; 14:26–38; 16:20–33; 20:12; Deut. 4:21–25). And just as God’s wrath is not some unreasonable and uncontrolled passion, so also is it not inert. To the contrary, the wrath of God produces the most serious consequences. Sin results in nothing less than separation from God—and the inevitable death that is entailed by such separation (e.g., Num. 3:10; 4:20; 15:30–31; 21:6–9; Deut. 7:9–26; 17:2–7; 21:21; 24:16).

As deadly as sin is, however, it does not have the last word. God promises, and then he provides, atonement and reconciliation. The gravity of sin is so profound that some kind of atonement *must* be made for there to be any hope of reconciliation and life (e.g., Num. 18:21–22). Amazingly, however, *God* is the one who offers atonement. Just as in the covenant, where the stronger (in this case, the greater-than-which-cannot-be-conceived) party takes the initiative and offers himself, so also it is Yahweh who does so with respect to atonement. It is *God* who provides for the sacrificial system, it is God who lays down the conditions of the various sacrifices, and it is God who graciously

accepts the sacrifices. God will not finally abandon the people with whom he has made the covenant (e.g., Lev. 26:40–45; Deut. 4:25–31). And it is none other than God himself who makes provision for the atonement that his holiness demands. God promises that he will restore those who turn to him (e.g., Lev. 22:32–33; 26:40–45; Num. 29:7–39).

Sin is deadly serious, for God is omniscient; just as no sin escapes his notice, so also no sin escapes judgment. “Be sure your sin will find you out” (Num. 32:23). For Moses as much as for Paul, “the wages of sin is death” (Rom. 6:23). And for Moses as much as for the author of Hebrews, this is true because “our God is a consuming fire” (Heb. 12:29; cf. Deut. 4:24). It is no wonder that “the people of Israel said to Moses, ‘Behold, we perish, we are undone, we are all undone’” (Num. 17:12). But for Moses as well as for Paul, it is also true that “where sin increased, grace abounded all the more” (Rom. 5:20).

Boda offers a helpful summary of sin in the Torah. He notes that it is

a dynamic force that causes impurity and threatens the presence of Yahweh among the people. The elaborate priestly system presented in Exodus–Numbers shows the constant concern to protect and preserve the tabernacle from the impurity caused by imperfection and sin within the created order. This system was concerned not just with the sacred precincts but also with the entire camp that surrounded it. This demanded the vigilance of all Israel . . .⁴¹

In addition,

Sin, however, is not just a dynamic force but also a violation of basic justice that brings on the violator a response in kind. . . . These violations of basic justice are all placed in covenant frameworks, and thus sin of this sort is fundamentally a betrayal of covenant relationship, not a violation of an abstract legal code. . . . At the core of the covenant is the Decalogue, which defines sin first and foremost in terms of humanity’s relationship with Yahweh, then in terms of relationships with fellow humans, and finally in terms of humans’ relationships with non-humans.⁴²

B. Sin in Israel’s Continuing Story

Sometimes the situation portrayed in Joshua and Judges is referred to as a “vicious cycle.” But Raymond Dillard has pointed out that the scene described in Judges is better viewed as a “downward spiral” rather than as a repetitious cycle.⁴³ Joshua leads the people of Israel into the land of Canaan, but their initial success is followed by a series of defeats and partial victories. There is “rebellion” and “breach of faith” (Josh. 22:16), enough to bring “wrath” on

⁴¹ Boda, *Severe Mercy*, 119.

⁴² Boda, *Severe Mercy*, 110.

⁴³ Raymond B. Dillard, “Theology of Judges,” in *EDBT*, 735.

“all the congregation of Israel” (v. 20). Within a generation of the death of Joshua, the apostasy was so complete that they “did not know the LORD or the work that he had done for Israel” (Judg. 2:10):

The people of Israel did what was evil in the sight of the LORD and served the Baals. And they abandoned the LORD, the God of their fathers, who had brought them out of the land of Egypt. They went after other gods, from among the gods of the peoples who were around them, and bowed down to them. And they provoked the LORD to anger. They abandoned the LORD and served the Baals and the Ashtaroth. So the anger of the LORD was kindled against Israel. . . . And they were in terrible distress. (Judg. 2:11–15)

Dillard offers a helpful summary of this sorry state:

1. The children of Israel do evil in the eyes of the Lord (2:11; 3:7, 12; 4:1; 6:1; 10:6; 13:1).
2. Although the nature of this evil is rarely spelled out, their sin prompts the anger of God and results in oppression at the hands of some foreign nation (2:14; 3:8; 4:2; 10:9). . . .
3. During their oppression, the Israelites cry out to the Lord (3:9, 15; 6:6–7; 10:10).
4. The Lord hears their cry and raises up a deliverer, one of the judges (2:16; 3:9, 15; 10:1, 12). The deliverer is chosen and empowered by the Spirit of the Lord (3:10; 6:34; 11:29; 13:25; 14:6, 19).
5. It is often reported that this deliverance was followed by the submission of the enemy and a period of peace during which the deliverer judged Israel, followed by the death and burial of the judge (3:10–11; 8:28–32; 10:2–5; 12:9–15).⁴⁴

And then, inevitably it seems, the time of peace and prosperity brings complacency and disregard for the Lord and his ways, shortly followed by outright disobedience and rebellion. And even the gains made by the judges are themselves marred by outright sin. As Dillard notes, we do not know of Ehud’s relationship to God, but we do know that he “delivers Israel by deceit and treachery.”⁴⁵ The story of Deborah’s victory includes “factionalism and intertribal disunity that will ultimately culminate” in the mess with which the account ends.⁴⁶ Gideon “pursues a personal vendetta (8:10–21)” and “eventually succumbs to false worship that leads Israel astray (8:22–27).”⁴⁷ Finally we read that “everyone did what was right in his own eyes” (Judg. 21:25).

Israel’s history is recounted in Scripture in a way that highlights rather than downplays or diminishes its sin. Early Israel’s religious leaders are often

⁴⁴ Dillard, “Theology of Judges,” 434.

⁴⁵ Dillard, “Theology of Judges,” 435.

⁴⁶ Dillard, “Theology of Judges,” 435.

⁴⁷ Dillard, “Theology of Judges,” 435.

portrayed as inept and spiritually weak, and very often as corrupt. Eli's sons are said to be "worthless men" who "did not know the LORD" and instead treated the sacrificial system with "contempt" and indeed were "blasphemers" (cf. 1 Sam. 2:12–17; 3:13). The religious leaders attempt to use the cultic artifacts as means of manipulating the Lord (4:1–10). Samuel's own sons turn away from the Lord and his ways as well; they "took bribes and perverted justice" (8:3).⁴⁸

Israel's lack of trust in God is seen in her throbbing desire to have a king. Yahweh recognizes that their craving demands for a king are nothing less than their rejection of *him* as their king (1 Sam. 8:6–9; 10:17–19). Nor does Israel's situation improve (at least not much, or at least not for long) when she gets a king. Saul's reign has barely begun before his lack of trust leads to disobedience of God's command (1 Sam. 13:8–15; 15:17–23; 1 Chron. 10:13). The story of Israel's rulers during the united kingdom is filled with intrigue, deception and treachery, unreasonable rage, and stark cruelty. It is a story of false starts and halfhearted measures; it is a saga of weakness and hypocrisy (e.g., 1 Sam. 24:16–22; 26:21–25). In many places, it spares nothing in portraying the stark and ugly depravity of the situation. When Saul's reign and life come to a tragic end (1 Sam. 31:1–13), David's reign begins with a covenant and promise of a divinely constituted reign that will not end (2 Sam. 7:4–17). For a while he rules with "justice and equity" (2 Sam. 8:15; 1 Chron. 18:14) as well as kindness (2 Sam. 9:1–13; 1 Chron. 19:2), but as the story progresses we find David ensnared in sin as he commits adultery and murder (2 Sam. 11:2–25). His own confession says it with simple clarity: "I have sinned against the LORD" (2 Sam. 12:13; cf. Psalm 51). David's own home soon becomes a hall of moral horrors, a rogues' gallery of deception, rape and incest, fratricide, conspiracy, treason, and rebellion (2 Sam. 13:1–18:33). And despite the fact that David solemnly charges Solomon to "be strong, and show yourself a man, and keep the charge of the LORD your God, walking in his ways and keeping his statutes, his commandments, his rules, and his testimonies, as it is written in the Law of Moses," Solomon fairly quickly departs from the Lord's will and ways (1 Kings 2:2–3; cf. 1 Chron. 28:9–10). He first "loved the LORD" but "sacrificed and made offerings at the high places" (1 Kings 3:3). This tendency to "[tolerate] worship of the Lord at these places" soon turns into "full-blown apostasy (1 Kings 11:7–8)."⁴⁹ He even builds a place of worship for Molech, who is often associated with child sacrifice and the burning of the victim (cf. Lev. 18:21; 2 Kings 16:3; 21:6; Jer. 32:35).⁵⁰ Not surprisingly, the people follow their leader, and soon the whole nation is worshipping other gods (e.g., 1 Kings 11:31–33).

When the kingdom is divided, the situation only deteriorates further.

⁴⁸ This is in contrast to Samuel himself (1 Sam. 12:1–5).

⁴⁹ *The ESV Study Bible* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2008), 597 (comment on 1 Kings 3:2).

⁵⁰ *ESV Study Bible*, 617–618 (comment on 1 Kings 11:7–8).

Jeroboam leads Israel into idolatry (1 Kings 12:28–31), and Rehoboam leads Judah further into sinful patterns of worship and behavior as well (1 Kings 14:23–24). Again and again we read that the kings do what is “evil in the sight of the LORD” and bring divine wrath upon themselves and their people (cf. e.g., 1 Kings 15:30; 16:7, 26; 21:22; 22:51–52; 2 Kings 10:29–31; 13:11; 14:24; 15:9, 18, 24, 28; 21:2, 20; 23:32, 36–37; 24:8–9, 19; 2 Chron. 22:4; 33:2; 36:5, 9, 12). Ahaz of Judah “even burned his son as an offering” (2 Kings 16:3). Israel is finally captured and carried into exile by the Assyrians. As they had been warned from the earliest times and in the strongest terms, the Lord used their godless enemies to chastise and punish them for their sins. The verdict is clear:

And this occurred because the people of Israel had sinned against the LORD their God, who had brought them up out of the land of Egypt from under the hand of Pharaoh king of Egypt, and had feared other gods and walked in the customs of the nations whom the LORD drove out before the people of Israel, and in the customs that the kings of Israel had practiced. And the people of Israel did secretly against the LORD their God things that were not right. They built for themselves high places in all their towns, from watchtower to fortified city. They set up for themselves pillars and Asherim on every high hill and under every green tree, and there they made offerings on all the high places, as the nations did whom the LORD carried away before them. And they did wicked things, provoking the LORD to anger, and they served idols, of which the LORD had said to them, “You shall not do this.” Yet the LORD warned Israel and Judah by every prophet and every seer, saying, “Turn from your evil ways and keep my commandments and my statutes, in accordance with all the Law that I commanded your fathers, and that I sent to you by my servants the prophets.”

But they would not listen. . . . They despised his statutes and his covenant that he made with their fathers and the warnings that he gave them. They went after false idols and became false. . . . They abandoned all the commandments of the LORD their God, and made for themselves metal images of two calves; and they made an Asherah and worshiped all the host of heaven and served Baal. And they burned their sons and their daughters as offerings . . . and sold themselves to do evil in the sight of the LORD, provoking him to anger. (2 Kings 17:7–17)

Despite being blessed by several good kings (especially Hezekiah, 2 Kings 18:3; 2 Chron. 29:2; and Josiah, 2 Kings 22:2; 2 Chron. 34:2), and despite the fact that God sent prophets to warn them (2 Chron. 24:19), Judah finally meets the same end as the northern kingdom (2 Kings 25:21). As Mark Chavalas notes, “Their tragedy was a product of God’s judgment.”⁵¹ And this judgment comes upon them strictly for what they have done and have made of themselves. David understood well the responsibility that rests upon the people: “If you seek him,

⁵¹ Mark Chavalas, “Theology of First and Second Kings,” in *EDBT*, 454.

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