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## **CERTIFICATE COURSE IN THE OLD TESTAMENT**

### **UNIT 4: THE FALL**

#### **BIBLICAL TEXT:**

Read Genesis chapters 2- 3 before reading the following background information.

#### **BACKGROUND AND PERSPECTIVES:**

Like the story of creation, the narrative of the first humans and their first sin (often called “the fall”) is a complex one that different Christians view in various ways. Some regard the story as representing the literal first man and woman. Others, taking an evolutionary perspective, see Adam and Eve as representing the first “fully human” individuals in the history of our species. Yet others take a symbolic view, pointing out, for example, that in Genesis 2:17 man is told that “in the day” he ate from the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil he would die, but Genesis 5:5 tells us Adam lived 930 years. If we take both these verses literally, they obviously contradict each other, so proponents of this view feel it is more likely that the story of the fall might be at least partly symbolic in the way that it is told.

We will look closely at the symbolic viewpoint, as it is the one least understood by most people but one that a great many scholars of the Bible accept as having definite strengths – especially because the story of Adam and Eve seems to contain a number of ties to ancient Mesopotamia. For example, the name “Eden” itself may be related to the Mesopotamian word (*Edin*) for the area of Mesopotamia /modern Iraq, and Genesis 2:8 says Eden was located “in the East” of ancient Israel – the area of Mesopotamia.

More specifically, the story of the first sin bears some striking resemblances to much older Mesopotamian stories such as that of Adapa (a-dah-pa), whose name is similar to the Hebrew name for Adam – Adama. Although a great many details of the stories are different, both Adapa and Adam do something which is regarded as a sin against the gods/God. A Mesopotamian god, Ea (Ay-a), secretly intervenes so that Adapa is able to acquire knowledge about heaven and earth, just as the serpent intrudes into the biblical story so that Adam acquires knowledge about good and evil. Both Adapa and Adam are tested regarding something to eat. If Adapa had accepted the food and drink he was offered, he would have become immortal like the gods. The biblical story likewise tells us of the Tree of Life which was available to Adam, but of which he did not partake. When Adapa declines the food of life, he is driven back from heaven to earth – just as Adam’s sin leads him to be driven out of Paradise into the world.

In another ancient Mesopotamian story, the god Enki (en-key) ate plants created by a goddess, so she cursed him and parts of his body became diseased. When Enki became direly ill, the other gods persuaded the offended goddess to help him, and so she created minor healing goddesses to heal the stricken parts of his body. The goddess who healed Enki's rib was Ninti (nin-tee), whose name means “lady of the rib” or “lady of life” – evoking the story of Eve whose name means “life” and who was created from the rib of Adam, as well as the role of the forbidden plant in the biblical Eden. In the *Epic of Gilgamesh* the character Enkidu (en-key-doo) is created in the area of Edin and at first lives in harmony with the animals. But after making love with a woman, he is rejected by the wild animals and has to leave the Edin area.

Similarities such as these indicate the possibility that some aspects of the biblical story of humanity's first sin could have been recast from commonly known Mesopotamian stories which were retold from a monotheistic perspective. But whichever of the various viewpoints of the origin of the story of the “Fall” may make the most sense to us personally, as with our response to the biblical creation account, it is imperative that we do not become fixated on or polarized over our views of the story. We must look beneath the narrative to find its message – which is one that all Christians can share and appreciate.



Image: Rossella Apostoli

## UNDERSTANDING THE TEXT:

When we are introduced to the first man and woman, the man is said to be a “man” (Hebrew *ish*). He is called Adam, a name often said to be from the Hebrew word *adamah* meaning “earth” because he was made from the earth, but the name is perhaps more likely from the Mesopotamian word *adamu* meaning “to make.” The woman is not named at first – she is simply called “woman” (Hebrew *isha*) because she is “from man,” though this is probably a kind of literary pun (just as the English words male and female are not really from the same word though they sound the same). The woman was apparently only later named Eve (after she had children), as her name is said to mean “mother of all living” (Genesis 3:20).

It is the woman who actually plays the central role in the narrative of the fall. The text does not tell us whether her understanding of the prohibition against eating from the forbidden tree came directly from God or was relayed to her by Adam, but when the serpent asks her about the prohibition, it is interesting that she both adds to and takes away from what God actually said.

First, she added that they were not even to touch the forbidden tree; secondly, her words subtly subtracted from the penalty, saying God had said “you will die” (Genesis 3:3), rather than the much more forceful expression (in Hebrew) used by God that “you will *certainly* die” (Genesis 2:17).

In the same way the serpent both adds and subtracts from the truth by demeaning God and elevating humans. He does this by intimating God did not want humans to have the knowledge he possessed, and that humans were capable of thinking for themselves in such matters and could make their own moral decisions.

Genesis next tells us what occurred when the “Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil” became the focus of Eve’s attention: “When the woman saw that the fruit of the tree was good for food and pleasing to the eye, and also desirable for gaining wisdom, she took some and ate it” (Genesis 3:6). The temptation appears to have been threefold: at the sensory level (“good for food”), the aesthetic level (“pleasing to the eye”), and the cognitive level (“for gaining wisdom”). But if we analyze the account more closely, we also see a clear pattern regarding the development of sin (one that, for the purposes of easy memorization, can be described by the analogy of a growing tree):

Seed: Exposure to temptation – “the woman saw”

Roots: Considering the temptation – “the tree was good for food and pleasing to the eye”

Trunk: Intellectual acquiescence – “and also desirable for gaining wisdom”

Branches: Submission to sin – “she took some and ate it”

Fruit: The eventual result of sin – “when you eat from it you will certainly die.”

The apostle James describes the genealogy of temptation leading to transgression in the same way (James 1:14-15):

Seed: Exposure to temptation – “each person is tempted”

Roots: Considering the temptation – “dragged away by their own evil desire”

Trunk: Intellectual acquiescence – “and enticed”

Branches: Submission to sin – “then, after desire has conceived, it gives birth to sin”–

Fruit: The eventual result of sin – “sin ... gives birth to death.”

Although the woman certainly played a central part in the first sin, the Bible places the blame mainly upon Adam. This is for two reasons. First, Adam was given the headship of the family and did not properly exercise it in guiding the woman in this situation, allowing himself to be wrongfully influenced. Second, the apostle Paul wrote that “Adam was not the one deceived; it was the woman who was deceived and became a sinner” (1 Timothy 2:14). Eve was deceived, but the story suggests Adam knew what he was doing when he took and ate the forbidden fruit. Both the man and the woman sinned, but Adam’s sin was more serious as being disobedient is worse than being deceived.

After their first sin, when God approached the man and woman, his question “Where are you?” does not reflect on his omniscience – he knew where they were, of course – but the question was really an opportunity for them to come to him and confess what they had done. Instead, the couple showed a very different attitude in reacting with shame (resulting in concealment), fear (resulting in trying to hide from God), and guilt (resulting in their attempts to shift the blame for what they had done (Genesis 3:12-13). While the woman blamed the serpent (“the serpent deceived me”), Adam blamed both the woman and God (“the woman ... you gave me”), indicating an even more desperate attempt to deny responsibility for his actions.

God’s judgment on the serpent and the human race is the Bible’s first prophecy and a crucial part of the story. In each case the punishment meted out reflects in some way the nature of the sin committed. God declares that because of the serpent’s role in bringing sin into the world – and thus bringing destruction on humanity – the serpent would be destroyed by a member of the human race: the woman’s “Seed” or offspring (Genesis 3:14-15). This “Seed” or future descendent is called “he” and is a singular noun – which Christians believe is a reference to Jesus Christ – the “Last Adam” (1 Corinthians 15:45), who would eventually destroy the serpent Satan (Revelation 12:9).

The judgment on the woman (Genesis 3:16) indicates she would experience both pain in her role as a mother (pain in childbirth) and as a wife (conflict with her husband). The expression “Your desire shall be for your husband” does not refer to physical desire, but to potential marital struggle (the same Hebrew expression is used of Cain’s struggle with sin in Genesis 4:7).

The judgment on the man (Genesis 3:17-19) reflects the fact that he ate what he should not have eaten (and by inference that he rejected the food he was freely offered), so Adam would now struggle to eat and his labor to produce food would be burdensome. In a final ironic turn on Adam’s attempt to become God-like, the man is reminded that he was made from the earth and to the earth he would return.



Image: John C Panella Jr.

### **KEY THEOLOGICAL CONCEPTS:**

The story of the fall contained in Genesis 2 and 3 teaches us a great deal about God. These chapters show him, for example, not only as a God of creativity, but also of generosity and love in what he was willing to share with humans, his desire for humans to be productive and to find satisfaction in work, his protective nature and his desire to walk with his created children. They also show his sense of justice, that he will not allow disobedience to go unpunished, and his patience in dealing with humans even when they have sinned. The account also makes an important point in showing that only the revelation of God – God’s word – regarding right and wrong can be fully trusted. Human thought and rationalization about morality cannot ultimately be trusted as it is often based not on what is objectively *right*, but what people *want*.

These chapters also teach us a great deal about sin. The fall story shows the personification of evil in the form of the serpent and underscores, for example, the truth that all sin is based on a lie of some kind, that sin separates us from God, that it changes our attitudes and destroys our happiness, and that regret alone does not erase the penalty of sin. The story is also of the greatest importance in teaching the concept of “Free Moral Agency” – that humans are not ruled by instinct like animals but have free will and can make their own choices between good and evil. Yet the responsibility of this freedom also means that humans are accountable for their own actions.

There are important ramifications to this view – that despite the claims of modern social science, we cannot blame sin on our childhood experiences or environment. The first man and woman experienced no childhood traumas and were not held back by their environment in any way, yet the story shows that even under perfect conditions humans can and will sin if they so choose.

Just as the story of the fall ends on a predictive note of human suffering, the account also shows that suffering is a result of human failure and sin, not because it was God’s will. In fact, another aspect of the theology of the fall story is the idea that the original sin committed by Adam and Eve not only directly affected them, but also affected all humanity. This doctrine of “original sin” maintains that human nature was corrupted due to the first sin and, as a result, all humans are born inherently sinful. The idea is not explicitly laid out in the Bible but was developed over the centuries (based on interpretation of scriptures such as Romans 5:12) and is held by many, but not all, Christians.

Finally, Genesis 2-3 also stress important aspects of human interaction – for example, the importance of the marriage relationship and its potential blessings. But the fall story also shows us negative aspects of human interaction such as the desire or willingness to please others that can be extremely destructive if not guided properly, and that we cannot escape the penalty of disobedience by blaming others for what we do. A psychologist once said “Human beings need four things: air, food, drink, and someone to blame” – which aptly summarizes this simple yet profound aspect of the fall narrative.

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## **REVIEW AND REFLECTION:** (complete in your notebook)

**Basics:** In looking at what Genesis 2-3 teach us about God, evil, and human interaction, we repeatedly said “for example.” What other things can you think of that this story teaches us in these three areas? List some additional points in each area in order to get a fuller picture of all that is in this narrative.

How did Eve add to and subtract from God’s actual message?

What five steps are described as a pattern in the development of sin?

**Looking Below the Surface:** The Hebrew word that tells us Eve was to be a “helper” is a form of the word used later in the Bible to describe God as our helper – showing that Eve was to be a help in the sense that Adam was not complete without her and needed her help in some areas – not that she was to be an “assistant.” Do other details of the story show the importance of the woman?

## **Everyday Applications:**

In what way can the analogy of the growth of sin from “seed” to “tree” be helpful in our lives?

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