PARADISE LOST: CHILDHOOD PUNISHMENT AND THE MYTH OF ADAM'S SIN*

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In reading the Hebrew Scripture's account of Adam and Eve's primordial sin and punishment in the third chapter of Genesis (Gen 3), one is left with the distinct impression that Adam and Eve, who in a sense are the first children of God, provide a mythic portrayal of childhood disobedience and its consequences. In fact, various commentators, formal and informal, have seen in the Genesis account the situation of ordinary children.

For example, Hermann Gunkel, in his classic commentary on Genesis, repeatedly points to images of childhood in Gen 2 and 3: "The first sin was only a child's sin"; "The model [for the biblical portrayal of Adam and Eve]…is clearly the state of children who are not yet ashamed"; "Just as the child who has transgressed its father's commandment flees his look, so the man did not dare appear in God's sight"; "The man is portrayed as an erring child, not as a hardened sinner"; "The sin the man committed is indeed portrayed…as a child's sin."[1] In a similar vein, E. A. Speiser, in his Anchor Bible commentary on Genesis, writes:

> When Adam has been caught in his transparent attempt at evasion, Yahweh speaks to him as a father would to his child: "Where are you?" In this context, it is the same thing as, "And what have you been up to just now?" This simple phrase—a single word in the [Hebrew] original—does the work of volumes. For what [the biblical author]…has thus evoked is the childhood of mankind itself.[2]

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1. Hermann Gunkel, *Genesis* (trans. Mark E. Biddle; Macon: Mercer University Press, 1997 [originally published in 1901]). Quotes found respectively on pp. 1, 14, 19, 19, 32.

2. E. A. Speiser, *Genesis: Introduction, Translation, and Notes* (AB 1; New York: Doubleday, 1964), 25.

Other writers have focused more directly on something Gunkel and Speiser leave unstated: the theme of corporal punishment. In the seventeenth century, Samuel Sewall, a colonial magistrate in Massachusetts, described how he beat his four-year-old son for misbehavior. Moments before the beating, Sewall writes, his son "sought to shadow and hide himself from me behind the head of the cradle, which gave me the sorrowful remembrance of Adam's carriage."[3] In the late twentieth century, the German writer Christoph Meckel linked Gen 3 to his own painful childhood:

> For ten days, an unconscionable length of time, my father blessed the palms of his children's outstretched, four-year-old hands with a sharp switch. Seven strokes a day on each hand: that makes one hundred forty strokes and then some. This put an end to the child's innocence. Whatever it was that happened in Paradise involving Adam, Eve, Lilith, the serpent, and the apple…—I know nothing about all that. It was my father who drove me out of Paradise.[4]

These and other writers take for granted the existence of strong thematic parallels between the story of Adam and Eve's sin and the experiences of ordinary children.[5] We ourselves likely do the same. Yet it is precisely because the parallels seem so natural, even obvious, that we must stand in wonder, pondering questions such as these: How did reflections of childhood disobedience and punishment enter into the Genesis account and, through it, emerge as a cornerstone of Judaism and Christianity? Once embedded in the biblical account, why did this particular story provide such a powerful focus and source of resonance for subsequent generations of believers? Why, in this otherwise transparent portrayal of childhood, is the archetypal act of filial disobedience represented as something we do not readily recognize in the situation of children—that is, eating from the tree of knowledge of good and evil?

Such questions form the central focus of this essay. But to address these questions in a meaningful way, we must begin by stepping back from the Gen 3 text and entering into the world of human childhood. For if it is childhood that is portrayed in the text, we must understand, in

3. Linda Pollack, *A Lasting Relationship: Parents and Children Over Three Centuries* (London: Fourth Estate, 1987), 183.

4. Quoted in Alice Miller, *For Your Own Good: Hidden Cruelty in Child-Rearing and the Roots of Violence* (New York: Farrar, Straus, Giroux, 1990), 3.

5. As another example, Jon D. Levenson ("Genesis," in *The Jewish Study Bible* [ed. Adele Berlin and Marc Zvi Brettler; New York: Jewish Publication Society/ Oxford University Press, 2004], 8–101 [17]) comments: "The primal couple have left the magical garden of their childhood and their innocence…"

some detail, what it is that children have experienced. Only then will we be positioned to grasp fully what the text is saying, and what it might teach us.

This essay has three parts. Part 1 describes the physical punishment of children in ancient Israel and the New Testament world, settings from which emerged crucial traditions pertaining to Adam's sin. Part 2 shifts attention from the external to the internal, focusing on the child's inner, psychological responses to punishment. Part 3 builds on the first two parts to elucidate Gen 3, showing that widespread patterns of childhood physical punishment are reflected in specific and unexpected ways in the Judeo-Christian myth of primal disobedience.

Part 1: Corporal Punishment of Children in the Pentateuch and Beyond

Since time immemorial, parents, and especially fathers, have inculcated obedience in children through corporal punishment. The book of Proverbs, of course, prescribes the rod as part of normal childrearing—for example, "He who spares the rod hates his son, but he who loves him is diligent to discipline him."[6] But the Pentateuch is especially harsh. In the book of Deuteronomy, a male child who is persistently disobedient is subject to death:

> If a man has a stubborn and rebellious son, that will not hearken to the voice of his father or the voice of his mother, and though they punish him, will not hearken unto them, then shall his father and his mother lay hold of him and bring him out unto the elders of the city…and all the men of the city shall stone him with stones, that he die… (21:18–21)

According to both Exodus (21:17) and Leviticus (20:9), a person who insults his parents is subject to death. Striking a parent, not surprisingly, also is punishable by death (Exod 21:15).[7] Though by the Rabbinic period these laws were, essentially, rejected through reinterpretation, there is no evidence that the biblical authors themselves intended the

6. Prov 13:24; see also 23:13 and 22:15

7. On the translation of "insults" (which can also be rendered as "curses" or "treats disrespectfully"), see Baruch A. Levine, *Leviticus* (Philadelphia: The Jewish Publication Society, 1989), 128, comment at 19:14. Deuteronomy specifies a male child (*ben*). Leviticus specifies a man (*ish*)—that is, an adult child. Exodus does not indicate the child's age; the text gives no explicit subject to the verbs "insults" and "hits," but simply gives the male singular form of the verbs; hence the verses are usually translated "He who insults…" and "He who hits…"

laws to be interpreted more loosely than others in the Pentateuch.[8] Thus, modern scholars have often presumed enforcement of these laws in ancient Israel. For example, Carol Meyers writes:

> The extreme penalties attached to legal strictures that aimed at ensuring parental authority…are most likely a function of the critical importance of establishing the household authority of mother and father, especially over adult children. When subsistence resources are scarce, as in early Israel, the exercise of parental authority is even more marked."[9]

In a similar vein, Leo G. Perdue suggests that paternal power in ancient Israel was nearly absolute:

> The primary designation of the household, *bet ᵓab*, translates literally as "house of the father," indicating that much of the authority within the extended family was vested in the "father," or head, of the household (*ᵓab*), who usually was the grandfather or father… In the household, the authority of the senior male in all areas of family life was considerable… [and included] handling the sale of children when the household was not economically viable, and having, at least for a time, the power of life and death over children and other household members judged in violation of certain laws… Married sons and their families remained under the authority of the head of the household until he died or became incapacitated.[10]

In these biblical injunctions and scholarly comments we find an extremely rigorous child-rearing culture, one that may well have included, in actual practice, capital punishment for offenses such as persistent disobedience. This is the child-rearing culture from which the story of Adam's sin emerged; this is the culture we must consult when examining thematic parallels between childhood and the Gen 3 narrative.[11]

8. The Rabbinic period spanned roughly from the first through sixth centuries C.E. The Mishna, which was edited in the early third century C.E., interpretively limits Deut 21:18–21 practically out of existence, and does much the same for the other cited passages from the Pentateuch.

9. Carol Meyers, "The Family in Early Israel," in *Families in Ancient Israel* (ed. Leo G. Perdue et al.; Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1997), 1–47 (31).

10. Leo G. Perdue, "The Israelite and Early Jewish Family: Summary and Conclusions," in Perdue et al., eds., *Families in Ancient Israel*, 163–222 (180).

11. Most scholars would date the Exodus injunctions as closest chronologically to Gen 3, with the Deuteronomic and Levitical injunctions coming somewhat later. In the context of the documentary hypothesis, Gen 3 and the Exodus injunctions are said to come from the two earliest sources, J and E, respectively. Though none of the injunctions may fully overlap in provenance with Gen 3, the injunctions as a group provide strong evidence of an enduring culture of rigorous childhood discipline in ancient Israel—one that can reasonably be extrapolated to the Gen 3 compositional context. In fact, there is soft evidence that childrearing norms associated with Gen 3 may have been even harsher than that expressed in the Deuteronomic injunction,

But we cannot stop there, for the myth of Adam's sin, while playing a significant role in later Judaism, became even more central to Christianity. Whereas in Judaism Adam's sin has served as a prototype and paradigm for human sin, in Christianity it became seen, much more explicitly, as the actual *source* of human sin.[12] For example, in his Letter to the Romans, often considered the most important theological tract in the New Testament, Paul writes:

> Then as one man's [Adam's] trespass led to condemnation for all men, so one man's [Jesus'] act of righteousness leads to acquittal and life for all men. For as by one man's disobedience many were made sinners, so by one man's obedience many will be made righteous. (Rom 5:18–19)

Here, Paul asserts that Adam's sin is the root source of human corruption, which, theologically speaking, makes salvation—and, by implication, the entire structure of Christianity—necessary. Thus, if we wish to understand the cultural setting from which Judeo-Christian ideas about Adam's sin arose and developed, we must examine not only ancient Israel but Paul's world, that is, the cultures of Imperial Rome and Hellenistic Judaism.

Let us first consider the pagan Imperial context, with examples arranged chronologically from the century before to the century after the emergence of Christianity. The *Rhetorica ad Herennium* (4.17.25; first century B.C.E.) advocates that parents and teachers "chastise the young with special severity" to shape them for a virtuous life. According to Cicero (106–43 B.C.E.), boys could be beaten by fathers, mothers, grandfathers, and teachers. The poet Ovid (43 B.C.E.–17 C.E.) addresses the dawn-goddess Aurora, saying, "You defraud boys of their sleep and hand them over to their teachers, so that their tender hands should suffer savage blows" (*Amores* 1.13.17–18); of course, it was parents, not Aurora, who actually handed over the children. The philosopher and Imperial advisor Seneca (3 B.C.E.–65 C.E.) explained that children are beaten for the same reason that animals are, "so that the pain overcomes their obstinacy" (*De Constantia Sapientis* 12.3). The poet Martial (40–103 C.E.)

which at least did not authorize the father unilaterally to execute the child; see the discussion of Gen 38:24 (also said to be J source) in Jeffrey H. Tigay, *Deuteronomy* (Philadelphia: The Jewish Publication Society, 1996), 196. For a table of putative documentary sources for the complete Pentateuch, see the appendix in Richard Elliott Friedman, *Who Wrote the Bible?* (New York: Summit, 1987), 246–60.

12. This Christian understanding may have been built on earlier Jewish texts whose interpretation did not become highly influential in Judaism, especially 2 Esd 7:48: "Adam, what have you done! For though it was you who sinned, the fall was not yours alone, but ours also who are descendants." See W. Gunther Plaut, *The Torah: A Modern Commentary: Genesis* (New York: Union of American Hebrew Congregations, 1974), 34.

complained for comic effect that his sleep was being interrupted by schoolhouse beatings “as loud as that of bronze being beaten on an anvil.” The medical authority Galen (130–200 C.E.) states that once children are about one year old they “can be made to obey by the use of blows, threats, reprimands, and admonishments.” Quintilian (first century C.E.) provides insight into the terror experienced by these Imperial children, hinting that they frequently lost bowel or bladder control during punishment: “when children are beaten, the pain and fear often have results which it is not pleasant to speak of and which will later be a source of embarrassment” (*Institutio Oratoria* 1.3.16).[13]

Clearly, the physical punishment of children was common in the cultural setting where Christianity developed as a distinct religion, and in which the texts of the New Testament were composed. In fact, the ubiquity of punishment in the Imperial context is indicated in the New Testament itself. The book of Hebrews, probably composed around 65 C.E., asserts that *all* legitimate sons are beaten (12:8). Paul himself speaks to the overall situation of children as follows: even the “heir to an estate,” when still a child, “is no better than a slave” (Gal 4:1)—a comment that, given the routine physical punishment of slaves, may itself have had corporal overtones. Jewish sources from the period, both in Palestine and the Diaspora, also make clear that corporal punishment, especially by fathers, was widespread.[14] Much the same can be said of Christian sources from the first four centuries of the Common Era.[15]

13. For *Rhetorica ad Herennium*, see Emiel Eyben, “Fathers and Sons,” in *Marriage, Divorce, and Children in Ancient Rome* (ed. Beryl Rawson; Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1991), 113–43 (126). For Cicero, see Richard P. Saller, *Patriarchy, Property and Death in the Roman Family* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), 147. For Ovid and Seneca, see Thomas Wiedemann, *Adults and Children in the Roman Empire* (London: Routledge, 1989), 27–29. For Martial, see Jane F. Gardner and Thomas Wiedemann, *The Roman Household: A Sourcebook* (London: Routledge, 1991), 112. For Galen, see Aline Rouselle, *Porneia: On Desire and the Body in Antiquity* (New York: Barnes & Noble, 1996 [first English translation, 1988]), 54.

14. See, e.g., Philo (*Special Laws* 2.232, 248) and Josephus (*Against Apion* 2.28). Earlier, Sirach (second century B.C.E.) is especially blunt: “Beat his sides while he is an infant, lest he be hardened and disobey you” (30:12). For a discussion of corporal punishment during the Rabbinic period, see John Cooper, *The Child in Jewish History* (Northvale: Jason Aronson, 1996), 91–93.

15. For a discussion of childhood corporal punishment as prescribed in early Christian writings including Ephesians, Didache, Barnabas, Didascalia, Apostolic Constitutions, John Chrysostom, and Augustine, see O. M. Bakke, *When Children Became People: The Birth of Childhood in Early Christianity* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2005), 152–222.

The punishment of children in a patriarchal context has characterized not only ancient Israel, Greco-Roman culture, the Jewish-Hellenistic world, and the early Christian environment—but the West in general (and many other cultures as well). Though a recitation of evidence is beyond the scope of this essay, the basic pattern of patriarchal punishment in the West is well documented from classical Greek times to the modern period.

Part 2: The Inner Realities of Childhood

So far, we have spoken of the *external* realities of childhood—of what has been done *to* children. We turn now to the internal realities of childhood, to the inner, psychological responses of children to physical punishment and threat.

Let us start by considering the obvious fact that when children wish to do something, to follow their own wills, they naturally view the situation from their own perspective. They see their own gratification as vitally important, their own desires as valid, their own actions as a valuable and necessary means to achieve their aims. But the corporal training process impresses on children a new perspective. Children quickly learn that to focus on their own desires and objectives—to the extent that these conflict with the aims of the parents—is a punishable act. As a result, to reduce the frequency of punishment, children begin to internalize the lessons that are being pressed upon them. They come to see their natural desires as culpably willful, their actions as disobedient, their own gratification as being at most of secondary importance, acceptable only when it comports with the parents' objectives.

One way to describe this change is to say that children abandon their own perspective and adopt the perspective of the parents, moving from identification with their own will to identification with the will of the parent. But how does this complex change in perspective and identification occur? To answer this question, it is useful to conceptualize the child's mental operation as involving five related but distinct processes, which we consider in turn:

Disengagement
Adoption
Repudiation
Idealization
Self-Incrimination

Disengagement. By "disengagement" I mean the process by which the child disconnects from or suppresses his or her natural desires and goals. Depending on the rigor and thoroughness of the training regimen, disengagement may be partial or total, but it must occur. If the child does not disengage, he or she will ultimately be holding warring perspectives, the child's own and the parents'. To give a spatial analogy, disengagement creates the necessary space in the child's mind to accommodate the desires and goals of the parents.

Adoption. By "adoption" I mean the process by which the child accepts the parents' desires and goals as his or her own. During this process, the parents' desires and goals (to continue the spatial analogy) enter into the psychic space that was emptied when the child disengaged from his or her natural desires and goals.

It is important to recognize that when children learn discipline, morality, values, ideas, or modes of behavior through the threat of punishment, it is not learning in the usual sense. In fact, it is not "learning" at all, but coercive inculcation—a word that derives from the Latin *calx*, "heel," and whose etymological meaning is to "stamp in" or impress with the heel: to "teach" with the foot, through the use of force. The distinction between learning and coercive inculcation explains why terms such as "disengagement" and "adoption" must be used to describe the child's mental operations. In true learning, the child undergoes a natural, internally driven change of mind. Often, rational argument and empirical evidence play an important role in this process, convincing the child of the inherent falsity of his or her previous position and opening the child's mind to new ways of seeing things. In contrast, during coercive inculcation, the child's previous assumptions, ideas, and values do not change or evolve in response to an inner grasp of their falsity. They are, instead, abandoned out of fear of punishment or loss of love.

To clarify this point, consider the following quotation from the Englishman Joseph Strutt (1765–1844), who describes how he responded to his six-year-old daughter when she misbehaved:

> I took her by the hand into a tent pitched by the side of the house and there I reasoned, and inflicted with my open hand, alternately, till I observed [that] her mind received the warm, kind, pathetic, parental observations I addressed to her.[16]

16. Linda Pollack, *Forgotten Children: Parent–Child Relations from 1500–1900* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983), 164.

Although Strutt believed he was teaching his daughter proper behavior, it is clear that what really occurred was the coercive inculcation of obedience, a crude form of brainwashing. The contradictions inherent in this educational method are particularly apparent in Strutt's description because of the stark juxtaposition of "reason" and "open hand," and the explicit statement that something "warm, kind, [and] pathetic" can be communicated with blows. Yet the same contradictions can be discerned in all cases where the threat of physical force is used to affect a child's outlook and behavior.

Repudiation. In this stage, having now adopted the parents' perspective, children look back, so to speak, on their own disengaged desires and goals and judge them critically. Repudiation is a pejorative process. The previously held desires, goals, actions, and attitudes—all of which had been accepted without thought or question—are now seen by the child as willful, self-centered, disobedient, and prideful. In fact, these judgments are the same ones held by the parent and, in this sense, repudiation is an aspect of the process of adoption. Eventually, the child, grown into an adult, may direct these same critical judgments against the natural perspectives of his or her *own* children. The simple fact that parents throughout history have, generation after generation in an unbroken chain, used physical punishment to inculcate their children with obedience testifies to the durability of the repudiation process.

Idealization. Young children often idealize their parents—seeing them as exceptionally smart, strong, good, and the like. This tendency to idealize provides a number of specific benefits for the child. Among these, idealization motivates the child to interact with the parent in ways that can improve the child's treatment by the parent. This point requires some explanation.

The love that children have for their parents, and the love and affection that parents bestow on their children, are often viewed as wholly natural, automatic, and unconditional. But the reality is more complex. Because children require nurture to survive, and this nurture is not always readily available, evolution and psychology have equipped children with emotional and behavioral strategies to help ensure adequate parental affection and attention. Jennifer Freyd, Professor of Psychology at the University of Oregon and an expert in childhood memory, development, and trauma, describes the situation this way:

> Because attachment is of overwhelming significance [to the child], a complex system of emotional, cognitive, and behavioral components is operative during the child's development. The system ensures attachment: children love their caregivers, and that love motivates the children to display affection towards their caregivers, which in turn elicits love, nurturing, and protection from the caregivers.[17]

When children idealize their parents, they see them as especially worthy of love, affection, and respect. The children are therefore naturally motivated to act and communicate in ways that increase the likelihood of a benevolent and nurturing parental response. The importance of this process for the child's well-being, even survival, is especially great in situations where the child is subject to parental threat, neglect, or betrayal. Such children, though in desperate need of a strategy to improve their situation, are unable to exert a direct, beneficial influence on parental behavior. For example, they cannot impel their parents through entreaty or coercion to reduce the threat of punishment or neglect. However, these children can *indirectly* improve their situation by adopting a benevolent psychological posture of love and adulation toward the parent, which is likely to be reciprocated to a greater or lesser degree. The benefit that children can obtain through this process can be schematized simply: idealization of the parent → improved attachment between the parent and child → better nurture and protection by the parent.

In contrast, if a parent is hostile or inattentive and the child does *not* idealize the parent, the child may be persistently angry, mistrustful, critical, or resentful. The child might even be strongly inclined to seek retribution against the parent. In all these situations, the child will tend to act and communicate, verbally and non-verbally, in ways that alienate the parent, attenuate the parent–child bond, and heighten conflict with the parent. The risk of corporal punishment and of emotional or physical rejection by the parent is increased. This situation also can be schematized simply: child is persistently angry, critical, or resentful toward the parent → parent responds with defensive or retributive hostility → child receives less nurture and more corporal punishment.

It is important to recognize that, while in *principle*, the child can think and feel one way about the parent yet act another, the practical reality is otherwise. Children, especially young children, lack the sophistication and social skills to persuasively dissimulate their true feelings—which can inadvertently be revealed through subtle shifts in vocal tone, facial expression, and bodily attitude, to say nothing of more overt verbal or

17. Jennifer J. Freyd, *Betrayal Trauma: The Logic of Forgetting Childhood Abuse* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1996), 71.

physical expressions of hostility. Even adults find it hard to dissimulate deeply felt inner states; young children can find it impossible. As Jennifer Freyd notes, "a young child is ill equipped to manage such a façade."[18] Thus, in situations of potential conflict, to avoid punishment and increase nurture, young children are practically forced to change their *inner perceptions* about the propriety of parental actions. As a practical matter, young children *must* see their parents and their parents' behavior as good and appropriate.

Bessel A. van der Kolk, Professor of Psychiatry at Boston University and an expert on trauma, discusses this same issue from a different perspective:

> People in general, and children in particular, seek increased attachment in the face of external danger. Pain, fear, fatigue, and loss of loved ones and protectors all evoke efforts to attract increased care… When there is no access to ordinary sources of comfort, people may turn to their tormentors. Adults as well as children may develop strong emotional ties with people who intermittently harass, beat, and threaten them. Hostages have put up bail for their captors, expressed a wish to marry them, or had sexual relations with them; abused children often cling to their parents and resist being removed from home; inmates of Nazi prison camps sometimes imitated their captors by sewing together clothing to copy SS uniforms.[19]

The common link among these varied situations is the vulnerability and dependence of the individuals, and the resultant danger of fully experiencing, on a conscious level, internal responses against their tormentors that otherwise would arise spontaneously.

In the early twentieth century, the iconoclast psychoanalyst Sandor Ferenczi attempted to parse the moment-by-moment experience of children who are physically overwhelmed by adults:

> It is difficult to fathom the behavior and the feelings of children following such acts of violence. Their first impulse would be: rejection, hatred, disgust, forceful resistance. This or something like it would be the immediate reaction, were it [i.e., the child] not paralyzed by tremendous fear. The children feel physically and morally helpless, their personality is still too insufficiently consolidated for them to be able to protest even if only in thought. The overwhelming power and authority of the adults renders them silent; often they are deprived of their senses. Yet that very fear, when it reaches its zenith, forces them automatically to surrender to the will of the aggressor, to anticipate each of his wishes and to submit to them….[20]

18. Ibid., 65.

19. Bassel A. van der Kolk, "The Compulsion to Repeat the Trauma," *Psychiatric Clinics of North America* 12, no. 2 (June 1989), 389–411

20. Sandor Ferenczi (trans. J. M. Mason and M. Loring), "Confusion of Tongues Between Adults and the Child," (originally published in 1932) in Jeffrey Mousaiff

The writings of Freyd, van der Kolk, and Ferenczi help clarify different aspects of the same childhood situation. The picture that emerges has profound implications for the child's developing moral sense, that is, for his or her evolving capacity to judge right and wrong. Consider a child who is physically punished for disobedience. At the start of punishment, the child may believe that the parent is acting unjustly. In fact—to the extent that the child does not initially believe his or her own behavior is improper—this perception of injustice follows almost automatically. Perhaps the child believes that the parents, in giving priority to their own wishes, are acting arbitrarily. Or perhaps the child thinks it wrong for the parent to compel compliance through force. Certainly, most adults would think it wrong for someone to initiate force against *them*. In fact, many would see the initiation of force as the defining feature of immoral and illegal behavior. (In writing here of justice, arbitrariness, and the initiation of force, I do not suggest that children can themselves articulate these concepts with precision. However, I do believe—and anyone who has observed children knows—that even small children have intense and deeply felt, if inchoate, perceptions about the justice and propriety of parental actions.)

And yet, for the child to maintain these morally critical perspectives on the parent—to see the parent as wrong or bad—is unsustainable. If the goal of punishment is to induce submission, the child's refusal to relinquish this moral perspective and submit requires that the parent up the ante, with threats of increasingly intense or sustained violence. This is the meaning of "a battle of wills," and it is a battle that the culture has long taught parents they must not lose. The terse recommendation of the Italian Renaissance writer Giovanni Dominici—"Double the punishment if they deny or excuse their fault or if they do not submit to punishment"[21]—is just one of many comparable examples from the historical literature. Similar advice can be found today in pro-punishment child-rearing books and websites. The passage from Deuteronomy quoted earlier (21:18–21) is merely an extreme version of the same dictum.

Mason, *Assault on the Truth: Freud's Suppression of the Seduction Theory* (New York: Collins, 1984), Appendix C, 283–95 (289). Both Freyd and Ferenczi, in the quoted passages, are referring to childhood sexual abuse. However, their concepts apply well also to the situation of children who experience non-sexual physical assault by parents, because the underlying power-dynamics of violence and vulnerability are similar.

21. Quoted in J. B. Ross, "The Middle-Class Child in Urban Italy, Fourteenth to Early Sixteenth Century," in *The History of Childhood: The Untold Story of Child Abuse* (ed. Lloyd DeMause; New York: Psychohistory Press, 1974), 183–228 (214).

According to that passage, a son who refuses to obey should first be punished and then, if he still refuses to submit, should suffer the ultimate escalation of threat—death. The general point is this: the parental threat of physical punishment, and the credible threat of its escalation, by its very nature forces children to obey blindly, and this entails a suppression of their own moral judgments. For children implicitly understand (or learn quickly) that to maintain principled moral judgments can readily lead to resistance, insubordination, punishment, tremendous pain, and a rapid deterioration of their physical safety—even, potentially, to the point of death.

To conclude this discussion of idealization—which has now become, in part, a discussion about the coercive suppression of moral judgment in children—consider this quotation by the psychiatrist Leonard Schengold:

> If the child must turn to the very parent who inflicts abuse and who is felt as bad for relief of the distress that the parent has caused, then the child must break with what has been experienced and out of a desperate need for rescue, must register the parent, *delusionally*, as good… So the bad has to be registered as good. This is a mind-splitting or mind-fragmenting operation.[22]

Here, Schengold suggests that the threat of physical harm by parents can induce a kind of moral insanity in children, literally driving them out of the moral dimension of their minds. This understanding of physical threat and its psycho-moral consequences stands in diametrical opposition to the traditional view of corporal punishment, which for virtually all of history has been thought necessary for fostering and promoting the child's moral sense.

Self-Incrimination. When a child is physically punished, he or she has two options: to see the beating as justified or as unjustified. If the child views the beating as justified, he or she will necessarily see the self as guilty and the parent as innocent. If the child views the beating as unjustified, he or she will necessarily see the self as innocent and the parent as guilty. The former perspective, while humiliating, is relatively safe and free of risk. In contrast, as we have seen, the latter perspective is dangerous, and there are tremendous pressures operating against it. From the child's perspective, blaming the self, while not a desirable option, is the only action that is compatible with a state of dependence and vulnerability. The child *cannot* blame the parent so the child *must* blame the self. As a result, almost automatically, whenever a child is corporally

22. Leonard Shengold, *Soul Murder: The Effects of Childhood Abuse and Deprivation* (New York: Ballantine, 1991), 26 (italics in original).

punished by the parent, the child comes to see the self as bad and guilty. As Bessel van der Kolk explains,

> When the persons who are supposed to be the sources of safety and nurturance become simultaneously the sources of danger against which protection is needed, children maneuver to re-establish some sense of safety. Instead of turning on their caregivers and thereby losing hope for protection, they blame themselves. They become fearfully and hungrily attached and anxiously obedient.[23]

Notice here that the child's sense of guilt does not arise because the child believes he or she has acted wrongly. The guilt arises for purely psychological reasons having to do only with the child's state of dependence and vulnerability, and the child's resulting inability to oppose the parent. Notice, too, that the guilt arises irrespective of whether there is a legitimate reason for feeling guilty. Finally, notice that the intensity of the child's guilt does not depend primarily on the nature of the infraction. Instead, the intensity depends on the severity of the punishment itself. This is the case because, the harsher the punishment, the more guilt the child must accept on the self if the parent is to remain blameless.

Van der Kolk is not alone in noting links between coercion, obedience, and guilt. The psychologist Alice Miller writes that the physically punished child, "would like to shout out its anger, give voice to its feeling of outrage… But that is exactly what it may not do… [T]he healthy impulse to protest against inhumanity has to be suppressed… What remains is a feeling of its own guilt, rather than outrage."[24] The Harvard psychiatrist and trauma expert Judith Herman has expressed a somewhat similar perspective:

> Self-blame is congruent with the normal forms of thought of early childhood, in which the self is taken as the reference point for all events. It is congruent with the thought process of traumatized people of all ages, who search for faults in their own behavior in an effort to make sense out of what has happened to them. In the environment of chronic abuse, however, neither time nor experience provide any corrective for this tendency toward self-blame; rather, it is continually reinforced.[25]

23. Van der Kolk, "The Compulsion to Repeat the Trauma," 392.

24. Alice Miller, *Breaking Down the Wall of Silence: The Liberating Experience of Facing Painful Truth* (New York: Meridian, 1993), 129–30. Elsewhere Miller makes a similar point: "children tend to blame themselves for their parents' cruelty and to absolve the parents, whom they invariably love, of all responsibility"; see Alice Miller, *The Untouched Key: Tracing Childhood Trauma in Creativity and Destructiveness* (New York: Doubleday, 1990), 169.

25. Judith Lewis Herman, *Trauma and Recovery: The Aftermath of Violence—from Domestic Abuse to Political Terror* (New York: Basic Books, 1992), 103.

Let me end this part of the presentation with a clarification. Some of the above-quoted passages use the term "abuse." In citing these passages, I do not mean to suggest that one must apply this emotionally laden and arguably culture-bound formulation to historical situations of physical punishment. Neither must one accept the view that physical punishment is, by its very nature, a form of "abuse"—a term that commonly bears some connotation of malicious ill-intent by the person carrying out the action. Clearly, such ill-intent has by no means always been present in situations of corporal punishment. In fact, there is ample evidence that in many circumstances parents have punished children in the belief that doing so was beneficial or even necessary for the child's well-being. Thus, I do not mean to equate corporal punishment with "abuse." However, I *do* mean to suggest that, whether it occurs in the context of parental ill-intent or good-intent, physical punishment has fundamentally similar effects on the child. Almost inevitably, physical punishment produces in the child specific and destructive psychological pressures, motivations, and consequences. The above-quoted passages provide penetrating insight into these harmful effects.

Part 3: Adam's Sin in the Context of Childhood

If children come to believe, through the mind-twisting process of self-incrimination just described, that they are guilty, what is the nature or quality of the guilt they experience? A great diversity of "offenses" may lead to punishment, but there is a single, unifying feature that defines an action as punishable: it willfully contravenes the parents' wishes or stated rules. That is, *disobedience*, and especially willful disobedience, is what leads to punishment. As a result, when children, in response to physical punishment, come to see themselves as guilty, they experience the guilt as arising from *a tendency towards willful disobedience*.

This fact points to a remarkable set of overlaps or parallels between the psychological experiences of the child and those of the religious believer—for the Judeo-Christian concept of sin, like the quintessential "sin" of childhood, is centered on disobedience. Observe that in both Judaism and Christianity, as in childhood, disobedience leads to punishment and obedience obviates punishment.[26] These thematic parallels or

26. Though the punishment is understood somewhat differently in Judaism and Christianity. In Judaism, the punishment is primarily collective and this-worldly, especially the destruction and expulsion of the people Israel. In contrast, in Christianity the punishment is primarily individual and other-worldly, especially punishment in hell.

overlaps with childhood help explain why the concept of sin has been so believable, so resonant. Sin portrays, in mythic form, the time-immemorial punitive experiences of children, and it epitomizes the sense of guilt, which is rooted in an awareness of one's willfulness, that emerges from these experiences. Because corporal punishment has been the cultural norm, the biblical conception of sin has tended to "make sense" subliminally and thus to engage powerful childhood emotions.

These considerations may be particularly relevant to Christianity. Observe that for most of Western history, by both tradition and law, the father has been the ultimate authority and punisher within the family. Thus, one would expect that punishment-induced guilt from childhood would be experienced primarily with respect to the father. It is therefore striking that the Christian concept of sin (especially as taught by Paul) is specifically one of willful disobedience to a divine Father. The precision of this parallel with the realities of childhood suggests that Christianity would engender particularly strong childhood resonances. To frame the point in psychoanalytic terms, the Christian concept of sin appears to be an especially well-suited vehicle for experiencing emotional transferences arising from childhood punishment. Further, the precision of this parallel raises the distinct possibility that Christian teachings about sin were deeply shaped by, or even arose in response to, cultural patterns of paternal coercion and violence.[27] Given the exceptionally explicit patriarchy of the early Roman Empire—which provided the most immediate formative environment for the writings of the New Testament—it seems reasonable to suggest that Christian concepts of sin and punishment arose as an evolutionary refinement of the somewhat more generic portrayals of sin within Judaism. In fact, I would suggest that the Jewish concept of sin-as-disobedience was itself deeply shaped by patterns of punishment in the ancient Jewish world.

These ideas are relevant to Gen 3, which on the level of narrative myth embeds overt thematic parallels with childhood. To summarize some of these parallels: Adam and Eve are child-like, exemplified by their innocence, nakedness, and lack of shame; they disobey a father-like God;

27. For additional arguments relevant to this point, see Benjamin J. Abelow, "Religious Behavior as a Reflection of Childhood Corporal Punishment," in *The Biology of Religious Behavior: The Evolutionary Origins of Faith and Religion* (ed. Jay R. Feierman; New York: Praeger, 2009), 89–105, and "What the History of Childhood Reveals About New Testament Origins and the Psychology of Christian Belief," *CSER Review* 2 (2007): 11–16. For a different formulation of fundamentally similar concepts, see Rita Nakashima Brock, *Journeys by Heart: A Christology of Erotic Power* (New York: Crossroad, 1991), 50–56.

their manner of disobedience is naïve and child-like; Adam responds to God's call as children might, by hiding; Adam and Eve are punished for their disobedience, as are children. When believers who were reared with traditional modes of discipline encounter teachings about Adam's sin, they experience powerful resonances. When these believers learn that, according to Christian teaching, humans are tainted with the Sin of Adam—the primal Sin of disobedience to the Father—they sense subliminally, from their own childhood experiences and emotions, that the teaching portrays reality. For these reasons, I suggest, the Gen 3 narrative has tended to be affecting and believable.

As with the concept of sin itself, these narrative parallels with childhood likely help explain not only the cultural resonance of the Gen 3 story, but its origins. The thematic parallels between Gen 3 and the experiences of ordinary children are precise and therefore, I suggest, are not likely to have arisen by chance. The simplest explanation is that the Bible's primordial myth of sin and punishment was fundamentally shaped by the situation of children in the culture from which the myth emerged, that is, the culture of ancient Israel.

This shaping process could have occurred through several possible mechanisms. First, the author of Gen 3, or of its underlying oral tradition, could have deliberately portrayed themes from childhood. Second, the author might have naturally but without conscious awareness portrayed these themes. Third, a perceived divine revelation or even a simple dream could have been the source of childhood symbolism in the story. It is not uncommon for dreams to symbolically portray salient themes from waking reality. For an author reared in the culture of ancient Israel, themes of childhood disobedience and punishment certainly would have been salient. The author might have used this unconsciously generated symbolic material in the creation of the story. Fourth, Gen 3's parallels with childhood might have developed gradually, in evolutionary fashion, during the oral transmission of the story. The parallels could have emerged—to apply Darwinian terms—through a process analogous to "natural selection." During this process, emotional resonances from childhood could have provided the "selective pressure" that led to the emergence and preservation of particular traditions. Any of these four mechanisms, or any combination of them, could account for childhood parallels in Gen 3. Other mechanisms are also possible. Note that these mechanisms can account for either the production of a new narrative, or for the symbolic modification of an existing narrative, including one with roots in another culture.

Leaving aside the question of which mechanism or mechanisms might have been involved, the overall thesis that Gen 3 was deeply shaped by patterns of mundane childhood experience is not new. For example, as we have seen, Hermann Gunkel in his Genesis commentary holds that the biblical narrator chose to “portray” and “model” aspects of Gen 3 on the situation of children.[28] E. A. Speiser, in the passage quoted earlier, writes that the biblical author has “evoked” the “childhood of mankind itself.” The precise intention here is less clear than in Gunkel, but Speiser may also be asserting that the biblical text was patterned on actual childhood norms. More generally, it is taken for granted in biblical scholarship that social context—that is, the patterns of ordinary human interaction in the culture from which a religious tradition arises—can shape a religious text in fundamental ways. Genesis 3, I suggest, provides a striking, specific example of this kind of influence.

Let us now step back for a moment from Gen 3 and again focus on more general overlaps between the psychological experiences of believers and those of children. I noted previously that when a parent threatens physical punishment for disobedience, the child can view the threat as either justified or unjustified.[29] As I described, when the child views the threat as justified, he or she can continue to see the parent as good and loving. In contrast, if the child views the threat as unjustified, the child undermines his or her positive valuation of the parent and now sees the parents’ threat, or even the parents themselves, as bad, evil, or persecutory. I also described how, even if the threat is initially viewed as unjust, the child cannot readily maintain a conscious image of the parent as bad, for doing so can lead the vulnerable and dependent child into an unsustainable stance of direct opposition to the parent.

Believers, especially Christian believers, are in a similar situation.[30] Like children, believers are at risk of punishment for disobedience—that is, divine punishment for the disobedience of Adam. Like children,

28. See the quotes from Gunkel at the beginning of this essay. On the deliberateness of the narrator’s decision, see Gunkel, *Genesis*, 14: “The narrator intends to present…”

29. Actually, I discussed the child’s responses to punishment itself, not to the *threat* of punishment, but the point is the same.

30. In the Jewish context, the punishable disobedience is not that of child-like Adam, but of the individual Jew or the Jewish people as a whole. Also, in the Hebrew scriptures, and in Judaism in general, the potentially punishing God is less specifically (or singularly) a Father than in the New Testament. For these reasons, theological parallels with childhood are in Judaism somewhat less precise and ramified. Thus, aspects of my argument are most directly relevant to Christian believers, though many points apply also to Jewish believers to a greater or lesser extent.

believers must obey the will of the Father if they hope to avoid punishment. Like children, believers do not make the rules governing punishment and cannot escape from them. Like children, believers know that, while obedience may be essential if one is to avoid punishment, the Father's decision to punish is his alone and is not constrained by the believer's actions. As a result, believers, like children, understand that freedom from punishment ultimately depends on "grace"—that is, the unilateral, unearned gift of the Father. Like children, believers can view the Father as just or unjust, righteous or persecutory. Like children, few believers can sustain a mental image of the Father as unjust or persecutory.

There are practical reasons for this last fact, the inability of the believer to sustain a negative Paternal image. These reasons themselves parallel the pressures leading to idealization in childhood. For example, if the believer views the Father's threat of punishment as unjust, he or she will resent God and tend to rebel against him. Yet rebellion was the sin of Adam and is the reason the believer is at risk in the first place; additional rebellion would only add to the believer's troubles. Even to *think* that God's actions are unjust is to put oneself at risk, because no thought is unknown to the Father. The situation of the child, who cannot effectively dissimulate his or her true feelings, is almost identical: for the child who cannot conceal inner states and perceptions, the parent is in effect omniscient.

Beyond these practical reasons, the believer is not likely to see the Father as unjust because the believer already sees himself or herself as sinful. As discussed earlier, a child reared with corporal punishment will almost necessarily develop, for purely psychological reasons, a profound sense of guilt. As the child grows and is taught religious concepts, his or her sense of childhood psychological guilt merges with and is experienced as sin. The deep emotions of childhood are psychologically assimilated to the theological context. This transformation in the individual's experience of guilt occurs readily because the guilt, in both childhood and the religious context, is fundamentally the same: a sense of personal culpability or "badness" associated with an awareness of one's tendency toward willfulness, especially with respect to the father/Father. Once this transformation occurs, the believer will feel that punishment by God, the Father, is just. For if one views oneself as guilty, the threat of punishment will be experienced as righteous retribution, not persecution. Such is the perspective of both the child vis-à-vis the natural father and the believer vis-à-vis the heavenly Father.

These same points can be made differently. A child who is beaten will develop a conviction of personal guilt. The child will internally incriminate the self and justify the father. As the child grows, he or she will project or "map" childhood experiences, thought processes, and emotions onto the religious realm, thus forming an image of a heavenly Father that corresponds to the image of the natural father. Once this divine image is formed, the child-now-adult will relate to this Paternal image in much the same way that he or she related to the natural father early in life. If as a young child an individual sees the self as guilty and deserving of punishment, so will the believer, as an adult, tend to attribute to the self theological sin and see this sin as worthy of Paternal punishment. Thus, I suggest, the believer's image of the divine Father, like the child's image of the human father, is an *idealized* image. God and His punishment is Just, the believer is sinful and worthy of punishment—never the reverse.

Put yet another way, the believer does not and, for very practical reasons, *must* not form independent moral judgments about the activities of the heavenly Father—just as the human child does not, and *must* not, pass independent moral judgment on the natural father. This suppression of moral judgment is an essential feature of idealization, for to idealize is to judge everything as good, whereas to pass moral judgment is to discriminate between good and bad, right and wrong. A child who uses independent moral judgment, who applies to the parent the categories of right and wrong, is *by definition* no longer idealizing the parent. A child who judges the parent or the parent's actions negatively, as morally wrong or evil, and communicates that judgment either explicitly or implicitly, engages in the most blatant impudence imaginable. As we have seen, such insubordination is proscribed and punished with utmost severity.

And this leads us back to Gen 3, for the situation of ordinary children—whose free moral judgment *must* be suppressed—finds remarkably precise expression in the Garden narrative. The disobedience of Adam and Eve took a specific form: eating from the tree of knowledge of good and evil. To eat something is to internalize it, to acquire it in the deepest sense, to make it part of oneself. To acquire the "knowledge of good and evil" means to become a person who distinguishes right from wrong—that is, a person who exerts independent moral judgment. As we have seen, this is precisely what the child must *not* become, for to exercise moral judgment can lead to insubordination and punishment. To exercise moral judgment is to create an internal standard that guides one's perceptions and actions. Such a standard is utterly incompatible with blind obedience to the parent—yet blind obedience is *exactly* what is required.

The singular prohibition against eating from the tree of knowledge of good and evil can now be understood as a precise symbolic expression about the situation of children, for children *must not eat that fruit.* The violation of the prohibition by Adam and Eve, the primordial children, depicts what has happened, time immemorial, when actual children have attempted to exercise free moral judgment: they have been punished. The particular designation of the forbidden tree ("of knowledge of good and evil") thus provides a highly specific symbolic focus to the story of childhood disobedience and punishment that is portrayed in Gen 3 as a whole.

Notice, too, that the story as a whole and the image of forbidden fruit portray two different aspects of the child's experience. The story as a whole symbolically portrays the *external* situation of children, for when children disobey they are punished. The element of forbidden fruit symbolically portrays the *internal* psychological and moral situation of corporally punished children, for these children are compelled to idealize the parent and are effectively proscribed from exercising independent moral judgment. [31]

Let us go one step further in analyzing the image of the forbidden fruit. We previously considered verses from the Pentateuch which showed that children in ancient Israel may have risked death if they were insubordinate or persistently disobedient. Such children could not dare to form independent judgments about the propriety of their treatment. These children were absolutely forbidden, at risk of death, to "eat from the tree of knowledge of good and evil." Notice that the risk of death itself appears in the Genesis story: "From every tree of the garden you may eat. But of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil you may not eat, for on the day you eat of it *you will surely die*" (2:17). Here in Genesis we may be observing, as narrative myth, reflections of an actual historical situation that confronted children in the culture: the fact that forming independent moral judgments could lead to death. Put differently, Gen 2:17 may well be portraying as symbolic narrative the very

31. I earlier raised the possibility that unconscious processes, possibly including dreaming, might provide the ultimate source of the childhood parallels in Gen 3. It is perhaps thus worth noting that the image of forbidden fruit is just the kind of rich, complex, and precise symbolic image that one sometimes finds in dreams.

The childhood inculcation of blind obedience, and the suppression of an internal moral standard which is entailed by this inculcation, has implications that extend far beyond the realm of religion. For example, this suppression may lie at the root of the obedience to authority observed in the experiments of Stanley Milgram, and during the Hitler era. For penetrating discussions of this general topic, see Miller, *For Your Own Good*, and Morton Schatzman, *Soul Murder: Persecution in the Family* (New York: Random House, 1973).

same historical reality that is expressed as legal injunction in Deut 21:18–21.

Notice that this understanding of the source and ultimate meaning of the text makes sense of the otherwise problematic fact that eating the forbidden fruit does not prove lethal to Adam and Eve, and certainly not on the day that they eat it. Read as a simple narrative, God's assertion of the fruit's lethality in Gen 2:17 cannot be reconciled with the survival of Adam and Eve. On a basic level, the story loses coherence.[32] But when Gen 3 is understood in its social-historical context of childhood, and the story itself is understood as a symbolic narrative that reflects that context, the difficulty is resolved.

Conclusion

The situation portrayed in Gen 3 applies, to one degree or another, to virtually all children who have been reared with corporal punishment. These children at first may have angrily protested their punishment, seeing it as an evil, an injustice. But they quickly learned that this reaction was unacceptable. These children were taught, often with stark brutality and overwhelming force, that moral judgment of the father is taboo, that moral judgment itself must be considered a monopoly of the parents.[33] The unconscious mind grasps symbolic meanings that the conscious mind cannot readily identify. This innate symbolic capacity helps explain how the myth of Adam's sin arose historically and why for countless generations it has resonated so powerfully in the Western consciousness.

The thesis that Gen 3 was fundamentally shaped as symbolic myth in response to the situation of physically punished children provides a single, parsimonious explanation for several striking aspects of the story. It provides a level of narrative coherence and contextual reference that is difficult to attain otherwise. Specifically, it explains broad parallels, in the story as a whole, with the child's (external) experiences of disobedience and punishment. It explains specific parallels, in the image of forbidden fruit, with the child's (internal) psychological and moral situation. And it renders meaningful the divine assertion that the fruit is lethal, by showing that this assertion, when understood psychologically as symbolic myth, may have been literally true in the historical context from which the myth emerged.

32. The view that the biblical author is in Gen 2:17 explaining the origins of human mortality in general is contradicted by the text itself. First, as discussed, the death in question is explicitly immediate ("on the day"); second, Gen 3:22 clearly implies that Adam and Eve are already mortal, apparently by nature.

33. This monopoly is itself reflected in the story. See Gen 3:5 and 3:22.

More generally, in the course of this exploration, we uncovered a set of remarkable overlaps between the experienced realities of corporally punished children and those of religious believers. This degree of overlap is unlikely to have arisen by chance. Instead, the overlap suggests that major elements of religious teaching and myth, including foundational concepts of religious sin, may have arisen as reflections of mundane childhood experiences of parental coercion and violence. Further, these extensive and precise overlaps make it likely—perhaps even inevitable—that the most painful realities of childhood would become psychologically superimposed on and confounded with religious perceptions and experiences.