



PROJECT MUSE®

Humanity: Texts and Contexts

Igrave, Michael , Marshall, David, Williams, Rowan

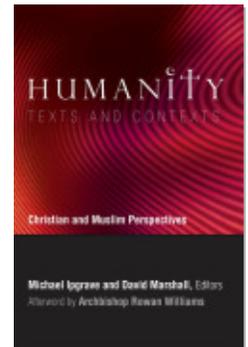
Published by Georgetown University Press

Igrave, Michael, et al.

Humanity: Texts and Contexts: Christian and Muslim Perspectives.

Georgetown University Press, 2010.

Project MUSE.muse.jhu.edu/book/149.



➔ For additional information about this book

<https://muse.jhu.edu/book/149>

CHAPTER FIVE

Human Alienation

5.1 Genesis 3, Romans 7:15–25

Mona Siddiqui

The biblical passages discussed in this essay have been selected because of their significance for Christian reflection on human alienation. There is a great deal of material in these texts suggesting tensions and difficulties in the relationship of human beings to God, to each other, and to the natural environment. The following brief comments seek to give some impression of how these passages appear when read from a Muslim perspective.

The narrative in Genesis 3 concerning the disobedience of Adam and Eve to God's commandment and their consequent expulsion from Eden is paralleled at several points in the Qur'ān.²³ The biblical and Qur'ānic accounts do, however, diverge in various ways and contain some quite different emphases. In purely narrative terms, a Muslim reading the biblical account would probably first be struck by the role Eve plays in it. In the Qur'ān there is no account of Eve's conversation with the serpent; nor of Eve's attraction to the tree and its fruit, and of her eating it before Adam does; nor of God addressing Eve and her response; nor of God's further words directed specifically to Eve.²⁴ The Qur'ānic accounts do not distinguish as much between Adam and Eve, and when they speak, they do so together.²⁵ Whereas from a certain perspective there may appear to be more dramatic interest in the more developed and individual role that Eve plays in Genesis, from a different perspective—not least that of women readers—this focus on her is not altogether welcome. In particular, the fact that Eve was, according to Genesis, the first to eat the forbidden fruit has tended to lead to the view among Christians that women are more to blame than men for humanity's sinful condition. This is a view that Adam himself appears to express when, in response to God's question at Genesis 3:11, he responds evasively: "The woman whom you gave to be with me, she gave me fruit from the tree, and I ate."²⁶ If anything, the Qur'ān lays responsibility more on Adam than on Eve.²⁷

A question raised by this narrative that has been much debated both between Christians and between Muslims is whether there is a genuine religious basis for the subordination of women to men, and more specifically of wives to their husbands. In Genesis God says to Eve, "your desire shall be for your husband, and he shall rule over you."²⁸

These words recognize at least the fact of the subordination of women to men; however, it can be argued that such subordination is not presented as God's will but rather as a regrettable result of the Fall, an outworking of human alienation from God rather than an expression of divine intention. Nevertheless, the Genesis narrative clearly can be, and has been, used to justify patriarchy. In this context we might also note a New Testament passage where the argument that it was Eve, not Adam, who was deceived by the serpent, is linked to calls for submissiveness on the part of women.²⁹ Christians concerned to read the Bible in ways that do not support patriarchal attitudes would argue that other, more central scriptural themes point to quite different understandings of the relationship between men and women. Reference is often made to St. Paul's words: "There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus."³⁰ Of course, debates about the interpretation of scripture with regard to the male-female relationship also occur among Muslims, with appeals being made to a range of Qur'anic texts in support of quite different positions.³¹ It is not possible to consider the Qur'anic material here, although it is interesting to note that it does not appear that the Qur'anic narratives concerning Adam and Eve are as significant within intra-Muslim discussion of male-female relations as the Genesis narratives are for intra-Christian discussion of this theme.

Within the Christian tradition, chapter 3 of Genesis has been especially significant in providing the narrative basis for the doctrine of original sin. Read in this way, this passage is taken as describing humankind as created in a state of primal innocence and bliss which, through rebellion against God's will, has been lost, leading to expulsion from Eden and the consequent experience of enmity within humankind, frustration in relation to nature, and ultimately death. Some commentators have claimed that the plot of this story hinges on the idea that God does not want humanity to eat from the tree of knowledge.³² While no Hebrew equivalent of the term "fall" is used in this context, this reading of the text sees it as providing the foundational diagnosis of the human condition as fallen, for which the only remedy is the redemption from sin that God would offer in due course through Jesus Christ. Traditional Christian exegesis has seen Genesis 3:15 as foretelling the coming of Christ and the conflict with Satan in which Christ engaged to redeem humankind. The interpretation of this narrative that has become dominant, especially in the Western Christian tradition, is that associated with Augustine, building on Paul's argument in Romans 5. This theological tradition asked questions about the manner of the transmission of original sin through the generations of the human race from Adam onward, but the text does not seem concerned to address these matters.

Here we touch on an area of significant doctrinal contrast, for Islam teaches neither that human beings exist in a state of original sin nor that resolving the human predicament requires the kind of atoning action of God through Jesus proclaimed by Christianity. It is not that Islam sees nothing wrong with humanity but that its diagnosis is less pessimistic. Some observations about the Qur'anic Adam and Eve narratives are illuminating in this context. Certainly the Qur'anic Adam and Eve are depicted as committing a serious error; God says of Adam that he "forgot" and was found "lacking in

constancy,” and Adam and Eve recognize that they have wronged their own souls by their disobedience and need God’s mercy.³³ But the merciful response of God in the Qur’ān is to accept their repentance and to provide guidance that, if followed, could bring human beings to eternal salvation.³⁴ There is no echo here of the traditional Christian teaching that the Fall makes necessary a long process of redemptive divine intervention culminating in the sending of Christ and his death and resurrection.

Having acknowledged these major contrasts, a Muslim response to Genesis 3 might well ask whether this narrative has to be interpreted in the manner familiar in the Western Christian tradition that has been so shaped by Augustine. Muslim readers would find it significant, for example, that neither Judaism nor, indeed, all Christian traditions derive the same concept of original sin from this passage. From a Muslim perspective, it is interesting that many Christian commentators today tend to distance themselves from the Augustinian perspective. For example, one recent commentary suggests that the real purpose of Genesis 2–3 is to tell the story not of the “fall” of the human race but of its “necessary maturing.” The second century Irenaeus is seen as a better interpreter of these narratives than the later Augustine.³⁵ Muslims are likely to find more encouraging prospects for dialogue with Christians in this kind of approach to the text than in ones that stick closer to the traditional Augustinian interpretation.

The shorter passage from Paul’s letter to the Romans in many ways raises similar questions for Muslims in dialogue with Christians as the passage from Genesis. Christian commentators have long argued whether Paul is describing in this passage his past experience before his conversion or his present experience as a Christian. If one adopts the latter interpretation (held by many influential theologians such as Augustine, Aquinas, and Luther), Paul is expressing a highly paradoxical account of Christian experience; he is at the same time confident of redemption through Christ but also continues to be aware of the power of sin within him.³⁶ It is not entirely clear how this paradox is resolved.

The language used here by Paul to convey his experience of life as a believer would probably strike most Muslim readers as strangely negative. Returning to a point already mentioned earlier, although Islamic understandings of the human condition take seriously the human tendency to sin, they also incline to a much more optimistic picture than we have here in Romans of the capacity of human beings to receive God’s merciful gift of guidance and, by following this guidance, to attain God’s favor. There are more than thirty words in the New Testament that convey some notion of “sin,” and Paul uses at least twenty-four of them. Paul does not define sin, but he regards the sin inherent in humankind as a barrier to fellowship with God, for it is sin that brings alienation from God. For Paul, sin was not a part of human nature as God created it, for God’s creation was not flawed until Adam’s sin.

As a faithful Jew, Paul recognized the Law as a blessing from God, but as a Christian, he also realized that the Law taught what sin is, and that its definition of right and wrong made plain what was wrong. In verses 7–12, Paul refers to the human enslavement to sin, suggesting that even when human beings try to do moral good by observing the Law, they cannot master their passions and desires (14–23) and end up doing what they do not want to do.

These observations give some indication as to why Paul has often been regarded negatively in the history of Islamic writing on Christianity. Muslims have often argued that Paul was responsible for initiating a process that transformed the message of Jesus from one essentially identical with that of Islam to a significantly different religion. While the relationship between God's will and human disobedience is a significant Qur'anic theme, it bears little resemblance to the tragedy implied in the Pauline understanding of the Law and sin. One modern Muslim scholar sees Paul as responsible for the twin errors at the heart of Christianity: "peccatism" (a false diagnosis of radical human sinfulness) and "saviorism" (a false solution involving incarnation and atonement).³⁷ It is not the purpose of these brief comments to argue for or against this generally negative Muslim view of Paul but simply to recognize that the account of human alienation that we find in some Pauline passages is one that most Muslims may find quite unfamiliar. Therefore, in view of Paul's decisive significance in the development of the Christian faith, it is all the more important that this account should be intelligently explored in the context of a Christian-Muslim dialogue on what it means to be a human being.

Genesis 3

¹Now the serpent was more crafty than any other wild animal that the LORD God had made. He said to the woman, "Did God say, 'You shall not eat from any tree in the garden?'" ²The woman said to the serpent, "We may eat of the fruit of the trees in the garden; ³but God said, 'You shall not eat of the fruit of the tree that is in the middle of the garden, nor shall you touch it, or you shall die.'" ⁴But the serpent said to the woman, "You will not die; ⁵for God knows that when you eat of it your eyes will be opened, and you will be like God, knowing good and evil." ⁶So when the woman saw that the tree was good for food, and that it was a delight to the eyes, and that the tree was to be desired to make one wise, she took of its fruit and ate; and she also gave some to her husband, who was with her, and he ate. ⁷Then the eyes of both were opened, and they knew that they were naked; and they sewed fig leaves together and made loincloths for themselves.

⁸They heard the sound of the LORD God walking in the garden at the time of the evening breeze, and the man and his wife hid themselves from the presence of the LORD God among the trees of the garden. ⁹But the LORD God called to the man, and said to him, "Where are you?" ¹⁰He said, "I heard the sound of you in the garden, and I was afraid, because I was naked; and I hid myself." ¹¹He said, "Who told you that you were naked? Have you eaten from the tree of which I commanded you not to eat?" ¹²The man said, "The woman whom you gave to be with me, she gave me fruit from the tree, and I ate." ¹³Then the LORD God said to the woman, "What is this that you have done?" The woman said, "The serpent tricked me, and I ate."

¹⁴The LORD God said to the serpent,
"Because you have done this,
cursed are you among all animals

and among all wild creatures;
 upon your belly you shall go,
 and dust you shall eat all the days of your life.
¹⁵I will put enmity between you and the woman,
 and between your offspring and hers;
 he will strike your head,
 and you will strike his heel.”
¹⁶To the woman he said,
 “I will greatly increase your pangs in childbearing;
 in pain you shall bring forth children,
 yet your desire shall be for your husband,
 and he shall rule over you.”
¹⁷And to the man he said,
 “Because you have listened to the voice of your wife,
 and have eaten of the tree
 about which I commanded you,
 ‘You shall not eat of it,’
 cursed is the ground because of you;
 in toil you shall eat of it all the days of your life;
¹⁸thorns and thistles it shall bring forth for you;
 and you shall eat the plants of the field.
¹⁹By the sweat of your face you shall eat bread
 until you return to the ground,
 for out of it you were taken;
 you are dust, and to dust you shall return.”

²⁰The man named his wife Eve, because she was the mother of all who live.

²¹And the LORD God made garments of skins for the man and for his wife, and clothed them.

²²Then the LORD God said, “See, the man has become like one of us, knowing good and evil; and now, he might reach out his hand and take also from the tree of life, and eat, and live for ever”—²³therefore the LORD God sent him forth from the garden of Eden, to till the ground from which he was taken. ²⁴He drove out the man; and at the east of the garden of Eden he placed the cherubim, and a sword flaming and turning to guard the way to the tree of life.

Romans 7:15–25

¹⁵I do not understand my own actions. For I do not do what I want, but I do the very thing I hate. ¹⁶Now if I do what I do not want, I agree that the law is good. ¹⁷But in fact it is no longer I that do it, but sin that dwells within me. ¹⁸For I know that nothing good dwells within me, that is, in my flesh. I can will what is right, but I cannot do it. ¹⁹For I do not do the good I want, but the evil I do not want is what I do. ²⁰Now if I do what I do not want, it is no longer I that do it, but sin that dwells within me. ²¹ So I find it to be a law that when I want to do what is good, evil lies close at hand. ²²For I delight in the law of God in my inmost self, ²³but I see in my members another law at war with the

law of my mind, making me captive to the law of sin that dwells in my members.

²⁴Wretched man that I am! Who will rescue me from this body of death?

²⁵Thanks be to God through Jesus Christ our Lord!

So then, with my mind I am a slave to the law of God, but with my flesh I am a slave to the law of sin.

5.2 *al-Baqara* 2:36–39; *Ṭā' Hā'* 20:115–24

Daniel Madigan

The beginnings of this story of alienation are in the Qur'ānic text already discussed in chapter 4, “Human Dignity,”—Iblis’s refusal to obey God and bow to Adam. It is worth noting at the level of text the intertwining, interleaving almost, of human dignity and alienation. The two cannot be separated easily.

We are actually dealing here with two alienations, each quite distinct in its own way, yet also intimately bound up with the other. The human alienation that is our focus in this essay is, if anything, less mysterious than Iblis’s alienation from the God whom, according to Islamic tradition, he had served with distinction and worshipped with extraordinary devotion.

The story of Iblis’s refusal to obey is told seven times in the Qur'ān, two examples of which we have in these texts. The Qur'ān is characteristically spare in its recounting of detail, here as elsewhere addressing its hearers on the presumption that they are already familiar with the characters and the narrative. Indeed, the story of God’s command to the angels to bow to the human being newly created in God’s image and likeness as well the devil’s refusal to bow was already found in noncanonical Jewish and Christian texts prior to the emergence of Islam.³⁸ For those later readers who were not familiar with the story, a wealth of detail, reflection, and explanation are to be had in the ḥadīth and in the *tafsīr* tradition, to say nothing of the extensive treatment given to the subject by poets and mystics.

Iblis is a tantalizingly paradoxical character in the Islamic tradition. Not all commentators agree that he was an angel (as the Qur'ān texts would seem to suggest). Nonetheless, even for those who deny that he is an angel because angels are incapable of disobeying God, Iblis’s presence in Paradise and among the angels bears witness to his high status. He is presented as being heroically ascetic, a devoted worshipper, master of the seven heavens, guardian of Paradise, defender of God’s throne, and yet also arrogant, prideful, and impetuous.³⁹

We notice in both the texts presented here that Iblis comes to be called Satan. According to commentators, he was previously ‘Azāzil or, less often, Hārith. The change of name in these Qur'ān texts marks a transition from Iblis’s refusal of obedience to that of Adam and Eve. While Iblis’s refusal is seen as originating within himself, rather than in the malevolence of a tempter, that of Adam and Eve is attributed to the deceit and hostility of Satan. Iblis becomes “the accursed Satan” or literally “the stoned Satan” *al-shayṭān al-rajīm*, sworn enemy of the human person and our constant companion. Thus, there are two major strands in the discourse about the devil—the Iblis strand (the paradoxical, tragic figure whose sin is self-motivated) and the Shayṭān strand (the constant presence of an external tempter who deceives and leads astray).⁴⁰

In some respects, the Qur'ān texts appear to distance the human person from his or her sin, and the apparent simplicity of Adam’s repentance and God’s acceptance of that repentance have suggested to many readers that the sin of Adam should not be taken as

seriously as Christians are accustomed to do. Yet a closer look at our texts and at some ḥadīth may perhaps show that, although there is a difference, there is less distance between us on this point than is often assumed.

The first point to be considered is that, in much spiritual writing, Iblīs's sin can be ours. Even those who have reached the heights of devotion can fall into the sin of pride. The word in Arabic is "*istikbār*," literally "to consider oneself greater." Iblīs explains to God his refusal to bow to Adam by asserting, "I am better (*khayrun*) than him!"⁴¹ The word "*istikbār*" reminds us of the essential affirmation about God: *Allāhu akbar*, "God is greater." And so we see why *istikbār* is sinful—it is a way of associating oneself with God; it is a form of *shirk*. Iblīs is also represented in the tradition as the first to have used analogical reasoning. He explains the reason for his belief that he is better than Adam: God has made him from fire, whereas Adam was created only from clay.⁴² His misguided trust in his own intellect rather than in obedience to the inscrutable command of God has brought him to a miserable end.

Second, a number of elements in the tradition can be read as a recognition that the tendency to sin is not simply external to being human but is an intimate and integral part of it. For example, according to a widely quoted ḥadīth, Satan "courses through a human being's veins (*yajrī min ibn ādam majra al-dam*)."⁴³ A number of pious practices based on ḥadīth take it for granted that Satan is seeking ways to enter into people physically. Then there is the notion of the *nafs*—the (lower) soul—which provokes one to sin. It is sometimes identified with Satan and at other times is seen as his instrument.

What are we to make of Adam and Eve's readiness to believe what the deceiver tells them? According to the commentators, he convinces them that it is God's intention to send them from the Garden and that only if they eat the fruit of the tree of immortality will they be able to remain. This predisposition to suspect that God is trying to cheat them out of something they can easily have, or to which they believe they have a right, is very significant. Such a skewed, contentious, competitive relationship to God is a key element in the understanding of what Christians call original sin. The origin of this jaundiced attitude to God that leaves humans open to the insinuations of the tempter is not explained in either the Qur'ān or the Bible. It could be said that this is what Iblīs's sin and that of Adam and Eve have in common. Why then the difference in outcome? On the one hand, Iblīs is punished with the loss of everything and excluded from repentance. Adam, on the other hand, can ask for forgiveness and immediately receive it, as though his sin had scarcely touched him.

A couple of further notes on the text: The expulsion from the garden and a life on earth are not to be understood as punishments—at least for Adam. Although apparently created in heaven, human beings were created from earth and for the earth. For Iblīs, however, the expulsion and the condemnation to earthly wandering are central aspects of the punishment.

What were the "words" that, according to the Qur'ān, Adam received from his Lord?⁴³ These could be the verse: "Our Lord, we have wronged our souls: if you do not forgive us and have mercy we are lost."⁴⁴ There are other proposals in the commentary literature, including the following: "O Lord, the sin which I have committed, is it

something which you decreed for me before you created me, or is it something which I have invented of my own accord?' God answered, 'Rather it is something which I decreed for you before I created you.' Adam said, 'Then as you have decreed it for me, so do now forgive my sin.'⁴⁵ This supposed dialogue between God and Adam reflects the tradition's interest in the question (never entirely resolved) of free will and predestination. A popular story describes a meeting between Adam and Moses, who questions his forebear as to why, with all the advantages he had, he would disobey God. Adam points out that such disobedience had already been decreed long before he was ever created.

al-Baqara 2:36–39

³⁶Then Satan caused them to slip therefrom and brought them out of that they were in; and We said, "Get you all down, each of you an enemy of each; and in the earth a sojourn shall be yours, and enjoyment for a time."

³⁷Thereafter Adam received certain words from his Lord, and He turned towards him; truly He turns, and is All-compassionate.

³⁸We said, "Get you down out of it, all together; yet there shall come to you guidance from Me, and whosoever follows My guidance, no fear shall be on them, neither shall they sorrow.

³⁹As for the unbelievers who cry lies to Our signs, those shall be the inhabitants of the Fire, therein dwelling forever."

Ṭā' Hā' 20:115–24

¹¹⁵And We made covenant with Adam before, but he forgot, and We found in him no constancy.

¹¹⁶And when We said to the angels, "Bow yourselves to Adam"; so they bowed themselves, save Iblis; he refused.

¹¹⁷Then We said, "Adam, surely this is an enemy to thee and thy wife. So let him not expel you both from the Garden, so that thou art unprosperous.

¹¹⁸It is assuredly given to thee neither to hunger therein, nor to go naked, ¹¹⁹neither to thirst therein, nor to suffer the sun."

¹²⁰Then Satan whispered to him saying, "Adam, shall I point thee to the Tree of Eternity, and a Kingdom that decays not?"

¹²¹So the two of them ate of it, and their shameful parts revealed to them, and they took to stitching upon themselves leaves of the Garden. And Adam disobeyed his Lord, and so he erred.

¹²²Thereafter his Lord chose him, and turned again unto him, and He guided him.

¹²³Said He, "Get you down, both of you together, out of it, each of you an enemy to each; but if there comes to you from Me guidance, then whosoever follows My guidance shall not go astray, neither shall he be unprosperous; ¹²⁴but whosoever turns away from My remembrance, his shall be a life of narrowness, and on the Resurrection Day We shall raise him blind."