

# Can a major religion change? Reading Genesis 1–3 in the twenty-first century<sup>1</sup>

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## ABSTRACT

### Can a major religion change? Reading Genesis 1–3 in the twenty-first century

*Ever since the fourth century Christian theologians read Genesis 1–3 as a historical account about creation and fall. Augustine (354–430), one of the Latin fathers of the Church, introduced the idea of “original sin” on account of his reading of these chapters. According to him God created a perfect world which collapsed because of the sin of Adam and Eve. This idea became a fixed doctrine in the Roman Catholic and Protestant Churches. The doctrine holds that every human being, by the very fact of birth, inherits a “tainted” nature in need of regeneration. Since the paradigm shift in Biblical Studies which occurred towards the end of the nineteenth century, the doctrine has come under severe criticism by Old Testament scholars. In recent years even systematic theologians are questioning the interpretation of Augustine and proclaim: “There is no fall in Scripture.” This issue is discussed in detail and an answer is given to the question whether Christians can accept other readings and whether Christianity can change.*

## 1 INTRODUCTION

In some theological circles the year 2006 has been earmarked as Bonhoeffer year. This well-known German theologian of the twentieth century was born a century ago on February 4, 1906. He was one of twins born to Paula and Karl Bonhoeffer. His sister was given the name of Sabine and they were the sixth and seventh siblings respectively in a family of eight children. To a large number of Christians throughout the world he has become the example of how Christians should behave in a world characterized by war, oppression, poverty, hunger and suffering.

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1 Inaugural lecture delivered on 19 September 2006 at the University of South Africa (Pretoria/Tshwane). The wording reflects the context.

Although Bonhoeffer's life and theology influenced theological discussions in South Africa during the apartheid era (De Gruchy 1984), he is not all that well-known at the grassroots level in our country. Only a small number of South African Christians are aware that he was a pacifist in his early years but that he later on joined others in planning to overthrow and, if need be, to assassinate Adolf Hitler. Three assassination attempts were made but none succeeded, the last took place on July 20, 1944. Four people were killed, but Hitler escaped with minor injuries. This event led to the arrest and execution of those who had planned it. Bonhoeffer was already in prison at that stage but was not directly involved in this attempt. However, the discovery of incriminating evidence eventually led to his own execution. He was hanged in the concentration camp at Flossenbürg on April 9, 1945 — a month before the end of World War Two (Raum 2002).

I learned something about Bonhoeffer during my training as a theological student at the University of Stellenbosch (1971–1977). However, my recent interest in the doctrine of original sin led me to the discovery of his book *Schöpfung und Fall* (1937)<sup>2</sup>. The volume is based on lectures which he delivered during the winter semester of 1932–33 at the University of Berlin. It immediately attracted my attention, since John A T Robinson had called Bonhoeffer “the John the Baptist of the new reformation” (1965:23). I was curious about how he expounded Genesis 1–3, and hoped that he showed a better understanding of these chapters than other contemporary systematic theologians. To my astonishment this was not the case. His reading and exposition of these chapters are to be classified as “eisogesis” rather than “exegesis”. And about “eisogesis” Joseph Hoffmann wrote the following memorable sentence: “‘Eisogesis’ — the skill of reading out of the text the interests we read into it — is a well-developed habit in theological circles” (1993:241).

## **2 BONHOEFFER AND GENESIS 1–3**

In his introductory notes to the English translation John de Gruchy emphasises that Bonhoeffer's book is not a philological commentary but rather a commentary in which he, like Karl Barth (1886–1968), tries to develop a “post-critical” method of expounding the Bible,

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2 Translated by Douglas Stephen Bax as *Creation and Fall* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1997).

that is, “seeking to hear and expound ‘the Word ... in the words’” (De Gruchy 1997:7). Barth and Bonhoeffer’s post-critical method of exegesis is, however, merely a disguise for introducing past Christian readings of the texts and often for keeping Christian doctrines intact. It is therefore not astonishing that Bonhoeffer adheres to the interpretation of Genesis 2–3 as a narrative concerning the fall of Adam and Eve and the subsequent transmission of a sinful nature to their progeny (Bonhoeffer 1997:115–120). Moreover, he endorsed the idea that death is the result of the fall, and that the earth “is cursed on account of Adam’s act” (Bonhoeffer 1997:134).

Bonhoeffer unconsciously collapsed the distance which separated him from the authors who wrote Genesis 1–3 and christianized them and their texts. Commenting on the first two verses of Genesis 1, he wrote:

It is either *the evil one* who speaks or that other who speaks, the one who has been the truth from the beginning, and the way and the life, the one who was in the beginning, the very God, Christ, the Holy Spirit. No one can speak of the beginning but the one who was in the beginning (Bonhoeffer 1997:29).

Six pages later he wrote:

It means also, however, that the God of creation, of the utter beginning, is the God of the resurrection. The world exists from the beginning in the sign of the resurrection of Christ from the dead. Indeed it is because we know of the resurrection that we know of God’s creation in the beginning, of God’s *creating out of nothing* (Bonhoeffer 1997:34–35)<sup>3</sup>.

His comments on Genesis 2–3 follow the same trends. Although he acknowledges the fact that the second creation story differs from the first, he immediately relativizes this by stating that the two creation stories are merely representations of the same thing but from different perspectives. In his own words:

The first account is about humankind-for-God, the second about God-for-humankind. The first is about the

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3 Emphasis added to the translation.

Creator and Lord, the second about the fatherly God who is near at hand. The first is about humankind as the final work of God, with the whole world created before humankind, the second just the other way around ... (Bonhoeffer 1997:72).

### **3 PARADIGM SHIFT IN THE STUDY OF THE BIBLE**

When Bonhoeffer delivered his lectures on Genesis 1–3 there was already a lively debate taking place between the Swiss Old Testament scholar Ludwig Köhler (1880–1956) and the dogmatician Emil Brunner (1889–1966) concerning Genesis 2–3 (Reventlow 1985:19–27; Barr 1992:87–93). Köhler was adamant that the narrative did not concern original sin. According to him it is an etiological myth. The narrative tries to answer questions like: why do snakes not have feet and why do they slough off their skin; why is there enmity between humans and snakes; why is farming such a time-consuming and tedious task, and why do women have to suffer during childbirth? Köhler also emphasized that none of the other Old Testament books referred back to the story of Adam and Eve in order to explain sin and evil. Moreover, Jesus himself never referred back to this story in order to explain his mission. Brunner, on the other hand, referred to Paul’s interpretation as reflected in Romans 5. According to him, he would rather err with Paul than follow the type of interpretation which Köhler was advocating since his interpretation smacked of Pelagianism (Barr 1992:89)<sup>4</sup>.

Debates like these were not confined to the German-speaking world. Almost a decade before Bonhoeffer delivered his lectures Johannes Geelkerken, a minister from the Reformed Churches in the Netherlands, voiced his doubt about whether the snake mentioned in Genesis 3 really spoke. His questions created so much confusion in his congregation that the synod of the Reformed Churches had to step in. At their meeting in Assen (1926) they condemned Geelkerken and declared that the snake did speak with an audible voice (Labuschagne 1977:32; Den Heyer 1988:129–132).

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4 Pelagius held a different theological view about sin from Augustine. According to him human beings do not inherent a sinful nature. They sin when they do wrong and “wrong-doing takes place through the exercise of free choice” (Lampe 1997:160).

During these same years Johannes du Plessis (1868–1935) of the Theological Seminary at Stellenbosch introduced students and interested readers to the latest results of the research into the Pentateuch. He paid special attention to the views of the German Old Testament scholar Julius Wellhausen (1844–1918). Although Du Plessis was not an Old Testament scholar he took a keen interest in historical-critical research. His own views, which were published in the theological journal *Het Zoeklicht*, eventually led to his dismissal as a professor at the seminary (Van der Watt 1987:163–170; Deist 1994:31–154).

In the English-speaking world a number of prominent Old Testament scholars suffered the same fate. Amongst them were William Robertson Smith (1846–1894) and Charles Augustus Briggs (1841–1913) (Saebø 1995; Rogers 1997).

Scholars interested in the history of Old Testament research are of the opinion that Old Testament scholarship experienced a paradigm shift at the end of the nineteenth and the beginning of the twentieth century. Mark Noll describes the emerging new paradigm as follows: “[T]he Bible, however sublime, is a human book to be investigated with the standard assumptions that one brings to the discussion of all products of human culture” (1991:45).

The viewpoint that the Bible is a human document carrying the “fingerprints” of its authors who lived in a totally different age from later readers, was revolutionary. This can best be illustrated by looking at the paintings of Rembrandt van Rijn (1606–1669). Rembrandt was born four centuries ago and possessed seemingly little sense of the historical. He collapsed the centuries which separated him from the biblical characters which he painted, and dressed them in garments of his time and culture. Take his painting of Mary and Elizabeth as an example (Rembrandt 1960). This is a reflection of European society and culture during the seventeenth century. Rembrandt was, however, not the only artist of those days who did this<sup>5</sup>. No one living in Europe during the seventeenth century (or the centuries prior to it) had an accurate idea of what the

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5 Roger Moorey (1991:1) describes this practice as follows: “Artists who sought to portray scenes from the Bible (...) used either a wholly western idiom for costume and setting or else a vaguely oriental imagery blending fantasy with travellers’ tales.”

world in which the ancient Israelites lived, looked like. It was only during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries that people developed a sense of the historical and realised that nothing remained the same as the centuries passed. Moreover, a number of important archaeological discoveries were made during the nineteenth and twentieth century which radically changed scholars' views of the history of Israel and Judah, their religion, culture and world-view (cf. Moorey 1991; Smith 2004).

Christians living in the seventeenth century not only maintained a simplistic view of the past, they also possessed a naïve understanding of how biblical books came to be written. Almost all believed that the Holy Spirit dictated the words to the authors. Rembrandt gave us a vivid picture of this view in his painting of Matthew and the angel (Rembrandt 1960).

The new paradigm which emerged during the early decades of the twentieth century was revolutionized even further during the seventies. Biblical scholars took note of modern literary theories and applied these to their readings of biblical texts. The revolutionary nature of the new approach to the Bible is excellently expressed by the Dutch scholar Jan Fokkelman:

In narrative texts God is a character, i.e. a creation of the narrator and writer.... God can only act if the narrator is willing to tell us about it. The narrator decides whether God is allowed to say anything and if so, how often and how much (1999:58).

To ordinary Bible readers not familiar with narrative criticism this may sound heretical but the truth expressed in these sentences is acknowledged by many modern literary critics. We do not possess objective descriptions of God in the Bible but only subjective ones reflecting the views of people living in Palestine during pre-modern times.

#### **4 READING IN THE TWENTY-FIRST CENTURY**

A large number of Biblical scholars these days do not read the Bible in the same way as their colleagues in other theological departments. The above-mentioned new paradigm informs their reading and interpretation. It is thus inevitable that theological skirmishes will occur, especially if the outcomes of the new readings do not concur with traditional doctrines and interpretations. But then, why should

they? We do not live in the fourth-century Mediterranean world when the ecumenical creeds were formulated, nor do we live in the Europe of the sixteenth century when the Protestant creeds were formulated and the Council of Trent was held. We live in the twenty-first century in the global world, which totally differs from those worlds. George Pattison expresses this best: “The first and the twenty-first centuries are divided by precisely twenty centuries, twenty centuries of continual and colossal change” (1998:35).

We live in a world which is informed by the theory of evolution, by the theory of the “big bang”, and by the theory of plate tectonics, etc. We know that the earth is one of at least eight planets revolving around a star which we call the “sun”; that this solar system is part of a larger system which we call the Milky Way galaxy; that there are millions of other galaxies in the universe (Bryson 2005:12–57). We know that the earth is 4.6 billion years old; that the continents as we know them today, did not exist in this form right from the start; that geological processes which are called plate tectonics played a role in the formation of the different continents (Bryson 2005:217–233; McCarthy & Rubidge 2005:18–163). We know that human beings only recently evolved on earth; that they and the larger apes like orang-utans, gorillas, chimpanzees and bonobos share a common origin (Hilton-Barber & Berger 2002:98–115; Dawkins 2005: 36–103; McCarthy & Rubidge 2005:274–295; Bryson 2005:540–583).

With this information in mind I would like to undertake a narrative critical reading of Genesis 1–3 and thereafter I will attempt to answer the question whether a major religion can change. However, before we proceed we need to pay attention to the following statement by Daniel Marguerat and Yvan Bourquin (1999:121):

Like tennis, reading takes two to play. And for the game to be played well, both sides must have talent. Far from being reduced to a passive registration, reading is a magic which brings the text to life – for the text is dead unless it is looked at by the reader who gives it life by deciphering it.

To be able to decipher Genesis 1–3 we need knowledge of Biblical Hebrew and familiarity with the world in which the text was written. However, since I cannot bargain on the fact that all listeners present

will be able to understand the Hebrew text, I will, in fairness to all, make use of an English translation<sup>6</sup>.

## 5 A NARRATIVE CRITICAL READING OF GENESIS 1–3

Any reading of a narrative text should start with the demarcation of its boundaries. The question, “where does a story begin and end?” is of utmost importance for the proper reading and understanding of a narrative. But that is not all, the reader should try to identify the genre of the text as well. A reading can go astray if the reader makes false assumptions about the genre of the text (Coats 1985:10). Take the Jonah narrative as an example. Ordinary Bible readers tend to read it as history while scholars classify it as a satirical novel (Spangenberg 1996).

In previous centuries Christian theologians regarded Genesis 1–3 as a single creation story consisting of two episodes<sup>7</sup>. This view is still reflected in Bonhoeffer’s book *Creation and Fall*. This is rather strange since it was already widely accepted amongst German Old Testament scholars that Genesis 1–3 consists of two different stories called the P- and the J-narrative. This view is currently the dominant one in scholarly circles (Westermann 1972:13, 26–27). The boundaries of the first creation story are defined as 1:1–2:4a, while the boundaries of the second one are 2:4b–3:24. The first story ends with the words: “Such is the story of heaven and earth when they were created” (2:4a), while the second one begins with the words: “When the LORD God made earth and heaven....” (Gn 2:4b). Anyone who listens attentively will immediately recognise that the words “heaven and earth” in the first narrative are reversed in the second one to read “earth and heaven.”

The second question “what type of literature are we reading?” also elicits different answers. Ordinary Bible readers tend to regard these narratives as history. This view is inscribed in almost all the

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6 All biblical quotations are taken from the *TANAKH*-translation published by the Jewish Publication Society (1985).

7 Some dogmaticians are of the opinion that the so-called “fall of the angels” occurred between the two episodes. Herman Bavinck may serve as an example. He wrote: “Deze val had na de voltooiing van het scheppingswerk, Gen. 1:31, en vóór de ongehoorzaamheid des menschen plaats, maar word in de H. Schrift slechts nu en dan kort vermeld, Joh. 8:44, 1 Joh. 3:8, 2 Petr. 2:4, Jud.6” (Bavinck 1932:98).



Protestant creeds which were written during the sixteenth century. However, a number of Old Testament scholars are of the opinion that they are not historical texts since there was no eyewitness present to verify what was taking place. Moreover, events in the story itself reflect that it should not be read as history but as story. Both narratives could be classified as etiological narratives. This type of narrative tries to explain how specific customs, cultic practices, feasts, etc. came into being. It recounts particular events which are supposed to have originally caused these customs, practices and feasts (O'Collins & Farrugia 1991:70).

### **5.1 Giving life to Genesis 1:1–2:4a**

Since it is not possible here to pay attention to all aspects of a narrative reading I will only focus on one or two. The first and foremost aspect which needs to be looked into is the narrator (or story teller). How should we classify the narrator of this story? Since he is a person who is able to tell us about what happened when God created heaven and earth, we cannot but classify the narrator as an omniscient narrator<sup>8</sup>, who makes us “share in events which no other person has witnessed” (Marguerat & Bourquin 1999:11). He even tells us how God delights in his own creative acts (cf Gn 1:4a, 10b, 12b, 18b, 21b, 31a) and how He deliberates with the divine council before making human beings (Gn 1:26).

Bonhoeffer (1997:29) had it wrong when he argued: “No one can speak of the beginning but the one who was in the beginning”. An omniscient narrator can. But take note: the omniscient narrator is not God. God is the one about whom the story is being told. He is a character in the story and at the mercy of the narrator. The narrator allows Him to act and puts words in his mouth. God is allowed to speak on each of the six days except on the seventh. On the Sabbath He remains silent and ceases to act (Gn 2:2–3).

The opening sentences of the narrative (Gn 1:1–2) are of utmost importance for understanding how the narrator conceives of God's creative acts. Older translations of the Bible usually commence with the words: “In the beginning God created heaven

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8 Fokkelman (1999:56) identifies an important distinction when he says: “The first sentences of the Bible immediately betray one of the main characteristics of the narrator: he is *omniscient* — but in a literary rather than a theological sense.”

and earth... (Gn 1:1). Nowadays scholars prefer to translate the first three verses as follows<sup>9</sup>:

When God began to create heaven and earth — the earth being unformed and void, with darkness over the surface of the deep [water] and a wind from God sweeping over the water — God said, “Let there be light”; and there was light.

There is a definite parenthesis which reflects the state of affairs before God commenced with his work. The Hebrew word for “the deep water” (*tēhōm*) is a play on the name “Tiamat”. Hermann Gunkel (1862–1932) was the first Old Testament scholar to express the view that this story was constructed “in deliberate distinction from that of Mesopotamia (as represented by *Enuma Elish*), in which the creator god fashions the cosmos from the slain corpse of a sea monster (Tiamat)” (Heider 1999:835). In the Genesis narrative the narrator remarks that the great sea monster is part of the created order (Gn 1:21), which includes the sun, moon and stars (Gn 1:14–19). They are not gods but creations of Israel’s God<sup>10</sup>.

According to this introduction chaos reigned before God started to create. He organized “chaos into cosmos” (Benjamin 1997:39; Gerstenberger 2002:242). The idea of creation out of nothing (*creatio ex nihilo*) which plays such an important role in Christian theological reflections is not rooted in the text. Bonhoeffer (1997:34–35) was off the mark when he linked creation with resurrection, as if the first creation narrative, and the narratives about Jesus’ resurrection, concern creation out of nothing.

Throughout the story it is evident that the narrator uses a minimum of expressions to inform the reader how creation unfolded. Each subsequent day exhibits the same pattern of events. The day commences with God commanding something to happen. Then it

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9 McKenzie (2005:179) discusses the difference in some detail.

10 Hans Heinrich Schmid’s remarks are typical of an Old Testament scholar writing for ordinary Bible readers. Ancient and modern views are not kept separate but intertwined: “Hier sagt die Bibel entscheiden: Nein. Nein, Tiâmat, tehôm, ‘Urflut’ is keine Göttin, sonder ganz gewöhnliches Wasser, H2O. Der Himmel is kein Himmels-gott, sondern lediglich ein festes Gewölbe aus durchsichtigem Material, durch das man die Wasser über dem Himmel sieht — darum auch ist der Himmel blau” (Schmid 1975:39).

happens, or in some cases God creates what He has commanded. This is followed with narrative comments about God’s approval of what has transpired. What has been created is then given a name before the narrator informs the reader that yet another day has passed. The pattern can be represented as follows (McKenzie 2005:31):

God said: “Let there be A.”  
 And there was A / So God made A  
 God saw that A was good.  
 God called A “A.”  
 And there was evening and there was morning, day X<sup>11</sup>.

Apart from the repetitive expressions, the first three days and the last three form a symmetrical structure. Day four is related to day one; day five is related to day two, and day six is related to day three. On the first three days the “environments” for the “inhabitants” of the last three days are created. This structure may be described as follows (Bandstra 1995:62; McKenzie 2005:33):

<b>DAY</b>	<b>ENVIRONMENT</b>	<b>DAY</b>	<b>INHABITANT</b>
Day 1	Light	Day 4	Sun, moon & stars
Day 2	Sky and sea	Day 5	Birds & fish
Day 3a	Dry land	Day 6a	Animals
Day 3b	Vegetation	Day 6b	Humans
<b><i>On the seventh day God finished the work that He had been doing</i></b>			

It is evident from the diagram that it took eight acts of God to bring everything in the cosmos into being. However, these eight acts are compacted into “six days by placing two installments on days three and six” (McKenzie 2005:33). The author deliberately did this so that his God-character was able to rest on the Sabbath. Genesis 1:1–2:4a is first and foremost an etiological narrative concerning the Sabbath. The creation story is told primarily to recount the origin of the Sabbath, and to legitimize its celebration. The celebration of the

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11 An important variation occurs on day six when humans are created. The second act on day six is introduced with the words: “Let us make man into our image, after our likeness” (Gn 1:26). God consults the divine council before He creates human beings: something which He did not do before.

Sabbath gained in importance during the Babylonian exile, probably because of the taboo-days which the Babylonians celebrated. By means of this feast the Jews confirmed their identity in a foreign country.

Throughout the narrative the three-decker universe (heaven, earth and water) is ever present (Janowski 2001:25). Therefore readers who try to merge the ancient Israelite worldview with our present one, and thereby collapse the distance which separates the narrator of this story from readers living in the twenty-first century, treat the author and his narrative with disrespect.

## 5.2 Giving life to Genesis 2:4b–3:24

Interesting similarities and differences exist between the second and the first creation story. First of all, this story begins with the same grammatical structure as the previous one. It commences with a temporal clause which is interrupted by a parenthesis describing the conditions at the time of God’s first creative deed before the deed itself is mentioned (McKenzie 2005:34):

	<b>Genesis 1:1–3</b>	<b>Genesis 2:4b–7</b>
<i>Temporal Clause</i>	When God began to create heaven and earth	When the LORD God made earth and heaven
<i>Parenthetical description</i>	— the earth being unformed and void, with darkness over the surface of the deep [water] and a wind from God sweeping over the water —	— when no shrub of the field was yet on earth and no grasses of the field had yet sprouted, because the LORD God had not sent rain upon the earth and there was no man to till the soil, but a flow would well up from the ground and water the whole surface of the earth —
<i>First deed</i>	God said, “Let there be light”; and there was light.	The LORD God formed man from the dust of the earth.

However, in this case a human being is important for the completion of creation. He is needed to till the soil. He is a co-creator but mortal, since he is created from the soil of the earth. Nothing in the narrative suggests that he was created immortal (Von Rad 1976:95; Barr 1992:21). Later on in the narrative it becomes evident that the

human beings could have gained immortality if they had eaten from the fruit of the tree of life. But they did not, and in the end were driven out of the garden to prevent them from taking hold of this fruit (Gn 3:23–24).

The second creation story, like the first one, is narrated by an omniscient narrator who is able to tell the reader exactly what happened in the garden of Eden. However, this time the main character is not God but the male and female human beings. The story is all about how they gained *divine knowledge*.

An important difference which is rather puzzling for some Bible readers is the God character of this story. He differs considerably from the God character of the first narrative. Here He is very humanlike. He walks around in the garden, visits the human beings, talks with them face to face and even makes them garments. He is not omniscient, since He has to call on the humans to discover where they are hiding. He is even obliged to enquire where they acquired the knowledge that they are naked. He is undoubtedly clad, since the human beings would not have worried about being naked if He too had been naked. He is an adroit tailor knowing exactly how to make proper clothes.

The second creation story may be classified as an etiological narrative if we take Ferdinand Deist's definition as guide<sup>12</sup>. The narrator explains why humans possess *divine knowledge*, but not *divine life*, that is, they are able to distinguish between good and bad, but they do not live forever. The mentioning of the tree of life in the closing paragraph of the tale (Gn 3:22–24) has always perplexed scholars (Westermann 1972:27–28; Von Rad 1976:78) since it is only once referred to in the rest of the story (Gn 2:9). However, it takes up the exact position which the Sabbath occupies in the previous narrative, thus reflecting its importance. Although James Barr is hesitant to classify the story as an etiological narrative, his reading does bring him to the conclusion that "it is a story of how human immortality was almost gained, but in fact was lost" (1992:4).

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12 Deist (1990:87) defines etiology as follows: "An explanation or answer offered in response to a question about origins. Explaining an otherwise incomprehensible phenomenon by means of a quasi-historical answer, e.g. explaining the existence of the rainbow by means of the story of the flood."

There is a humorous confusion in the narrative about the tree standing in the middle of the garden. Is the *tree of life* in the middle (Gn 2:9b) or the *tree of knowledge of good and bad* (Gn 3:3), or are both situated in the middle? (Gn 2:9b & 9c)<sup>13</sup>. The narrator creates this confusion and then takes advantage of it in order to create tension in the narrative. When the serpent addresses the female human being and puts her knowledge to the test the reader wonders whether she will be able to supply the correct answer. He asks: “Did God really say: You shall not eat of any tree of the garden?” (Gn 3:3:1)<sup>14</sup>. The answer which she gives reveals that Adam did inform her. She is not ignorant. However, her answer reveals that she is not able to identify the specific tree. She merely says: “the fruit of the tree in the middle of the garden” (Gn 3:3). Since the narrator earlier informed the reader that both trees are located in the middle of the garden (Gn 2:9b & 9c) the reader wonders which one she is referring to. Is she referring to *the tree of life*, or is she referring to *the tree of knowledge of good and bad*?

As soon as the serpent continues with the dialogue the reader realises that the serpent is well informed. He knows that the LORD God forbade Adam to eat from the tree of knowledge of good and bad (Gn 2:17). But the serpent knows even more. He is aware that the fruit of the tree will not cause death but will supply the human beings with wisdom. When they eat from the fruit they will become wise like God. They will be able to distinguish between good and bad. The serpent thus assists the humans in attaining divine knowledge! But in this way he prevents them from attaining immortality by not offering them the fruit of the *tree of life*.

We all know how the story further unfolds. The female takes the fruit, eats — and stays alive! She immediately offers some of the fruit to her companion. He takes it, eats — and stays alive! The serpent did not tell a lie. Nobody dies. But the knowledge which

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13 Some scholars developed the idea that two traditions have been conflated in Genesis 2–3 in order to explain the “impossibility” of two trees standing in the middle of the garden. According to them there was a “tree of life” tradition and a “tree of the knowledge of good and bad” tradition.

14 This character is not the Satan whom some later Jewish and Christian readers have construed (Von Rad 1976:87; Tucker 1978:117). The narrator employed an ancient Near Eastern motif of the serpent stealing eternal life from a human being.

they gained had an unexpected effect: it suddenly dawns on them that they are naked while God Himself is clothed! The narrator suggests that being naked is not good. It is not godlike. Since the human beings now possess divine knowledge they ought to behave like God and put on garments. The male and female thus make themselves clothes. Being inexperienced, they merely took fig leaves and made loincloths (Gn 3:7). Later on in the narrative the LORD God will make them proper attire from animal skin (Gn 3:21).

When the LORD God arrives on the scene — clothed as behoves a god — He has to deal with an unexpected situation. The human beings now possess divine knowledge. However, He does not react as if He has been angered. Quite the contrary. He enquires about the source of their knowledge that they were naked. After getting to the gist of the matter, He makes the different characters pay for this acquisition. Gaining *divine knowledge* comes with a price. The serpent will be forced to crawl on the ground during the rest of his life for offering the fruit. Moreover, there will be enmity between him and the woman; between his progeny and hers (Gn 3:14–15). Why? Perhaps because serpents slough their skin, this gives the impression that they possess divine life. They can regenerate themselves.

The price which the woman will be obliged to pay for gaining divine knowledge comprises the experiencing of pangs during childbirth and being subservient to her husband (Gn 3:16). The price which the man will have to pay is working hard in order to eke out a living (Gn 3:17–19). However, death is not part of the price. The narrator merely states that the man will pay the price until death.

Genesis 2:4b–3:24 is thus *not* an etiological narrative about original sin and death as punishment, though so many theologians in the West have read and interpreted it like this, ever since Augustine (354–430). Sibley Towner (1984:81) quite correctly observes:

There is no Fall in scripture, if by Fall one means the doctrine of the shattering of the divine image in humankind, the loss of immortality at an early moment in human history, and the inexorable transmission of the original sin through human genes ever after. There is no account of the origin of evil and no primeval encounter with Satan.

How do we know this? First of all, the fact that this is a story and not history. There never was a real Adam. He is a character in a story, like the serpent. Moreover, the Hebrew word for “sin” is nowhere used in the narrative (Tucker 1978:119; Primavesi 2000:30). None of the other biblical books ever refer to this story in order to explain the origin of sin and mortality. It is worth noting that a growing number of biblical scholars emphasize that “original sin” does not form part of Jesus’ message (Holman 1986:39; Barr 1988:61; Benjamin 1997:47–48). We all know that death is a natural event and that human beings are not exempt from death (Primavesi 1991:228; Eloff 1975:15; Weber 1998:106). The ancient Israelites shared this realistic view about death, which, according to them, is only “unnatural” when it arrives before a person has lived a full life.

Augustine was not a talented reader of the Hebrew Bible. To speak the truth — he could only read Latin and a little bit of Greek (Freeman 2003:294). He committed a grave error by reading the narrative as an etiological narrative about original sin and by linking “original sin” with sexual desire and thus denigrating sexuality. The two humans in the story were not a-sexual before they ate from the fruit. The narrator does not suggest that “knowing good and bad” should be linked to “the knowledge or consciousness of sexuality” (Rosenberg & Bloom 1990:183). Moreover, Augustine’s ideas contributed to the denigration of women in the church and in Western society. This is indeed part of the “sad legacy” of Christianity (Benjamin 1997:50).

## **6 CAN A MAJOR RELIGION CHANGE?<sup>15</sup>**

As stated in the introduction, a large number of theologians have always regarded Genesis 1–3 as “an accurate account of the beginning of the world and of the history of humankind” (De Gruchy 1997:6). According to their interpretation God created a perfect world in the beginning out of nothing (Gn 1–2). However, this perfect world collapsed after the “fall” which is narrated in Genesis 3. The disobedience of the first male and female human beings was said to have had detrimental effects. Humans were supposed to have lived for ever, but death was introduced as the punishment for “original sin”. Yet God not only punished humans, He was so

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15 I give credit to Eugene Ulrich (2004:18) who formulated this question in his article concerning the effects of the study of the Dead Sea Scrolls.



aggrieved that He even cursed the whole of creation. Augustine's theological interpretation of Genesis 1–3 exerted a powerful influence on Western Christianity, as is evident from the book by Dietrich Bonhoeffer<sup>16</sup>. However, more and more biblical scholars working within the new paradigm are questioning Augustine's interpretation. Moreover, paleontology and evolutionary biology have revealed beyond doubt that “there has been death since the origin of life on earth” (Weber 1998:106). James Barr (1992:92) quite correctly points out: “If people believe in ‘the Fall’, in ‘original sin’ and the like, they do so not because of what they have read in Genesis, but on other grounds”.

The question “can a major religion change?” — formulated in the title of my lecture — should be answered with a “yes”. What reasons can be given? First of all, religions do not possess lives of their own. They are interpretive systems which assist humans in making sense of existence (Theissen 1999:2). When Christians accept the outcomes of scientific research into the Bible, and scientific research at large, the old interpretive system inevitably comes under pressure. It must change if it wishes to serve as an interpretive system for humans living in the third millennium. The history of Israel may serve as a lesson in this regard as Bob Becking recently wrote: “Over the years the Israelites were urged by the circumstance to make choices and to reformulate their faith. Modern believers should feel free to do the same when necessary” (Becking 2001:200).

We may reformulate our understanding of who we are, where we come from and where we are heading to. We may reformulate our understanding of the divine and rethink the message of Jesus. We need not be captives of Augustine's interpretations. Dietrich Bonhoeffer did exactly this — he revised his views while he was in prison during the last years of his life. His thoughts, published as *Letters and Papers from Prison*, reveal that he was sensing that humans were changing because of what they were experiencing during World War Two. In a letter written to a cousin on the latter's baptism he wrote: “By the time you are grown up, the form of the Church will have changed beyond recognition” (Bonhoeffer

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16 Charles Freeman (2003:277–312) wrote an excellent chapter on Augustine's influence.

1956:140). He was, however, too hopeful and idealistic about changes in the church, as Anne Primavesi (1991:117) remarks: “Nearly fifty years later, the form of the church seems to have changed very little”. But changes are occurring — not always inside the church as Bonhoeffer hoped, but more often than not, outside it. Biblical scholars are currently playing a vital role in these changes since they are better equipped than Augustine in reading the Hebrew and Greek Bibles. I would therefore like to end this lecture with the words of Maurice Wiles (1999:74):

So giving expression to Christian belief is never a matter of simply being faithful to the teachings of the past, of preserving the deposits of truth as it has been handed on to us by previous generations. Every generation has the task of constructing forms of belief and practice appropriate to its own times and culture.

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