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ADAM AND THE FALL IN THE BIBLE AND THE QUR'AN: A COMPARATIVE STUDY OF SYMBOLISM AND THEOLOGICAL ANTHROPOLOGY

Abstract

The article offers a comparative theological and symbolic analysis of the Adam narrative in the Book of Genesis and the Qur'an, focusing on its implications for anthropological, ethical, and soteriological constructs within Christian and Islamic traditions. Both texts recount the creation of Adam from earthly material, the divine breath, the command not to eat from a forbidden tree, the act of disobedience, and the subsequent exile. Yet beneath these structural parallels lie profound theological divergences. The Genesis narrative emphasizes rupture: Adam and Eve's transgression introduces original sin, hereditary guilt, and the need for divine redemption, culminating in Christian doctrines of atonement and grace. Influenced especially by Augustinian theology, this view sees the human will as impaired and salvation as dependent on Christ's redemptive work.

By contrast, the Qur'anic retelling reframes the fall as a moral error, immediately followed by repentance (*tawbah*) and divine mercy (*raḥma*). Adam's mistake is not inherited by his descendants; instead, each individual is responsible for their own moral choices. The Qur'an portrays human beings as created in a state of *fitrah* (primordial purity), endowed with free will and moral agency, and continually guided by prophetic revelation. Rather than legalistic satisfaction, salvation in Islam is achieved through sincere repentance and ethical living.

The article explores four core dimensions – human origin, sin and the fall, repentance and mercy, and free will and moral agency – and demonstrates how typological and symbolic distinctions between the texts contribute to distinct theological anthropologies. While Genesis often leads to a pessimistic view of human nature, mitigated only by divine intervention, the Qur'an presents a more rehabilitative, hopeful model of moral growth. This comparative inquiry not only clarifies doctrinal differences but also opens space for interfaith reflection on shared concerns regarding divine justice, human responsibility, and the possibility of redemption.

Keywords: Adam, sin, fall, divine mercy, free will.

Introduction

The figure of Adam is a primordial archetype in both the Judeo-Christian and Islamic traditions. While the Genesis narrative emphasizes a theological rupture through original sin, the Qur'anic depiction avoids this framework, instead highlighting divine mercy and the educational function of moral failure. These differences underscore profound divergences in the understanding of sin, free will, and salvation history. Through a comparative examination, this article investigates the symbolic and typological dimensions of the Adam narrative and its implications for theological anthropology in both traditions.

Human Origin: Creation of Adam as Archetype

Both the Bible and the Qur'an present Adam as the primordial human, created directly by God, and as a prototype for the human condition. In Genesis 2:7, Adam is formed *"from the dust of the ground"*, and God *"breathed into his nostrils the breath of life; and the man became a living being"*. This description emphasizes Adam's earthly origin and divine animation, marking a dual nature of material fragility and spiritual vitality. The motif of dust functions theologically to underscore humanity's

mortality and dependence on God, themes echoed in later Jewish and Christian reflections (Wenham 1987, 60-65; Middleton 2005, 25-30).

The Qur'an parallels this creation narrative by describing Adam as created "from clay" (*ṭīn*), further developed into "black mud altered" (*ḥamaʾin masnūn*) and "sounding clay" (*ṣalṣāl*) in various passages (Qur'an 15:26; 38:71-72). In Qur'an 3:59, the divine act is summarized: *"He created him from clay, then said to him, 'Be!' and he was."* This Qur'anic formulation mirrors the Biblical idea of creation through divine breath, but it reconfigures it through the Islamic theological principle of divine command (*kun fa-yakūn*), which underscores the immediacy and omnipotence of God's creative word (Nasr et al. 2015, 178-180).

However, the Qur'an introduces additional theological layers that distinguish its anthropological vision. In Qur'an 2:30, Adam's creation is situated within a cosmic discourse about divine purpose and human vocation: *"I am going to place a vicegerent [khalīfa] on earth."* The notion of *khalīfa* (vicegerent or steward) conveys not merely dominion over creation – as in Genesis 1:28 – but a moral and spiritual trusteeship, entrusting humanity with the responsibility to uphold justice, cultivate the earth, and live in accordance with divine guidance (Rahman 1982, 16-21; Sachedina 2001, 45-50). This concept grants humans a teleological significance beyond biological origin, suggesting that creation was not a passive event but a call to ethical and metaphysical responsibility.

Furthermore, the Qur'an's narrative introduces an epistemic dimension largely absent from Genesis: God teaches Adam "the names of all things" (*asmāʾa kullahā*) (Qur'an 2:31). According to classical and modern exegetes, this act signifies humanity's unique capacity for language, cognition, and classification – tools necessary for engaging with the world and fulfilling the role of *khalīfa* (Al-Rāzī [d. 1210] in Nasr et al. 2015, 52; Izutsu 2002, 45-49). This moment also has ontological implications: it affirms that humans are not merely reactive beings, but self-aware and knowledge-bearing entities capable of moral discernment and self-direction (Kamali 2001, 98-100).

In contrast, the Genesis account's emphasis lies more on relational and agricultural motifs – Adam is placed in the Garden "to till it and keep it" (Gen. 2:15) – rather than a formal assignment of moral vicegerency. While both texts affirm human dignity and divine proximity, the Qur'anic Adam is a pedagogical subject and moral agent, symbolizing humanity's potential for learning, moral failure, and return to God through repentance and obedience.

Sin and the Fall: Disobedience and Its Consequences

The biblical account of the Fall, as presented in Genesis 3, constitutes one of the most theologically significant moments in Christian anthropology and soteriology. In this narrative, Adam and Eve, tempted by the serpent, eat from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, directly violating God's command (Gen. 2:17; 3:1-6). The immediate consequences include a loss of innocence ("they realized they were naked" – Gen. 3:7), the introduction of shame and alienation, and the imposition of divine judgment upon all parties involved. God's pronouncement – *"Cursed is the ground because of you... By the sweat of your brow you will eat your food until you return to the ground"* (Gen. 3:17-19) – establishes suffering, labor, and mortality as the new human condition.

Theologically, this episode forms the foundation of the doctrine of original sin, particularly as articulated by Saint Augustine in the 4th-5th century CE. Drawing on Romans 5:12, which states that *"sin came into the world through one man, and death through sin,"* Augustine argued that all human beings inherit a sinful nature from Adam, transmitted biologically and spiritually through human generation (Brown 1967, 371-373; Williams 2005, 91). This view became central to Western Christian theology, especially within Roman Catholicism and much of Protestantism, forming the backdrop for doctrines of atonement and the necessity of Christ's redemptive sacrifice. In this framework, Adam is not merely a historical figure but a typological prototype, whose fall is reversed by Christ, described by Paul as the "second Adam" who brings life and righteousness (1 Corinthians 15:22, 45; cf. Romans 5:18-19) (Wright 2003, 82-89).

In sharp contrast, the Qur'anic account reframes this event through a different theological lens. While Adam and his spouse do disobey God's command not to approach the forbidden tree (Qur'an 2:35; 7:19; 20:121), the Qur'an deliberately avoids constructing a doctrine of hereditary guilt or cosmic rupture. Instead, the Qur'an presents Adam's error as a personal moral lapse – a moment of forgetfulness rather than rebellion (Qur'an 20:115). More importantly, this lapse is followed by an act of divine mercy: *"Then Adam received words from his Lord, and He turned toward him. Truly, He is the Accepting of*

Repentance, the Merciful" (Qur'an 2:37). This passage foregrounds repentance (*tawbah*) as a divinely-endorsed response to human fallibility and affirms God's attribute of mercy over judgment (Izutsu 2002, 137-139; Rahman 1982, 31-33).

Moreover, the Qur'an places the fall not as the origin of sin but as part of a pedagogical process through which humanity learns moral responsibility. The banishment from paradise (Qur'an 2:38; 7:24) is not viewed as a punishment inherited by all progeny, but as a necessary relocation to a realm of testing (*al-dunyā*), where divine guidance is provided: *"When guidance comes to you from Me, whoever follows My guidance will have no fear, nor shall they grieve"* (Qur'an 2:38). In Islamic theology, therefore, humans are born in a state of purity (*fitrah*) and moral potential, not in sin (Kamali 1998, 93-95). The Islamic narrative thus emphasizes human agency, divine forgiveness, and personal accountability, in contrast to the more juridical and inherited conception of sin in much of Christian tradition.

Consequently, while both traditions recognize disobedience as a fundamental part of the human story, their theological interpretations of its significance diverge profoundly. Christianity, especially in its Augustinian and Pauline forms, stresses inherited guilt and the necessity of redemptive grace through Christ. Islam, by contrast, situates the fall within a framework of divine pedagogy, moral growth, and continuous guidance, underscoring the possibility of redemption through repentance without the mediation of an atoning figure. This divergence illustrates not only differing theological premises but also distinct understandings of human nature, sin, and the role of divine mercy.

Repentance and Divine Mercy

The theme of repentance and divine mercy occupies a critical yet differently nuanced place in the Genesis and Qur'anic narratives of Adam's fall. In the Genesis account (Gen. 3:1-24), Adam and Eve's post-transgression behavior reflects shame and fear rather than formal penitence. Upon realizing their nakedness, they cover themselves and hide from God, suggesting a broken relationship (Gen. 3:7-10). Yet the narrative offers no direct record of a verbal confession, appeal for mercy, or divine pronouncement of forgiveness. Instead, the theological weight is placed upon the consequences of sin: the cursing of the serpent and the ground, the pain of childbirth, the hardship of labor, and the couple's expulsion from Eden (Gen. 3:14-19, 23). The silence on forgiveness, as some scholars argue, reflects the narrative's emphasis on divine justice and the establishment of a moral order in which disobedience has enduring consequences (Wenham 1987, 80-85; Brueggemann 2010, 48-50).

In contrast, the Qur'anic account explicitly centers the theological themes of repentance (*tawbah*) and divine mercy (*raḥma*). After their disobedience, Adam and his wife immediately turn back to God, who in turn responds with forgiveness: *"Then Adam received from his Lord [some] words, and He turned toward him. Indeed, He is the Accepting of Repentance, the Merciful"* (Qur'an 2:37). This verse is crucial in Islamic theology as it establishes the paradigm that sin, even primordial sin, does not irreparably sever the human-divine relationship. Rather, moral failure is framed as part of human nature, and repentance is presented as both accessible and effective (Nasr et al. 2015, 55; Rahman 1982, 31-34).

The Qur'an repeatedly affirms God's attributes as *al-Raḥmān* (The Most Merciful) and *al-Raḥīm* (The Especially Merciful) – terms that appear in nearly every surah and in the *basmalah* (Qur'an 1:1). These divine names are not merely descriptive but ontological affirmations of God's disposition toward creation. According to Islamic theology, God's mercy *precedes* His wrath (cf. Hadith Qudsi: *"My mercy prevails over My wrath"*), making mercy a foundational aspect of divine governance rather than a contingent or exceptional act (Kamali 1998, 93; Izutsu 2002, 199-202).

This stands in contrast to dominant Christian soteriological models, particularly in Western theology, where divine forgiveness is often mediated through substitutionary atonement – the belief that Christ's sacrificial death satisfies divine justice on behalf of sinners (Rom. 5:8-19; Heb. 9:22). In the Augustinian tradition, human beings are incapable of achieving reconciliation with God on their own due to the inherited stain of original sin (Williams 2005, 87-92). Forgiveness, therefore, is contingent upon divine grace enacted through the person of Christ. While Eastern Christianity offers more therapeutic or restorative models (such as theosis), Western theology has largely emphasized a juridical structure of sin and redemption, wherein mercy is granted within a legal framework of satisfaction (Anselm 1998, 20-33; Gunton 2002, 78-81).

The Qur'an's model, in contrast, is rehabilitative rather than punitive. Adam's narrative becomes a didactic example for all humanity – sin is real, but so is the possibility of reform. As such, repentance is

an act of hope, not despair, and forgiveness is an act of divine generosity, not a legal transaction. This view aligns with the broader Qur'anic vision of human beings as fallible yet dignified moral agents, endowed with freedom and always capable of return (*rujūʿ*) to God's mercy (Qur'an 39:53). The Qur'an thereby creates an anthropology grounded not in inherited guilt, but in personal responsibility and divine compassion, underscoring a theology of hope and return rather than condemnation and exclusion (Sachedina 2001, 52-55).

Free Will and Moral Agency

The question of free will and moral agency lies at the heart of the fall narratives in both the Bible and the Qur'an, yet the two traditions articulate markedly different theological anthropologies. In the Genesis account, the decision to eat from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil is made by Adam and Eve, but it is significantly mediated by the serpent, who functions as a tempter and deceiver (Gen. 3:1-6). The presence of this external agent introduces ambiguity regarding moral responsibility, raising questions about the degree of autonomy exercised by the human couple. While the act is a clear violation of divine command, the role of the serpent – later equated with Satan in Christian tradition (Rev. 12:9) – renders human agency influenced if not compromised by a malevolent force. This ambiguity became central to Augustine's doctrine of concupiscence, which holds that the original act of disobedience resulted in a hereditary moral disorder, rendering all human beings incapable of choosing the good without divine grace (Augustine 1991 34-36; Brown 1967, 377-380). In this framework, free will remains ontologically intact, but is functionally impaired, requiring the salvific intervention of Christ to restore human moral capacity (Williams 2005, 89).

In contrast, the Qur'anic perspective presents a robust affirmation of human free will and personal moral responsibility. While Satan (Iblīs) tempts Adam and his wife (Qur'an 7:20; 20:120), the text carefully maintains that the act of disobedience was their own conscious choice: *"But Satan whispered to them to make apparent to them that which was concealed of their private parts... So he caused them to fall by deception"* (Qur'an 7:20-22). Unlike the Christian doctrine of original sin, which externalizes the origin of evil to a cosmic fault line within creation, the Qur'anic narrative resists transferring blame to external forces. Instead, Adam's sin is treated as a moral error with personal consequences, followed by sincere repentance and divine forgiveness (Qur'an 2:37). The moral agent remains accountable, not inherently depraved.

Moreover, the Qur'an's depiction of Iblīs himself reinforces the Islamic emphasis on agency. When God commands the angels and Iblīs to bow before Adam, Iblīs refuses out of pride, declaring, *"I am better than him: You created me from fire and him from clay"* (Qur'an 7:12). His rebellion is presented not as the result of compulsion or inherent evil, but as a deliberate and arrogant choice. As such, both humans and jinn are endowed with free will and are subject to divine testing: *"And say: The truth is from your Lord. So whoever wills – let him believe; and whoever wills – let him disbelieve"* (Qur'an 18:29). This theological anthropology posits human beings as morally capable and ontologically responsible agents, created in a state of natural purity (*fitrah*) and inclined toward recognizing God (Qur'an 30:30; Izutsu 2002, 251-254).

In Islamic theology, *fitrah* plays a foundational role in discussions of human moral potential. It suggests that human beings are not born sinful but are naturally disposed toward truth and virtue, though susceptible to external corruption. This stands in stark contrast to Augustinian anthropology, where the will is enslaved by sin from birth. As Fazlur Rahman (1982, 21-23) explains, the Qur'anic view of free will is existential and moral, emphasizing ongoing choices and accountability, rather than inherited guilt or metaphysical bondage. Thus, sin is a deviation, not an ontological flaw, and divine mercy is always accessible through conscious return (*tawbah*).

This Islamic framework of moral agency fosters a theology of hope, effort, and personal responsibility, which shapes Islamic jurisprudence, ethics, and pedagogy. While both traditions recognize the reality of temptation and moral failure, their interpretations of its origin, mechanism, and consequences diverge sharply. Christianity, particularly in its Western tradition, often interprets human disobedience through the lens of original sin and divine grace, whereas Islam views it as an outcome of free choice within the bounds of a divinely guided cosmos.

Conclusion

The Adam narrative in both Genesis and the Qur'an offers a foundational framework for understanding human origins, sin, and divine interaction. Despite their shared symbolic motifs – creation from dust or clay, the prohibition of a specific tree, temptation by a deceiver, and eventual expulsion from an ideal state – the narratives diverge significantly in their theological underpinnings and interpretive trajectories. In Genesis, the fall of Adam and Eve is portrayed as a cosmic rupture, a paradigmatic act of disobedience that introduces original sin into the human condition. This narrative lays the groundwork for much of Christian soteriology, which posits a fallen humanity in need of divine redemption through the atoning work of Christ, the "second Adam" (cf. Rom. 5:12-21; 1 Cor. 15:22, 45). The emphasis here is on hereditary guilt, alienation from God, and the need for salvific mediation.

By contrast, the Qur'anic retelling of the Adam story reframes the fall not as an ontological catastrophe but as a moral lapse within a pedagogical context. Adam's act of disobedience is followed by sincere repentance (*tawbah*) and immediate divine forgiveness (*raḥma*), signaling that while human beings are fallible, they remain morally competent and spiritually recoverable. There is no notion of inherited sin; instead, each individual is accountable for his or her own actions (Qur'an 6:164; 53:38-39). The Qur'anic anthropology thus preserves the dignity and responsibility of the human being, who is born in a state of *fitrah* – a primordial purity inclined toward good – and tested through free will and moral choices. In this view, divine mercy is not contingent upon sacrificial atonement but is accessible through moral effort, self-awareness, and sincere return to God.

Ultimately, the Adam narratives in the Bible and the Qur'an encapsulate distinct visions of what it means to be human – visions that continue to resonate across centuries of theological interpretation and spiritual reflection. The comparative study of these narratives not only clarifies doctrinal divergences but also opens space for mutual understanding, highlighting shared concerns about human responsibility, divine justice, and the enduring hope for reconciliation between the human and the divine.

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