

Sin, Authority, and Trauma

By Jim Wibberding, D. Min.

Sin as Damage

The premise that sin inflicts damage on humans suggests that sin creates trauma. One dimension of the interplay between sin and trauma is human authority; its procurement, direction, and use.

While social and behavioral scientists are best equipped to analyze the nature and treatment of trauma itself, theology may speak to its origins through sin. Understanding specific ways sin damages human experience may inform the social sciences but certainly informs the practice of religion, if we wish to mitigate its traumatic affects and improve religion's healing potential.

Human Authority in the Biblical Origin Story

The biblical narratives show that an early and prominent feature of sin is a shift in human authority. Its procurement, direction, and use are at the center of this change.

In the first chapter of Genesis, authority is a feature of God's image and likeness. The text reads, "So God created mankind in his own image, in the image of God he created them; male and female he created them. God blessed them and said to them, 'Be fruitful and increase in number; fill the earth and subdue it. Rule over the fish in the sea and the birds in the sky and over every living creature that moves on the ground.'" (Genesis 1:27-28 NIV).

To the extent this pericope defines the "image and likeness" of God, it defines it by relationship ("male and female"), production, and authority. The verbs are "be fruitful" (פָּרָה), "multiply" (רָבָה), "fill" (מָלֵא), "subdue" (כָּבַשׁ), and "rule" (רָדָה). The humans procure authority as a gift from God and direct it toward land and animals. The next chapter describes the posture of its use in Eden; "to work it [עָבַד; "serve"] and take care of it [שָׁמַר; "protect" or "guard"]" (Genesis 2:15).

The Fall narrative in Genesis 3 depicts changes in the procurement, direction, and use of authority. These changes point to ways sin might damage—or traumatize—humans.

At the tale's pivotal moment, the serpent tempts the woman with a promise that she will "be like God;" כְּאֱלֹהִים (Genesis 3:5). This speaks to authority, with the preposition "like"

(זָ) having the force of equality. The tempter promises to move humans from equal with a likeness of God (כְּדִמוּתוֹ) to equal with God (כְּאֱלֹהִים). It proves to be the clenching argument, so she eats the forbidden fruit, and the man does the same. Their procurement of authority is not, as before, a gift from God. It is theft. This, in turn, changes the direction and use of authority among humans.

Post-Fall authority shifts its direction as the two humans attempt to subdue and rule each other. They go beyond their God-given purview over land and animals. Each tries to be God to the other. The text captures their authority struggle in God's warning to the woman, "Your desire [תַּשׁוּקָה; "stretching out after"] will be for your husband, but he will rule [תִּשָּׁל; "have dominion"] over you" (Genesis 3:16). The direction, or object, of human authority shifted from caring for land and animals to ruling other humans.

The use of post-Fall authority also shifts, from serving and protecting to exploiting. Over time, this becomes apparent regarding the natural world but is, in the immediate aftermath of that first sin, clear in human relations. Genesis 4 portrays the shift through the story of Cain and Abel, where Cain exerts control over Abel to the extreme of extinguishing his life. In 4:7, God pairs the same terms for "desire" and "rule" from 3:16 in his attempt to prevent the tragedy. This links God's first warning about sinful authority with the harm done to Abel.

The misdirection and misuse of authority resulting from illicit procurement of God's authority fractured human love in three prominent ways. First, it fractured Gender equality, moving from co-rule of creation to one ruling the other (see Genesis 1:26-28; 3:16). Second, it introduced class disparity, with its forms of compulsory service or slavery, mentioned first in Genesis 9:25 using עֶבֶד. Third, it created ethnic conflicts, with the cloistering effect of language dispersion at Babel (see Genesis 11:1-9) festering ethnic hatred.

Human Authority in Ancient Israel's Power Structures

Authority in the biblical origin story—with its illicit procurement, misdirection, and misuse—might explain the unusual power structures of Israel. As God built his nation to bless all nations (see Genesis 22:18), it should not surprise us that he moved his people away from these sinful authority practices—at least as an idealized trajectory.

From inception, the power structures of Israel lacked hierarchy. When God called Abram to father a nation, promising "all peoples on earth will be blessed through you" (Genesis 12:3 NIV), Abram had no throne. When God called Moses to lead that nation from

Egypt to their Promised Land, he had no throne. When God called Joshua to lead that nation into their Promised Land, he had no throne.

For the first 450 years in the Promised Land, prophets and judges led God's nation (see Acts 13:20), without law enforcement or the other usual coercives. Although Moses had foreseen the prospect of a king (see Deuteronomy 17:14-20), God resisted monarchy for centuries. Why would God invite a human to subdue and rule other humans as part of his plan to save them from sin, when that impulse to be "like God" was the original sin?

When Israel demanded, "now appoint a king to lead us, such as all the other nations have" (1 Samuel 8:5 NIV), God called it a rejection of his authority and warned that a king would abuse their authority (verses 6-18). The people insisted, so God let them have one (verses 19-22). Moses' idealistic hope of a king who would "not consider himself better than his fellow Israelites" (Deuteronomy 17:20) proved vain, as the impulse to "be like God" corrupted each king's authority.

Human Authority in the New Testament Church

By New Testament times, Israel found itself with scant national authority, but they dreamed of its return. When God-incarnate began to teach on the shores of Galilee, it stoked their dreams of a messianic king. How did God respond? "Jesus, knowing that they intended to come and make him king by force, withdrew again to a mountain by himself" (John 6:15 NIV). Jesus rejected a human throne, multiple times. The pattern of God moving his people away from hierarchies of authority continued.

John does not explain Christ's reason for rejecting a throne, but Jesus provided a clear teaching on authority. With ambitions of crowing Jesus king in the backdrop, James and John enlisted their mother to secure the highest posts in his cabinet (see Matthew 20:20-21; Mark 10:35-37). In response, "A dispute also arose among them as to which of them was considered to be greatest" (Luke 22:24 NIV).

Jesus replied, "The kings of the Gentiles lord it over them; and those who exercise authority over them call themselves Benefactors. But you are not to be like that. Instead, the greatest among you should be like the youngest, and the one who rules like the one who serves." (Luke 22:25-26 NIV). That contrast between gentile ways and the way of the faithful is poignant. The Greek *κυριεύω*, translated "to lord over" is the Septuagint word for "rule" in Genesis 3:16. The plan of salvation calls God's people away from trying to "be like God" in authority.

Matthew and Mark record the same teaching with minor variations. Since Luke locates it at the Last Supper, we can view John's account of the Last Supper in parallel. John 13:1 foreshadows his narrative with, "he loved them to the full extent" (τέλος ἡγάπησεν). That τέλος of love remedied the original sin by releasing hierarchical authority to serve. After washing their feet as their servant, Jesus asked if they understood what he—their Lord—had done, then implored them to do the same with their power. He finished with, "As I have loved you, so you must love one another. By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you love one another." (John 13:34-35 NIV). This ties the decisive test of Christianity—love your neighbor—with the direction and use of authority.

Jesus' teaching contained the seeds of a New Testament church that would lack hierarchy. As a result, the church of Acts had a distributed authority structure, with apostles (see Acts 1:4-9), deacons (see Acts 6:1-7), and elders (see Acts 14:23) making independent decisions. In response to attempts at homogeneity, New Testament leaders argued for diversity (see Acts 15) and painted the result as the body—or living picture—of Christ (see 1 Corinthians 12; Ephesians 4:1-16).

Implications for Healthy Use of Authority

This thematic review of Scripture demands that we avoid authority over the personhood of others, putting in check the original sin—to "be like God". Instead, it calls us to serve others in ways that elevates them. In view of this, Paul argued, "There is neither Jew nor Gentile, neither slave nor free, nor is there male and female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus (Galatians 3:28 NIV). He presents Christ as the source of healing gender, class, and ethnic fractures. Christianity must be the antidote to the traumas that sin inflicts through corrupt human authority.

If the preceding argument proves true, taking it seriously requires church communities to rethink some issues, with procurement, direction, and use of authority at the center. To begin, it challenges us to address the prominent fractures in human love around gender, class, and ethnicity.

Regarding gender disparity, it demands that classic views of submission in marriage be restudied to purge that original sin of the man ruling the woman. It also means that churches must fully abandon the notion of male priority in church leadership, for the same reason.

Regarding class disparity, it requires a reassertion of distributed authority in church organization and practice. It also requires that dress codes—whether stated or implied—

finally die, because they presume authority over another person's body and imply you do not belong until you rise to someone else's class level.

Regarding ethnic disparity, it presses the need for paths to ethnic equality and integration in our structures. It invites us to begin with inter-ethnic listening, understanding, and respect at the local level.

It similarly expects us to rethink our relationship with power in church discipline, parenting, political engagement, and much more.

Conclusion

This hamartiology identifies corrupt authority as a source of trauma; a force one human exerts on another that harms them. The sinful impulse to “be like God” toward other people always creates trauma. Perhaps doing the opposite—following Jesus as “the one who serves”—can nurture healing. One must wonder whether religion might do more to heal wounds and less to inflict them if we took seriously the relationships between sin, authority, and trauma.