

# Original Sin and the Innocence of Children: A Latter-day Saint Defense

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LDS Apologetics Research

ABSTRACT

## 1. Introduction

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The doctrine of original sin — the belief that all human beings inherit guilt and a corrupt nature from Adam's transgression — is one of the most consequential doctrines in Western Christianity. It has shaped theories of baptism, infant salvation, human nature, grace, and the Atonement for over fifteen centuries. Critics of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints argue that the LDS rejection of original sin (Article of Faith 2: "We believe that men will be punished for their own sins, and not for Adam's transgression") contradicts the clear teaching of scripture, particularly Romans 5:12 and Psalm 51:5. This document demonstrates that the doctrine of inherited guilt is not the clear biblical teaching its proponents assume, that it was not universally held in the early church, and that the LDS position — that children are born innocent and that the Atonement of Christ covers the effects of the Fall for all humanity unconditionally — is the more biblically and morally coherent view.

## 2. The Criticism (Steelmanned)

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The strongest version of the original sin argument holds:

1. **Romans 5:12** — "Wherefore, as by one man sin entered into the world, and death by sin; and so death passed upon all men, for that all have sinned." Adam's sin brought both death and guilt upon all humanity. "All have sinned" in Adam — not merely that all eventually sin personally, but that all participate in Adam's guilt.
2. **Romans 5:18-19** — "By the offence of one judgment came upon all men to condemnation...by one man's disobedience many were made sinners." The language is explicit: Adam's disobedience made all people sinners.
3. **Psalm 51:5** — "Behold, I was shapen in iniquity; and in sin did my mother conceive me." David confesses that he was sinful from the very moment of conception.
4. **Ephesians 2:3** — "We...were by nature the children of wrath." Wrath is the natural condition of humanity, not an acquired state.
5. **The necessity of infant baptism follows logically.** If children are born with inherited guilt, they must be baptized to be cleansed. The LDS rejection of infant baptism contradicts the practice of most of Christendom for nearly two millennia.
6. **Without original sin, the Atonement is diminished.** If humans are not radically fallen, then Christ's sacrifice addresses only personal sins, not a deep ontological corruption that permeates human nature. The LDS view, it is argued, underestimates both the devastation of sin and the scope of grace.

This is a serious theological argument with significant textual support. But the textual support is less decisive than it appears, and the moral implications of the doctrine are deeply troubling.

### 3. Biblical Response

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#### *Romans 5:12 – "For That All Have Sinned"*

The critical phrase in Romans 5:12 is *eph' ho pantes hemarton* — traditionally rendered "for that all have sinned" or "because all sinned." The interpretation of this phrase determines the entire doctrine:

1. **Augustine's Latin translation was the origin of the inherited-guilt reading.** Augustine read the Latin Vulgate, which translated *eph' ho* as *in quo* — "in whom." This yielded: "death passed upon all men, *in whom* all have sinned" — meaning all sinned *in Adam*. But the Greek *eph' ho* does not mean "in whom." It means "because" or "on the basis that." The accurate translation is: "death spread to all men, *because* all have sinned." Each person dies because each person sins — not because they inherited Adam's guilt.
2. **The Eastern church never adopted Augustine's reading.** Greek-speaking theologians, who could read Paul in the original, did not derive the Augustinian doctrine of inherited guilt from this passage. The Eastern Orthodox tradition teaches that humanity inherited mortality and a weakened nature from Adam, but not guilt. This is precisely the LDS position.
3. **Paul's own argument in Romans 5 distinguishes Adam's sin from personal sin.** Romans 5:13-14 states: "Until the law sin was in the world: but sin is not imputed when there is no law. Nevertheless death reigned from Adam to Moses, even over them that had not sinned after the similitude of Adam's transgression." Paul acknowledges that people died who had not sinned as Adam did — he does not say they were guilty of Adam's sin. They inherited mortality, not guilt.

#### *Psalms 51:5 – Poetic Hyperbole, Not Doctrinal Statement*

"Behold, I was shapen in iniquity; and in sin did my mother conceive me."

1. **This is Hebrew poetry, not systematic theology.** David is writing a penitential psalm after his sin with Bathsheba. He is using hyperbolic language to express the depth of his sinfulness — "I have been sinful my whole life, even from the womb." Hebrew poetic convention regularly employs overstatement for emotional emphasis. In Psalm 58:3, David writes: "The wicked are estranged from the womb: they go astray as soon as they be born, speaking lies." Newborns do not literally speak lies. The genre is poetic exaggeration, not doctrinal precision.
2. **"In sin did my mother conceive me" is about David's environment, not his nature.** The phrase can be read as describing the sinful world into which David was born and the sinful circumstances of human existence — not as a statement about inherited metaphysical guilt. Many scholars read the phrase as referring to the universality of human sinfulness as a context, not as an assertion that the act of conception transmits guilt.
3. **Other psalms affirm the goodness of creation and human nature.** Psalm 139:13-14 — "Thou hast covered me in my mother's womb. I will praise thee; for I am fearfully and wonderfully made." If

humans are born under condemnation and inherent corruption, "fearfully and wonderfully made" is an odd descriptor.

### ***Ephesians 2:3 – "Children of Wrath" Is Not About Infants***

"We...were by nature the children of wrath, even as others."

1. **The context is pre-conversion life, not birth.** Paul is describing the Ephesian converts' former way of life – walking "according to the course of this world" (v. 2), fulfilling "the desires of the flesh and of the mind" (v. 3). "By nature" (*physei*) here means "by habitual practice" or "by the pattern of our lives" – not "by biological inheritance from Adam."
2. **"Children of wrath" is a Hebraism meaning "deserving of wrath."** Just as "children of light" (Ephesians 5:8) does not mean "biologically descended from light," "children of wrath" does not mean "born under wrath by genetic transmission." It means "people whose conduct deserves wrath."

### ***Ezekiel 18 – The Definitive Rejection of Inherited Guilt***

The most devastating biblical text against the doctrine of inherited guilt is Ezekiel 18, where God explicitly and emphatically rejects the concept:

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"What mean ye, that ye use this proverb concerning the land of Israel, saying, The fathers have eaten sour grapes, and the children's teeth are set on edge? As I live, saith the Lord God, ye shall not have occasion any more to use this proverb in Israel. Behold, all souls are mine; as the soul of the father, so also the soul of the son is mine: the soul that sinneth, it shall die." (Ezekiel 18:2-4)

"The son shall not bear the iniquity of the father, neither shall the father bear the iniquity of the son: the righteousness of the righteous shall be upon him, and the wickedness of the wicked shall be upon him." (Ezekiel 18:20)

This passage could not be clearer: children do not bear the guilt of their parents. The soul that sins – *that* soul dies. Each person is accountable for their own actions. If this principle applies to a father and his son, it certainly applies to Adam and his descendants. The doctrine of inherited guilt directly contradicts God's own declaration in Ezekiel 18.

### ***Deuteronomy 24:16 – A Legal Codification***

"The fathers shall not be put to death for the children, neither shall the children be put to death for the fathers: every man shall be put to death for his own sin."

This principle – individual accountability – is woven into the very fabric of Israelite law. Inherited guilt violates it.

### ***Jesus and Children***

Jesus' own treatment of children undermines the inherited-guilt doctrine:

1. **Matthew 18:3** — "Except ye be converted, and become as little children, ye shall not enter into the kingdom of heaven." If children are born under condemnation and inherent corruption, why does Jesus hold them up as the model for kingdom entry?
2. **Matthew 19:14** — "Suffer little children, and forbid them not, to come unto me: for of such is the kingdom of heaven." Children belong to the kingdom of heaven — not to the kingdom of wrath.
3. **Mark 10:15** — "Whosoever shall not receive the kingdom of God as a little child, he shall not enter therein." The child is the paradigm of receptivity and worthiness — not of inherited corruption.

## 4. Early Christian Evidence

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### *Original Sin Was Not Universally Held*

The doctrine of original sin as inherited *guilt* — as opposed to inherited *mortality* or a weakened *nature* — was not the consensus of the early church. It was primarily the creation of Augustine of Hippo in the late fourth and early fifth centuries:

**Irenaeus (c. 180 AD)** taught that Adam's sin brought death and corruption to humanity, but he did not teach inherited guilt in the Augustinian sense. Children, in Irenaeus's framework, are born innocent but into a world affected by sin (*Against Heresies*, 3.22.4).

**Clement of Alexandria (c. 200 AD)** explicitly stated: "A newborn child has not sinned...it has done nothing to incur punishment" (paraphrase from *Stromata*). He rejected the notion that infants bear guilt.

**The Eastern Fathers broadly** — Athanasius, the Cappadocians (Basil, Gregory of Nazianzus, Gregory of Nyssa), John Chrysostom — taught that humanity inherited mortality and a disordered nature from Adam, but not personal guilt. This is why the Eastern Orthodox Church to this day does not teach original sin in the Western/Augustinian sense.

**Augustine (354-430 AD)** developed the doctrine of inherited guilt primarily in his conflict with Pelagius. Augustine's reading depended on the Latin mistranslation of Romans 5:12 (*in quo* for *eph' ho*) and was driven by his particular theological concerns about grace and human inability. His position was contested in his own time — the monks of southern Gaul (so-called "Semi-Pelagians") and the Eastern church rejected his extreme formulations.

**The Council of Carthage (418 AD)** and the **Council of Orange (529 AD)** endorsed Augustinian positions on original sin — but these were Western councils, not ecumenical, and their authority was not accepted by the Eastern church.

### *Infant Baptism Was a Later Development*

The practice of infant baptism, which is closely tied to the doctrine of original sin, was not universal in the early church:

- **The Didache (c. 70-100 AD)**, the earliest known church manual, describes baptism as requiring instruction and fasting — prerequisites that presuppose adult converts, not infants.
- **Tertullian (c. 200 AD)** explicitly argued *against* infant baptism: "Let them come, then, while they are growing up; let them come while they are learning, while they are being taught to what they are coming; let them become Christians when they are able to know Christ" (*De Baptismo*, 18).
- The earliest clear evidence for infant baptism comes from the mid-to-late second century, and it did not become standard practice until the fourth and fifth centuries, coinciding with the rise of Augustinian original sin theology.

## 5. LDS Doctrinal Position

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The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints teaches:

1. **Article of Faith 2:** "We believe that men will be punished for their own sins, and not for Adam's transgression." This directly echoes Ezekiel 18:20: "The son shall not bear the iniquity of the father."
2. **The Atonement of Christ covers the effects of the Fall for all humanity unconditionally.** "For as in Adam all die, even so in Christ shall all be made alive" (1 Corinthians 15:22). The universal effects of the Fall (mortality, spiritual separation from God) are universally remedied by the Atonement — without any action required by the individual. Resurrection is universal; the overcoming of spiritual death (through grace) is available to all.
3. **Little children are innocent and alive in Christ.** Moroni 8:8 — "Listen to the words of Christ, your Redeemer, your Lord and your God. Behold, I came into the world not to call the righteous but sinners to repentance; the whole need no physician, but they that are sick; wherefore, little children are whole, for they are not capable of committing sin."
4. **Infant baptism is an abomination.** Moroni 8:9-15 — Mormon's epistle to Moroni declares that baptizing infants is a mockery of God, because it denies the Atonement's power to cover children who are incapable of sin. "Little children are alive in Christ, even from the foundation of the world" (v. 12).
5. **The Fall was a necessary step, not a catastrophe.** 2 Nephi 2:22-25 — "Adam fell that men might be; and men are, that they might have joy." The Fall brought mortality and the capacity for moral experience — not inherited condemnation. It was foreknown, planned, and essential to the plan of salvation.
6. **Children who die before the age of accountability are saved in the celestial kingdom** (D&C 137:10). This reflects the principle that God does not condemn those who have not had the opportunity to exercise moral agency.

## 6. Key Scriptures

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- **Ezekiel 18:2-4, 20** — "The son shall not bear the iniquity of the father" — the definitive rejection of inherited guilt
- **Deuteronomy 24:16** — "Every man shall be put to death for his own sin"
- **Matthew 18:3** — "Become as little children" — children as the model, not the condemned

- **Matthew 19:14** — "Of such is the kingdom of heaven"
- **1 Corinthians 15:22** — "As in Adam all die, even so in Christ shall all be made alive" — universal coverage
- **Romans 5:12** — "Death passed upon all men, *because* all have sinned" — not "in whom"
- **Psalms 139:13-14** — "Fearfully and wonderfully made" — not fearfully and corruptly made
- **Jeremiah 31:29-30** — "Every one shall die for his own iniquity" — same principle as Ezekiel 18
- **Moroni 8:8-12** — Little children are whole, alive in Christ, incapable of sin
- **2 Nephi 2:22-25** — "Adam fell that men might be; and men are, that they might have joy"
- **D&C 93:38** — "Every spirit of man was innocent in the beginning"
- **D&C 137:10** — Children who die before accountability are saved in the celestial kingdom
- **Article of Faith 2** — "Men will be punished for their own sins, and not for Adam's transgression"

## 7. Responses to Common Objections

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### ***"Romans 5:12 clearly says all sinned in Adam."***

The Greek *eph' ho pantes hemarton* means "because all have sinned" — not "in whom all sinned." Augustine's inherited-guilt reading was based on a Latin mistranslation. The Eastern church, reading Paul in the original Greek, never derived the Augustinian doctrine from this verse. Paul's point is that death came through Adam and spread to all because all eventually sin personally — not that Adam's guilt was biologically transmitted.

### ***"Psalm 51:5 says we are sinful from conception."***

Psalm 51 is Hebrew penitential poetry employing hyperbolic language. David is expressing the depth and lifelong nature of his sinfulness, not making a doctrinal statement about metaphysical transmission of guilt. Psalm 58:3 says the wicked "go astray as soon as they be born, speaking lies" — newborns do not literally speak lies. The genre is poetic exaggeration.

### ***"If there is no original sin, why do all people sin?"***

The LDS position does not deny that all accountable humans sin (Romans 3:23). It denies that they are *born* guilty. The difference is critical. People sin because mortality involves temptation, weakness, and the exercise of agency in a fallen world — not because they inherited Adam's personal guilt. The universality of sin does not require the mechanism of inherited guilt.

### ***"Without original sin, infants who die would not need Christ."***

In the LDS framework, infants who die *are* covered by Christ — not because they needed to be cleansed of inherited guilt, but because the Atonement universally overcomes the effects of the Fall (mortality and spiritual separation). "As in Adam all die, even so in Christ shall all be made alive" (1

Corinthians 15:22). Children are redeemed by Christ — they are simply not personally guilty of anything.

### ***"The practice of infant baptism shows the early church believed in original sin."***

Infant baptism was not universally practiced in the early church. The Didache, the earliest church manual, presupposes adult baptism. Tertullian explicitly argued against infant baptism around 200 AD. The practice became widespread only in the fourth and fifth centuries, coinciding with Augustine's formulation of inherited guilt. The practice cannot be used to prove a doctrine that predates it.

### ***"Your view is Pelagianism."***

Pelagius denied the need for grace and taught that humans could achieve righteousness through their own effort. The LDS position emphatically affirms the necessity of grace: "We know that it is by grace that we are saved, after all we can do" (2 Nephi 25:23). The LDS view is not that humans do not need grace — it is that they are not born *guilty*. Innocence at birth and the need for grace in moral life are not contradictory positions.

## **8. Conclusion**

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The doctrine of original sin — specifically, the Augustinian doctrine of inherited guilt — is not the clear biblical teaching its proponents claim. It depends on a Latin mistranslation of Romans 5:12, a non-contextual reading of Psalm 51:5, and the theological innovations of Augustine in the late fourth century. The Eastern church, reading Paul in the original Greek, never adopted the Western doctrine of inherited guilt. The Bible explicitly and repeatedly teaches individual moral accountability: "The soul that sinneth, it shall die" (Ezekiel 18:20); "The son shall not bear the iniquity of the father" (Ezekiel 18:20); "Every man shall be put to death for his own sin" (Deuteronomy 24:16).

Jesus held up children as the paradigm of kingdom worthiness (Matthew 18:3; 19:14), not as objects of inherited condemnation. The Atonement of Christ universally covers the effects of the Fall — mortality and spiritual separation — so that "as in Adam all die, even so in Christ shall all be made alive" (1 Corinthians 15:22). Children are born innocent, alive in Christ, and incapable of sin (Moroni 8:8-12; D&C 93:38). The Fall was a necessary and foreknown step in the plan of salvation, not a catastrophic corruption of human nature that condemns infants to wrath.

The Latter-day Saint position — that individuals are accountable for their own sins and not for Adam's transgression — is not a departure from the Bible. It is a recovery of the biblical principle of individual moral accountability, the teaching of the Eastern church, and the moral conviction that a just God does not condemn infants for a sin they did not commit.

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### **Further Reading and Resources:**

- FairLatterdaySaints: [Original Sin](#)

- Church of Jesus Christ: [Fall of Adam and Eve](#)
- Stephen Robinson, *Are Mormons Christians?* (1991), chapter on original sin
- Tad Callister, *The Infinite Atonement* (2000)
- David Paulsen and Hal Boyd, "Are Mormons Pelagians?" *BYU Studies* (2011)
- Jesse Couenhoven, *Stricken by Sin, Cured by Christ: Agency, Necessity, and Culpability in Augustinian Theology* (2013) — scholarly critique of Augustine's formulation