

# The Fall and Twentieth-Century Culture

BY SAM MCBRIDE

Dozens of new versions of the Bible have emerged in the twentieth century: translations, paraphrases, even a graphic-novel reduction. Even the venerable King James Version has been modernized. Throughout the past eleven centuries, however, the KJV has remained the standard against which all others are measured, just as the plays of contemporary William Shakespeare remain the standard of English-language drama.

What has changed dramatically over the same time period is the way humans think, a transformation which in turn affects contemporary understanding of Biblical concepts such as “the Fall.” Science asserts a very old earth shaped by slow transformations; this makes the first chapters of Genesis seem mythological rather than historical. Psychology has taught twenty-first century readers to see human actions rooted in impulses deep within the mind; as a result, Eve’s

and Adam’s actions at the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil seem unmotivated, providing no adequate answer for the question, “Why?” When approached as literature, the story of the Fall progresses too rapidly, with inadequate character development and plotting. From a contemporary perspective, the Fall seems an inferior story.

Yet the concept of the Fall continued to pervade the past century’s culture. John Steinbeck’s 1952 novel, *East of Eden*, with a title taken from the fourth chapter of Genesis, focuses on family relationships that parallel those among Adam and Eve and Cain and Able. The entire book is about the problem of evil and what humans can and should do about it. Chapter 34, in which “John Steinbeck” the narrator intrudes into the story, illustrates Steinbeck’s thinking:

*I believe that there is one story in the world, and only one, that has frightened and inspired us. . . . Humans are caught—in their*

The Bible and Twentieth-Century English Literature

**William Shakespeare**  
English Playwright,  
c. 1560 - 1616

**King James Bible**  
1611

**C. S. Lewis**  
British Novelist, Academic,  
and Christian Apologist;  
1898 - 1963  
"Perelandra," 1944

**John Steinbeck**  
California Writer  
1902 - 1969  
"East of Eden," 1952

**STEINBECK**  
**EAST OF EDEN**

1952: appearance of Revised Standard Version of the Bible, first serious competition of KJV. Based on American Standard Version from 1901.

lives, in their thoughts, in their hungers and ambitions, in their avarice and cruelty, and in their kindness and generosity too—in a net of good and evil. I think this is the only story we have and that it occurs on all levels of feeling and intelligence. Virtue and vice were warp and woof of our first consciousness... There is no other story... All novels, all poetry, are built on the never-ending contest in ourselves of good and evil. And it occurs to me that evil must constantly respawn, while good, while virtue, is immortal.<sup>1</sup>

Here Steinbeck outlines a twentieth-century version of the Fall. First, it has no beginning; it always, already was. Second, it has humans trapped; there is no escape from the struggle. But third, Steinbeck wishes to assert the superiority of good over bad, to give virtue a higher status than evil. "Evil must constantly respawn," he says, while "virtue is venerable as nothing else in the world is."<sup>2</sup> This thought represents a philosophical change underlying Steinbeck's writing; earlier, in *The Grapes of Wrath*, he expresses naturalistic philosophy in the words of ex-preacher Jim Casey: "There ain't no sin, and there ain't no virtue. There's just stuff people do."<sup>3</sup>

The twentieth-century version of the Fall that we see in Steinbeck's story has also impacted popular culture. Few events epitomize the 1960s as well as Woodstock, the 1969 rock music festival held on Max Yasgur's farm in rural New York. Here 500,000 idealistic and drug-influenced young people began to wonder whether they might have the power to transform the culture they had received

from their elders, a culture blindly embracing political evils such as the war in Vietnam.

Singer/song-writer Joni Mitchell, though not present at Woodstock, has immortalized the event in her song "Woodstock." Mitchell speaks of "going on down to Yasgur's farm" in hope of discovering a greater meaning and purpose in life. Perhaps joining a crowd that is "half a million strong," camping "on the land," and getting away from the "smog" of contemporary life will contribute somehow to world peace. Mitchell writes: "I dreamed I saw the bombers / Riding shotgun in the sky / And they were turning into butterflies / Above our nation." The song's chorus, especially its last iteration, alludes to the Fall:

*We are stardust (Billion-year-old carbon)  
We are golden (Caught in the devil's bargain)  
And we've got to get ourselves  
Back to the garden<sup>4</sup>*

Like Steinbeck, Mitchell sees humans always already trapped in the struggle between good and evil; we are "caught in the devil's bargain." Yet she refuses to give up hope for an exit from that struggle; her closing refrain, "we've got to get ourselves back to the garden," implies that surely there must be some means of recovering or returning to our lost state of innocence, personally if not politically.<sup>5</sup>

The words of another twentieth-century author stand in contrast to those of Steinbeck and Mitchell. This author is truly counter-cultural in that his thinking does not reflect the

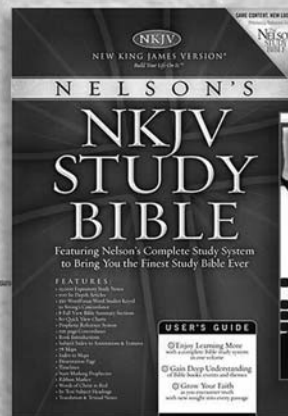


**Joni Mitchell**  
Canadian Singer and Songwriter,  
1943 -  
"Woodstock," 1969

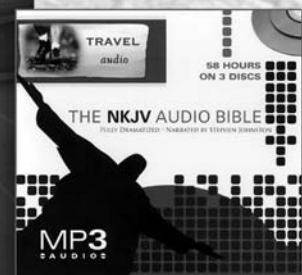
Woodstock Music  
and Art Fair  
New York, 1969



The New King James Version — Version 1979 - 1982



**New King James Version**  
print edition, first published by  
Thomas Nelson, Inc.  
1979 - 1982



...and **NKJV Audio Bible**  
MP3 format published by  
Nelson Bibles, 2006

mainstream of twentieth-century thought. C. S. Lewis certainly recognized the awkwardness of the story of the Fall within twentieth-century culture. His science fiction novel *Perelandra* seeks to correct some of the aspects of the story that he felt Milton got wrong in *Paradise Lost* (the grandeur of Satan; the depiction of post-fall sexuality), yet it provides a version of the story that is neither abrupt nor unmotivated.

Lewis' hero, Elwin Ransom, is transported to Venus where he meets the planet's Queen, who along with her king, is the planet's only sentient resident. Lewis' Venus is a pre-fall Eden of floating tropical islands which have caused the Queen to become separated from her King. Also present is Weston, quite literally the devil incarnate, sent by evil spirits from Earth to accomplish the Queen's fall. Ransom, in contrast, is sent by angelic beings to intercede and works against the Queen's succumbing to evil. Lewis gives his Eve-figure character and psychological depth that make her temptation literarily and psychologically satisfying to twentieth-century minds. The following passage sums up the slow, steady, insistent and suggestive work of the devil over an extended period of time as he influences a noble, rational, intelligent Queen to carefully choose evil:

*It was on those lines that the enemy now worked almost exclusively. Though the Lady had no word for Duty [Weston] had made it appear to her in the light of a Duty that she should continue to fondle the idea of disobedience, and convinced her that it would be a cowardice if she repulsed him. The ideas of the Great Deed, of the Great Risk, of a kind of martyrdom, were presented to her every day, varied in a thousand forms. The notion of waiting to ask the King before a decision was made had been unobtrusively shuffled aside. Any such "cowardice" was now not to be thought of. The whole point of her action—the whole grandeur—would lie in taking it without the King's knowledge, in leaving him utterly free to repudiate it, so that all the benefits should be his, and all the risks hers; and with the risk, of course, all the magnanimity, the pathos, the tragedy, and the originality. And also, the Tempter hinted, it would be no use asking the King, for he would certainly not approve the action: men were like that. The King must be forced to be free. Now, while she was on her own—now or never—the noble thing must be achieved; and with that "Now or never" he began to plan on a fear which the Lady apparently shared with the women of earth—the fear that life might be wasted, some great opportunity let slip. . . . [Yet the Queen] was still in her innocence. No evil intention had been formed in her mind. But if her will was uncorrupted, half her imagination was already filled with bright, poisonous shapes. "This can't go on," thought Ransom.<sup>6</sup>*

Lewis has created a complex Eve-figure, one psychologically adequate for contemporary sensibilities; her temptation, perhaps like the real Eve's, is not based on a whim or a spur-of-the-moment acquiescence.

Just as important, the last words of Lewis's hero, "This can't go on," offer Christians a hope that Steinbeck and Mitchell can only wish for. In *Perelandra* the temptation does not go on forever; Ransom, with divine assistance, overcomes the evil Weston. The Christian, too, possesses the certainty that we are not eternal victims of humans' fallen status, that there will be a return to the garden, that virtue will outlive evil. Though newer translations have pushed the King James Version out of first place in the list of best-selling Bibles,<sup>7</sup> Biblical truths, such as the story of the Fall will live eternally. ■

## Footnotes

1. Steinbeck, John. *East of Eden*. (New York: Penguin, 1952), 475–477.

2. *Ibid*, 477.

3. Steinbeck, John. *The Grapes of Wrath*. (New York: Viking, 1939), 23. Steinbeck also contributes to the gender debate as central to representations of "the Fall"; his Eve character in *East of Eden* is pure evil, having no impulse toward good even in her childhood. In fact, she is more akin to Lilith than to Eve. While Steinbeck makes no generalization that all women have an evil bent, he is comfortable with one-dimensional caricatures of woman as evil, though he never wrote such an evil male character.

4. Mitchell, Joni. "Woodstock," [Jonimitchell.com<http://jonimitchell.com/music/song.cfm?id=75>](http://jonimitchell.com/music/song.cfm?id=75)

5. The fact that Mitchell is a woman imagining a return to Eden for men caught up in an evil war suggests a gender reversal that also reflects a late twentieth-century transformation in thought: women, instead of the cause of the problem, may offer a solution.

6. Lewis, C. S. *Perelandra* (New York: Macmillan, 1944), 131, 134. This passage leaves out an unfortunate reference to the gender issues that have surrounded the Fall; in response to the Queen's fear that life might be wasted, Ransom argues that she ought to find adequate satisfaction in having babies.

7. "CBA Best Sellers," March 2011. Christian Booksellers Association. [http://www.cbaonline.org/nm/documents/bsls/bible\\_translations.pdf](http://www.cbaonline.org/nm/documents/bsls/bible_translations.pdf)

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