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Moral Landscape of Creation

Michelangelo's astonishing images of Eden disclose the root and effects of our sin. From yielding to temptation in a rocky terrain, Adam and Eve must wander into a terribly vacant and barren landscape.

Sin's Landscape

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Michelangelo, who preferred to sculpt rather than to paint, could not decline Pope Julius II della Rovere's 'request' to continue the decoration of his private place of worship, the Sistine Chapel. The walls of the chapel, built in the 1480s by Julius' uncle, Pope Sixtus IV, had been adorned with scenes of "the world during Law," specifically from the lives of the lawgivers Moses and Jesus. Michelangelo painted the ceiling with Genesis-based scenes from the world before Law. An image of the world after Law would complete the theological program when he returned in 1534-41 to paint the *Last Judgment* above the altar.

The famous ceiling's nine bays are divided into three triads of images: the creation of the world (Genesis 1), the stories of Adam and Eve (Genesis 2-3), and the Noah stories (Genesis 6-9). *Original Sin and Expulsion from the Garden of Eden* illustrates well the artist's surprising use of landscape in the Adam and Eve images. Notice that this is not the green, flowery conception that most of us have of Paradise: here sin is born in a rocky landscape filled with boulders and a twisted tree stump. The left side of the composition shows the moment of temptation as the serpent, wrapped around the thick trunk of the tree of knowledge of good and evil, passes its fruit to Eve. Adam holds the limb back to allow the pass to be easier. These gestures by the serpent and Adam are the artist's interpretation; they go beyond the Genesis account (3:6) and suggest their complicity in Eve's sin. The right side of the image shows the effect of sin: the land is terribly vacant and barren behind the sinful couple and the anguish visible in their faces heightens the drama of their expulsion.

We expect the artist's Eden landscape to reveal the goodness and vitality of God's creation, but here it discloses the root and effects of our sin.