



## The Book of Genesis

### Genesis 3: The Garden of Eden

The J account begins with one of the most familiar of all biblical narratives—the story of Adam and Eve. There is surprisingly little reference to this story in the remainder of the Hebrew Bible, although there are several allusions to the garden of Eden as a place of remarkable fertility. For clear allusions to Adam and Eve we have to wait until Ben Sira, in the early second century BCE, and the Dead Sea Scrolls.

The story focuses on the creation of humanity. Little is said about the creation of heaven and earth, except that they are the work of YHWH, and that the earth was not watered initially. The man (*adam* is the generic Hebrew word for human being) is made from the dust of the ground and animated by the breath of life. In the Babylonian myth of Atrahasis, humanity is also made from clay, mixed in that case with the flesh and blood of a slain god. In the biblical story, the breath of God is the element of divine origin in the human makeup. In this rather simple understanding, life comes with the breath and ceases when the breath departs. Then human beings return to the state of clay.

Two trees are singled out in this garden: the tree of life in the middle of the garden, and the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. (The precise meaning of “the knowledge of good and evil” is disputed. It may mean “universal knowledge,” or it may mean the power of discernment between good and evil—cf. Isa 7:15-16, which refers to the age by which a child knows how to choose the good and reject the evil.) Symmetry would lead us to expect that if one tree is the tree of life, the corresponding one should be the tree of death, and sure enough, Adam is told that if he eats of it he shall die. The tree is not introduced to Adam under the negative name of death, however, but in its attractive aspect as the tree of knowledge. The plot of the story hinges on the idea that God does not want humanity to eat from the tree of knowledge. The idea that gods jealously guard their superiority over humanity is widespread in the ancient world. It is also found in the Greek myth of Prometheus, the hero who was condemned to torture because he stole fire from the gods to benefit humankind. Adam is not initially forbidden to eat from the tree of life.

The plot is complicated when the Creator decrees that “it is not good that the man should be alone.” In the J account, the man is allowed responsible participation in the choice of his mate. In the process, he is allowed to name all the beasts, but none of these is found to be a fit

partner for him. God is not an unmoved mover who produces creation fully formed. Rather, the Creator proceeds by a process of trial and error and engages in unsuccessful experiments. This is also the way creation is imagined in the Babylonian Atrahasis myth.

Finally, Adam finds a partner in the woman who is formed from his rib. Whether the manner in which the woman is created implies the subordination of woman to man is a matter of heated dispute. For two thousand years, the implication of subordination was thought to be obvious. In the words of St. Paul, in the course of his attempt to argue that women should cover their heads when they pray or prophesy: “man was not made from woman, but woman from man. Neither was man created for the sake of woman, but woman for the sake of man” (1 Cor 11:8-9; cf. 1 Tim 2:13, which forbids women to teach or have authority over men, because “Adam was formed first”). Even Paul recognized the anomaly of this claim. He added that though woman came from man, “so man comes through woman, and all things come from God” (1 Cor 11:12) and that “in the Lord, woman is not independent of man, or man independent of woman” (v. 11). In the Genesis text, the emphasis is on the closeness of the bond between man and woman: “This at last is bone of my bones and flesh of my flesh. . . . Therefore a man leaves his father and his mother and clings to his wife, and they become one flesh.” (Gen 2:23-24: Usually in ancient Israel, the woman left her parents’ house to live with her husband; either the Genesis text reflects a time when this was not the custom or it simply means that for a man the bond with his wife takes precedence over that with his parents.) Despite all this, however, the reversal of the natural order of birth, by having the woman taken from the man’s body, cannot be denied. The order of creation surely implies an order of precedence. In the ancient (and modern) Near East, it was assumed that females should defer to males. But to speak of subordination here is too strong. In the account of the original creation the emphasis is on the closeness of the bond between male and female.

The man and wife were naked and not ashamed. This notice alerts us to the sexual overtones of the story. Some interpreters even hold that the “knowledge of good and evil” refers to sexual initiation. Immediately after their expulsion from Eden, we are told that Adam “knew his wife, Eve, and she conceived and bore Cain” (Gen 4:1). The verb “to know” often refers to sexual relations in biblical idiom. Genesis does not say explicitly that Adam “knew” his wife in the garden. Later Jewish tradition insisted that he did not, since the garden was holy, like the temple, because of the presence of God. Nonetheless, the motif of the forbidden fruit in Genesis 3 has always lent itself to a sexual interpretation. More fundamentally, however, the nudity of Adam and Eve symbolizes their initial innocence and lack of self-awareness—a state in which human beings are not sharply different from animals. By the end of the story they will have put on clothes and become human, for better or worse.

#### The Serpent

Genesis 3, however, introduces another character into the story: “the serpent was more crafty than any other wild animal that the Lord God had made” (3:1). In later tradition, the serpent would be identified as Satan, or the devil. According to the Wisdom of Solomon (a Jewish text, written in Greek around the turn of the era, and included in the Catholic canon and Protestant

Apocrypha), death entered the world “by the envy of the devil” (Wis 2:24). The New Testament book of Revelation refers to “the ancient serpent, who is called the Devil and Satan, the deceiver of the whole world” (Rev 12:9). The figure of the devil, however, is a latecomer on the biblical scene. When Satan appears in the Hebrew Bible (in the book of Job, and again in Chronicles), he is not yet quite “the devil”—in Job he appears among “the sons of God” in the heavenly court. Neither should the serpent in Genesis be interpreted as the devil. Talking animals are a standard device in the literary genre of the fable, which was developed most famously by the Greek writer Aesop. The appearance of a talking snake should alert even the most unsophisticated reader to the fictional nature of the story. The snake articulates the voice of temptation, but it is not yet a mythological figure such as Satan later became.

### The Knowledge of Good and Evil

The snake leads the human couple to question the divine prohibition against eating from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil: “You will not die; for God knows that when you eat of it your eyes will be opened, and you will be like God, knowing good and evil.” So the woman takes the forbidden fruit and eats, and then offers it to Adam, and he eats. Then “the eyes of both were opened and they knew that they were naked; and they sewed fig leaves together and made loincloths for themselves.” The “knowledge of good and evil” that they attain does not quite make them like gods, but it does give them self-awareness, and it sets them apart from the animals. There is an analogy here with the figure of Enkidu in the Babylonian Epic of Gilgamesh.

The evaluation of Adam’s action is severe. First God curses the snake and condemns it to crawl on its belly and eat dust. Then he tells the woman that he will greatly increase her pain in childbearing (a subject that had not previously been mentioned). Yet she is told “your desire shall be for your husband, and he shall rule over you” (3:16). Finally, the man is told that “because you have listened to the voice of your wife” and eaten from the forbidden tree, the ground is cursed because of him. Consequently, “By the sweat of your face you shall eat bread until you return to the ground, for out of it you were taken. For you are dust, and to dust you shall return” (3:19). God then expels Adam and Eve from the garden, lest they put forth their hands and eat from the tree of life and live forever.

### Disobedience and Fall

The story of Adam and Eve is known in Christian theology as the Fall, and it is assumed that the human condition, subject to suffering and death, are consequences of the sin of Adam. Adam and Eve are expelled from Eden as a punishment for eating the forbidden fruit. Moreover, God pronounces curses on the serpent and on the ground because of what Adam and Eve have done. The narrative can still be read, like that of Enkidu, as a coming of age story of the transition from a pre-human to a human state. But unlike the Babylonian story, Genesis judges this transition negatively. Even though no words meaning “sin” or “punishment” are used in the story, it is quite clear that the conditions in which men and women must henceforth live are explained as punishment for disobedience.

These conditions are described in God's words to the serpent, the woman, and the man in Gen 3:14-19. It should be clear that these passages give us only the author's assumptions about the nature of life. They are not descriptions that are universally valid. Still less can they be read as normative accounts of how life must, or should, be. The nature of these passages can be seen clearly in the words addressed to the snake: "upon your belly you shall go, and dust you shall eat all the days of your life." Snakes do not in fact eat dust; this was simply a misconception on the part of the author. The curse pronounced on the snake provides an etiology of the way the snake was thought to live. God's words to the woman likewise reflect the author's view of the female condition. There is pain in childbearing, and subordination to a husband who "will rule over you." It is often pointed out that this condition is not the original design of creation. It is a punishment, imposed after Adam and Eve ate from the forbidden tree. It is a mistake to read this passage as if it were the normative expression of God's will for women (as seems to be implied in the New Testament in 1 Tim 2:13-15, which says that woman will be saved through childbearing). In that case, one would also have to conclude that it is God's will that snakes eat dust and that men earn their bread by the sweat of their brow. God's words to the woman simply reflect the common experience of women in ancient Israel and throughout the ancient Near East. The passage is explanatory in nature. It is not prescriptive or normative.

If God's words to the woman paint a grim picture of life, his words to the man are no less severe: "by the sweat of your brow you shall eat bread until you return to the ground, for out of it you were taken" (3:19). There is no hint here of any possibility of meaningful life after death. (The common assumption in the Hebrew Bible, as we shall see later, was that after death all people, good and bad, went to the shadowy underworld, Sheol, the counterpart of the Greek Hades.) The biblical text explains this by laying the blame on human beings. In part, the problem is disobedience to the divine command. More broadly, however, one could say that the problem is human overreaching. Like the heroes of Greek tragedy, Adam and Eve are guilty of hubris in their desire to be like God, knowing good and evil. One message of this story, which is a common message in ancient Near Eastern literature, is that human beings should know their place and stay in it.

#### Theological Misconceptions

More than most stories, these chapters of Genesis have been overlain with theological interpretations that have little basis in the Hebrew text. Since the time of St. Augustine, Christian theology has maintained the doctrine of original sin—the belief that human beings after Adam are born in a state of sin. There is a partial basis for this idea in the New Testament, where St. Paul asserts that "one man's trespass led to condemnation for all" and "by the one man's disobedience the many were made sinners" (Rom 5:18-19), but there is no suggestion of this in the text of Genesis. The story of Adam is paradigmatic, insofar as the temptation to eat forbidden fruit is typical of human experience. One might also suppose that an *inclination* to sin is inherited from one generation to another. But there is no suggestion in the biblical text that guilt is transmitted genetically.

Equally unfounded is the view that the responsibility for sin lay with Eve rather than with Adam. The earliest occurrence of this idea is found in the book of Ben Sira in the early second century BCE: "From a woman sin had its beginning, and because of her we all die" (Sir 25:24). It is repeated in the New Testament in 1 Tim 2:14: "Adam was not deceived, but the woman was deceived and became a transgressor." One may reasonably infer from the text of Genesis that the serpent approached Eve first because she was weaker, but Adam still bears the primary responsibility in the story. The command was given to him before Eve was created. Only after they have both eaten are their eyes opened. Adam and Eve suffer equally from the consequences of their action.

Finally, the words of God to the snake have been invested with theological meaning in Christianity: "I will put enmity between you and the woman and between your offspring and hers; he will strike your head and you will strike his heel." Catholic Christianity has traditionally identified the woman as Mary, her seed as Jesus, and the snake as Satan. The passage is then read as a prophecy of the crushing of Satan and has inspired countless statues of Mary with a snake under her feet. Such allegorical interpretation has its place in a religious tradition, but we should be aware that it is not implied by the Hebrew text. Like the preceding verse, about the snake crawling on its belly and eating dust, this one is an etiology, meant to explain a fact of experience—snakes bite people, and people kill snakes.

#### The Contrast with Modern Values

The story of Adam and Eve is a compelling story, largely because the lure of forbidden fruit rings true to human experience, as does the sense that our enjoyment of paradisiac bliss is likely to be short-lived and doomed to frustration. It should be emphasized, however, that the worldview of this story is antithetical to modern Western culture. While Adam has free range over nearly all the garden, the limit imposed by the divine command is crucial. Obedience to a higher authority is an essential element of the biblical ethic. For modern culture, in contrast, the sky is the limit and people are constantly encouraged to "go for it." One may debate the relative merits of the two approaches to life, but the fundamental difference between them must be acknowledged.