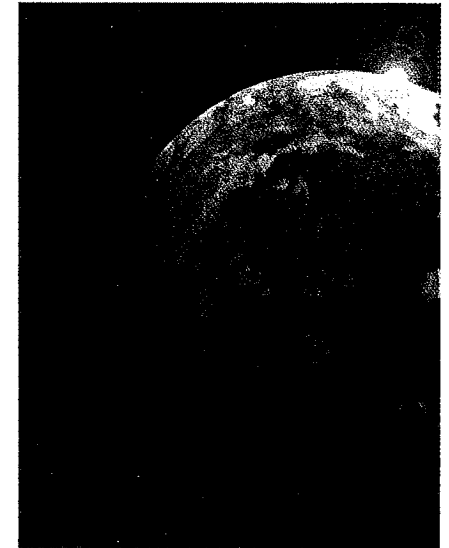


Another Look at Creation; The Temptation Story

If you draw a line dividing the text at the middle of verse 4 in Genesis 2, you see a dramatic change in setting, style, and story beginning with Genesis 2:4b.

The material in Genesis 1:1–2:4a is a doxology: a hymn of praise to the transcendent Creator and the good created order. The stanzas of the hymn are the seven “days.” God’s awesome power is expressed through language. “Let there be,” so it is, “and God saw that it was good.” The portrait of creation is carefully crafted. The language is stately and measured. God brings order out of chaos, pushing back the primeval waters to make light, sky, and dry ground. Vegetation, fish, fowl, and animals are called into being by God. God saves the best for last. The simultaneous creation of male and female “in the image of God” (1:27) is the crowning glory of creation. Humanity is given dominion or lordship over all that was created before, and the task of humankind is to be fruitful and multiply. The majestic hymn ends with creation of Sabbath time, when God and all the world stop to admire this good work. Sabbath is the great “Amen.”



“In the day that the LORD God made the earth and the heavens . . .”

Dust to Dust

If the creation account of Genesis 1 is a doxology, what begins with Genesis 2:4b is a short story with economy of characters, action, and place. In contrast to the material in Genesis 1, we step into a barren world, parched dry (2:5). The primeval stuff is dust (Hebrew: *'adamah*) and the problem is not too much water, but too little. Springs rise up from below, clouds appear above, and an oasis is planted in the desert from which the rivers of life flow to the four corners of the earth. A male creature is formed first (Hebrew: *'adam*). He is patted into shape by God from the dust of the ground. God creates not by the magnificent word, but simply and by hand. The clay doll or earthenling is animated by the breath (*ruach*) of God blown into the man's nostrils (2:7; in 1:2 the *ruach* is the spirit hovering over the primeval waters). To be alive is to have the breath, the spirit, of God.

Partners

Mirroring the command in Genesis 1 to have dominion, in 2:15 the human task is told in terms of stewardship. The man is to till and keep the garden (2:15), to tend the created order. But then the Lord senses that something is "not good": the male creature is lonely. The man is given animals as companions, to name and to care for. But wait; this companionship will not suffice (2:20) . . . God seems, with a scratch of the head, to ponder for a moment. The

"Woman is the crowning event in the narrative and the fulfillment of humanity."—Walter Brueggemann, *Genesis, Interpretation*, 51.

female creature is a better plan. Last but not least, she is formed (2:22). A partner is made, again by hand, created separately from the male creature. Together they exist in the little community of the garden.

God is transcendent, omniscient, and deliberate in Genesis 1. In contrast, the picture of God in Genesis 2 is anthropomorphic, immanent, tentative; creation is a work in progress. If Genesis 1 is a fine oil portrait, then Genesis 2 is a photograph slowly emerging out of the chemicals in a darkroom. However, they stand by side in the biblical text, and we are to understand that both pictures are theologically true.

The anthropology, or view of humanity, is likewise complementary. Who are we? Genesis 1 answers that male and female, created si-

multaneously, together reflect the image of God. We are language creatures, like God. We are powerful and creative. With God we rejoice in the good earth and the creatures therein. Genesis 2 answers that we are made alive by the breath of God and formed with great care. This story describes the human vocation with a different emphasis, for while there is stewardship of the garden (and no command to be fruitful and multiply in Eden!) there is also prohibition. Not everything is permitted. There is a tree, and to taste its fruit is forbidden (2:17). As with any prohibition in any story, there is a hint of trouble ahead. The narrative is open-ended. What will the human creatures do with their freedom?

The narrative of chapter 2 continues without a pause into chapter 3, a drama set in the locale of the forbidden tree. God has delighted in creative activity, worked with the man to find a partner, and shown hands-on loving care. Tilling and keeping the garden is the human enterprise. Life is full. Aside from the etiology in 2:24, there is no interruption in the action or time to take a breath. But then the focus shifts from God's work to the initiatives of the human couple.

A Misunderstood Text

Genesis 3 is one of the most misunderstood texts in the Bible. In Christian traditions it has been used (following Augustine, and with the poetic imagery of Milton) to show the fall of humanity. Countless interpreters have employed this chapter as a proof text for the sin of pride and rebellion. Paradise is lost, we are told in Sunday school and from the pulpit, and someone is to blame. But what does the story say? First we should look at some assumptions and what needs to be cleared away.

The Bible is not controlled by Genesis 3. It is instead a marginal text. After Genesis 4:1, Eve is not mentioned in the Old Testament again. No allusion is made to Adam's sin except possibly Job 31:33. In Romans 5:12-21 and 1 Corinthians 15 Paul uses Adam as a type, by way of comparison and contrast, for Christ as the "new Adam." Nevertheless the role of the text is exceedingly limited. There is no reference to Genesis 3 in the prophets of the

"All that they had been given was not enough. They wanted ultimate power, the power to be like God. . . . The only person who did not grasp at equality with God was Jesus (Phil. 2:5-8). . . . All other humans have failed."—Page H. Kelley, *Journey to the Land of Promise: Genesis-Deuteronomy* (Macon, Ga.: Smyth & Helwys, 1997), 18.

Old Testament or the Gospel writers of the New Testament. The fact is that the text is simply not central or decisive to the biblical testimony.

What we have instead are many misunderstandings of both the importance of the text and the way it is supposed to be interpreted. Let us begin by looking at some common misconceptions.

Genesis 3 makes no reference to a “fall.” If we mean by “fallen” that, since Adam and Eve, humans are not capable of choosing the good, then we must ignore much that the Bible has to say. Cain is told by God that he may master sin in the very next chapter (4:7). Deuteronomy 30:11–14 assumes that humans are capable of obedience to God’s purposes, and Joshua calls on the Israelites to “choose this day whom you will serve” (Josh. 24:15). In the great summary of true religion, Micah writes:

“We’ve heard the fearful phrase ‘fallen from grace.’ But here is God’s good news: We all, you and I, the whole human running race, have, by the mercy of God, fallen toward grace.”—H. Stephen Shoemaker, *GodStories: New Narratives from Sacred Texts* (Valley Forge, Pa.: Judson Press, 1998), 26.

What does the LORD require of you but to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God? (Micah 6:8)

These are not impossible demands. Humans are both required and able to do these very things.

This biblical anthropology is expressed in the Jewish teaching of the *yetzer ha-ra*, or inclination to do evil, and the *yetzer ha-tov*, or inclination to do good. Both are present in human nature. People are required to worship God with their *yetzer ha-ra* and their *yetzer ha-tov*, that is, with the whole self. Indeed the potentially aggressive and self-centered *yetzer ha-ra* can be marshaled and used for the good. The rabbi noted that without it, children would not be conceived, houses would not be built, business would not be conducted (Telushkin, 544). But we must work to develop the *yetzer ha-tov*, strengthening the inclination toward righteousness as we mature. Choices really exist. In other words, life outside the garden is problematic but not fallen.

The text does not explain the origin of evil. Nowhere in the Bible are we given theodicies or theories on this subject. Even in 1 Corinthians 15, Paul is not concerned with the origin of evil, sin, or death, but rather with the proclamation of the gospel. Such philosophical arguments and abstract statements are not the Bible’s concern.

There is no devil in the garden to take the blame. The “Satan” in the book of Job is a member of the heavenly court, the prosecuting

attorney for God whose job is to patrol the earth. “Lucifer” is a name applied to a Babylonian tyrant by Isaiah in reference to his glory and pomp (14:12). These figures are absent from the narrative. If we wish to find Satan in the garden we must look to the Qur’an, where a rebellious angel is the trickster, rather than to Genesis 3.

Instead the Bible has a serpent, one of God’s creatures. This creature functions as a technique to move the plot of the story. The serpent is simply described as “more crafty than any other wild animal that the LORD God had made” (3:1). The Hebrew for crafty is also translated “prudent,” as in the book of Proverbs. The talking creature is shrewd, but hardly the embodiment of evil.

The text is not about sex, much less the identification of sexual intercourse with “original sin.” Labor pains, both for the woman in childbearing (3:16) and the man in sweaty toil of the ground (3:17–19), characterize life outside the garden. But nowhere do we find sexual activity to be a curse. The fruits of intercourse (children) and of hard work (fields and vineyards) are indeed blessings, not curses. An honest day’s work and bouncing babies are now part of the human drama. The idea that every child is born damned or that sex is evil is alien to the text.

Finally, many interpreters approach the text with a seriousness that it does not deserve. They look for the root of sin (a word that is not mentioned) and assign blame accordingly. The blame is then made part of a moral tale, as if the story were a timeless fable on the battle between the sexes. Let’s look at some of the ways this has been done.

Who’s to Blame?

1. Adam’s problem was Eve. He listened to her voice (3:17, but what did she say?), became the first hen-pecked husband, and suffered for it. He was simply following orders (3:12). The moral of the story: He who listens to his wife is a fool. Beware of the woman who talks too much.



Want to Know More?

About the concept of the Fall? See Shirley C. Guthrie, *Christian Doctrine*, revised ed. (Louisville, Ky.: Westminster John Knox Press, 1994), 221–27.

About cherubim? See Walther Eichrodt, *Theology of the Old Testament*, vol. 2, Old Testament Library (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1967), 202–5.

About Satan? See Shirley C. Guthrie, *Christian Doctrine*, rev. ed., 166–91 (and particularly 179–82); Walther Eichrodt, *Theology of the Old Testament*, vol. 2, Old Testament Library, 205–9.

2. Adam's problem was Eve. If anything, his "sin" was that he loved her too much. He knew that her fate was death (2:17), and he could not bear to live without her. This Romeo-and-Juliet scenario has Adam ready to die with or for Eve out of his great but misplaced devotion. The moral of the story: Beware of too much love for another human being, especially a woman.

3. Adam's problem was Eve. He never knew what hit him; he was simply handed a fruit and he ate (3:6). He was clueless, tricked by a duplicitous Eve. The moral: Beware of the seductress. Women are wily and evil.

4. Eve's problem was her pride. She wished to be "like God" (3:5), which is not her lot in life. Hers was a true act of rebellion. She was aware of the consequences of disobedience, yet she arrogantly chose to reach beyond her human limits and grasp at the prerogatives of God. The moral of the story: Pride goes before a fall.

5. Eve's problem was her naïveté. She was not around when the prohibition was given to Adam (2:16-17), she has no knowledge of what it means to die, and she is no more culpable than a curious child entranced by the fruit's beauty (3:6). The serpent tricked her (3:13) by playing on her gullibility. The subterfuge is heinous, for she is an innocent while the serpent is crafty (3:1). Eve was set up and entrapped. The lesson here (if there is one): Life is not fair; no good deed goes unpunished.

6. The problem is theological talk. The serpent is the first creature to talk about God, and he engages Eve in this inappropriate discussion. He misrepresents God in 3:1 and Eve embellishes the command (adding "nor shall you touch it") in 3:3. "In the day that you eat of it you shall die," says God in 2:17; "You will not die," the serpent says in 3:4. The serpent speaks the truth here, for the day passes and the humans still live. He is technically correct but theologically dangerous. The moral: Beware of God-talk. Don't rationalize, just obey.

7. The problem is the desire for knowledge. Knowing good and evil (or all things) comes from eating of the tree (2:17; 3:5). Eve wanted to be wise, so she ate. Adam, fully aware of what is going on here, wants wisdom too. Adam calculates that Eve is the guinea pig who did not die, as promised in 2:17, so the coast is clear. Besides, she now has something he lacks; Adam desires for himself what Eve has. The moral: Ignorance is bliss. Too much knowledge is a dangerous thing.

The list goes on. Countering number 4, above, for instance, one might as easily say that Eve was not prideful enough. Had she asserted

herself, she would have boldly and abruptly told the talking serpent to shut up and be gone. By politely deferring to the serpent's suggestions, she lacked the sense of pride and self-respect necessary to follow through on her convictions.

The range of interpretations is bewildering for some rather uncomplicated reasons. We long for a kinder, simpler world. Hope for Eden implies its existence. Paradise must be lost; perhaps it can be regained.

Another powerful reason for the dazzling array of interpretations is the nature of the text itself. Its characters are few and the narrative is terse. All we have here are a man, a woman, God, a mysterious tree, a talking snake. We have, for whatever reasons, both God's permission and God's prohibition. The scope is limited; we have noted that Genesis 3 is a marginal text. Yet it abuts those big heated issues over which humans have fought, evidently, from the beginning. What went wrong? Who is to blame? What should the woman have done differently? What about the man? Why did God include the tree in the first place? As Adam passed the buck to Eve (3:12) and Eve passed the buck to the serpent (3:13), most interpreters merely repeat this procedure.

"The Bible is not an answer book to all of the curious questions we may ask. Of very many such questions, we may, along with the Bible, be prepared to say, 'We do not know.'"—Walter Brueggemann, *Genesis, Interpretation*, 43.

Reading into the Text

But the text is not concerned with these questions and it admits no answers whatsoever. As far as interpretations go, the text allows for "all of the above" and yet "none of the above." Propositions and theories are reductionist; they are attempts to control the story to meet an agenda. Controlling the story is not our task. Our responsibility is simply to read and attend to what we hear. When we listen closely, we hear another kind of truth. And that truth is about our own perspective.

Psychology knows that what Peter says about Paul tells you more about Peter than it does about Paul. The history of biblical interpretation indicates that what Peter says about Genesis 3 tells you more about Peter than it does about Genesis 3.

To illustrate, patriarchal societies read of the need for hierarchy and the subordination of women (note how many of the interpretations

above blame Eve for a “fall”). Feminists protest this agenda and read that in eating the fruit, Eve acted with great courage and wisdom. “Woman, the one who will house life within her, helps to generate this new, active, challenging life beyond Eden” (Niditch, 17).

Augustine read our text and Psalm 51:5, RSV: “in sin did my mother conceive me,” and found a doctrine of hereditary original sin transmitted through the sexual act. (This was after he was forced by his mother, Monica, to leave his concubine and son.) Judaism and many Christian traditions do not see this at all. With its emphasis on the righteous God who commands obedience, Judaism finds no hint of oppressive original sin. Adam and Eve were indeed disobedient, but outside the garden possibilities exist for authentic action and righteousness that did not exist in the confines of Eden.

Listening to the Text

Whether the Fall is read as up, down, out, or simply falling short, rest assured that the interpreter tells us what his or her perspective already acknowledges to be true. How then is the reader to proceed?

The first and most difficult task of the reader is to separate and set aside what has been said *about* the text. The story is so familiar. Interpretations abound, whether illuminating or restrictive. It is time to read the text afresh.

Next, as we read (or better, hear) Genesis 3, we listen to what arises in the heart and the imagination. Thoughts and feelings pop up: fear, anxiety, consternation, our stereotypes about men or women or God. These we note with a nod of the head. What we recognize tells us something about ourselves; we will ponder

this later. We will prayerfully reflect on how the text interprets us.

Then we read on to verse 21: “And the LORD God made garments of skins for the man and for his wife, and clothed them.” And we notice that life goes on.

The story is finally about God and the way God responds to the human drama. The potter with the clay is also the seamstress with the garments: Button up your overcoat . . . you belong to me. Whether stumbling or arrogant, short-sighted or far-reaching, bold or fearful, we are God’s. We are cared for and protected.

“God’s love for us supersedes our sinfulness.”—Carol M. Bechtel, *Glimpses of Glory: Daily Reflections on the Bible* (Louisville, Ky.: Westminster John Knox Press, 1998), 9.

Our fig leaves (3:7) are pitiful; what we long for and receive is the finery of God’s own making. To be clothed is to be given life (2 Cor. 5:4). The trial and sentence of Genesis 3:9–19 describes the reality of life. God struggles with the humans and decides finally to respond graciously, to clothe them with care. There is simplicity in the action and dignity in the effect. God does for them what they cannot do for themselves.

“Our text leaves us with the hope that the creator is at work *renewing every day*.”—Walter Brueggemann, *Genesis, Interpretation*, 44.

This little story has been overworked, made to play the part of a timeless moral tale or a tragic epic drama. But it concludes with the focus back on God’s creative, simple action. The biblical story is just beginning, and the future is open-ended. God makes possible life, in its texture and richness, outside the garden.



Questions for Reflection

1. This unit affirms life as the handiwork of God. In fact, one of the quotes from this unit is: “To be alive is to have the breath, the spirit, of God.” How does this statement speak to issues like capital punishment or hate crimes?
2. Adam and Eve struggle with choices, between the desire to do good and the desire to do evil. What guidelines do people use when they make a choice (difficult or otherwise)?
3. Seven ways this story has been interpreted are listed in this unit. Keeping those in mind, what would you say the story of the Garden of Eden is about?
4. This story, like much of scripture, may have become too familiar. It becomes hard to hear the story without also remembering everything else we have always associated with the story. What are ways that help you hear the biblical story as if for the first time?