

## Introduction to Genesis Chapter 3:

### The purpose of the serpent

**[NS]** There is abundant evidence that [a variety of pagan] cosmologies once existed in Israel. Scattered allusions to be found in the prophetic, poetic, and wisdom literature of the Bible testify to a popular belief that prior to the onset of the creative process the powers of watery chaos had to be subdued by God. These mythical beings are variously designated Yam (Sea), Nahar (River), Leviathan (Coiled One[; or Serpent]), Rahab (Arrogant One), and Tannin (Dragon). There is no consensus in these fragments regarding the ultimate fate of these creatures. One version has them utterly destroyed by God; in another, the chaotic forces, personalized as monsters, are put under restraint by His power. [Thus, Isaiah 27.1 states, “In that day the Lord will punish, with His great, cruel, mighty sword, Leviathan the Elusive Serpent—Leviathan the Twisting Serpent; He will slay the Dragon of the sea.”]

These myths about a cosmic battle at the beginning of time appear in the Bible in fragmentary form, and the several allusions have to be pieced together to produce some kind of coherent unity. Still, the fact that these myths appear in literary compositions in ancient Israel indicates clearly that they had achieved wide currency over a long period of time. They have survived in the Bible solely as obscure, picturesque metaphors and exclusively in the language of poetry. Never are these creatures accorded divine attributes, nor is there anywhere a suggestion that their struggle against God could in any way have posed a challenge to His sovereign rule.

This is of particular significance in light of the fact that one of the inherent characteristics of all other ancient Near Eastern cosmologies is the internecine strife of the gods. Polytheistic accounts of creation always begin with the predominance of the divinized powers of nature and then describe in detail a titanic struggle between the opposing forces. They inevitably regard the achievement of world order as the outgrowth of an overwhelming exhibition of power on the part of one god who then manages to impose his will upon all other gods.

The early Israelite creation myths, with all their color and drama, must have been particularly attractive to the masses. But none became the regnant version. It was the austere account set forth in the first chapter of Genesis that won unrivaled authority.

This brings us to the serpent’s appearance in Chapter 3.

The serpent has always been a creature of mystery. With its venomous bite, it can inflict sudden and unexpected death. It shows no limbs, yet it is gracefully and silently agile. Its glassy eyes—lidless, unblinking, strangely lustrous— have a fixed and penetrating stare. Its longevity and the regular, recurrent sloughing of its skin impart an aura of youthfulness, vitality, and rejuvenation. Small wonder that the snake simultaneously aroused fascination and revulsion, awe and dread. Throughout the ancient world, it was endowed with divine or semidivine qualities; it was venerated as an emblem of health, fertility, immortality, occult wisdom and chaotic evil; and it was often worshipped. The serpent played a significant role in the mythology, the religious symbolism, and the cults of the ancient Near East. As noted above, biblical poetic texts such as Isaiah 27.1 demonstrate that there once existed in Israel popular compositions in which the serpent, a monster representing primeval chaos, challenged, to its own ruin, God’s creative endeavors.

This background is essential for an understanding of the demythologizing that takes place in the present narrative. Here the serpent is introduced simply as one of “the creatures that the Lord God had made.” In the wording of the curse imposed on it in verse 14, the phrase “all the days of your

life” underlines its mortal nature. Of the three parties to the transgression, the serpent alone is summarily sentenced without prior interrogation—a token of God’s withering disdain for it. Further, the voluble creature does not utter a word—a sure sign of its impotence in the presence of the Deity.

In sum, the serpent is here reduced to an insignificant, demythologized stature. It possesses no occult powers. It is not demonic, only extraordinarily shrewd. Its role is to lay before the woman the enticing nature of evil and to fan her desire for it. The serpent is not the personification of evil; in fact, its identification with Satan is not encountered before the first century B.C.E., when it appears for the first time in the apocryphal Wisdom of Solomon 2.24.

There is more here, however, regarding demythologization.

The two outstanding features of the Garden of Eden are the “tree of life” and the “tree of knowledge of good and evil.” They possess no magical properties which operate independently of God. They are in no wise outside of the divine realm, and their mysterious powers do not exist apart from the will of God. The eating of the fruit of the “tree of knowledge” did not endow the man and his wife with any special supernatural powers. They were unable to hide from God, to conceal their sin. They made no effort to oppose the divine judgment; the absolute sovereign will of God is never called into question. The magical element, so constant in ancient myths, is entirely and conspicuously absent here.

However, the most remarkable break of all with Near Eastern mythology lies in the subtle shift of emphasis. As far as is known, the “tree of knowledge” has no parallel outside of our biblical Garden of Eden story. Yet it is upon this tree, and not upon the well-known to ancient mythologies of the “tree of life,” that the narrative focuses its main attention. The divine prohibition makes no mention of the “tree of life.” The dialogue of the serpent and Eve likewise ignores it, as, too, does God’s questioning of Adam after the latter had eaten from the forbidden fruit. It is mentioned again only at the end of the narrative in explaining the expulsion from Eden. All this cannot be accidental, particularly in view of the great prominence of the “tree of life” motif in Near Eastern religion and the absence of the “tree of knowledge” idea outside of the Bible. We shall shortly offer an explanation of this phenomenon, but first we must turn our attention to the symbolism of the serpent.

The serpent figures prominently in all the world’s mythologies and cults. In the Near East, the serpent was a symbol of deity and fertility, and the images of serpent-goddesses have been found in the ruins of many Canaanite towns and temples. This tradition probably explains why the serpent is introduced in our story as simply one of “the wild beasts that the Lord God had made” (3.1).

This reduction of the serpent to natural, insignificant, demythologized stature is further pointed up in the difference between God’s dialogues with Adam and Eve and his monologue to the serpent. God does not interrogate the serpent, and the voluble reptile utters not a sound in the presence of the Deity. The role of the creature is that of seducer, laying before the woman the enticing nature of evil and fanning her desire for it. The use of the serpent symbolism in this situation has most likely been conditioned by the place of the serpent in the old cosmic combat myth described earlier.

This brings us back to the shift of focus from the “tree of life” to the “tree of knowledge.” The quest for immortality seems to have been an obsessive factor in ancient Near Eastern religion and literature. The preoccupation with death was the most characteristic feature of Egyptian civilization to the prominence of which the mighty pyramids still bear eloquent testimony. The Gilgamesh legend of Mesopotamia, to name but one, is the best known literary expression of this recurring theme in that part of the world.

By relegating the “tree of life” to an insignificant subordinate role in the Garden of Eden story, the Bible dissociates itself completely from this pre-occupation. Its concern is with the issues of living rather than with the question of death, with morality rather than immortality, Its problem is not the mythical pursuit of eternity, but the actual relationships between man and God, the tension between the plans of God and the free-will of man.

Not magic, it proclaims, but human action is the key to a meaningful life.

The sin of Adam and Eve thus has implications far beyond the immediate context of the narrative. The conversation between the serpent and the woman shows that the most seductive attraction that the creature could offer was the potentiality of the forbidden fruit to make humans like God.

Now the imitation of God is indeed a biblical ideal. Man was fashioned in the divine image, and “to walk in God’s ways” is a recurring admonition of the biblical writings. But true godliness is an expression of character, an attempt to imitate in human relationships those ethical attributes the Scriptures associate with God. The deceptive nature of the serpent’s appeal lay in its interpretation of godliness which it equated with defiance of God’s will, with power, rather than with strength of character.

God Himself testifies that “man has become like one of us, knowing good and evil” (3.22). In other words, man does possess the possibility of defying the divine word, and therein lies the secret of his freedom. The Garden of Eden incident is thus a landmark in the development of the understanding of the nature of man, his predicament and destiny. Man is a free moral agent and this freedom magnifies measurably his responsibility for his actions.

## Genesis Chapter 3—Translations and Commentary

- 1 Now the serpent was the shrewdest of all the wild beasts [more subtle—OJPS; most cunning—RA & CS; slier than—REF] that the Lord God had made. He said to the woman, "Did God really say: You shall not eat of any tree of the garden?"
- 2 The woman replied to the serpent, "We may eat of the fruit of the other trees of the garden.
- 3 It is only about fruit of the tree in the middle of the garden that God said: 'You shall not eat of it or touch it, lest you die.'"

**[REF] 1. slier.** A pun: The snake is introduced as the most "sly" ('*arum*) of the animals (3:1). In the subsequent dialogue between God and the man, the man says, after eating from the tree, that he is '*erom*, naked. His condition is spelled with the same consonants as the snake's characteristic. The paronomasia may be purely a play on the root letters. Or it may be a pun of content, since the man now uses the word '*erom* when he is in fact no longer naked but is attempting, like the snake, to mislead.

**[NS] the shrewdest** The serpent's cunning reveals itself in the way it frames the question, in its knowledge of the divine proscription, in its claim to be able to probe God's mind and intent, and in the selection of its victim.

**[NS] to the woman** She, rather than her husband, is approached because she has not received the prohibition directly from God. She is, therefore, the more vulnerable of the two, the more susceptible to the serpent's insidious verbal manipulation.

**[REF] Has God indeed said you may not eat from any tree of the garden?** A confusing formulation, conceivably to throw the woman off.

**[RA] 3.** As many commentators have observed, Eve enlarges the divine prohibition in another direction, adding a ban on touching to the one on eating, and so perhaps setting herself up for transgression: having touched the fruit, and seeing no ill effect, she may proceed to eat.

**[REF]** God is not quoted as having given any instruction to the woman. The natural understanding is that she has learned it from the man. So it may suggest that he adds it to protect himself (or her), or that she adds it herself. Either way, it is a caution concerning human oral transmission of a divine command.

**[NS] or touch it** In correcting her enquirer, she either unconsciously exaggerates the stringency of the divine prohibition or is quoting what her husband told her. Either way, she introduces into her own mind the suggestion of an unreasonably strict God.

**[AVOT OF RABBI NATAN]** What is the fence that Adam placed around his words? Lo, it says, "And the Lord God commanded the man, saying: Of every tree of the garden you may freely eat; but of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, you shall not eat of it; for in the day that you eat thereof, you shall surely die." Adam, however, did not wish to speak to Eve the way the Holy One, blessed be He, had spoken to him. Rather, this is what he said to her: "But of the fruit of the tree which is in the midst of the garden, God has said: You shall not eat of it, neither shall you touch it, lest you die...." What led to Chava's touching the tree? It was the fence that Adam put around his words. Hence, it has been said: If a man puts an [excessive] fence around his words, he shall not be able to stand by his words. Hence, it has also been said: Let no man add to what he hears.

### Guide to the Translators and Commentators used here

**EF:** Everett Fox   **REF:** Richard Elliott Friedman   **RA:** Robert Alter   **NS:** Nahum Sarna   **CS:** Chaim Stern  
**SRH:** Samson Raphael Hirsch   **RASHI:** Rabbi Shlomo ben Yitzchak   **OJPS:** Old Jewish Publication Society version  
**WGP:** W. Gunther Plaut, *The Torah: A Modern Commentary* <sup>4</sup>   **TWC:** *The Torah: A Women's Commentary*

4 And the serpent said to the woman, "You are not going to die, [shall not surely—OJPS; die, you will not die—EV; shall not be doomed to die—RA; you won't die!—REF; you most certainly will not die—CS]

5 but God knows that as soon as you eat of it your eyes will be opened and you will be like [divine beings] [God] who know[s] good and bad."

6 When the woman saw that the tree was good for eating and a delight to the eyes [lust to the eyes—RA; an attraction to the eyes—REF; alluring to the eyes—CS], and that the tree was desirable as a source of wisdom [desirable to contemplate—EV; lovely to look at—RA; desirable to bring about understanding—REF; how desirable the insight was that the tree would bring—CS], she took of its fruit and ate. She also gave some to her husband with her, and he ate.

7 Then the eyes of both of them were opened and they perceived that they were naked [Heb. 'arummim, play on 'arum "shrewd" in 3.1]; and they sewed together fig leaves and made themselves loincloths [skins—CS].

**[REF] 3:5. you'll be like God.** Whatever is meant by creation in the image of God, it means that humans are understood to participate in the divine in some way that animals do not. Only humans would aspire to the divine. And that is the basis of the snake's appeal to the humans here.

**[NS] like divine beings** Hebrew *'elohim* is a comprehensive term for supernatural beings and is often employed for angels. Any possible ambiguity inherent in the use of the same word for "God" and for "divine beings" is here removed by the plural form of the verb "know" (*yode'e'i*) and by verse 22 ("one of us"). As BT Sof'rim 4:5 notes, "the first 'elohim [here] is sacred, the second non-sacred."

**[WGP] 3.6. Fruit.** Jewish tradition suggests wheat, grape, fig, or citron—all prominent Near Eastern fruits. In Christian tradition, the fruit is generally thought to be an apple—because it was a popular fruit in Europe and because the Latin translation of *ra* (evil) is *malum*, which also means "apple."

**[REF] 3:6. its fruit.** I think it is meaningful that the text does not tell us what it is. This may suggest that it is a unique fruit, the fruit of this unique tree. Or it may convey that the kind of fruit is not the point. In its extraordinary economy of detail, the Torah gives us only what is crucial to the story. What matters is not whether the fruit is a grape or a banana—but that it is forbidden, that it gives one the knowledge of good and bad, and that the humans are attracted to take it.

**[RA] 6. lust to the eyes.** There is a long tradition of rendering the first term here, *ta'avah*, according to English idiom and local biblical context, as "delight" or something similar. But *ta'avah* means "that which is intensely desired," "appetite," and sometimes specifically "lust." Eyes have just been mentioned in the serpent's promise that they will be wondrously opened; now they are linked to intense desire. In the event, they will be opened chiefly to see nakedness. *Ta'avah* is semantically bracketed with the next term attached to the tree, "lovely" *nechmad*, which literally means "that which is desired."

**[RA] to look at.** A venerable tradition renders this verb, *lehaskil*, as "to make one wise." But Amos Funkenstein has astutely observed to me that there is an internal parallelism in the verse, "lust to the eyes...lovely to look at." And in fact, the Aramaic Targums of both Onkelos and Yonatan ben Uziel render this as "to look at." At least one other biblical occurrence is almost certainly in the sense of look, the beginning of Psalm 41: "Happy is he who maskil to the poor man"—surely, who looks at, has regard for, the poor man. A correlation between verbs of seeing and verbs of knowledge or understanding is common to many languages.



8 They heard the sound of the Lord God moving about in the garden at the breezy time of day; and the man [human—EF, RA, & REF] and his wife hid from the Lord God among the trees of the garden.

9 The Lord God called out to the man [human—EF, RA, & REF] and said to him, “Where are you?”

**[NS] 7. the eyes. . . were opened** Just as the serpent had foretold! But, ironically, the new insight they gain is only the consciousness of their own nakedness, and shame is the consequence.

**fig leaves** The fig tree has unusually large and strong leaves. Incidentally, it is indigenous to the Land of Israel, where it was cultivated very early, but it was not known in Babylon; hence, this detail reflects a West Semitic, not a Mesopotamian, cultural background.

**[REF] 7. fig leaves** they picked fig leaves and made loincloths. Humans do not yet fashion or invent anything new themselves. They do not actually make clothing. They only cover themselves with leaves. The first clothing is made by God (3.21).

**[NS] loincloths** Their pristine innocence is gone. In a sense, this action has already taken them outside Eden, for clothing is a characteristic of civilization. In the Gilgamesh Epic, putting on clothes is one of the tokens of the wild Enkidu’s abandonment of his outdoor life with the beasts of the field.

**[EV] 8 breezy-time:** Evening.

**face of YHWH:** The “face” or presence of God is a dominating theme in many biblical stories and in the book of Psalms. People seek God’s face or hide from it; God reveals it to them or hides it from them.

**[WGP] 8 Walking about.** God is pictured in human terms as inspecting the divine creation.

**[NS] 8. hid from the Lord** The foregoing dialogue and action had proceeded as though God were backstage. Now, prompted by a guilty conscience, the disobedient couple suddenly becomes aware of the Divine Presence. God reemerges and moves to the center of the stage. The attempt to evade God is tantamount to an admission of guilt.

**[NS] 9. God called out to the man** Not the woman, because only he had heard the prohibition directly from God.

**Where are you?** The question is merely a formal civility, often used as a way of opening conversation.

**[REF] 9. Where are you?** The conversation between God and the two humans in the garden is a masterpiece. God says, “Where are you?” (a strange thing for a deity to say). The man answers, “I hid because I was naked,” and his creator pounces like an attorney who has caught a witness in a stupid mistake on the stand: “Who told you that you were naked?! Have you eaten from the tree...?” To which the man replies, unchivalrously, “The WOMAN,” and ungratefully, “whom YOU placed with me,” and trying to escape responsibility for his own actions: “SHE gave me from the tree, and I ate.” The creator turns to the woman, who also tries to pass the responsibility down the line: “The SNAKE tricked me.” God pronounces a curse on the snake (and on all snakes)—no dialogue, there’s no one left for the snake to blame—but then God turns back to the woman and pronounces a painful fate for her (and all women). During this pronouncement one should consider the tension in the man, who does not know if the pendulum of recompense will swing all the way back to him. Did his blaming the woman excuse him? Clearly not, as God next turns back to him and says, “Because YOU listened...” and pronounces a hard fate for him (and all men), as well. This first divine-human dialogue in the Torah is remarkable—at times humorous and at times fearfully serious—but the point is not merely a literary one; it is a psychological one (showing the sexes reacting to guilt and fear) and a spiritual one (showing divine-human confrontation), as well. This exchange is a powerful introduction to the coming account of the relationship between God and humans in the Torah.

10 He replied, "I heard the sound of You in the garden, and I was afraid because I was naked, so I hid."

11 Then He asked, "Who told you that you were naked? Did you eat of the tree from which I had forbidden you to eat [commanded you not to eat—EF; RA; REF]?"

12 The man [human—EF, RA, & REF] said, "The woman You put at my side [others, that You gave me]—she gave me of the tree, and I ate."

13 And the Lord God said to the woman, "What is this you have done!" The woman replied, "The serpent duped [beguiled—OJPS & RA; enticed—EF; tricked—REF & CS] me, and I ate."

**[NS] 10.** The man's evasive words contain a hint of irony, for in Hebrew the words "I heard the sound of You" can also be translated "I obeyed You," which, of course, is the opposite of the truth. **I was afraid because I was naked** Another evasion of the truth. The statement itself voices the Israelite ethos that it is improper for man to appear naked before God. This finds practical expression in the laws of Exodus 20.26 and 28.42-43 that regulate the proper dress code for the act of worship. *There is probably an underlying protest here against pagan fertility cults and a reaction against a Near Eastern practice of priests, such as in Sumer, where the cultic ritual was performed in the nude.*

**[NS] 11.** Man's self-awareness discloses the radical change that has taken place in the human condition. The consciousness of nakedness can have meaning only in contrast to the consciousness of being clothed, a new condition that came about only because of his sin. **forbidden** Literally, "commanded not to," in contrast to the softer verb used by the serpent in verses 1 and 3.

**[NS] 12-13.** The confessions are compromised by each shifting the blame onto the other. The man does not say why he ate. He stands self-condemned, for he unquestioningly did what his wife told him to do but did not do as God told him.

#### **[NS] THE PUNISHMENT (vv. 14-19)**

Human beings have arrogated the right to make decisions concerning human welfare independently of God and in defiance of His norms. They have lost their innocence and must assume full responsibility for their actions. Accordingly, God now metes out punishment on each transgressor in turn, in the order of their original appearance on the scene. In each case, the judgment is of a twofold nature: it affects what is of central concern in the life of each entity, and it regulates a basic relationship.

The snake is punished in its manner of self-propulsion and in its contacts with human beings; the woman is doomed to suffer in childbearing, and her relationship to her husband is defined; the man is fated to a life of arduous labor, and his interaction with the soil is to be disagreeable.

14 Then the Lord God said to the serpent, "Because you did this, More cursed shall you be than all cattle and all the wild beasts: On your belly shall you crawl and dirt [or dust as per OJPS, EF, RA, REF, & CS] shall you eat all the days of your life.

15 I will put enmity between you and the woman, and between your offspring and hers; They shall strike at your head, and you shall strike at their heel." [bruise you on the head and you will bruise him in the heel—OJPS & EF; boot your head and you will bite his heel—RA; strike you at the head and you will strike him at the heel—REF & CS]

**[NS] 14. more cursed. . . than** Hebrew *'arur mi-kol* evokes the description in verse 1, *'arum mi-kol*, "more shrewd than," in a kind of literary framework expressing the idea of measure for measure.

**On your belly** This reflects a popular notion, often represented in the art of the ancient Near East, that the serpent originally walked erect. Having arrogantly aggrandized itself in a challenge to God, it is now permanently doomed to a posture of abject humiliation.

**[WGP] 14 Under a curse.** Condemned to wriggle and slither rather than walk and run.

Paleontologists have found evidence (already attested in iconographical depictions) that the earliest serpents had hind legs. The Christians bible identified the dragon, "that serpent of old," with Satan.

**[NS] dirt shall you eat** The transgression involved eating, and so does the punishment. As the serpent slithers on its way, its flickering tongue appears to lick the dust.

**[REF] 14. you'll go on your belly.** Scholars often refer to the "economy" of wording in biblical stories, but even by the Bible's obviously economical standard the story of Eden stands out as a showpiece for accomplishing so much in just 24 verses. Stories in Genesis frequently develop etiologies—explanations of the origins of names and practices—but none comes close to the number of origins accounted for in Genesis 3. Namely:

1. It is the story of why snakes do not have legs. Contrary to the vast majority of depictions of this story in art—which have the snake coiled around the tree while addressing the woman—the text states explicitly in v. 14 that the fact that snakes crawl on their bellies is the punishment imposed on the snake (and its descendants) for the offense that it has committed. Before v. 14 the snake must be pictured as having legs.
2. The story is the etiology of what was perceived to be the natural enmity between humans and snakes (v. 15). Presumably, the human phobia even of harmless snakes was as common at the time of this story's composition as it is to this day.
3. It is the etiology of man's domination of woman in the world in which this story was composed (v. 16).
4. It is the author's etiology of woman's being drawn to man (v. 16), and:
5. man's mating with woman ("On account of this a man leaves his father and his mother and clings to his woman, and they become one flesh," 2.24).
6. The story contains the etiologies of clothing (and embarrassment over nudity), 2.25; 3:7,10-11,21;
7. labor pain in childbirth (v. 16);
8. work (vv. 17-19);
9. knowledge of good and bad;
10. death. The humans have access to the tree of life initially, which would make them immortal (v. 22). They are denied only the tree of knowledge of good and bad. It is as a result of eating from the tree of knowledge that they lose access to the tree of life. They are driven from the garden of Eden, in which the tree of life is located, and cherubs and a flaming sword bar the way back.

**15. enmity** This curse seeks to explain the natural revulsion of humans for the serpent. Clearly, when it entered into conversation with the woman, it could not have been so regarded; indeed, it posed as her friend, solicitous of her interests. *The imprecation may also carry antipagan undertones, as if to say that the serpent is neither a fertility symbol, as in Canaan, nor a protective emblem, as among Egyptian royalty, but a hostile object of aversion.*



16 And to the woman He said, "I will make most severe Your pangs in childbearing; in pain shall you bear children. Yet your urge shall be for your husband, and he shall rule over you." [I will multiply, multiply your pain (from) your pregnancy, with pains shall you bear children. Toward your husband will be your lust, yet he will rule over you—EF; I will terribly sharpen your birth pangs, in pain shall you bear children. And for your man shall be your longing, and he shall rule over you—RA; I'll make your suffering and your labor pain great. You'll have children in pain. And your desire will be for your man, and he'll dominate you; REF; I am doubling and redoubling your pains of pregnancy; / with pain shall you bear children, / yet your craving shall be for your man, / and he shall govern you—CS]

**[WGP] 16-19** These four verses serve to explain the basic condition of humanity: in the case of the woman, her problems in childbearing and delivery, as well as her relationship to her husband; in the case of the man, the universal need to work for a living. Though serpent and earth are cursed, the two humans are not.

**[NS] 16. Your pangs in childbearing** This verse, like the preceding, presupposes the blessing of 1.28, "Be fertile and increase." Now, however, its fulfillment is to be accompanied by pain and suffering, which include the disorders occurring during pregnancy as much as the rigors of parturition itself.

Intense pain in childbearing is unique to the human species and generally unknown to other female mammals. It, therefore, calls for explanation. While the rigors of childbearing are presented here as a consequence of partaking of the tree of knowledge, modern biology traces the woman's condition to the enlargement of the human skull that was entailed by the evolutionary increase in the size of the human brain, especially that part of the brain, the neocortex, that is associated with human intelligence.

**your urge** The import of this phrase is unclear. Rashi understood this, together with the next clause, to refer to the satisfaction of female sexuality being traditionally dependent upon the husband's initiative. Ramban (Nachmanides) took it to mean that despite the discomforts and pain attendant upon childbearing, the woman still longs for the sexual act that brings about this condition.

Another possibility is to see the two provisions as a reflection of social reality. Historically, the woman was wholly dependent for her sustenance upon what her husband could eke out of the soil, in striking contrast to the situation in Eden where her food was readily and independently available at all times. It should be noted that the "curse" is used in connection with the judgments on the serpent and the man, but not in relation to the woman.

**he shall rule over you** *It is quite clear from the description of woman in 2.18, that the ideal situation, which hitherto existed, was the absolute equality of the sexes.* The new state of male dominance is regarded as an aspect of the deterioration in the human condition that resulted from defiance of divine will.

**[TWC] 16.** God's words to the woman have been misinterpreted in ways that disadvantaged women dramatically. The pronouncements to the woman (v. 16) and to the man (v. 17) are largely parallel, which implies parallel consequences. But for several centuries the key term has been typically rendered one way regarding the woman and another regarding the man, in a manner that intensifies the punishment for the woman, prompting the claim that her culpability must have been greater than the man's. Genesis 3.16 neither imposes physical pain upon the woman nor condones it. Unlike the pronouncements to the serpent, which speak of perpetual enmity, nothing suggests that this etzev is a continual condition. "desire. " God's words should not be read (as they have in both Jewish and Christian traditions) as an unqualified mandate for males' general control over females.

17 To Adam [the human—RA & REF; the man—CS] He said, "Because you did as your wife said and ate of the tree about which I commanded you, 'You shall not eat of it,' cursed be the ground because of you; By toil shall you eat of it [Damned be the soil on your account, with painstaking-labor shall you eat from it— EF; cursed be the soil for your sake, with pangs shall you eat from it—RA; the ground is cursed on your account. You'll eat from it with suffering—REF; the soil is now cursed on your account: Only through pain shall you eat of it—CS] all the days of your life:

**[NS] 17.** God's longest address is reserved for the man, for his is the greatest share of culpability since it was he who received the prohibition directly from God. His cowardly shifting of the blame is rejected. The individual is morally autonomous and must bear responsibility for his actions.

**Cursed be the ground** Once again, the punishment is related to the offense. The sin of eating forbidden food results in complicating the production of goods. The man himself is not cursed, only the soil. *The matter from which he sprang turns against him. His pristine harmony with nature is disturbed by his transgression.* This notion of moral ecology is a major biblical theme; it is explicitly formulated in Leviticus 18.24-28 and 20.22.

**[EF] 17. the ground is cursed on your account.** As a consequence of human behavior, the environment suffers. This phenomenon will recur in the Torah.

**[WGP] 17 Soil is now cursed.** The earth was thought to share in humanity's guilt. "When we corrupt our way the land is corrupted."

**[EF] painstaking-labor:** Heb. *itzavon*. Man and woman receive equal curses (see v.16).

**[RA] with pangs shall you eat.** The noun *itsavon* is the same used for the woman's birth pangs, confirming the lot of painful labor that is to be shared by man and woman.

**[NS] By toil** The man's backbreaking physical labor is regarded as the male equivalent of the labor of childbearing. The curse lies not in the work itself, which is decreed for man even in Eden (2.15), but in the uncooperative nature of the soil, so that henceforth the wresting of subsistence from it entails unremitting drudgery.

**[WGP] Only through pain shall you eat.** The need to work appears to be part of God's curse. The Rabbis, however, interpreted God's dictum as a concession: By work we are able to fend for and feed ourselves. The Rabbis further observed that the task of providing human sustenance is God's greatest problem.

**[NS] All the days of your life** The same phrase as used of the serpent in verse 14. Man and beast were created mortal from the start. The formula is absent in verse 16 because childbearing does not occur all the days of a woman's life.

18 Thorns and thistles shall it sprout for you. But your food shall be the grasses of the field;

19 By the sweat of your brow shall you get bread to eat, until you return to the ground— For from it you were taken. For dust you are, and to dust you shall return.”

20 The man [human—EF, RA, & REF] named his wife Eve [Chavah], because she was the mother of all the living [kol chai].

21 And the Lord God made garments of skins for Adam [the human—RA & REF] and his wife, and clothed them.

**[NS] 18. Thorns and thistles** Weeds that rob the cultivated plants of light, water, and the soil's nutrients and that require much effort to control. And this occurs in the face of mankind's need to subsist on the grasses of the field! Humankind is once again viewed as being vegetarian, and agriculture is taken to be man's earliest occupation.

**[RA] 18.** The vista of **thorn and thistle** is diametrically opposed to the luscious vegetation of the garden and already intimates the verdict of banishment that will be carried out in verses 23-24.

**[NS]19.** The sentencing ends on an ironic note. Human beings had attempted to elevate themselves to the level of the divine. All they achieved was to condemn themselves to a ceaseless, brutal struggle for subsistence, with the consciousness of the fragility of life ever hanging over them.

#### **[NS] A MEASURE OF RAPPROCHEMENT (vv. 20–21)**

These verses interrupt the flow of the narrative, which draws to its logical conclusion in verses 22–24. Such apparently intrusive data is one of the recurring literary features of the Genesis narratives. Generally, their function is to provide the background for the understanding of future developments. Verse 20 signifies a restoration of relationships between man and wife, indispensable to the development in 4.1; verse 21 indicates a measure of reconciliation between human beings and God. Both are essential for survival after the expulsion from Eden.

**[NS] 20. The man named his wife** Previously he had given her a generic name (2.23). Now she acquires a personal one that expresses her nature and destiny positively and sympathetically. The woman's procreative role is implied in verse 15 and made central in verse 16. It is appropriate that she now receive a name that symbolizes its actualization, which is shortly to take place. The man's act is thus an affirmation of life.

**[RA] 20. Eve . . . all that lives.** Like most of the explanations of names in Genesis, this is probably based on folk etymology or an imaginative playing with sound. In the Hebrew here, the phonetic similarity is between *chavah*, "Eve," and the verbal root *chayah*, "to live." It has been proposed that Eve's name conceals very different origins, for it sounds suspiciously like the Aramaic word for "serpent" [*chivyah* in the targum]. Could she have been given the name by the contagious contiguity with her wily interlocutor, or, on the contrary, might there lurk behind the name a very different evaluation of the serpent as a creature associated with the origins of life?

**[NS] mother of all the living** This description is closely paralleled in Near Eastern mythology, where it belongs to the mother goddess. Here it is demythologized and naturalized to express the biblical concept of the unity of the human race and of woman's primary role—motherhood.

**[EV] 21 God . . . clothed them:** Once punishment has been pronounced, God cares for the man and the woman. Both aspects of God comprise the biblical understanding of his nature, and they are not exclusive of each other.

22 And the Lord God said, "Now that the man [human—EF, RA, & REF] has become like one of us, knowing good and bad, what if he should stretch out his hand and take also from the tree of life and eat, and live forever!"

23 So the Lord God banished him from the garden of Eden, to till the soil from which he was taken.

24 He drove the man [human—EF, RA, & REF] out, and stationed east of the garden of Eden the cherubim and the fiery ever-turning sword [the winged-sphinxes and the flashing, ever-turning sword—EF], to guard the way to the tree of life.

**[NS] 22.** Man, having already exceeded the limits of creaturehood, has radically altered the perspective of human existence. He lives henceforth in the consciousness of his mortality. He may therefore be tempted to change his condition by artificial means, rather than by restoring the ruptured harmony between divine will and human will, the harmony that is ultimately the definition of paradise.

**[EV] 24 winged-sphinxes:** "Cherubim," the traditional English rendering, has come to denote chubby, red-cheeked baby angels in Western art, an image utterly foreign to the ancient Near East.

**[NS] cherubim** The function of these creatures, as stated in 3.24, is to secure the Garden of Eden from intrusion. "The fiery ever-turning sword" is an additional and separate deterrent and not a weapon in their hands. The manner in which they are introduced shows that they are well known and require no definition. It reflects their unique position in the religious art of ancient Israel.

Two golden cherubim with outstretched wings overshadowed the cover of the Ark in the Tabernacle in the wilderness, and from the space between them issued the divine Voice that spoke to Moses. Pictorial representations of them were also worked into the cloth curtains of that Tabernacle. The same cherubic motif decorated Solomon's Temple and was envisaged by Ezekiel. One of the epithets of God, especially in poetry, is "The One Enthroned on the Cherubim." Biblical poetic texts also imagine the cherubim bearing the invisible throne of God from place to place. By the end of the Second Temple period, reliable traditions about their nature no longer existed.

Their frequent portrayal as beautiful winged children in Renaissance art has nothing to do with biblical notions.

Archaeological findings in the Near East have shed some light on the mystery of the cherubim. The name would appear to be connected with the *kuribu*, the Akkadian term often applied to the composite figures—man-headed bulls with eagles' wings—that frequently stood outside Mesopotamian temples. The name seems to derive from Akkadian *kara-bu*, "to pronounce formulas of blessings, to pray." The *kuribu* was an advocate for the faithful before the god and an advisor to the great gods, but it also guarded the entrance to the temple. The motif of the composite human-animal-bird figure is widespread in various forms in art and religious symbolism throughout the Fertile Crescent, and the biblical cherubim would seem to be connected with this artistic tradition.

An examination of the various scriptural passages in which cherubim occur leads to the conclusion that they filled multiple conceptual roles. First, they symbolized the invisible Divine Presence. The divine epithet "Enthroned on the Cherubim" expresses His sovereignty. Ezekiel depicts these creatures as composites of man-lion-ox-eagle, and each of the components is king in his respective domain. Finally, they guard the Ark and its sacred contents inside the Holy of Holies. The only pictorial representation permitted in an otherwise aniconic religion, the cherubim do not violate the prohibition against the plastic arts decreed in the Ten Commandments. Purely products of the human imagination, they do not represent any existing reality in heaven and earth. Moreover, whether in the Tabernacle or in Solomon's Temple, they were hidden from public gaze.