

Genesis, Commentary to Chapter 2:4-24

Robert Alter

4. As many modern commentators have noted, the first Creation account concludes with the summarizing phrase in the first half of this verse: "This is the tale [literally, these are the begettings] of the heavens and the earth when they were created," these two paired terms, "heavens" and "earth," taking us back in an envelope structure to the paired terms of the very first verse of the Creation story. Now, after the grand choreography of resonant parallel utterances of the cosmogony, the style changes sharply. Instead of the symmetry of parataxis, hypotaxis is initially prominent [*parataxis* is a rhetorical and syntactic arrangement in which clauses are strung together in series, without subordination: *We ran, we sang, and we told jokes*; *hypotaxis* is the syntactic subordination of one clause to another: *As we ran, we sang and told jokes*]: the second account begins with elaborate syntactical subordination in a long complex sentence that uncoils all the way from the second part of verse 4 to the end of verse 7. In this more vividly anthropomorphic account, God, now called YHWH 'Elohim instead of 'Elohim, as in the first version, does not summon things into being from a lofty distance through the mere agency of divine speech, but works as a craftsman, fashioning (*yatsar* instead of *bara'*, "create"), blowing life-breath into nostrils, building a woman from a rib. Whatever the disparate historical origins of the two accounts, the redaction gives us first a harmonious cosmic overview of creation and then a plunge into the technological nitty-gritty and moral ambiguities of human origins.

7. the human, humus. The Hebrew etymological pun is *'adam*, "human," from the soil, *'adamah*.

16-17. surely eat ... doomed to die. The form of the Hebrew in both instances is what grammarians call the infinitive absolute: the infinitive immediately followed by a conjugated form of the same verb [in this case, *mot tamut*, מות תמות]. The general effect of this repetition is to add emphasis to the verb, but because in the case of the verb "to die" it is the pattern regularly used in the Bible for the issuing of death sentences, "doomed to die" is an appropriate equivalent.

18. sustainer beside him. The Hebrew *`ezer kenegdo* (King James Version "help meet") is notoriously difficult to translate. The second term means "alongside him," "opposite him," "a counterpart to him." "Help" is too weak because it suggests a merely auxiliary function, whereas *`ezer* elsewhere connotes active intervention on behalf of someone, especially in military contexts, as often in Psalms. [Also, consider these two texts: (1) **Exodus 18:4** — "And the other was named Eliezer, meaning, 'The God of my father was my help [lit. my *ezer*], and He delivered me from the sword of Pharaoh.'" (2) **Deuteronomy 33:7** — "...Hear, O Lord, the voice of Judah, and restore him to his people. Though his own hands strive for him, help him [lit., be an *ezer* to him] against his foes."]

22. built. Though this may seem an odd term for the creation of woman, it complements the potter's term, "fashion," used for the creation of first human, and is more appropriate because the Lord is now working with hard material, not soft clay. As Nahum Sarna has observed, the Hebrew for "rib," *tse'la*, is also used elsewhere to designate an architectural element.

23. The first human is given reported speech for the first time only when there is another human to whom to respond. The speech takes the form of verse, a naming-poem, in which each of the two lines begins with the feminine indicative pronoun, *zot*, "this one," which is also the last Hebrew word of the poem, cinching it in a tight envelope structure.

24. Therefore. This term, *'al-ken*, is the formula for introducing an etiological explanation: here, why it is that man separates from his parents and is drawn to join bodily, and otherwise, to a woman.

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Everett Fox

Garden and Expulsion (2:4b–3:24): From the perspective of God in Chap. 1, we now switch to that of humankind (note how the opening phrase in 2:4b, "earth and heaven," reverses the order found in 1:1). This most famous of all Genesis stories contains an assortment of mythic elements and images which are common to human views of prehistory: the lush garden, four central rivers located (at least partially) in fabled lands, the mysterious trees anchoring the garden (and the world?), a primeval man and woman living in unashamed nakedness, an animal that talks, and a God who converses regularly and intimately with his creatures. The narrative presents itself, at least on the surface, as a story of origins. We are to learn the roots of human sexual feelings, of pain in childbirth, and how the anomalous snake (a land creature with no legs) came to assume its present form. Most strikingly, of course, the story seeks to explain the origin of the event most central to human consciousness: death.

The narrative unfolds through a series of contrasts: good and evil, life and death, heaven and earth, give and take, knowledge and ignorance, humans and animals, hiding and revealing. Some of these concepts appear literally as key words in the text. The characters also appear through contrasts: man as God's image and as dust, woman as helper and hinderer, the snake as shrewd and (after the curse) lowly.

A further focus is provided by the echoing of the word "eat," whose connotation changes from sustenance/bounty (2:9, 16), to prohibition (2:17), to misunderstanding (3:1–5) and disobedience (3:6, 11–13), and finally to curse (3:14, 17, 19). Such a flexible use of words sets up a rhythmic drama which, as much of Genesis, bears resemblance to poetry rather than to prose.

Part I of the story (Chap. 2) sets the stage in the garden, focusing on Adam, "Everyman" (see Cambridge Bible Commentary, Gen. 1-2). God is here regularly called "YHWH, God," a rare designation which may suggest a pre-expulsion view of the wholeness of God as well as of humankind. Man continues his status as "God's image" (1:26-27), imitating the divine act of giving names (1:5, 8, 10). He is also nevertheless a creature of the dust, both at the beginning (2:7) and end (3:19) of the story.

The bridge to Part II (Chap. 3) is deftly accomplished by linking two identical-sounding words in the Hebrew, *arum* (here, "nude" and "shrewd"). The choice of the snake as the third character is typically ancient Near Eastern (it is so used in other stories about death and immortality, such as the Gilgamesh Epic from Mesopotamia). Some interpreters have seen sexual overtones in this choice, as well. Yet a plain reading of the text need not overemphasize the snake, who disappears as a personality once the fatal fruit has been eaten.

The ending of the story has also raised questions of interpretation. Buber was among those who see in the act of expulsion from the garden a deed of mercy rather than one of fear or jealousy. Certainly a creature whose first act upon acquiring new "knowledge" is to cover himself up poses no threat to the Creator. The text, like its late successor, the book of Job, may be suggesting that in the human sphere, unlike the divine, knowledge and mortality are inextricably linked. This is a tragic realization, but it is also the world as human beings know it.

Although the specifics of this story are never again referred to in the Hebrew Bible, and are certainly not crucial for the rest of Genesis, one general theme is central to the Bible's worldview. This is that rebellion against or disobedience toward God and his laws results in banishment/estrangement and, literally or figuratively, death. Thus from the beginning the

element of choice, so much stressed by the Prophets later on, is seen as the major element in human existence.

All this said, it should be recognized that the garden story, like many biblical texts, has been the subject of endless interpretation. One line of thought takes the psychological point of view. The story resembles a vision of childhood and of the transition to the contradictions and pain of adolescence and adulthood. In every way moral, sexual, and intellectual—Adam and Havva are like children, and their actions after partaking of the fruit seem like the actions of those who are unable to cope with newfound powers. The resolution of the story, banishment from the garden, suggests the tragic realization that human beings must make their way through the world with the knowledge of death and with great physical difficulty. At the same time, the archetypal man and woman do not make the journey alone. They are provided with protection (clothing), given to them by the same God who punished them for their disobedience. We thus symbolically enter adulthood with the realization that being turned out of Paradise does not mean eternal rejection or hopelessness.

5 human/adam ... soil/adama: The sound connection, the first folk etymology in the Bible, establishes the intimacy of humankind with the ground (note the curses in 3:17 and 4:11). Human beings are created from the soil, just as animals are (v.19). Some have suggested "human . . . humus" to reflect the wordplay.

5 surge: Or "flow"

8 Eden/Land-of-Pleasure: For another use of the Hebrew root, see 18:12. The usage here may be a folk etymology; Speiser translates it as "steppe."

9 Tree of Life: Conferring immortality on the eater of its fruit.

Knowing of Good and Evil: Interpreters disagree on the meaning of this phrase. It could be a merism (as in "knowledge from A to Z"—that is, of everything), or an expression of moral choice.

to stream-heads: Branches or tributaries.

12 bdellium ... carnelian: Identification uncertain; others suggest, for instance, "lapis" and "onyx."

15 work: A different Hebrew word (here, *avod*) from the one used in 2:2-3 (*melakha*).

16 eat, yes, eat: Heb. *akhol tokhel*, literally, "eating you may eat." Others use "you may freely eat"; I have followed [the] practice of doubling the verb throughout, which retains the sound as well as the meaning. In this passage, as in many instances, I have inserted the word "yes" for rhythmical reasons.

17 die, yes, die: Others use "surely die."

18 It is not good: In contrast to the refrain of Gen. 1, "God saw that it was good."

corresponding to: Lit. "opposite." The whole phrase (Heb. *ezer kenegdo*) could be rendered "a helping counterpart." At any rate, the Hebrew does not suggest a subordinate position for women.

20 called out: Or "gave." for the human: Others use "for Adam" or "for a man."

21 ribs: Or possibly "sides," paralleling other ancient peoples' concept of an original being that was androgynous.

23 She: Lit. "this-one."

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Richard Elliott Friedman

2:4. These are the records. A second account of creation starts here. What is the relationship of the two creation accounts: In the scholarship of recent centuries, the two creation stories have come to be attributed to different authors. On this and other matters of authorship, see my *Who Wrote the Bible?* There I addressed the story of how the Torah came to be written, and I identified the source texts that were combined to form it. I concluded that the combination of those texts produced a Torah that is greater than the sum of its parts. In this commentary I am more concerned with the point at which *Who Wrote the Bible?* leaves off: with the final product of centuries of history and composition, which came to be known and cherished as the Torah. In the case of the creation story, the combination of the from-the-sky-down and the from-the-earth-up accounts produces a much richer and much more whole conception of creation than we would have if there were only one account. Also, placing the cosmic conception first creates the impression of the wide camera view narrowing in. This feeling of narrowing in will continue through the coming stories, contributing to the rich-in-background feeling that will persist through the rest of the Bible.

2:4. records. This word has commonly been understood to mean "generations," but that translation is inadequate. The word is used both to introduce records of births (as in Gen 5:1) and to introduce stories of events within a family (as in Gen 37:2). (Its root meaning is "to give birth," but it acquired a much broader sense. Its broadest meaning is here in its first occurrence in the Torah, where it refers to the skies and earth and introduces the story of the early events of creation.) It thus means historical records, and usually family records.

This verse is sometimes taken to be the conclusion of the preceding seven-day account. That is wrong. The phrase "These are the records" always introduces a list or story. It is used ten more times in Genesis to construct the book as continuous narrative through history rather than as a loose collection of stories.

2:5. not yet. The word for "not yet," Hebrew *terem*, occurs twice in this verse, followed by the explanation that God has not "rained," Hebrew *himtir*, on the earth. This kind of pun, based on rearrangement of root letters (metathesis), occurs frequently. This story is riddled with puns. They convey right from the beginning that the elegance of the Torah's wording is important even while it imparts important content. One might say: even though the ideas here could stand on their own feet, they are given chariots of gold in which to ride. Also, since puns are untranslatable, their presence here urges us all to learn to read the Torah in Hebrew.

2:6. a river. The Hebrew word, 'ed, is probably related to Sumerian *ID*, which means a river, rather than meaning a mist, as it has frequently been understood.

2:7. human. Hebrew *adam*. As in Gen 1:26, the word refers to the species, not to the male of the species. The word "man" (Hebrew *אִישׁ*) is not used until after the formation of woman (2:23), which implies that a sexual identification is meaningless so long as there is only one being. This may in turn imply something about the sexual identification of the deity in monotheism. On one hand, God is regularly identified with masculine verbs and adjectives and has a masculine name. (See the comment on Gen 1:26.) On the other hand, what is the meaning of a sexual distinction when there is only one of something?! As in many other matters relating to God in the Tanakh, the hiddenness of the deity leaves this question unanswerable. The ancient Israelites themselves were at least as uncertain about this as people in subsequent ages, for there were times when they conceived of their God as having a female consort. Thus the prophet Jeremiah

criticizes the people for including "the Queen of the skies" in their worship (Jer. 44:17ff.). And an inscription that was excavated at Quntillet `Ajrud refers to "YHWH and His Asherah."

2:7. a human, dust from the ground. A pun: The word for human in Hebrew is *'adam* (sometimes translated in English as "Adam"), and the story reports that he is formed from the ground (Hebrew *'adamah*). And this in turn began with a river (*'ed*) coming up. So we have in vv. 6-7 the sequence אד , אדם , אדמה.

2:9. tree of life. Ancient Israelites believed in an afterlife, but it will not come up in the Torah until later. It is not part of the creation account. Even in the combined picture of the two parts of the creation account there is no reference whatever to the creation of a realm for afterlife—no heaven or hell. On the contrary, there is a tree of life in the garden which enables one to live forever. Humans are not forbidden to eat from this tree. (Only the tree of knowledge of good and bad is prohibited.) So death, life after death, heaven and hell, eternal reward and punishment are not yet elements of the account. After the humans are expelled from the garden and thus cut off from the tree of life, death will enter the story. But there still will be no account of the establishment of any realm of afterlife.

2:9. tree of knowledge of good and bad. Not good and "evil," as this is usually understood and translated. "Evil" suggests that this is strictly moral knowledge. But the Hebrew word (*ra'*) has a much wider range of meaning than that. This may mean knowledge of what is morally good and bad, or it may mean qualities of good and bad in all realms: morality, aesthetics, utility, pleasure and pain, and so on. It may mean that things are good or bad in themselves and that when one eats from the tree one acquires the ability to see these qualities; or it may mean that when one eats from the tree one acquires the ability to make judgments of good and bad. Perhaps the meaning was clear to the ancient reader who knew the immediate connotations of the words. It is not clear to us in the text of the story as it has survived. The only immediate consequence of eating from the tree that the story names is that before eating from the tree the humans are not embarrassed over nudity and after eating from it they are. This is not sufficient information to tell us what limits of "good and bad" are meant, nor does it tell us if absolute good and bad are implied or if it is the more relative concept of making judgments of good and bad. The wording, "the eyes of the two of them were opened, and they knew that they were naked," may imply awareness of an absolute value. On the other hand, great numbers of commandments, as articulated in later accounts in Genesis and especially in the following four books of the Bible, suggest that few things are treated as good or bad acts in themselves in these texts. Rather, there is only that which God commands or God prohibits.

2:13. Gihon. The name is a pun, because later the snake will be cursed that it (and all snakes) must crawl on its "belly," which in Hebrew is *gehon* (Gen 3:14). The names of the other rivers may contain puns as well, for the letters of Euphrates (Hebrew פרת) occur in the next words of the snake's curse: עפר תאכל; Pishon (Hebrew פישון) contains the same root letters as the word that describes the human's becoming "a living being" (Hebrew נפש); and the letters of Tigris (Hebrew חדיקל) occur in a similar jumble (a metathesis) at the end of the story: ידו ולקח (3:22). So the rivers that all derive from Eden both convey geography and hint at the coming events there.

2:16-17. every tree of the garden but from the tree of knowledge of good and bad. Only the tree of knowledge of good and bad is forbidden. The tree of life is not forbidden.

2:17. in the day you eat from it: you'll die! On first reading, most readers take this to mean that one's death will occur in the very day that one eats from the tree. In the absence of punctuation in the Hebrew text, however, one cannot be certain. Before eating from the tree of knowledge, humans have access to the tree of life and therefore can live forever. This verse

may mean that in the day that humans eat from the tree of knowledge they become mortal, in the sense of: "If you stay away from it, you'll live; in the day you eat from it, you'll die." This general meaning of the expression "In the day you do you'll die" occurs elsewhere (1 Kings 2:37,42); and this is what in fact occurs in the story here.

Alternatively, if it does in fact mean that their death will occur in the very day that they eat from the tree, then we must understand what subsequently occurs to be a divine act of mercy or relenting: they do not die immediately but are rendered mortal.

2:18. a strength corresponding to him. Woman is usually understood to be created as a suitable "helper" (Hebrew *'ezer*) to man in this account. The Hebrew root, however, can also mean "strength." (This was first proposed by R. D. Freedman. See cases of *'ezer* in parallel with *'oz*, another word for "strength," as in, for example, Ps. 46:2. See also Azariah [2 Kings 14:21] and Uzziah [2 Chron. 26:1] as alternative names of the same king.) The Hebrew phrase *'ezer kenegdo* therefore may very well mean "a corresponding strength." If so, it is a different picture from what people have thought, and an intriguing one in terms of recently developed sensitivities concerning the sexes and how they are pictured in the Torah. In Genesis 1, man and woman are both created in the image of God; in Genesis 2, they are corresponding strengths. However one interprets subsequent stories and laws in the Torah, this essential equality of worth and standing introduces them.

2:19. animal of the field. This phrase refers to wild animals.

2:20. the human gave names. The human, who is created in the image of the creator, is now given a function that the creator performed in Genesis 1: bestowing names on parts of the creation.

2:23. bone from my bones and flesh from my flesh. In addition to its literal meaning in this case—the woman is formed from the bone of the man—this expression has the figurative meaning of persons belonging to one another. It has this latter meaning in biblical episodes to come (Gen 29:14; Judges 9:2; 2 Sam 5:1 = 1 Chron. 11:1; 2 Sam 19:13-14).

2:23. will be called 'woman; for this one was taken from 'man.' The Septuagint and Samaritan read "her man" (Hebrew *אישה*), which makes the pun better, and that reading avoids both the grammatical problem and the social problem that Hebrew *אשה* is not in fact the feminine of Hebrew *איש*. (Its [*אשה*] root is *אנש* and is related to Hebrew *'enōš*.) [The root for *איש* is *אוש*.] It also makes a better parallel to the coming reference in 3:20 to "his woman."

2:23. man. Now, after woman has been formed, the word "man" occurs for the first time instead of "human." Sexual distinction has no meaning unless there are two or more kinds of a species, so there is no male until there is a female.

2:24. On account of this ... This is understood to be more than the story of two individuals. The acts of the first two humans are presented as having implications for the character and destiny of all their descendants. This fact is established here, prior to the events surrounding the tree of knowledge, so that it will be clear that the consequences of those events will be the fate of all humankind.

2:24. and clings to his woman, and they become one flesh. This may be taken as the origin of marriage or of sexual union or both.

Eden and the Expulsion: The Human Condition (Part 1: 2:4–2:24)

While God the Creator was the primary subject of the previous chapter, the focus of attention now shifts to humankind. This change in perspective and emphasis is signaled by the inversion of the regular sequence “heaven and earth” in the opening sentence. The almost unique expression “earth and heaven” suggests pride of place for terrestrial affairs. Information about the physical world is offered only to provide essential background for the understanding of the narrative, which seeks to explain the nature of man and the human condition.

Chapter 2 is not another creation story. As such it would be singularly incomplete. In fact, it presupposes a knowledge of much of the preceding account of Creation. Many of the leading ideas in the earlier account are here reiterated, though the mode of presentation is different. Thus, in both narratives God is the sovereign Creator, and the world is the purposeful product of His will. To human beings, the crown of His Creation, God grants mastery over the animal kingdom. In chapter 1, this idea is formulated explicitly; in the present section it is inferred from the power of naming invested in man. Both accounts view man as a social creature. Both project the concept of a common ancestry for all humanity. The notion that the human race was originally vegetarian is implied in 2:16-17, as in 1:29. Finally, one of the most serious questions to which the present narrative addresses itself—the origin of evil—would be unintelligible without the fundamental postulate of the preceding cosmology, repeated there seven times: the essential goodness of the divine creation.

The startling contrast between this vision of God’s ideal world and the world of human experience requires explanation. How did the pristine harmony between God, man and nature come to be disturbed? How are we to explain the harsh, hostile workings of nature, the recalcitrance of the soil to man’s arduous labors? If God ordered man and woman to procreate, why then does woman suffer the pangs of childbirth in fulfilling God’s will? If God created the human body, why does nudity in the presence of others instinctively evoke embarrassment? In short, how is the existence of evil to be accounted for?

The biblical answer to this fundamental question, diametrically opposed to prevalent pagan conceptions, is that there is no inherent, primordial evil at work in the world. The source of evil is not metaphysical, but moral. Evil is not transhistorical but humanly wrought. Human beings possess free will, but free will is beneficial only insofar as its exercise is in accordance with divine will. Free will and the need for restraint on the liberties of action inevitably generate temptation and the agony of choosing, which only man’s self-mastery can resolve satisfactorily. The ensuing narrative demonstrates that abuse of the power of choice makes disaster inescapable.

THE CREATION OF MAN (vv. 4–7)

Whereas the previous chapter simply recorded without detail the creation of humankind, male and female, the creations of man and woman are now described separately.

4. Such is the story The *’elleh toledot* formula is one of the distinguishing characteristics of the Book of Genesis. In each of its other ten occurrences, it introduces what follows, invariably in close connection with the name of a person already mentioned in the narrative. Its use indicates that a new and significant development is at hand. Deriving from the verb *y-l-d*, “to give birth,” the noun form would mean “begettings” or “generations,” and in most instances it

precedes genealogies that are sometimes interspersed with narrative material. In 25:19 and 37:2, where no family tree follows but only stories of subsequent events, the formula is used figuratively for “a record of events.” This is the meaning it bears in the present passage. In this sense, the entire verse may be understood as a unity referring to what follows. Further support for this interpretation lies in its parallel structure, not to mention its poetic chiasm, “heaven and earth,” “earth and heaven.”

the LORD God This combination of the personal divine name YHVH with the general term *'elohim* appears twenty times in the present literary unit, but only once again in the Torah, in Exodus 9:30. It is exceedingly rare in the rest of the Bible. The repeated use here may be to establish that the absolutely transcendent God of Creation (*'elohim*) is the same immanent, personal God (YHVH) who shows concern for the needs of human beings. Admittedly, however, the remarkable concentration of the combination of these divine names in this narrative and their virtual absence hereafter have not been satisfactorily explained.

5. This passage is not a cosmogonic account but simply a description of the initial, barren state of the earth after the formation of dry land, which was briefly recorded in 1:9-10. The existence of both celestial and subterranean stores of water are presupposed here. The earth itself is still a desert. It lacks rain, verdure and humankind.

rain Rain is not conceived simply as a phenomenon of nature; it is a source of blessing to man from God.

no man to till the soil Agriculture is considered to be the original vocation of man, whose bond to the earth is an essential part of his being.

6. a flow The idea seems to be that the primordial, subterranean waters would rise to the surface to moisten the arid earth, thereby making it receptive to the growth and survival of vegetation and providing the raw material with the proper consistency for being molded into man.

7. Nothing was said in 1:27 of the substance from which man was created. Here it is given as “dust,” a word that can be used synonymously with “clay.” The verb “formed” (Heb. *va-yitser*) is frequently used of the action of a potter (*yotser*), so that man’s creation is portrayed in terms of God molding the clayey soil into shape and then animating it. This image is widespread in the ancient world. In Egyptian art the god Khnum is shown before a potter’s wheel busily fashioning man, and in the Wisdom of Amen-em-opert (chap. 35), it is stated that “man is clay and straw, and the god is his builder.” Mesopotamian texts, in particular, repeatedly feature this notion. The same is found in the Greek myth about Prometheus, who created a man, and about Hephaestus, who molded the archetypal woman Pandora from earth.

The poetic imagery evoked by the Genesis text is graphically explicit in the Book of Job: “Consider that You fashioned me like clay” (10:9); “You and I are the same before God; / I too was nipped from clay” (33:6). The human body is a “house of clay,” and human beings are described as “those who dwell in houses of clay, / Whose origin is dust” (4:19).

Here in Genesis, the image simultaneously expresses both the glory and the insignificance of man. Man occupies a special place in the hierarchy of Creation and enjoys a unique relationship with God by virtue of his being the work of God’s own hands and being directly animated by God’s own breath. At the same time, he is but dust taken from the earth, mere clay in the hands of the divine Potter, who exercises absolute mastery over His Creation.

man...earth Hebrew *'adam... 'adamah*. This word play, not given in chapter 1, once more expresses man’s essential bond to the earth. An oft-cited equivalent is “homo. . . humus.”

the breath of life The uniqueness of the Hebrew phrase *nishmat hayyim* matches the singular nature of the human body, which, unlike the creatures of the animal world, is directly inspired by God Himself.

THE GARDEN OF EDEN (vv. 8–17)

Man's first domicile is a garden planted by God. The narrative is very sparing of detail about its nature and function. Other biblical references indicate that a more expansive, popular story about man's first home once circulated widely in Israel. A phrase like "the garden of the Lord," as well as the figurative use of "Eden" or "Garden of Eden" as symbols of luscious vegetation, suggests a background not given here. Ezekiel 28:13; 31 testify to the one-time existence of a tale about a wondrous "garden of God," rich in a large variety of precious stones, beautifully wrought gold, and an assortment of trees.

Ancient Near Eastern literature provides no parallel to our Eden narrative as a whole, but there are some suggestions of certain aspects of the biblical Eden. The Sumerian myth about Enki and Ninhursag tells of an idyllic island of Dilmun, now almost certainly identified with the modern island of Bahrain in the Persian Gulf. It is a "pure," "clean" and "bright" land in which all nature is at peace, where beasts of prey and tame cattle live together in mutual amity. Sickness and old age are unknown. The Gilgamesh Epic likewise knows of a garden of jewels. It is significant that our Genesis account omits all mythological details, does not even employ the phrase "garden of God," and places gold and jewels in a natural setting.

8. a garden The Greek version, the Septuagint, translated this word by *parádeisos*, a term that originated in the Old Persian *pairi-daeza*, meaning "an enclosed park, a pleasure ground." The translation was taken over by the Vulgate version and so passed from Latin into other European languages. Because Hebrew *'eden* was interpreted to mean "pleasure," "paradise" took on an exclusively religious connotation as the place of reward for the righteous after death. Such a meaning for *'eden* is not found in the Hebrew Bible.

in Eden Clearly, Eden designates a wider geographical location of which the garden was a part. The name has been derived from the Sumerian *edinu*, "a plain," but an Aramaic-Akkadian bilingual inscription suggests that the real meaning is "luxuriance."

in the east Hebrew *mi-kedem*, here interpreted spatially, can also have a temporal meaning, "in primeval times," and was so rendered in some ancient versions and exegesis. This would preclude the possibility that the garden was planted after the creation of man.

9. The verse tells nothing about the greening of the earth in general, only about the garden, which is pictured as a tree park. This accords with the description of the "garden of God" in Ezekiel 31:8-9. The idea is that man's food was ever ready at hand. The attractive, nutritious, and delectable qualities of the fruit are stressed with the next episode in mind. The human couple will not be able to plead deprivation as the excuse for eating the forbidden fruit.

The two special trees are brought to our attention in a deliberately casual manner; their significance will become obvious later on. The "tree of life" is mentioned first, the "tree of knowledge" second. Only the first is given prominence in the garden, while the second gives the appearance of being an appendage to the verse. Yet as the narrative unfolds, the sequence is reversed. Only the "tree of knowledge" comes into focus, only its fruit is prohibited, only it is mentioned in the subsequent dialogues.

This shift in emphasis signals another breach with the central pagan theme of man's quest for immortality, as illustrated, for example, in the Mesopotamian Gilgamesh Epic and the Story of Adapa. It is not the mythical pursuit of eternal life but the relationship between God and man that is the primary concern here.

the tree of life It is clear from 3:22 that the fruit of this tree was understood to bestow immortality upon the eater. What is uncertain is whether a single bite was thought to suffice or whether steady ingestion was needed to sustain a process of continuous rejuvenation. Either way, the text presupposes a belief that man, created from perishable matter, was mortal from the outset but that he had within his grasp the possibility of immortality. The “tree of life” is not included in the prohibition in verse 17.

the tree of knowledge of good and bad The interpretation of this enigmatic designation, which is unparalleled anywhere outside the present narrative, hinges upon the definition of “knowledge” and the scope of “good and bad.” Ibn Ezra, followed by many moderns, understood carnal knowledge to be intended since the first human experience after eating the forbidden fruit is the consciousness of nudity accompanied by shame; moreover, immediately after the expulsion from Eden it is said, “Now the man knew his wife Eve.”

Against this interpretation is the fact that at this stage woman is not yet created, that sexual differentiation is made by God Himself (cf. 1:27), that the institution of marriage is looked upon in verse 24 as part of the divinely ordained order, and that, according to 3:5, 22, “knowledge of good and bad” is a divine characteristic. Thus it will not do to take “good and bad” as the human capacity for moral discernment.

Aside from the difficulty of understanding why God should be opposed to this, there is the additional argument that a divine prohibition would be meaningless if man did not already possess this faculty. Indeed, from 3:3 it is clear that the woman knows the meaning of disobedience; that is, she is already alert to the difference between right and wrong, which can have no other meaning than obedience or otherwise.

It is more satisfactory, however, to understand “good and bad” as undifferentiated parts of a totality, a merism meaning “everything.” True, man and woman do not become endowed with omniscience after partaking of the fruit, but the text does seem to imply that their intellectual horizons are immeasurably expanded. Passages like 2 Samuel 14:17, 20 lend support to this interpretation. It should also be noted that “good and bad,” exactly in the Hebrew form used here (*tov va-ra'*), occurs again only in Deuteronomy 1:39: “Moreover, your little ones who you said would be carried off, your children who do not yet know good from bad....” There the context leaves no doubt that not to know good and bad means to be innocent, not to have attained the age of responsibility. In the present passage, then, it is best to understand “knowledge of good and bad” as the capacity to make independent judgments concerning human welfare.

THE RIVERS OF PARADISE (vv. 10–14)

The story of man is abruptly interrupted by a description of the geographical setting of the garden. This pause functions as a tension-building device, for the reader is left wondering about the role of the two special trees. The identical literary stratagem is employed in the story of Joseph, where the digression of chapter 38 heightens the reader’s suspense at a critical moment in the development of the plot.

A single river “issues from Eden.” Its source appears to be outside the garden, which it irrigates as it passes through. Here, as in Genesis 13:10, which reflects this same tradition, the garden is made independent of the vagaries of seasonal rainfall. Somewhere beyond the confines of the garden the single river separates into four branches that probably represent the four quarters of the inhabited world. In other words, the river of Eden also nourishes the rest of the world with its life-giving waters. While the Tigris and the Euphrates are of course well

known, the other two names defy positive identification. They may stand for another great river civilization corresponding to that of the Mesopotamian plain, perhaps the Nile Valley.

11-12. Pishon is an unknown name. It is said to be a meandering river associated with “the land of Havilah.” If this latter name is Hebrew, it means “sandy land.” There are two biblical sites identified by the name Havilah, one within the Egyptian sphere of influence, the other in Arabia. Here the place is described as a source of gold and precious materials.

As far as Egypt is concerned, its primary sources of bullion and jewels were the mines of Nubia, a region south of Egypt that corresponds roughly to present-day Nilotic Sudan. In fact, the name Nubia is derived from Egyptian *nb*, meaning “gold.” The term “good gold”—that is, high-grade ore—was used in Egyptian commercial transactions. It is also possible that the mention of gold in connection with the river refers not to lode or vein mining, but to alluvial gold and reflects the ancient method of washing gold-bearing sands and gravel deposited by streams and rivers.

The description in verses 11–12 might also fit an Arabian location. In 10:29, Havilah is stated to be a “brother” of Ophir, which is the name of a country celebrated for its gold. It is not absolutely certain, however, that Ophir was in Arabia.

Bdellium is mentioned again only in Numbers 11:7, where it is assumed to be a well-known substance. From ancient times, opinion has been divided as to whether it was a precious stone or a much valued aromatic resin called bdellion by the Greeks and mentioned in Akkadian sources as budulhu, which corresponds to Hebrew bdolah. This product was an important export of Nubia.

lapis lazuli Hebrew shoham is an oft-mentioned precious stone; its exact identity is uncertain. Ezekiel 28:13 lists it among the gems found in the Garden of Eden.

13. Gihon is the name of a spring in a valley outside of Jerusalem. The stem g-y-h means “to gush forth.” No river of this name is otherwise known. The association with “the land of Cush” complicates the identification because in 10:6-10 Cush is a “brother” of Egypt and is also connected with South Arabia and with Mesopotamia. There also seems to be another Cush in Midian on the northeastern shore of the Gulf of Akaba. Generally in the Bible, Cush refers to Nubia. If this is the case here, too, then Pishon and Gihon may be terms for the Blue Nile and the White Nile. These two rivers unite at Khartoum to form the mightiest river of Africa, which finally empties into the Mediterranean Sea.

14. Tigris Hebrew hiddekel is mentioned again only in Daniel 10:4. 22.

east of Asshur Hebrew *kidmat* means literally “in front of,” that is, eastward, from the vantage point of one facing the rising sun, which is the standard orientation in the Bible. “Asshur” may be either the city of Ashur, which lay west of the Tigris, or the larger region of Assyria, to which it gave its name. The parallel with “the land of Cush” would favor the second possibility, but the Tigris actually bisects Assyria, so that here the city itself, not otherwise mentioned in Scripture, is more likely intended.

Euphrates To an Israelite, this was the river par excellence and therefore required no topographical description.

THE PROHIBITION (vv. 15–17)

15. The opening line of this section repeats the contents of verse 8. This resumptive repetition, or recapitulation after a digression, occurs again in 39:1=37:36 and in 43:24=verse 17.

to till it and tend it The man is not indigenous to the garden. He is fashioned elsewhere and finds himself in it solely by the grace of God. True, his needs are easily taken care of, but his life

in the garden is not to be one of indolence. He has duties to perform. It is his responsibility to nurture and conserve the pristine perfection of the garden. This he must do by the labor of his hands. Yet, no strenuous exertion is required, for nature responds easily to his efforts.

16-17. Just as in the Creation narrative of chapter 1, the human race is here assumed to have been originally vegetarian.

you must not eat Unrestricted freedom does not exist. Man is called upon by God to exercise restraint and self-discipline in the gratification of his appetite. This prohibition is the paradigm for the future Torah legislation relating to the dietary laws.

you shall die The threat of death would have been intelligible to the man only if he had witnessed the demise of animals and birds. Even without understanding the meaning of death, he would have inferred that disobedience incurs divine disapproval.

As noted in the Comment to verse 9, man was mortal from the beginning. Logically, therefore, the transgression should incur immediate capital punishment, not mortality as opposed to immortality. But man and woman did not die at once, and it is not stated that God rescinded the death penalty. For these reasons, “you shall die” must here mean being deprived of the possibility of rejuvenation by means of the “tree of life,” as existed hitherto—in other words, inevitable expulsion from the garden.

THE CREATION OF WOMAN (vv. 18–24)

Curiously, the extant Literature of the ancient Near East has preserved no other account of the creation of primordial woman. The present narrative is therefore unique. Moreover, whereas the creation of man is told briefly, in a single verse, the creation of woman is described in six verses. This detail is extraordinary in light of the generally nondescriptive character of the biblical narrative and as such is indicative of the importance accorded this event. With the appearance of woman, Creation is complete.

18. It is not good The emphatic negative contrasts with the verdict of 1:31 that everything was “very good,” this after the creation of male and female. The idea here is that man is recognized to be a social being. Celibacy is undesirable. Genesis Rabbah 17:2 expresses this point as follows: “Whoever has no wife exists without goodness, without a helpmate, without joy, without blessing, without atonement. . . without well-being, without a full life...; indeed, such a one reduces the representation of the divine image [on earth].”

I will make This divine declaration of intent balances that preceding the creation of the man in 1:26. It is God who takes the initiative to provide the wife for Adam.

a fitting helper Literally, “a helper corresponding to him.” This term cannot be demeaning because Hebrew *‘ezer*, employed here to describe the intended role of the woman, is often used of God in His relation to man.

19. As noted above, the dominant theme of this section, to which all else is subordinated, is man and the human condition. The narrative now focuses on humankind’s mastery over the animals. Mention of their creation is therefore made incidentally, not for its own sake, and is no indication of sequential order in regard to the creation of man.

and all the birds of the sky Another example of zeugma, as in 2:1. The birds were actually created out of the water and the animals out of the earth, according to 1:21, 24. The apparent contradiction between the two accounts is resolved by the Talmud in Hullin 27b, with the assumption that the origin of fowl life was alluvial mud. [Zeugma is the use of a single word, usually a verb, to refer to two (or more) other words, usually nouns, when the first word is only literally suited to one of the other words. The meaning of zeugma has been broadened to include the use of one verb to refer to two or more nouns, where the meaning of the

verb changes when used with the different nouns. Usually, the first use is figurative and the second use is literal (as in "opened the door and her heart to the homeless boy").]

and brought them to the man In chapter 1, God bestows names only on the cosmic phenomena connected with time and space. Here He assigns to man the role of naming terrestrial animates, which, as explained in the Comment to 1:5, is another way of expressing the bestowal of authority and dominion over them, the idea contained in 1:28.

20. The Bible offers no speculation about the origin of language, only a theory about the diversity of languages, which is presented in chapter 11. Here the first man is assumed to have been initially endowed with the faculty of speech, with a level of intellect capable of differentiating between one creature and another and with the linguistic ability to coin an appropriate name for each.

Adam The Hebrew vocalization *le-'adam* makes the word a proper name for the first time, 27 probably because the narrative now speaks of the man as a personality rather than an archetypal human.

no fitting helper was found The review of the subhuman creation makes the man conscious of his own uniqueness, of his inability to integrate himself into that whole biological order or feel direct kinship with the other animate beings. At the same time, by observing the otherwise universal complementary pairing of male and female, he becomes aware of his own exceptional status and of his solitariness.

21. God empathizes with man's loneliness.

a deep sleep Hebrew *tardemah* is used of abnormally heavy sleep, divinely induced. It has here the dual function of rendering the man insensible to the pain of the surgery and oblivious to God at work.

one of his ribs The mystery of the intimacy between husband and wife and the indispensable role that the woman ideally plays in the life of man are symbolically described in terms of her creation out of his body. The rib taken from man's side thus connotes physical union and signifies that she is his companion and partner, ever at his side.

This correspondence between the part of the body and the role of the one identified with it is found in both Mesopotamian and Greek literatures. In the former, Ea, the god of wisdom, is described as "the ear of [the god] Ninurta" because the ear was regarded as the seat of intelligence. In Greek mythology, Athena, goddess of wisdom, sprang from the forehead of Zeus, the seat of the brain; and Aphrodite, goddess of love, generation, and fertility, is said to have sprung from the foam in the sea that collected about the severed male organ of the god Uranus.

22. The LORD God fashioned Literally, "built," the only use of this verb in the Creation narratives. It certainly harks back to ancient Near Eastern poetic traditions, in which it is widely used for the action of the deity in creating mankind. At the same time, it well fits Hebrew *tsela'*, "rib," which frequently appears as an architectonic term in building texts. In a word play, Genesis Rabbah 18:1 connects the present use of *b-n-h*, "to build," with *b-y-n*, "to discern," indicating that "woman was endowed with intelligence surpassing that of man."

He brought her to the man As noted in a midrash, the image may well be that of God playing the role of the attendant who leads the bride to the groom. Without doubt, the verse conveys the idea that the institution of marriage is established by God Himself.

23. Man's first recorded speech is a cry of ecstatic elation at seeing the woman.

This one at last In contrast to the animals.

shall be called Woman Insofar as the power of naming implies authority, the text voices the social reality of the ancient Near East. Yet the terminology used here differs from that employed

in verse 20 for naming the animals. Here the man gives her a generic, not a personal, name, and that designation is understood to be derived from his own, which means he acknowledges woman to be his equal. Moreover, in naming her *'ishah*, he simultaneously names himself. Hitherto he is consistently called *'adam*; he now calls himself *'ish* for the first time. Thus he discovers his own manhood and fulfillment only when he faces the woman, the human being who is to be his partner in life.

Woman. . . man Hebrew *'ishah... 'ish*, though actually derived from distinct and unrelated stems, are here associated through folk etymology by virtue of assonance. The corresponding tacit word play for the man was noted in the Comment to verse 7.

24. Hence Hebrew *'al ken* is not part of the narration, but it introduces an etiological observation on the part of the Narrator; that is, the origin of an existing custom or institution is assigned to some specific event in the past. In this case, some interrelated and fundamental aspects of the marital relationship are traced to God's original creative act and seen as part of the divinely ordained natural order. The fashioning of the woman from the man's body explains why his bond to his wife takes precedence over his ties to his parents. It accounts for the mystery of physical love and the intense emotional involvement of male and female, as well as for their commonality of interests, goals, and ideals.

clings...one flesh There is a seeming contradiction here since Hebrew *d-v-k*, "to cling," essentially expresses the idea of two distinct entities becoming attached to one another while preserving their separate identities. To become "one flesh" refers to the physical aspects of marriage, as though the separated elements seek one another for reunification. The underlying meaning of the paradox is clear, if it is noted that the verb *d-v-k* is often used to describe human yearning for and devotion to God. Sexual relations between husband and wife do not rise above the level of animality unless they be informed by and imbued with spiritual, emotional, and mental affinity.

Rashi to BT Eiruvין 18a

Solomon ben Isaac

2. "The rib' — ...the meaning is that of side [rather than the anatomical definition of rib], as in 'the second side of the Tabernacle (Exodus 26)...He divided him [the *adam*] into two, for he was male on one side and female on the other."

The Pentateuch: Genesis

Samson Raphael Hirsch

V. 18 In the same way as Creation tarried and waited its completion before Man was created, and God had announced to it this crown of His creation, so was the case here before the creation of Woman. Man was there, and all about him all the beauties of paradise blossomed, and still God did not pronounce His "good"!...As long as Man stands alone it is altogether not yet good; the goal of perfection, which the world is to attain through him will never be reached as long as he stands alone. The completion of the "good" was not Man but Woman, and it was only brought to mankind and the world by Woman. And this fact has been so deeply appreciated by those "orientals," the "rabbis," that they teach in the Talmud: only through his wife does a man become a "Man," only husband and wife together are "Adam." A task which is too great for one person must be divided, and just for the accomplishment of the whole of Man's mission, God created Woman for Man. And this Woman is to be *ezer k'negdo*. Even looked at quite superficially, this designation expresses the whole dignity of Woman. It contains not the slightest reference to any sexual relationship; she is placed purely in the realm of Man's work [for] it was there that she was missing, she is to be *ezer k'negdo*. And *ezer k'negdo* certainly expresses no idea of subordination, but rather complete equality, and on a footing of equal independence. Woman stands to Man *k'negdo*, parallel, on one line, at his side.

V. 20. Thus Man tested all living creatures in their characteristics and listed them in his mind according to what they impressed him as being, and so gave them names, placed them in his mind..., [but] for an "Adam...", a vice-regent of God on earth, he found none that would be parallel to himself, none that could share his obligations with him.

V. 21. ... *Tsela* does not occur elsewhere in Tanakh as a "rib", but always as a "side," which is also why *tsalu'a* means to be inclined towards one side, to limp.... *Basar* [בשר], related to *vaser* [בשר], to announce, proclaim, expresses the deep importance of the pure human body, to be the herald of the spirit to the world, and of the world to the spirit. *Basar*, flesh, includes everything which is not blood and not bone; accordingly, skin, muscle and nerve, the means by which the interposition, the mediation, between the spirit, the mind, and the world takes place. Without *basar*, there is no consciousness of the world, and no effect can be made on the world....So that with Woman, the material for her body was not taken from the earth, as it was with man. God formed one side of Man into Woman; Man, as it were, was divided, and the one part formed into Woman, not "created" or "made", but built out, arranged, as Woman. So that what was previously one creature was now two, and thereby is the complete equality of women forever attested. Our sages also ascribe all the special characteristics of the female voice, the female character and temperament, as well as the earlier spiritual and mental maturity of women, as being connected with this formation of Woman out of the already feeling, sensitive living body of Man, in contrast to Man, whose body was created out of earth.

V. 24. *Al ken, Therefore.* Because as long as the man was alone it was not yet "good," and because once the division had been made, it was no longer at all possible for the man to fulfil

his calling by himself, because his wife was to be *ezer k'negdo*; without her he was only half a man, and only together with her did he feel himself a whole man. Therefore, a man leaves his father and his mother and attaches himself to a wife, and they become one single body. Just as before the division, originally, the man's body subordinated itself under one spirit and under one Divine Will, so after the reunion Man and Woman become one single body. But that can only take place if at the same time they become one mind, one heart, one soul, and this again is only possible if they subordinate all their strength and efforts, all their thoughts and desires to the service of a Higher Will. But herein lies the great difference between the sexual life of all other living creatures and that of human marriage. All the rest of the living world is also divided into sexes. But in their case both sexes sprang at the same time independently from the earth. They do not require each other for the fulfillment of their lives' calling, and only for the purpose of breeding, and for the time necessary for perpetuating the species, do they seek and find each other. But the human female is a part of the human male, is *ezer k'negdo*. The man is helpless and lacking independence without his wife. Only the two together form a complete human being. Life in its entirety, in every phase, demands their union. Only of men does it say "cleave unto his wife."

Our sages in the Gemora (Sanhedrin 56 et. seq.) find already in this verse an indication...[of the laws of incest, in that it suggests that a man was] not to look for a wife amongst near relations....Because the wife to be the *ezer* of her husband, she must be *k'negdo*; because she is to complete him, she must have different characteristics to his. If they are nearly related, they would perhaps have the same virtues, but also perhaps the same faults; the same perfections, but also the same deficiencies; their union would only strengthen and intensify the characteristics in both directions, good and bad, but they would not complement each other. Only in more distant grades would the salubrious wholesome differences be most likely to be present, which, when united, would tend to produce the perfect being suitable to become perfectly "one flesh," and to achieve more purely and completely the one great human task.