

Genesis, Commentary to Chapter 2:25-3:24

Everett Fox

3:1 Even though God said: Others use "Did God really say . . . ?"

in the garden . . . !: Such an uncompleted phrase, known as aposeopesis, leaves it to the reader to complete the speaker's thought which in the Bible is usually an oath or a threat (see also, for instance, 14:23, 21:23, 26:29, 31:50).

5 you: Plural. like gods: Or "like God."

7 then: Added in English to avoid a "knew-nude" rhyme.

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.

12 gave to be: Put. "Give" has been retained here, despite its awkwardness, as a repeating word in the narrative.

15 seed: Offspring, descendants.

17 painstaking-labor: Heb. עֲצָבוֹן *itzavon*. Man and woman receive equal curses (see v.16, "pain ... pains").

18 sting-shrub: Heb. דַּרְדַּר *dardar*, thistle ("thorns and thistles" suggests an alliteration not found in the Hebrew).

20 Havva: חַוָּה, Trad. English "Eve."

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.

one of us: See note on 1:26. [1:26 in our image: The "our" is an old problem. Some take it to refer to the heavenly court (although, not surprisingly, no angels are mentioned here).]

throughout the ages: Or "for the eons"; others use "forever."

24 winged-sphinxes: Mythical ancient creatures, also represented on the Ark of the Covenant (Ex. 25:18). "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.

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Robert Alter

1. cunning. In the kind of pun in which the ancient Hebrew writers delighted, 'arum, "cunning," plays against 'arumim, "naked," of the previous verse.

2. As E. A. Speiser has noted, the subordinate conjunction that introduces the serpent's first utterance does not have the sense of "truly" that most translators assign it, and is better construed as the beginning of a (false) statement that is cut off in mid-sentence by Eve's objection that the ban is not on all the trees of the Garden.

3. But, 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.

6. lust to the eyes. There is a long tradition of rendering the first term here, ta'awah (תאוה), according to English idiom and local biblical context, as "delight" or something similar. But ta'awah 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'awah is semantically bracketed with the next term attached to the tree, "lovely" nehmad (נחמד), which literally means "that which is desired."

to look at. A venerable tradition renders this verb, lehaskil (להשקיל), 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." Though the usual sense of lehaskil in the hiph'il conjugation does involve the exercise of wisdom, Funkenstein's suggestion leans on the meaning of the same root in the hitpa'el conjugation in postbiblical Hebrew and Aramaic, "to look." 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 (משקיל) 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.

12. gave by me, she gave me. The repeated verb nicely catches the way the first man passes the buck, not only blaming the woman for giving him the fruit but virtually blaming God for giving him the woman. She in turn of course blames the serpent. God's curse, framed in verse, follows the reverse order, from serpent to woman to man.

15. Enmity. Although the serpent is by no means "satanic," as in the lens of later Judeo-Christian traditions, the curse records a primal horror of humankind before this slithering, viscous-looking, and poisonous representative of the animal realm. It is the first moment in which a split between man and the rest of the animal kingdom is recorded. Behind it may stand, at a long distance of cultural mediation, Canaanite myths of a primordial sea serpent.

boot . . . bite. The Hebrew uses what appear to be homonyms, the first verb meaning "to trample," the second, identical in form, probably referring to the hissing sound of the snake just before it bites.

17. to the human. The Masoretic Text vocalizes le'adam without the definite article, which would make it mean "to Adam." But since Eve in the parallel curse is still called "the woman," it seems better to assume the definite article here.

with pangs shall you eat. The noun 'itsavon (עצבון) 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.

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.

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. The most searching explanation of these poetic etymologies in the Bible has been offered by Herbert Marks, who observes, "In a verisimilar narrative, naming establishes and fixes identity as something tautologically itself; etymology, by returning it to the trials of language, compromises it, complicates it, renders it potentially mobile." In the Hebrew here, the phonetic similarity is between hawah (חַוָּה), "Eve," and the verbal root hayah (חָיָה), "to live." It has been proposed that Eve's name conceals very different origins, for it sounds suspiciously like the Aramaic word for "serpent." 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?

23. the soil from which he had been taken. This reminder of the first man's clayey creatureliness occurs as a kind of refrain in this chapter, first in the act of God's fashioning man, then in God's curse, and now in the banishment. It is a mere thing shaped from clay that has aspired to be like a god.

24. The cherubim, a common feature of ancient Near Eastern mythology, are not to be confused with the round-cheeked darlings of Renaissance iconography. The root of the term either means "hybrid" or, by an inversion of consonants, "mount," "steed," and they are the winged beasts, probably of awesome aspect, on which the sky god of the old Canaanite myths and of the poetry of Psalms goes riding through the air. The fiery sword, not mentioned elsewhere but referred to with the definite article as though it were a familiar image, is a suitable weapon to set alongside the formidable cherubim.

Genesis, Commentary to Chapter 2:25-3:24

Richard Elliott Friedman

3:1. 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.

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

3:3. and you shall not touch it. But God is not reported to have said that they could not touch it (2:17). As Rashi notes, the dialogue appears to develop the principle that if one starts out by adding to a command, one may come to take away from it in the end. We should also note that this principle is already introduced here at the beginning of the Torah, because it is an essential principle that Moses pronounces twice near the end of the Torah: "You shall not add to the thing that I command you, and you shall not take away from it" (Deut 4:2; 13:1).

Moreover: 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.

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.

3:6. its fruit. The text does not say what kind of fruit. Rashi, following the Talmud (Sanhedrin 70b), suggested figs, so that it is ironic that they then cover themselves with fig leaves. Artists traditionally make it an apple. I have also heard pomegranate, citron (Hebrew 'etrog), and wheat! 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 mentioned because that 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. The kind of fruit is of concern only for picturing this story in art. My daughter Jesse, when she was nine years old, painted a picture of this story, and she made all different fruits grow from this same tree.

3:6. gave to her man with her. People frequently have claimed that this story blames the woman for persuading, enticing, or seducing the man to eat the fruit. But there is no reference to any act of persuasion. Indeed, the words "her man with her" may suggest that he should be pictured as having been there while the snake was speaking to her. And even the deity's words later—"you listened to your woman's voice" (3:17)—need not suggest seduction or persuasion on her part. They merely respond to the man's having tried to shift blame to her, and they affirm that he must bear the consequences of his own actions. Moreover, the snake speaks with plural verbs, suggesting that he is including the man.

3:7. 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).

3:9. 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), as well. 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 YHWH next turns back to the man 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.

3:14. the snake. Just a snake, not the devil or Satan, as later Christian interpretation pictured. As the curse that follows indicates, this story has to do with the fate of snakes, not with the cosmic role of a devil. There is no such concept in the Hebrew Bible.

3:14. 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 twenty-four 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.

3:17. the ground is cursed on your account. As a consequence of human behavior, the environment suffers. This phenomenon will recur in the Torah. See the comment on 4:11.

3:18. thorn and thistle. The environment now becomes hostile to humans.

3:20. Eve. Hebrew hawwah (חַוָּה), the feminine form of the word for "life" (חַי / יָחַי). Interestingly, this Semitic root elsewhere can mean snake! Again, the story is replete with puns.

3:22. to know good and bad. Together with the artistry of language (punning, dialogue) and the etiologies, the story merges insight into the human condition. Like the Greek myth of Prometheus, the first story of the Bible develops the notion that knowledge is a prize taken from the divine realm and that the price for this forbidden prize is suffering. What is particular to the Bible's story is the kind of knowledge that is at stake: knowledge of good and bad. As to what that means, see the comment on Gen 2:9.¹

put out. The text plays on forms of the verb שָׁלַח: rather than "put out" his hand (v. 22), the human is "put out" of the garden (v. 23).

tree of life. The comparative literature is intriguing. In the ancient Near Eastern epic of Gilgamesh, the hero, seeking immortality, goes to the bottom of deep waters and brings up a plant that is supposed to have the power to rejuvenate life. (If one eats from it, one becomes young again.) While he goes off to bathe, however, a snake steals away this "tree of life"; and this is the etiology of snakes' sloughing their skin and being rejuvenated (Gilgamesh, Tablet XII, lines 263-289).

3:22. and eat and live forever. The fact that there is no mention of afterlife being created at the time that death begins, in Genesis 3, is very suggestive. See the comment on Gen 2:9 [or the footnote below].

3:24. cherubs. Sphinxes. Creatures of mixed species, frequently with the head of a human, the body of a four-legged animal, and the wings of a bird. Cherubs guard the path to the tree of life. Later, statues of cherubs will be placed over the ark, seemingly guarding its contents, which are sources of wisdom and righteousness, which in turn are pictured as ultimately the key to a return to the closeness with the deity that is lost here (Prov. 3:18; 11:30; see my *The Hidden Face of God*, pp. 115-116).

¹ 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.

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W. Gunther Plaut

2:25] This verse should be considered a bridge, connecting the previous story to the subsequent one, which it introduces.

Naked. ערומים (arumim), a wordplay on ערום (arum, "shrewd") in 3:1.

Not ashamed. Nakedness is shameful only when inappropriate, as before God (Gen. 3:10) and especially in the act of worship at the altar (Exod. 20:23). The Bible, in the Song of Songs, even highlights the attractions of the human body, while the prophet Ezekiel speaks of the nakedness of poverty (18:7).

3:1] Serpent. The association of serpents with guile is an old one. In Mesopotamian, Hurrian and Ugaritic myths, serpents oppose the will of the gods; "snake" was already a derogatory term in an old Hittite document. A postbiblical book identifies the serpent of Eden with Satan and says: "Through Satan's envy death entered the world." Serpents play an important part in two incidents in Israel's history: Rods are turned into serpents by Moses and the Egyptian magicians (Exod. 4:3; 7:9-15), and serpents are agents of a plague in the wilderness (Num. 21:6-9; see also II Kings 18:4).

5] Like gods. אלהים (elohim) occurs twice in this verse. The first refers to the Creator and commands a singular verb form (ידע); the second speaks of gods, being followed by a plural verb form (ידעי). The plural form can also mean celestial beings (as in Gen. 6:4). Another translation: "You will be like God in telling good from evil."

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

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

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' New Testament identified the dragon, "that serpent of old," with Satan.

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.

16] Your craving shall be for your man. Despite the problems of pregnancy and parturition—a frank recognition of the legitimacy of female (hetero-) sexual desire (which Rashi tried to argue away but Nachmanides straightforwardly acknowledged).

He shall govern you. This is not the original state in Eden, but rather a description of what happened to the original equality of sexes in the post-Eden world.

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

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.

20] Eve. (חַוָּה / chavah); the text explains the name by connecting it with "living" (חַי / chai), while the Targum's term for serpent (חַוִּיָּא / chivya) hints at a relationship to chavah.

21] Outfits out of skin. Ibn Ezra recounts the various attempts to explain how animal skin came to be used in the Garden of Eden and comes to the conclusion that we need not investigate every action of the Almighty. He also suggests that "outfits for the skin" is a possible interpretation. Targum Jonathan speculates that this was the skin shed by the serpent.

24] Cherubim. Legendary winged beings who protect sacred places. The flaming sword may represent bolts of lightning.

Excurses

The Tree of Knowledge

Adam and Eve are depicted as living in an environment of ease, free from pain and worry. Their only task is to till and tend the garden, as stewards of the Creator. The tale of expulsion, of "Paradise Lost," which relates how humans came to forfeit their condition, has been the subject of much theological speculation, which in turn has had a profound effect on the religious and psychological orientations of Western society.

At the center of the story, as in the middle of the garden, stands the Tree of Knowledge. The tree is unique to biblical tradition, and three major interpretations have been offered to explain it.

Ethical Interpretation. Eating from the Tree of All Knowledge (or "Good and Evil" as most older translations render it) provided humanity with moral discrimination and thereby made human beings capable of committing sin. Yielding to the serpent's temptation and eating the fruit were two parts of the same act; once it was done, the relationship of humanity to God was essentially changed. The expulsion from Eden meant that humans could never return to their former state of ethical indifference; they had become "choosing" creatures. Two radically different theologies developed from this interpretation:

Christianity, building on certain, largely sectarian Jewish teachings, taught that after the transgression of Adam and Eve all human beings were inherently evil. In this interpretation, the guilt was assigned to Adam, and the event has come to be known as "the fall of man," an expression absent from the Bible itself and from ancient Jewish literature. "By one man, sin entered the world," says Paul in the Christians' New Testament, and again: "By the offense of one, judgment came upon all men to condemnation." An old New England primer put it simply: "In Adam's fall / We sinned all." This was humanity's original sin, a fatal flaw, from which it could be redeemed only after Jesus came into the world as the Christ. Without faith in him as the redemptive savior, people would live and die in their original sin. In the course of centuries, the doctrine of humanity's inherent sinfulness led to a thoroughly pessimistic view of humankind and a heavy emphasis on the right kind of faith.

The mainstream of Judaism refused to make the tale of Eden an important part of its worldview and maintained that the only road to salvation was through godly deeds (*mitzvot*), rather than through belief in a savior, and that, while humans tended to corruption (Gen. 6:5; 8:21), they were not basically corrupt creatures.

Especially, "O thou Adam, what hast thou done! For though it was thou that sinned, the fall was not thine alone, but ours also who are descendants." God's judgment on Adam ("For dust you are and to dust you shall return") is spoken by the Catholic priest as he puts ashes on the worshiper's head on Ash Wednesday. The Mormons, however, say: "We believe that humanity will be punished for their own sins and not for Adam's transgressions" (Second Article of Faith). Original sin was also denied by the Pelagians (5th century C.E.), who held that it was transmitted by bad example.

Though they were constantly exposed to the evil impulse (יצר הרע, yetzer ha-ra), by carrying out God's commandments they could overcome or at least control it and thereby could develop their impulse for good (יצר הטוב, yetzer ha-tov). The more closely they attended to mitzvot, the greater would be their protection from sin.

Intellectual Interpretation. In the Bible, the expression tov vara (טוב ורע), literally "good and evil," means "everything" (Deut. 1:39; II Sam. 19:36), as when we say, "I know its good and its bad features," meaning that I know everything about it that can be known. The tale may therefore be understood to say that primal humans ate of the Tree of Omniscience. Having tasted of it, they forever after will attempt to know everything; they will, in other words, play the part of God.

This intellectual overreaching is what the Greeks called hubris, or self-exaltation. We strive to be gods, but God will not permit us to become divine. When we persist in deifying our own powers, God calls us to account and exacts a terrible punishment. Like Adam and Eve, we have to leave our Eden, our desire for divine power turned back by the flaming sword at the gate of attainment.

Sexual Interpretation. The Eden story may also be read as the discovery not of our ethical or intellectual knowledge, but of our sexuality. This is suggested by the Hebrew word for "knowledge" (דעת), which has the meaning of "experience," including sexual experience. Note that the story of the expulsion from Eden begins with a discovery of nakedness and sexual shame (Gen. 3:7).

Reading the Eden tale in this light, we see a link between the Tree of (Sexual) Knowledge and the Tree of Life. The latter, whose fruit would have bestowed earthly immortality, is no longer accessible. We must now perpetuate our species through procreation, in the same way as other creatures do. But being human, our sexuality has a special dimension; our process of passing from childhood to adulthood, from innocence to maturity, is shot through with love and pain. All humans repeat the journey from Eden into the world. As infants they live in a garden of innocence; when they discover their sexual impulse and grow up, they must leave the garden forever.

Summary. All three interpretations do justice to the story, although there is some textual objection in each case! Whatever intent went into the earliest strands of the story, the three major themes outlined above have been thoroughly interwoven so that the fabric of the text exhibits not one theme but all, and each is discernible, depending on the light in which the text is viewed.

This becomes particularly evident when we ask the questions: How did the storytellers view the intention of God? What did they believe God wanted us to be? Thoroughly obedient or potentially defiant? A moral automaton or a free spirit?

Ethical interpretation: If Adam and Eve had no understanding of right and wrong, how could they be punished for their ignorance?

Intellectual interpretation: Adam and Eve, having eaten of the Tree of Knowledge, are said to have become like God. However, they did not in fact attain omniscience. Note also the question put to Maimonides: "It is a thing to be wondered at that our punishment for disobedience should consist of being granted a perfection that we did not possess before, namely, the 'intellect.'" Maimonides' answer: "There is a difference between 'necessary' and 'apparent' truths. Before his sin, Adam knew the former, afterwards the latter."

Sexual interpretation: In Genesis 3:22, after the eating of the fruit, God says to Adam and Eve: "You have now become like one of us, knowing everything." If "knowing" here refers to sexuality, it would be in contrast to the biblical concept of a God who otherwise never bears a

tinge of sexuality. For this reason, the ancients suggested that Adam and Eve had marital relations before they ate of the fruit. The biblical Eve has also been compared to the harlot in Gilgamesh as an agent of civilization.

Did God want humans to stay in Eden? And what was the punishment? Adam and Eve were, in the end, "condemned" to be human.

These questions arise not only from the biblical text but also, in a wider sense, from our very creation. Adam and Eve eat the tantalizing fruit, only to meet with disappointment and frustration. Theirs is an act of disobedience and defiance, yet at the same time of growth and liberation. God appears to provide them with the possibility of remaining in Eden, but the very temptation of knowledge makes this impossible. God tempts humans to be godlike, but when they yield, God rejects the attempt decisively.

Thus the emergence of that contradictory creature called human is in itself a process of contradictions. Adam and Eve are free to defy God, at a price, and the theme of human defiance runs through much of the Bible. For while our freedom may be limited in all other respects, we must believe that toward God our freedom is without limits.

The Tree of Life

Questions of immortality were of central concern to many ancient peoples, and it was widely believed that eating or drinking a sacred substance might bestow eternal life. Egyptian mythology spoke of a sycamore from which the gods obtained their immortality, the Greeks told of ambrosia, and the Indians of soma. Gilgamesh was promised access to a life-giving sea plant, and the Adapa tale spoke of magical bread and water. (The Adapa tale also deals with the human being offered life but choosing death, a theme recurring in the Bible, which may be viewed as a guide to those who want to mitigate the effects of the choice.) Some Christian sacraments, though they have long been spiritualized, still reflect their origins in the tree-of-life motif.

The Bible, however, while retaining the symbolism of a life-endowing tree, gives it a minor role (which explains why no prohibition is issued to Adam in this respect) and shifts its main attention to the Tree of Knowledge. The latter, whatever meaning assigned to "knowledge," in effect became a Tree of Death, for eating of its fruit caused expulsion from Eden and the permanent inaccessibility of any magical fruit from the Tree of Life. By choosing "knowledge," the Eden dwellers attained death. (Midrash Tanchuma speculates that God created the Angel of Death before creating humans, thus relating their mortality not to sin so much as to Providence itself and that, in fact, "death is good." The Talmud records a rabbinical debate that concludes that there is "death without sin.") Immortality and knowledge are pictured as incompatible in the human sphere; we desire both but cannot have both. Since Adam and Eve chose knowledge, mortality is now built into the very structure of human life, distinguishing creature from Creator. By procreating, we can in part overcome death, but, like the rest of the creatures, we cannot "be like God."

Eden and the Expulsion: The Human Condition (cont'd)

25. This verse forms the transition to the next episode by means of a word play on “naked” (Heb. ‘arom, pl. ‘arummim) and “shrewd” (Heb. ‘arum). It also conveys an anticipatory hint at what is related in 3:7.

they felt no shame The Hebrew expresses mutuality. So long as the harmony with God remained undisturbed, the pristine innocence and dignity of sexuality was not despoiled.

CHAPTER 3 *The work of God’s Creation has been termed “very good”; the idyllic life of man and woman in the Garden of Eden has been described. How did evil come into existence? Evil is seen to be the inevitable result of human violation of God’s law. Human beings are free moral agents; hence, they must bear the consequences of their actions.*

THE TRANSGRESSION (vv. 1–7)

1. the serpent 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 in the Introduction to Genesis 1, 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.

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.

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.

say The serpent subtly softens the severity of the prohibition by using this word in place of the original “command.” Then it deliberately misquotes God so that the woman cannot give a one-

word reply, but is drawn into conversation that forces her to focus upon the forbidden tree that he had not mentioned.

3. 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.

4–5. The serpent emphatically contradicts the very words God used in 2:17. In this way it removes her fears. It then proceeds to ascribe self-serving motives to God, thus undermining His credibility in her eyes. Finally, it appeals to an attractive standard of utility: eating of the tree's fruit elevates one to a higher plane of existence.

5. your eyes will be opened You will be endowed with new mental powers, with the capacity for reflection that allows one to make decisions independently of God.

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'ei) and by verse 22 ("one of us"). As tractate Soferim 4:5(4) points out, "the first 'elohim [in this verse] is sacred, the second non-sacred."

who know good and bad See Comment to 2:9. The notion that such is a prerogative of the angelic host is found again in 2 Samuel 14: "For my lord the king is like an angel of God, understanding. . . good and bad" (v. 17); and "My lord is as wise as an angel of God, and he knows all that goes on in the land" (v. 20). A polytheistic version of this sentiment is found in Gilgamesh: "Wise art thou, O Enkidu, like a god art thou." What the serpent is saying is that the woman and the man will have the capacity to make judgments as to their own welfare independently of God. The insidious nature of its discourse lies in the implication that defiance of God's law constitutes the indispensable precondition for human freedom.

The serpent had initially pretended total ignorance of the situation. The woman had merely referred to "the tree in the middle of the garden." By "coincidentally" using the phrase "to know good and bad," God's own words in 2:17, the creature cleverly enhances the listener's receptivity to its words.

6. The word of the serpent prevails over the word of God. The allure of the forbidden has become irresistible. There is an undertone of irony in the formulation that she "saw that it was good," for it echoes God's recurring judgment about His creation in chapter 1. Now, however, good has become debased in the woman's mind. Its definition is no longer God's verdict, but is rooted in the appeal to the senses and in utilitarian value. Egotism, greed, and self-interest now govern human action.

as a source of wisdom Hebrew le-haskil is the capacity for making decisions that lead to success. The Targums as well as the Septuagint, Latin, and Syriac versions all derive the verb from the stem s-k-l, "to see, contemplate."

and he ate The woman is not a temptress. She does not say a word but simply hands her husband the fruit, which he accepts and eats. The absence of any hint of resistance or even hesitation on his part is strange. It should be noted, however, that in speaking to the woman, the serpent consistently used the plural form. This suggests that the man was all the time within ear's reach of the conversation and was equally seduced by its persuasiveness. In fact, the Hebrew text here literally means, "She also gave to her husband with her ('immah)," suggesting that he was a full participant in the sin, thereby refuting in advance his later excuse.

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.

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.

THE INTERROGATION (vv. 8–13)

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.

8. hid from the LORD The attempt to evade God is tantamount to an admission of guilt.

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.

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.

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.

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.

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. 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.

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.

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.

the woman She is singled out because she conducted the dialogue with it, but she is here representative of the entire human race, as the reference to her "offspring" shows.

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 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.

17. The 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, and it underlies the great exhortations of Leviticus 26 and Deuteronomy 28.

By toil Hebrew *itsavon* is the same term as is used in verse 16 for the woman's anguish. 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.

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 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.

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.

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.

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.

Eve Hebrew *havvah* (חַוָּה), which seems to be an archaic form of *hayyah* (חַיָּה), could mean "living thing," life personified. This is how the Septuagint understood it when it rendered the name here *Zōē*. The vocalization suggests an intensive form, so that "propagator of life" is also a possible meaning. There might, in addition, be a word play involved, for Aramaic *hivya* (חַוְיָא) means a serpent, as noted in *Genesis Rabba* 20:11; 22:2. In the *Sifre* inscription (1.A.31), the word for serpent is actually written *hvvh* (חַוָּה).

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. On the former, see *Comment to 1:27*.

21. Despite their transgression and punishment, Adam and Eve are not wholly alienated from God, who now displays His parental concern for their welfare. Since nakedness now evokes shame, God restores human dignity by providing clothing. Also, the garments will afford protection against the harsh conditions of life they are to encounter outside Eden.

garments Hebrew *kutonet* was a kind of long- or short-sleeved shirt, generally made of linen or wool, that reached down to the knees or even the ankles. It became fashionable in the Late Bronze Age and standard dress in the Iron Age.

of skins This supposes that the earliest clothing was made of animal skins. An interesting tradition, preserved in the Targum Jonathan, has it fashioned from the sloughed-off skin of the serpent. As noted in Genesis Rabba 20:12 and Sotah 14a, the Hebrew can also yield “garments for the skin.” This leaves unspecified the material of their composition.

THE EXPULSION FROM EDEN (vv. 22–24)

By his transgression, man distanced himself spiritually from Eden. God’s punishment inevitably entailed physical separation from its precincts. This is now promptly brought about.

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.

like one of us See Comment to verse 5.

the tree of life See Comment to 2:9.

23. to till the soil As noted above, agriculture seems to be regarded as man’s earliest occupation.

from which he was taken This refers back to 2:7-8. Man was created from earth outside of Eden and is now returned to his place of origin.

24. drove. . . out Hebrew *geresh* is harsher and more explicit than *shillah* in the previous verse. The same two verbs also appear in tandem in Exodus 6:1 in connection with the Exodus.

east of the garden The entrance was envisaged as being on the east side, facing the rising sun. It is assumed that Adam and Eve could walk back into the garden if they so desired. Steps must be taken to prevent this from occurring.

the cherubim Neither here nor anywhere else is there a clearcut definition or description of these beings. The use of the definite article presupposes a familiarity with them on the part of the reader, probably because they figured in popular legend and folklore. An example of such is Ezekiel’s dirge over the king of Tyre in 28:11-19. See Excursus 1 [below].

and the fiery ever-turning sword This is a separate, protective instrument, not said to be in the hands of the cherubim. It too carries the definite article and so was also something well known to the Israelite imagination, even though it is not again mentioned in the Bible precisely in this form.

EXCURSUS 1: The Cherubim 3:24

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 the hands of the cherubim. The manner in which they are introduced into the narrative shows that they are well known and require no definition. It reflects the unique position of the cherubim 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 the cherubim were also worked into the cloth curtains of that Tabernacle. The same cherubic motif decorated Solomon’s Temple and was envisaged by Ezekiel in his restored temple. 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.

In the Tabernacle in the wilderness, the cherubim possess one face and two wings, but Ezekiel has them as composite figures with four faces and four wings each.

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. If this manner of representation was not inspired by the Greco-Roman Eros (“Loves”), then it probably owes its origin to the fanciful rabbinic etymologizing of Sukkah 5b and Hagigah 13b, which derives Hebrew *keruv* from Aramaic *ke-ravia*, “like a boy.”

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. These are highly reminiscent of the descriptions in Ezekiel 1:6-11 and 10:14. 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. Then, the emphasis on their perpetually outstretched wings projects supreme mobility and is an artistic presentation of God’s omnipresence. 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 over 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 of the wilderness or in Solomon’s Temple, they were hidden from public gaze.