

The Eden Narrative

*St. Aidan's Episcopal Church
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Hosted by John Lein and Rev. Jonathan Bryan

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Genesis 2:4b-3:24

Translation by Everett Fox (Shoken Bible), edited by John Lein

I

At the time of Y_{HWH}, God's making of land and skies,
no shrub of the field was yet on the land,
no grasses of the field had yet sprouted,
for Y_{HWH}, God, had not made it rain upon the land
and there was no earthling to till the earth—
but a flow would well up from the earth
and water the whole surface of the earth;
Y_{HWH}, God, sculpted the earthling from the dust of the earth,
he blew into its nostrils the breath of life,
and the earthling became a living soul.

II

Y_{HWH}, God, planted a Garden of Pleasure in days of old,
and placed there the earthling whom he had formed.
Y_{HWH}, God, caused to spring up from the soil
every kind of tree that was pleasing to the sight
and good for food,
and the Tree of Life in the center of the Garden,
and the Tree of the Discerning of Good and Bad.

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Y_{HWH}, God, took the human and placed him
in the Garden of Pleasure,
to work it and to watch it.
Y_{HWH}, God, commanded the human, saying,
“From every tree of the Garden you may eat—yes, eat!
but from the Tree of the Discerning of Good and Bad
you must not eat!
For on the day that you eat from it, you shall die—yes, die!”

III

Now Y_{HWH}, God, said,
“It is not good that the earthling is alone;
I will make a mighty-helper corresponding to it.”

So Y_{HWH}, God, formed from the earth
every living-thing of the field and
every bird of the heavens,
and brought each to the earthling to see what it would call it;
whatever the earthling called each living creature
that became its name.
The earthling called-out names
for every herd-animal
and for the birds of the heavens
and for every living-thing of the field,
but for the earthling,
there could be found none corresponding to it.

So Y_{HWH}, God, cast a deep sleep upon the earthling so it slept,
he took one of its sides and closed up the flesh there.
And Y_{HWH}, God, built up the side that he had taken from the
earthling into a woman;
and he brought her to the earthling.

The earthling said,
“This one at last
Is bone of my bones
And flesh of my flesh.
This one shall be called Woman,
For from Man was she taken.”

Hence a man leaves his father and mother
and clings to his woman,
so that they become one flesh.

IV

Now the two of them, the human and his woman, were *nude*,
yet they were not ashamed.

Now the snake was more *shrewd*
than all the living-things of the field
that YHWH, God, had made.

It said to the woman:

“Even though God said:
‘You are not to eat from any of the trees in the Garden...’”

The woman said to the snake:

“From the fruit of the trees in the Garden we may eat—
but from the fruit of the tree
that is in the center of the Garden God has said:
‘You are not to eat from it
and you are not to touch it,
lest you die.’”

The snake said to the woman:

“Die? You will not die!
Rather, God knows
that on the day that you eat from it,
your eyes will be opened
and you will become like gods,
discerning good and bad.”

The woman saw that the tree was good for *eating*
and that it was *beautiful* to the eyes,
and the tree was desirable for *wisdom*.

She took from its fruit and ate
and gave also to her man beside her,
and he ate.

The eyes of the two of them were opened
and they knew then that they were nude.

They sewed fig leaves together
and made themselves loincloths.

V

Now they heard the sound of YHWH, God,
walking about in the Garden
at the breezy-time of the day.
And the human and his wife hid themselves
from the face of YHWH, God,
amid the trees of the Garden.

YHWH, God, called to the human and said to him:

“Where are you?”

He said:

“I heard the sound of you in the Garden
and I was afraid,
because I am nude,
and so I hid myself.”

He said:

“Who told you that you are nude?
From the tree about which I command you not to eat,
have you eaten?”

The human said:

“The woman whom you gave to be beside me,
she gave me from the tree,
and so I ate.”

YHWH, God, said to the woman:

“What is this that you have done?”

The woman said:

“The snake enticed me,
and so I ate.”

VI

YHWH, God, said to the snake:

“Because you have done this,
damned be you from all the animals
and from all the living-things of the field!
Upon your belly shall you walk and dust shall you eat,
all the days of your life.
I put enmity between you and the woman,
between your seed and her seed:
they will bruise you on the head,
you will bruise them in the heel.”

To the woman he said:

“I will multiply—multiply!—your pain
from your pregnancy,
with pains shall you bear children.
Toward your man will be your lust,
yet he will rule over you.”

To the human he said:

“Because you have hearkened to the voice of your woman
and have eaten from the tree
about which I commanded you,
saying: ‘You are not to eat from it!’
Damned be the soil on your account,
with painstaking-labor shall you eat from it,
all the days of your life.
Thorn and sting-shrub let it spring up for you,
when you seek to eat the plants of the field!
By the sweat of your brow shall you eat bread,
until you return to the earth,
for from it you were taken.
For you are dust,
and to dust shall you return.”

VII

The human called his woman’s name: Havva, “Life-giver!”,
for she became the mother of all the living.

Now YHWH, God, made the human and his woman
coats of skins and clothed them.

YHWH, God, said:

“Here, the human has become like one of us,
in discerning good and bad.
So now, lest he stretch forth his hand
and take also from the Tree of Life
and eat and live throughout the ages...!”

So YHWH, God, sent him away from the Garden of Pleasure,
to work the earth from which he had been taken.

He drove the human out and caused to him dwell,
eastward of the Garden of Pleasure,
the winged-sphinxes
and the flashing, ever-turning sword
to watch over the way to the Tree of Life.

The Traditional Interpretation

The traditional Christian interpretation which most of us learned growing up in the church is that this story narrates a literal event (“the Fall”) in the past through which sin and death entered the world and the resulting curse and separation from God has been passed down through the generations (“Original Sin”). However:

- *Original Sin* has never been a doctrine in Judaism, so Jesus would not have thought of the world in this way.
- It was first discussed in the 2nd century by St. Irenaeus and St. Augustine (~400 CE) was the most prominent interpreter and popularizer of the doctrine. Very low opinion of women, taught that sin came through sex.
- Augustine’s doctrine was based on a poor translation of Romans (could not read either Hebrew or Greek).
- While there are verses describing God cursing three or four generations for a father’s sin in the Torah, Ezekiel 18 insists that each generation has a chance to change.

Other Ways of Interpreting

Some consider this as a vision of childhood transitioning to the contradictions and pains of adolescence and adulthood. Others see this as a fable describing the emergence of human consciousness from animal origins: by gaining an awareness of time and our egos, we enter into suffering and death in a new way than pre-conscious beings. Consequences exist for the kind of beings we are.

Consider alternative symbols: wisdom is always personified as a woman; woman providing the fruit of wisdom to man; Eden as a symbolic “womb” (which requires a woman to take the fruit); couple exercising will to leave. Notice that the serpent talks to the woman who considers and decides, while the man is standing there and merely takes and eats!

A Selection of Recent Varied Interpretations

- “Therefore, humans now have knowledge but no longer live in Paradise: a trade-off” (*Gunkel 1910*)
- Text addresses question: “Why is the human being, though created by God, a being limited by death, suffering, toil, and sin?” (*Westermann 1976*)
- “explains sin, a model of what happens whenever man disobeys God.” (*Gordon Wenham 1987*)
- “the possibility of an extension of human existence beyond the limits set for it by God at creation. Human hubris and consequences are thematic focus.” (*Gerhard von Rad 1961*)
- “Story that tells of reason for present human predicament of shortcomings and damaged relationships; the root of evil is human endeavor to form one’s own existence autonomously.” (*Odil Hannes Steck 1970*)
- “Trees show the two themes are knowledge and immortality; God is the one who comes out with a slightly shaky moral record. A story about how immortality was almost gained, but lost. God didn’t want to share.” (*James Barr 1993*)
- “fundamental conflict of the story is between Life and Knowledge. Impossibility of having both knowledge and life.” (*Stordalen 2000*)
- “Human maturation: before birth (2:4b-6), childhood (2:7-25), adolescence (3:1-7), maturity (3:8-24). Knowledge is sign of maturity.” (*Ellen van Wolde 1989*)
- “Life and Death is the subject. Interpretation is a love story gone awry: Eros created (2:4b-7), development of Eros (2:7-24), Eros contaminated (2:25-3:7), disintegration of Eros (3:8-24).” (*Phyllis Trible 1985*)
- “Choice as the major element in human existence” (*Fox*)

Translation Notes

Primary translation by Everett Fox (*Shocken Bible*)

As edited by John Lein

- **YHWH, God:** The *Tetragrammaton*, the unique and unpronounceable Hebrew name for God, is used in this second creation story along with the generic “elohiyim”.
- **land and skies:** “earth and heaven” is switched in order from the first story. They can also be translated land and skies, which allowed me to use earth for *h’adamah*.
- **earthling to till the earth:** the *h’adam* is the generic word for human/humankind, and comes directly from the world for soil/earth *h’adamah*. Following Phyllis Trible, the creature can be understood as an “un-sexed being” at this stage, which is found also in other early origin stories and Plato. I use “earthling” for *h’adam* until differentiated in verse 2:23 and then use “human.” “Adam” is not used as a proper name except briefly in Genesis chapter 5. Breath + body = soul.
- **Garden of Pleasure:** the name *eden* denotes fertility, and has connotations of luxuriance and bliss, paradise. A place where humans walked in perfect harmony with the divine and all creation.
- **in days of old:** the phrase “in the east” can also be translated temporally rather than geographically, as it is elsewhere in the Bible (see “from of old” Micah 5:2).
- **center of the Garden:** using “center” rather than “midst” aids in understanding the specific location. This likely applies to both trees, a common structure.
- **Discerning of Good and Bad:** this “knowing” can also be discerning, choosing among. What to do with it—wisdom. Could be a *merism* describing everything between “good and bad.” “Bad” is equally valid as “evil.”
- **on the day that you eat:** can be understood as conditional “if” rather than referring to a day. A threat of death as consequence rather than a formal death sentence.
- **mighty-helper:** the Hebrew *ezer* is used throughout the Bible for strength coming to aid, usually God for people.
- **corresponding to it:** emphasis is on similarity.
- **one of its sides:** *t’zela* means the side of a building or mountain elsewhere in Scripture, not rib. The KJV introduced this error from ambiguous Greek/Latin words
- **Woman/Man:** The *isha* “woman/wife” is named as distinct before the *ish* “man/husband” is. Since marriage relationships aren’t made explicit in Scripture, I use the clearer Woman/Man rather than Wife/Husband.
- **nude/shrewd:** Dr. Fox cleverly surfaces the rhyming word-play of the Hebrew behind these paired words.
- **snake:** a fellow creation of God’s, but seemingly in conflict with him, the serpent is crafty, disloyal, and lying—more of a trickster than “Satan.” Tricksters can be devices that raise consciousness in stories!
- **and you are not to touch it:** the woman adds instruction!
- **eating/beautiful/wisdom:** three growing levels of awareness by the woman of the benefits of the tree.
- **fruit:** note not an apple, though traditional.
- **Where are you?:** is an appeal to one’s responsibility, not just location.
- **damned:** the serpent and the ground alone are cursed.
- **you are dust to dust shall you return:** kept from the Tree of Life, humans return to the *humus* they came from.
- **Havva:** the human follows God by being a name-giver. Here he names the woman “Life Giver,” also reflecting God. This is traditionally transliterated “Eve.”

Notes for Readers

Remember, “myth tells us what is *most true* about a society.” Myth is one of the most powerful ways to explore meaning and purpose, and should be cherished and respected for its depths of interpretation and endless relevance. We are reading myths of the best kind, especially in the first 11 chapters of Genesis.

This mythological account is based on the earlier *Epic of Gilgamesh*, but is a uniquely Hebrew retelling. There also a woman transitions a brutish human into a mature man, though through more explicit means. It has been dated as both earlier and later than the first creation account depending on the scholars, but we do know they were written separately and later combined (with 2:4 creating the transition).

Resources used in this handout, for further education:

- *In the Beginning* by Karen Armstrong
- *The Five Books of Moses* translation/notes by Everett Fox
- *The Jewish Study Bible* translation/notes
- *Genesis (Belief Commentary)* by Migel De La Torre
- *Countertraditions in the Bible* by Ilana Pardes
- *The Eden Narrative* by Trygge N. D. Mettinger
- Classes with VTS’s Dr. Judy Fentress-Williams!