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The Story of Sin in Genesis 3

The story of sin begins in Genesis 3. The present form of Genesis 3 is dated between the tenth century BCE[1] to Israel's exile (587–537 BCE).[2] There is widespread agreement that it is written in a very literary, even poetic style, and with great rhetorical skill and nuance.[3]

It is important to note at the outset that the word "sin" is not used in Genesis 3 nor is the word "original sin" used in the story, or anywhere in the Bible. The form of Genesis 3 is a crime and punishment narrative that is told in two parts: 1) the transgression, vv. 1–7, and 2) the punishment, vv. 8–24.

THE TRANSGRESSION, VV. 1–7

The story of the transgression is told in three parts: 1) the temptation, vv. 1–5; 2) the transgression, v. 6; 3) the change effected by the transgression, v. 7.

1. So Wenham, *Genesis* 1–15, xlii–xlv.
2. So Bruggemann, *Introduction*, 5, 21.
3. See Trible, *God and Rhetoric*, 72–143.

The temptation,

The temptation, vv. 1–5, is initiated by "the serpent" (*arum*). The only thing we know about the serpent is that it "was more crafty than any other wild animal that the Lord God had made" (v. 1). So the serpent is one of the "animals of the field" formed out of the ground by the Lord God (2:19). In addition, the text says that it talks (v. 1), and that it knows something that humans do not know (v. 5). The text says nothing about the serpent as Satan or as some kind of demonic figure, nor anything about enmity between the serpent and God. The serpent is introduced in the story because of what it says, not because of who or what it is. The man and woman are led into disobedience by a creature of God. The story in Genesis tells us nothing about any fallen angel, Satan, or the origin of evil.[4]

The serpent initiates a pious dialogue, what Dietrich Bonhoeffer called "the first conversation about God, the first religious, theological conversation."[5] The opening question is, "did God say . . .?" The serpent exaggerates God's prohibition by asking, "did God say, 'you shall not eat from any tree in the garden'"(3:2)? The woman (she is not given a name, Eve, until v. 20) corrects the serpent's exaggeration, "you shall not eat of the fruit of the tree that is in the middle of the garden," but then offers her own exaggeration, "nor shall you touch it, or you shall die" (3:3). The serpent challenges the credibility of God, "you will not die. . ." but "your eyes will be opened, and you will be like God (or the gods), knowing good and evil" (3:4). You will see what until now you are not able to perceive, and you will be made wise (or successful) to distinguish what is useful or harmful for the community.[6] At the conclusion of the dialogue the issue is can God be trusted? Has God been completely truthful with humans? A pious question about God is really a very cunning question because it forces the woman to render a judgment about God.

It is important to note here that "to know good and evil" (v. 4) is a leitmotif in the narrative; it occurs four times in chapters 2–3 (2:9, 17; 3:5, 22). A study of these occurrences indicates that 1) the prediction that "you will die" is disputed: God predicts it in 2:17, the serpent challenges

4. The association of the serpent and Satan begins in Wisdom 2:24 (written in the first decades of the Common Era, or about the time of the Apostle Paul). See Fretheim, "Genesis 3 a Fall Story?" 149–51; Fretheim, *Genesis*, 359–60; Brown, "Devil in the Details," 200–227; Russell, *The Devil*, 174–220; and Kelly, *Satan*, 13–113.

5. Bonhoeffer, *Creation and Fall*, 111.

6. See von Rad, *Genesis*, 89; and Westermann, *Genesis 1–11*, 240–48 for this communal understanding.

it in 3:5, neither the woman nor Adam die in the account. 2) The phrase "your eyes will be opened" (3:4, 7) describes the process by which Adam and the woman come to the knowledge of good and evil. 3) The phrase "you will be like God" or "the gods" (3:5, 22) describes the ability to know good and evil.

The transgression

The transgression, v. 6, occurs in two movements. The woman sees that the tree is aesthetically attractive—it appeals to the sense of sight and taste—and that it is to be desired to make one wise. The text is restrained and nuanced. The desire is for wisdom, for the possibility to transcend one's limitations by gaining new knowledge and insight. There is no hint in the text of desire that leads to passion that leads to sex, as Augustine interpreted it, and then added that such desire and its accompanying passion and sex was sinful. The text also does not say that the woman wanted to become "like God," although that is generally the way it has been interpreted since Ambrosiaster and Augustine in the late fourth and early fifth centuries CE.

The transgression in v. 6 is that the woman ate the fruit because she desired to become wise.[7]

The second movement in the text is that the woman "also gave some to her husband," who "was with her (*immah*)," and "he ate." Adam was not tempted; he was beside the woman the whole time and simply conformed to her behavior. The text does not suggest that the woman was more susceptible to temptation than the man and that after being tempted she became the man's temptress.[8]

What was the transgression, the "primal sin"? The serpent asked the woman and Adam to make a judgment about God. They did. They both, standing together, decided to mistrust God, to mistrust the word of God, in quest for autonomy that would make them wise. Their mistrust of God led them to disobedience, to disobey the word of God.[9]

7. It is important to note that the text does not say that the fruit of the tree was an apple; that designation reflects the later understanding of Latin Christianity.

8. See Trible, *God and Rhetoric*, 113.

9. See Biddle, *Missing the Mark*, 12–13, 75–94, for a very good discussion of the transgression in this text as mistrust and sin as mistrust more generally in the Scriptures.

The Change Effected by the Transgression

The change effected by the transgression, v. 7, is narrated in three events: 1) their eyes are opened—they see what they had not seen before; 2) they see that they are naked (*arummim*, a play on the word *arum*, "crafty, prudent," used in 3:1); 3) they sew fig leaves to cover their nakedness.

The effect of eating the fruit of "the knowledge of good and evil" was that Adam and the woman were changed, as the serpent had predicted. They did not die, but they were changed. They see the world differently. The nature of the changed perspective is enigmatic. In 2:24 they become one flesh; that is, they consummated the relationship in sexual intercourse. In 2:25 they are naked and not ashamed, which, as Gordon Wenham points out, is best translated as "they were unabashed" or "they were not disconcerted" just like little children are unashamed of their nakedness.[10] But in 3:7 they suddenly realize that it is not appropriate to be naked and they cover themselves. Or, to use gender language, in 2:25 they see each other naked and do not notice their gender, but in 3:7 they suddenly realize that they are gendered, that they are sexually different. Something profound has changed by the eating of the fruit.[11]

THE PUNISHMENT, VV. 8–24

The punishment for Adam and the woman eating the forbidden fruit is expulsion from the garden. God put Adam and the woman in the garden. Adam and the woman chose to mistrust and, therefore, to disobey God. God expelled them from the garden. The explicit reason for the expulsion, stated in v. 22, is to prevent Adam and the woman from reaching out and taking fruit "from the tree of life, and eat, and live forever."[12]

The serpent said that Adam and the woman would die if they disobeyed God. But they did not. Some commentators and preachers have asked if the serpent told the truth while God lied? But, let's remember the text was written with great literary skill and nuance. V. 8 describes "God walking in the garden . . ." The word "walking" is used in the Hebrew Scriptures of God's presence among God's people, especially in the sanctuary (e.g., Lev 26:12; Deut 23:15; 2 Sam 7:6–7). In addition, many scholars have noted similarities between features of the Garden and the Tabernacle

10. Wenham, *Genesis* 1–15, 71.
11. Trible, *God and Rhetoric*, 105–15.
12. Barr, *The Garden of Eden*, 4.

as the place where God walked with God's people.[13] To be expelled from the Garden is to be expelled from the presence of God, to be cut off from the intimate relationship of regular communion with God as God "walks in the garden." That is the end of a relationship, or death. To the death of an intimate relationship with God, v. 22 adds the loss of the possibility of immortality through continued life in the Garden.

But that conclusion comes at the end of a crime and punishment narrative.

Hide and Seek, vv. 8–10.

Adam and the woman act like criminals. They run and hide (stated twice). God takes the initiative and comes looking and calling for them. Why did the man and the woman hide? The only answer given in the text is that "I was afraid, because I was naked." The couple is afraid of being naked before God. It is the couple's nakedness before God that represents something new and frightening. Adam and the woman are ashamed. There is no language or even suggestion of sin or guilt, consciousness of sin or consciousness of guilt in the text. The common Western interpretation of the narrative as "the Fall" with its accompanying theology of sin has been read back into the text. They have walked naked with God in the Garden before. They have had sex before and their nakedness was unitive ("one flesh," 2:24). Only one thing has changed because they have eaten from the forbidden fruit—they suddenly "see," a seeing that reveals something profoundly new about themselves, namely, that they are naked. They do not want to meet God naked. The text says nothing more, and we should not let Augustine, or Luther, or Freud, or anyone else tell us that there is more than the text says.

Interrogation and Defense, vv. 11–13

One question from God, "have you eaten from the tree of which I commanded you not to eat" (v. 11), establishes what has happened. Each confesses that "I ate" (vv. 12, 13), but only after blaming someone else: Adam blames the woman (v. 12), she blames the serpent (v. 13). Mistrust of God and disobedience of God leads to estrangement from each other.

13. Wenham, *Genesis* 1–15, 90.

The narrative sequence is important. In vv. 1–7 the sequence was serpent, woman, man. Here the sequence is man, woman. The serpent is mentioned, but is not interrogated by God. Humans have to answer for their choices and behavior. The assertion "you have done it" makes an action a crime against God, a "sin" although that word is not used. What constitutes a sin against God "is what people do in defiance of God and nothing else, not a consciousness of sin nor a bad conscience."[14]

The crime scene began with the serpent. There is no explanation of why the serpent tempted the woman. There is no interrogation of the serpent. The serpent is not forced to explain why it tempted the woman to eat the fruit. The intent of the author is not to offer an explanation of the origin of evil. The Bible does not offer an explanation of the origin of evil. Bonhoeffer was correct to observe that "the Bible does not seek to import information about the origin of evil but to witness to its character. . . . To pose the question about the origin of evil . . . is far from the mind of the biblical author."[15]

The Penultimate Punishment, vv. 14–19.

There is a remarkable difference between the ultimate punishment, expulsion from the garden, and the punishments enumerated in vv. 14–19. The expulsion from the garden is fixed in the structure of the narrative—God put man/woman in the garden, God drove them out of the garden. The punishments outlined in vv. 14–19 have no direct relationship with the offence; instead, they describe factually the state of existence of the serpent, the woman, and the man. Furthermore, the pronouncements of vv. 14–19 are in a different literary style from what precedes and what follows—the form is poetic. Some scholars believe that these verses were added by the editor(s) as a further elaboration. If that is true, the original and only punishment from God was the expulsion from the garden and alienation from God. Man/woman were expelled from the garden and were alienated from God.

The narrative sequence in vv. 14–19 follows the same pattern as in vv. 1–7: serpent, woman, man. The serpent only of the three parties is cursed via the use of an old curse formula, "cursed are you . . ." (v. 14). This curse as a direct address from God is found in the Old Testament only in 3:14 and 4:11. It represents an excommunication that separates the serpent

14. Westermann, *Genesis* 1–11, 255.

15. Bonhoeffer, *Creation and Fall*, 205.

from the rest of the animal kingdom because of its form and way of living. The curse explains the way in which the serpent moves and feeds itself.[16]

The "enmity" between the serpent and the woman in v. 15 defines a continual state of hostility, something that does not exist between humans and other animals, but only between humans and the serpent; each will literally seek to "grind" (*sup* in both phrases)—rather than "strike"—the head or heel of the other. Since the early church father Irenaeus (late second century CE) many commentators and preachers have understood v. 15 as a Christian prophecy about Christ and Mary. The "seed of the woman," Christ, was referred to one individual descendant who crushed the head of the serpent, whose seed was also an individual person, the devil or Satan.[17] Christian art and hymnology over many centuries has popularized this interpretation in the Western and Orthodox churches and cultures. However, this interpretation must be rejected for two reasons: 1) the word "seed" is collective, not singular; the NRSV and NIV translations "offspring" capture this collective understanding. The text is speaking of the line of descendants of the woman as well as of the serpent. 2) The word occurs in the context of the pronouncement of a curse. The form (form critically speaking) does not permit either a promise or prophecy as its primary or secondary meaning.[18] The woman is addressed in two clauses: v. 16a is a two parallel sentence structure which assigns pain in bearing children and in giving birth; v. 16b defines her relationship to her husband as desiring him and being subordinate to him. As Gerhard von Rad says, the woman's existence is described from two points of view: mother and wife.[19]

The address to the man is the longest and most detailed, and thus carries the most weight. Furthermore, it repeats the crime at the outset. It also uses a curse formula but in this case the curse is in the third person and is directed at the ground because of the man rather than directly at the man. The curse of the ground will be effective in the growth of thorns and thistles that will diminish the production of the crops and make the harvest difficult. The man will live and eat "by the sweat of your face" (v. 19a).

16. Trible, *God and Rhetoric*, 123–26.

17. The majority of church fathers did not follow Irenaeus, e.g., Basil of Caesarea, Gregory of Nazianzus, John Chrysostom in the East, Ambrose, Augustine, Jerome and Gregory the Great in the West.

18. See Hamilton, *Genesis* 1–17, 197–200, for a careful discussion of the language and issues; and Westermann, *Genesis* 1–11, 260.

19. Von Rad, *Genesis*, 96. See Trible, *God and Rhetoric*, 126–28, for an insightful analysis of the judgment on the woman.

V. 19b, "until you return to the ground for out of it you were taken," is a subordinate sentence to v. 19a. Death is not meant as a punishment; it is referred to as part of the natural order of things. Only with death will there be an end to hard work. V. 19c is a repetition of v. 19b, "you are dust, and to dust you shall return." The phrase is a fitting conclusion to the sentence of punishment in vv. 14–19. In their origin and destiny human beings belong to dust.[20]

Exegetes are divided over the question of whether death in this text was meant as a punishment for mistrusting and disobeying God. Some think death is a punishment. The majority argue that vv. 17–19 answer the question of why work is so burdensome. Man's return to the earth closes the life span that began with creation and liberates man from the toil of work. Still others see no difficulty in interpreting death both as a natural consequence of man's origin from the earth and as a punishment.[21]

THE CONCLUSION, VV. 20–24

Most commentators are agreed that the narrative of vv. 20–24 does not constitute a unity. The conclusion of the narrative is v. 24: God drove "the man" out of the garden." A number of other sentences have been added to the ultimate punishment narrative.

V. 20 presumes that the woman has given birth to a child. The man names his wife "Eve (= living) because she was the mother of all living." Some event must have occasioned the naming of the woman, and commentators presume it must have been the birth of a child. The blessing and the power of procreation has not been lost by the crime and punishment of disobedience to God. The man names the woman which is a chilling sign of domination even though he defines her as the bearer of life. The woman guarantees the future now in subordination to man.[22]

The verb "made" for "made garments of skin" in v. 21 is used only here and in the creation account. It refers to the unique creative activity of God. The last creative activity of God recorded in the Old Testament is an

20. The parallel expression "return to dust" is common in the OT—see Job 10:9; Ps 90:3; 146:3,4; also Sir 40:11.

21. See Westermann, *Genesis 1–11*, 266; Barr, *The Garden of Eden*, 4; Fretheim, "Fall Story," 152; Fretheim, *God and the World*, 76–77; Fretheim, "Genesis," 364; Goldingay, *Old Testament Theology*, 120; Hamilton, *Genesis*, 203; Trible, *God and Rhetoric*, 128–132; von Rad, *Genesis*, 95; Vawter, *On Genesis*, 85.

22. Trible, *God and Rhetoric*, 133–34.

act of covering and protecting God's creatures while putting them outside the garden, and at the same time distancing them from Godself.

V. 23 indicates that man expelled from the garden has a mission—it is to serve the earth. In 2.6 "there was no one to till the ground." Man's mission inside and outside the garden is to till the ground.

Vv. 22 and 24 belong together to form a single conclusion. So far in the narrative the reason for the expulsion from the garden is mistrust and disobedience. Vv. 22 and 24 add a second reason. Man and woman must be prevented from eating from the tree of life and living for ever. Chapter 3 has been concerned with one tree, "the tree of the knowledge of good and evil." It now returns to the "tree of life," mentioned before only in 2:9. "Knowledge of good and evil" and "eternal life" are two qualities that are peculiar to the Divine in the Old Testament, or the gods in the ancient world. Humans can and have acquired knowledge of good and evil. "Life forever" must be forbidden them. Therefore, the expulsion from the garden.

The punishment, vv. 14–24, indicate that every relationship in life and in culture is disrupted because of Adam and Eve's mistrust and disobedience—the relationship between an animal and God, between animals and humans, between man and woman, between humans and God. The beauty, harmony, and order of creation—the "it was good"—has been replaced by humiliation, domination, subordination, conflict, suffering, and struggle, and all of this with a fractured relationship with God.

SUMMARY

Eve and Adam are tempted by a creature of God, a serpent, to mistrust and disobey God by eating from the "tree of the knowledge of good and evil" which God had forbidden. Both the woman and Adam eat from the tree. They do not die immediately, but they are changed. They realize that they are naked, and they are afraid to meet God. The punishment for mistrusting and disobeying God is expulsion from the garden, which meant the loss of the intimate friendship with God that Adam and Eve enjoyed in the garden and the loss of the possibility of immortality. The mistrust and disobedience of Adam and Eve results in estrangement from God and exile from the Garden; exile means that "at homeness" is lost, fragmentation replaces unity and wholeness (*shalom*), death replaces the prospect of immortality.

Given all of the theological messages that have been overlaid on this text in the history of interpretation, it is important to note what is

not present in the text—there is no association of the serpent with Satan or the demonic; Eve is not pictured as seducing Adam sexually or in any other way; the words "sin," "transgression," "rebellion," "guilt" in Hebrew or English are not used; there is no linkage between Adam and Eve's disobedience and sex. There is no hint that Adam's moral condition is fundamentally changed by his act of disobedience or that his essential human or genetic nature was essentially altered. The changes effected by the punishment for Adam and Eve's mistrust and disobedience are entirely physical, the pains and struggles of human life. There also is no hint in the following tragic story that the sin of Cain, his murder of his brother Abel, is a function of a morally defective nature that he inherited from Adam; "sin" used for the first time in the Bible in this story is defined as "lurking at the door," and Cain is advised by God that "you must master it" or "rule over it" (Gen. 4:7).

Equally important, and profoundly significant for the interpretive lens through which Christians have come to read the Genesis 3 narrative, the story does not speak of a "fall." The description of the disobedience of Adam and Eve as a "fall," notes Westermann, is an "inaccurate and deceptive" construal of what the text says.[23] The interpretation of Genesis 3 as a fall reflects a much later Christian understanding which has been read back into the text; the term "the fall" was first used with certainty to describe the sin of Adam by the Greek church father Methodius of Olympus, late third or early fourth century (d. 311), as a reaction to Origen's teaching of a prenatal fall in the transcendent world (see chapter 4) (the possible use of the word "fall" in 4 Ezra 7:118 is quite uncertain—see p. 29). In other words, a "fall" theology about the interpretation of Genesis 3 begins to develop about six to eight centuries after the probable writing of the original Genesis 3 story in a totally different setting and for a totally different purpose (many more centuries later if Genesis 3 is dated to the tenth century BCE). Why is it profoundly significant that this much later Christian and Greek "fall" construal is not stated or even suggested in the text? Because that means the story of salvation history, which is a fairly normative interpretive framework for a Christian reading the whole Bible does not begin with "the fall." Rather, it begins with broken relationships and exile, which is a very Jewish way of reading the text. And lest we forget, it was Jewish people who wrote this text originally for Jewish people, probably for Jewish people living in exile trying to understand the profound tragedy of the destruction of their country, the Temple, many of their fellow-countrymen (women/children), and their

23. Westermann, *Genesis 1–11*, 276.

exile in Babylon. The re-definition of the story of Genesis 3 as a "fall" represented a much later Hellenistic-Gentile re-interpretation of the text (but, that is getting ahead of our story).[24]

The sin in the Adam and Eve story is mistrust and disobedience of God that results in fractured relationships, in estrangement from God, from each other, from some animals (e.g., the snake), from creation (e.g., the land). Sin (though, let's remember the word is not used in the text of the story), in other words, is defined in *relational* terms, not ontological terms. What I was taught in church and college did not come from the Genesis story.

REFLECTIONS

The Genesis 3 narrative is one of the few biblical stories that is known all over the world even to this day. And, as with the re-telling of stories in all cultures, the story has changed significantly in the re-telling over time. The rest of this book will trace the changes that take place as the story was retold and re-interpreted in the texts that we have which re-tell and re-interpret the meaning Genesis 3 through the Christian theologian Augustine in the early fifth century CE.

One of the most surprising discoveries is that the story of Adam and Eve in Genesis 3 is not re-told again in the Hebrew Scriptures, the Christian Old Testament. The stories of the founding patriarchs—Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob—Moses, the liberator from slavery in Egypt and the covenant maker between God and Israel, and David, the first great king of the Israelite people, are retold often, but the story of Adam and Eve in Genesis is missing in the rest of the Old Testament. The first re-telling of the story narrated in Genesis 3 for which we have a record is found in the literature of Second Temple Judaism. For centuries the story of Adam and Eve's mistrust and disobedience of God seem not to have been important in the life and faith of the Israelite people.

24. It should be noted that some scholars take an even more radical stance and assert that neither the Genesis 3 story, nor the Old Testament as a whole, explicitly tie the sin and death of all human beings with Adam's sin. See, for example, Hamilton, *Genesis*, 213; and Neenan, "Doctrine of Original Sin," 58–59. Both scholars attribute the Adam sin/humanity sin/death linkage to Paul in Romans 5, and the Catholic Neenan cites the Council of Trent as support for his interpretation. Neenan is correct that the Council of Trent does not cite the Genesis 3 text, but bases its interpretation of original sin entirely on the Vulgate's and Augustine's mistranslation of Romans 5.12, "in whom all sinned." See Pelikan and Hotchkis, *Creeds and Confessions*, Vol. 2, 821–71, for the text of the Council of Trent.