



Is Genesis 3 a Fall Story?

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The word “fall” is not found in Genesis 3. The traditional view of the story is heavily dependent upon post-Old Testament interpretation, both in Judaism (Sir 25:24; Wis 2:24; cf. 2 Esdr 3:7-22; 7:118) and the New Testament (Rom 5:12-21; 1 Cor 15:21-22, 45-49), mediated to us through Augustine, the reformers, and others. My question is whether, as many have recently suggested, this traditional interpretation does violence to the text. In seeking to get at these questions, I will be interacting with a recent book by James Barr, *The Garden of Eden and the Hope of Immortality*.¹

Barr claims: “OT scholars have long known that the reading of the story as the ‘Fall of Man’ in the traditional sense, though hallowed by St. Paul’s use of it, cannot stand up to examination through a close reading of the text.”² Among others, he echoes Brueggemann, who states that “nothing could be more remote from the narrative” than the fall.³ And Westermann: “The narrative of Gen 2-3 does not speak of a fall,” and these chapters know of no human being before sin.⁴

Key factors in reassessing Genesis 1-3 in the last 200 years have been the discovery of other creation stories in the ancient world, a more complex understanding of human beginnings emergent from non-theological disciplines, and a reappraisal of the literary genre of these chapters as other than historical narrative. Initially, a few remarks on the last factor.

¹J. Barr, *The Garden of Eden and the Hope of Immortality* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1993). This article is an extension of some of the arguments presented in my commentary on Genesis, due to appear in 1994 in the *New Interpreter’s Bible* (Abingdon Press).

²Barr, *The Garden of Eden*, ix.

³Brueggemann, *Genesis* (Atlanta: John Knox, 1982) 41.

⁴Westermann, *Genesis 1-11: A Commentary* (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1984) 276.

I. MYTH OR HISTORY?

Genesis 1-11 is an admixture of narratives and genealogies, but renaming the narrative has been difficult. Is it legend, etiology, myth, saga, primeval story, theological narrative, or simply story?⁵ In view of commonalities in the ancient Near East, many view these chapters as myth, in the sense of stories that explain human life in every age. I don’t want to set this aside, but it seems insufficiently complex. The claims of the text are more extensive; the past is not collapsed into the present. Placed within a temporal framework, the texts also tell a story of the past. This is not to say that the material is historical in any modern sense, yet Israel, it seems, understands these texts to be speaking in an imaginative way of an actual past time, the earliest

beginnings of life in the world. With our modern world views we may decide we cannot agree with these claims, but we should at least pause and give the text its due.

Important evidence for this view is the atypical element in the texts.⁶ Some texts speak of unrepeatable world situations, e.g., 11:1, “The whole earth had one language and the same words”; or 6:1, “When people began to multiply.” Or, the cherubim guarding the garden assure that Eden remains inaccessible. Or, creation is not a recurring event, but a beginning point in the world’s history. Or, the genealogies function in a way no different from others in Genesis. Israelites knew they would never again live as long as Methuselah; the ages of these persons belonged to the irretrievable past. Or, God promises that a flood will never again cover the earth. This is also a story of the past for God; indeed, God’s promise must mean for God a before and an after.

Sorting out Genesis 3 seems to entail moving at two levels, seeing it both as typical story and as story of the past, both as carrying general reflections about such matters as sin and temptation and making claims about a never-to-be-repeated time.

Let me now move through some considerations regarding sin, the serpent, and death, issues that ought not be collapsed into one another. I will seek to show that fall language *of some sort* is an accurate reading of the text, while traditional views of death and the serpent need serious revision.

II. SIN

First, some comments on the Old Testament understanding of sin in its ancient context. A number of texts (from 1 Kgs 8:46 to Jer 13:23 to Psalm 51) claim that sinfulness is a universal experience of brokenness at every level of existence; in that sense, sin is “original.” This idea of sin is not peculiar to the Bible, but is part of a general theology in the ancient Near East, long before Israel. Listen to a Sumerian wisdom saying: “Never has a sinless child been born to its mother.” And listen to these confessions of sin: “My god, though my transgressions are many—

⁵See G. Coats, *Genesis, With an Introduction to Narrative Literature* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1983).

⁶Cf. J. Rogerson, *Genesis 1-11* (Sheffield: JSOT, 1991) 53.

free me of my guilt!...Though my sins be countless—show mercy and heal me!” Or, this thanksgiving to the Egyptian god Amun-Re: “If it is the nature of the servant to commit sin, it is the nature of the Lord to be gracious.” The idea of “original sin,” indeed a profound confession thereof, is nothing uniquely biblical, let alone Christian. We are inheritors of a rich theology of sin from the ancient world.⁷

We return to Barr. He and others make much of the fact that the Hebrew Bible nowhere refers to this story.⁸ But, it is uncommon for the Old Testament to refer to any Genesis text. Uniqueness does not necessarily speak to the question of use or import or to what the story is about. Should the fact that Genesis 22 is not cited in the rest of the Old Testament determine its import for Israel or subsequent generations? Moreover, placement at the head of the canon has given to Genesis 2-3 a certain theological stature.

Another argument used by Barr and others is that words such as “sin,” “disobedience,” or “rebellion” do not appear in the account (nor do such words as “immortality” or “maturation”!).⁹ The word “evil” does, but only as part of the idiomatic phrase “good and evil,” used elsewhere in

Genesis for comprehensiveness; it probably should be taken no more literally than the individual words in the phrase “lock, stock, and barrel.” Aside from the last point, this argument is ironic, for it implies that because the chapter does not move at certain levels of abstraction, the story’s concreteness cannot carry such an understanding. But, to engage in theological reflection, more abstract language should be allowed to emerge.

Another issue arises in the way Barr and others portray God as a character in the story.¹⁰ The story is turned into a divine comedy. One might understand God’s negative response to the murder of Abel or the accumulated violence, but to eating a piece of fruit? It sounds like a divine sting operation. Parents know that one way to get a child interested in something is to prohibit it (at least a sinful child!). “[God] has made an ethically arbitrary prohibition, and backed it up with a threat to kill which, in the event, he does nothing to carry out.” God passes out “humiliations, limitations and frustrations” as if they were a dime a dozen, but then makes some clothes for them, only to kick them out of the garden. And God seems to be so self-protective. God wants to keep the knowledge of good and evil to himself, and having failed to do this, God expels the humans lest they also get to be immortal as God is.

Such readings are also ironic in that they often seem grounded in a surface reading. The fruit is fruit; eating means eating; nakedness is being without clothes. It is almost as if a literalist hermeneutic has returned, but with the powers of deconstruction at its disposal. More problematic is the refusal of some studies to

⁷For these and other texts, see the Index under “Sin” in W. Beyerlin, ed., *Near Eastern Religious Texts Relating to the Old Testament* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1978) 276.

⁸Barr, *The Garden of Eden*, 6.

⁹Ibid.

¹⁰Ibid., 12-13.

grant any content to the character of God based on material outside this story, even from chapter 1, let alone giving God any privileged position. One cannot help but wonder at times whether some seek to cope with the sometimes troubling God of the text by reducing God to an absurdity.

Another Barr argument: God’s evaluation of the newly created humans was “good,” and good does not mean “perfect.” Inasmuch as humanity was never perfect, “the idea of a ‘Fall’ is otiose”; human beings “were imperfect from the start...indeed, their imperfection makes it all the more *natural* that they disobeyed; everyone did.”¹¹ It does seem right to say that “good” does not mean “perfect.” Can perfect beings fail? The charge given humans to fill the earth and subdue it means that God’s creation is not a static state of affairs; its becoming is part of God’s creational intention. The creation is a living, dynamic reality; for it to stay just as originally created would be a failure of the divine design.

But other than perfect does not necessarily mean sinful or that sinning is somehow “natural.” Goodness can certainly entail a fundamental integrity short of perfection. Potentialities are built into the created order for either positive or negative futures, but neither is inevitable. If human beings are bound to sin from the beginning, then sin is collapsed back into the creation, and the goodness of God’s creation, indeed the goodness of God, is brought into question. It might be noted in this connection that several pentateuchal texts suggest that God’s knowledge of the future is not absolute, only that God knows all the possibilities.¹²

A positive view of Genesis 3, as old as Irenaeus, has received a chorus of adherents in recent years; it describes a process of maturation, an upward fall. Humans move out from under the parental hand of God, a necessary move if they are to grow up and become truly human. As always, the development to a higher level of self-consciousness is bought at the price of pain and suffering (cf. Eccl 1:18). If humans are created in God's likeness, it is asked, is not becoming like God in knowing good and evil an advancement within an already created reality?

Among the assumptions of this view is that humans in the garden exhibit a childlike innocence. But this is certainly an overly romantic view of the garden. D. J. Hall makes a strong case for seeing creational suffering or the suffering of becoming (over against suffering as burden or tragedy) as integral to God's good created order; it is evident in chapter 2 in terms of loneliness, limits, temptation, and anxiety born of ignorance (which Hall also finds in the Gospels' portrayal of Jesus).¹³ "Life without suffering...would be a form of death. Life depends in some mysterious way on the struggle to be." The effects of sin in chapter 3 are an intensification of suffering; it no longer serves life.

Moreover, chapter 2 assumes that Adam's language and understanding of life and world is full-blown. This is seen in his naming of the animals, his sophisticated language in responding to the newly created woman, the assumption by

¹¹Ibid., 92.

¹²See my *Suffering of God* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1984) 45-59.

¹³D. Hall, *God and Human Suffering* (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1986) 53-62.

God that the prohibition would be understood, and the woman's abilities at dialogue. The command of 2:16-17 not to eat of the tree—here law is built into the very created order of things—was tacitly accepted by the man as something good; the narrator understood this to be parallel to responsible adult behavior under Torah. Human beings can be what God intended only if they are not totally autonomous, only if there is an acceptance of limits, here seen as a fundamental reliance upon God's word for total well-being. So, the move to chapter 3 is not properly characterized as a move from innocence to maturity, from childhood to adulthood, from ignorance to wisdom.

Moreover, without dismissing the idea that some positive effect accrues to knowing good and evil, a basically positive view is difficult to sustain. Vv. 14-19 seem especially difficult. Here God announces to the serpent, woman, and man the effects of what has happened. They could be described with the word *ra'*, "evil," or *awon*, "sin," for sin and its effects constitute a continuum. Vv. 14-19 are moral-order talk, where correspondences exist between sin and consequence (eating, for example); what goes around comes around. God does not introduce judgment from the outside, or prescribe an eternal future; God announces that the moral order is such that these are the effects of sin.¹⁴

Now, if the sin in chapter 3 is minimized, then the effects of the sin in vv. 14-19 are minimized, including the patriarchy that now ensues; these effects are seen to be more normal, more ordinary, the frustrations associated with becoming, the price of maturation. From another angle, they make something of a mockery of the moral order and the God who midwives it; if the human action is basically positive, then the effects of vv. 14-19 are way out of line, incommensurate with the act, to which God becomes a party. These verses are often turned on

their head and made into a divine problem: God either overreacts or, like an insecure parent, resists the leave-taking. That the relationship with God is an issue in this chapter is a matter all too often left to one side.

The effects of vv. 14-19 are not such that no effort should be made to relieve them (any more than the judgment on Jerusalem means the city should not be rebuilt). In fact, efforts to overcome them are in tune with the salvific intentions of God. At the same time, continuing human sinfulness impedes these efforts, and other forms of the distorting effects of sin break out among us. For all the difficulty of these verses, the writer claims that patriarchy and related ills came as an effect of sin rather than being integral to God's good creation.¹⁵

Barr characterizes the traditional view of these effects in strong language: human beings underwent a "sudden, drastic and catastrophic change," and "in-

¹⁴See K. Koch, "Is There a Doctrine of Retribution in the Old Testament?" in *Theodicy in the Old Testament*, ed. J. Crenshaw (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1983) 57-87.

¹⁵See P. Tribble, *God and the Rhetoric of Sexuality* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1978) 126-128. Feminist scholarship on Genesis 2-3 is an important resource for the study of these chapters, and Tribble has shown the way. For a review and analysis of this literature, see Beverly J. Stratton, *Out of the Garden: A Feminist Theological Study of Reading, Rhetoric and Ideology in Genesis 2-3* (Th.D. dissertation, Luther Northwestern Theological Seminary, 1994).

stantly came under the total dominion of sin."¹⁶ Let's admit that that language is too strong for the text to bear. By saying that perfection is not a created reality, only a goal, the fall is not as precipitous as some views would have it. The continued use of image of God language in the narrative (5:1; 9:6) makes the same point. It is notable that Adam is not presented as a slob or Eve as a foul wretch. God's sending them out of Eden to take up the same task given in 2:15 (3:23) recognizes that humanity has not been reduced to a state of total depravity. Adam and Eve leave the garden with a certain integrity, still the bearers of the divine purposes for the world. Moreover, that the flood story does not immediately follow is important; the situation is not yet what it will be in chapter 6. Rather, the Creator of the universe takes on human form, goes for a walk among the creatures, and personally engages them. This is no naive theology; God comes to the man and the woman in their sin; God does not leave them or walk elsewhere. Even in announcing sin's effects, God remains concerned enough to name just what it is that has happened.

III. THE SERPENT

Now, a look at Genesis 3 with the serpent in focus. Much debate has centered on its identity. The association of the serpent with the "devil" begins already in Wis 2:24; it is implicit in the story of Jesus' temptation and has enjoyed a long history. But the text speaks of no supernatural being and no language of evil is used for it. It is simply identified as a beast of the field. This means that the serpent is firmly grounded within God's creation; it is neither primordial nor transhistorical. At the same time, it shows that the serpent is transpersonal, as does talk about the seed of the serpent and God's judgment upon it. This is more than simply the externalization of an inward struggle.

I suggest that the serpent is a living metaphor, representing anything in God's good creation that is able to facilitate options for human will and action. In the story, the tree (an

integral part of God's good creation) becomes the temptation, while the serpent (also an integral part of that creation) facilitates the options it presents. God creates a world in which alternatives to the will of God are available. The humans live in a world where choices count and the relationship with God is not a programmed affair; no response is coerced or inevitable.

The serpent is introduced abruptly, yet in a matter-of-fact way. It is one of the creatures God just formed in 2:19; that it is "more crafty" than other animals, a play on the word for "naked" in 2:25, suggests that the humans are exposed to something in God's good world that is shrewd—an ambiguous word, but not necessarily negative. The humans understand the serpent to be a natural part of their world. No fear, surprise, or concern on the part of the woman is evident, or the man for that matter, for we learn in v. 6 that the man was silently present the whole time. As such, what develops is as much his problem as it is hers.

The reader is brought into the middle of a theological dialogue; much has

¹⁶Barr, *The Garden of Eden*, 4.

been talked about already. The text focuses on the course of their conversation. The serpent is a facilitator of possibilities in view of the human responses or non-responses. Its knowledge may have been gained in the earlier part of this conversation, though the knowledge of God on the part of animals is not unique to this text, perhaps especially so in Eden.

The first word the reader hears is a question from the serpent to the woman. It is God-talk, focused on the prohibition, in response to something just said. Continuance of the conversation by the humans has brought them to this point. The word raises a question about freedom: "Let me see if I've got this straight. Did God really say that you (pl.) were not to eat of *any* tree?" The question begs for a response, but the deeper question becomes: Will the humans decide to continue the conversation, and if so, how? Eve does respond, and Adam simply stands there; both responses push the conversation one step further. The woman paraphrases the permission/prohibition in her own words and quotes God directly. Her reference to touching may mean she heard it this way from the man, but the text leaves it that *either* of them misstated it. This severity has been explained in various ways (from anxiety to confusion to hyperbole to a contribution in the search for truth). It is not a defense of God as shown by the delay in the text's reference to God (NRSV unfortunately advances it). Most likely, the serpent's reply reveals the reason: an anxiety about death (as with Jesus, this is not necessarily associated with sin).

The serpent responds precisely at the point of this anxiety: you will not die, or (perhaps more accurately) you will not certainly die, for God knows more about this than you've been told. This is more subtle than a simple contradiction of what God has said. In 3:22, God recognizes that, even though they have eaten, they would not die, if they eat of the tree of life. The serpent speaks a word about death that has the potential of being true; its saying they will become like God in knowing good and evil proves to be true.

The serpent's key phrase is "God knows." God has not told them the full truth about the matter; God has kept something back, at least in the initial conversation. In this, the serpent is not a deceiver but a *truth-teller*. The serpent may not tell the whole truth, but neither so far has God, and it is not clear that the serpent knows the whole truth. The heart of what has become a genuine temptation has to do, not with deception, but with what the humans will do with the *truth*, particularly the truth about God. At its deepest level the issue of knowledge becomes an issue of

trust. Can they trust God while pursuing the truth about God? Can they trust that God has their best interests at heart even though the knowledge they presently have comes up short of the full truth?

The humans are left to draw their own conclusions. To whom or what will they turn? Rather than turn to God to take up the issue with God, the humans silently—and the lack of communication speaks volumes—turn to the possibilities the tree presents. The text does not suggest it is wrong to pursue knowledge about God; the issue is the way in which it is gained: the fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom. Eating of the tree does lead to new knowledge, but because humans do

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not turn to God, but relate only to that which has been created, they are left to cope with the new knowledge from within a perspective no longer provided by a trusting relationship with God.

The primal sin is thus not disobedience, pride, rebellion, or violence, or even the desire to become like God; each is symptomatic of a more fundamental problem of trust. There is no storming of the heavens language here, no desire to take over the divine realm or run the universe, no declaration of independence and no celebration of a new-found autonomy. And that, of course, may be precisely the point. Temptation and sin are often quiet, seemingly innocent realities, associated with that which seems far removed from obvious sins. Mistrust is never initially visible.

The serpent has only presented some possibilities growing out of leads provided by the human responses or non-responses. There is no coercion here, no arm-twisting, no enticement by presenting the fruit; it is all handled through words.¹⁷ At the same time, the issue focuses on that which is a visible and tangible part of God's creation. It is not just something between minds and mouths. The heart of the temptation, then, is not that the humans have been tricked; the serpent did not seduce the woman any more than the woman seduced the man. This intensifies the human responsibility for what occurs. No Flip Wilson appeal—the devil made me do it—is possible here. But humans ever since have wanted somehow to slide out from under full responsibility and blame the poor snake.

What, then, of the judgment on the serpent—“because you have done this”? All involved suffer the effects. The judgment on the serpent constitutes a reduction of its status within the creation. Crawling on its belly—losing its reptilian legs—and eating dust are signs of humiliation. It is isolated from the community of animals (that is what cursed means) in view of the effects of its involvement. Like other good things within the creation that have functioned in comparable ways (one thinks of money or possessions) its positive value is lessened. Verse 15 shows that its functioning in this capacity will continue; not unlike other facilitators of possibilities in God's good creation, it takes on a transgenerational quality.

In some sense, the story creates a symbol out of the serpent; it will remind all who encounter it of the subtleties of such conversations about the truth, especially theological truth, and the humiliating and conflictual consequences of mistrust in God and in what God is about. But the serpent is not out to seduce human beings or challenge God; it is more of a neutral figure, a third party, mediating possibilities within God's good creation that can provoke reflection on the truth about God.¹⁸

¹⁷See H. White, *Narration and Discourse in the Book of Genesis* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991).

¹⁸See D. Gowan, *From Eden to Babel: A Commentary on the Book of Genesis 1-11* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1988).

IV. DEATH

Is death one of the effects of the sin of Adam and Eve? The traditional interpretation closely links sin and death, commonly formulating an ontological change: one who is immortal becomes mortal. Most scholars now conclude that the text makes no such claims; I would agree, given certain clues. God, assuming that Adam knows what death is, announces (2:17): on the day he eats of it he will die. That has the marks of capital punishment, and a speedy one; not: you will become mortal, or you will die by and by. Adam lives to the ripe old age of 930! Others die first. In vv. 14-19, there is no referral back to the prohibition and no forthright statement that death shall now be their lot, no sense of death as enemy or threat—only a proverbial saying that the man (not the woman) shall have difficulty farming until he returns to the dust out of which he was created. This is followed by exclusion from the tree of life, implying that even though they had sinned they could still live forever by eating of the tree.

I would speak of death in two ways, as the experience of death within life¹⁹ and as realized mortality. The two trees represent two possible futures: life and death. The tree of life represents possibilities for life not entailed in God's gift of the breath of life. If they were created immortal, the tree of life would have been irrelevant. Death per se was a natural part of God's created world. This is not likely the script we would have written for ourselves (is that why some have difficulty with this view?). Yet, eating of the tree of life was a potential vehicle for receiving a special blessing, some form of ongoing life. Now, even in sin, this remains a possibility. So God makes a further move beyond death within life, namely, exclusion from the tree. This might be seen as a defensive move, yet if death has become so integral to life, then never-ending life is no blessing. This is a gracious divine move.

The upshot of this is that Paul's interpretation of sin and death in Rom 5:12-21, while developing these themes beyond the scope of the story, is right to read the story in terms of an etiology of *the full reality of death*, if not mortality per se.

V. NEVERTHELESS, A FALL

To conclude, I return to the question of the "fall" as a metaphor for what happens in this text (whether it is a legitimate metaphor apart from this text is a larger issue). At least two issues present themselves: (1) the congruence of this metaphor with those in the text; (2) the idea of this sin as a decisive rupture in the history of the God-human relationship.

First, the metaphor. Traditionally, the metaphor refers to a fall "down" or a fall "short." A variation stresses the "becoming like God" theme, where human beings assume God-like powers for themselves. This is a kind of fall "up," or a reaching up only to fall down, for humans are not able to handle what they have

¹⁹See R. Moberly, "Did the Serpent Get it Right?" *Journal of Theological Studies* 39 (1988) 1-27.

become. Yet, the primary metaphors in chapters 3-6 are those of estrangement, alienation, separation, and displacement, with ever-increasing distance from Eden, each other, and God. Perhaps these themes would allow for a variation on the “fall” metaphor, namely, a falling “out.” This metaphor would also be true to the basically relational character of what happens here.

Second, while relationships at various levels are disrupted in chapter 3, the Cain story suggests they are not broken irrevocably. The first reference to sin following chapter 3 (4:7) speaks of Cain as one able to master the sin that lurks at the door. This implies that sin might be contained within manageable limits, not yet the enslaving reality it later becomes. At the same time, Cain’s birth outside a guarded garden indicates that he makes his decision in a new world, marked by alienation from Eden. The subsequent chapters intensify the range and depth of the estrangement, especially in the form of violence. In the angel marriage scene, sin catches up the entire cosmos in its effects, climaxing in the claim of 6:5: “the wickedness of humankind was great in the earth, and every inclination of the human heart was only evil continually.” Its virtual repetition in 8:21 shows that the flood did not cleanse the earth and its creatures. And so, after the flood, God takes a new, promissory relationship to the creation. The ever decreasing length of life in the genealogies interwoven with these stories constitutes a counterpoint to these intensifying narratives.

In summary, chapter 3 witnesses to an originating sin that begins a process, an intensification of alienation, extending over chapters 3-6, by which sin becomes “original” in the sense of pervasive and inevitable with effects that are cosmic in scope. However generalizable the story in chapter 3, it alone cannot carry the weight and freight of the traditional view; the fall is finally not understood to be the product of a single act. But it is a beginning of no little consequence and chapters 3-8 together witness to a reality that subsequent generations can with good reason call a fall.

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