

6. The Garden of Eden

Gen 2-3

This story of the origin of work is set in a paradise that requires no labor. The theme in all these stories is the wish to be like God.

It was originally the first thing in the Bible. This is how it now begins:

Gen 2:4.¹ These are the generations of the heavens and the earth when they were created, in the day that God² made earth and heaven. [5] And no plant of the field was yet in the earth, and no herb of the field had yet sprung up, for God had not caused it to rain upon the earth: and there was not a man to till the ground; [6] but there went up a mist from the earth, and watered the whole face of the ground. [7] And God formed man of the dust of the ground, and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life; and man became a living soul. And God planted a garden eastward, in Eden, and there he put the man whom he had formed [9] And out of the ground made God to grow every tree that is pleasant to the sight, and good for food; the tree of life also in the midst of the garden, and the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. . . [15] And God took the man, and put him into the garden of Eden to dress it and to keep it. [16] And God commanded the man, saying, Of every tree of the garden thou mayest freely eat, [17] but of the tree of knowledge of good and evil, thou shalt not eat of it; for in the day that thou eatest thereof, thou shalt surely die.

[18] And God said, It is not good that the man should be alone; I will make him a help meet for him. [19] And out of the ground God formed every beast of the field, and every bird of the heavens; and brought them unto the man to see what he would call them; and whatsoever the man called every living creature, that was the name thereof. [20] And the man gave names to all cattle, and to the birds of the heavens, and to every beast of the field; but for man there was not found a help meet for him. [21] And God caused a deep sleep to fall upon the man, and he slept, and he took one of his ribs, and closed up the flesh instead thereof; [22] and the rib, which God had taken from the man, made he a woman, and brought her unto the man. [23] And the man said, This is now bone of my bones, and flesh of my flesh; she shall be called Woman, because she was taken out of Man. [24] Therefore shall a man leave his father and his mother, and shall cleave unto his wife; and they shall be one flesh. [25] And they were both naked, the man and his wife, and were not ashamed.

But both later eat the forbidden fruit, and are banished:

Gen 3:17. And unto Adam he said . . . Cursed is the ground for thy sake; in toil shalt thou eat of it all the days of thy life; [18] thorns also and thistles shall it bring forth to thee; and thou shalt eat the herb of the field; [19] in the sweat of thy face shalt thou eat bread, till thou return unto the ground.

That original meaning of the Eden story will presently get more complicated.

¹Omitting Gen 2:1-3, the last paragraph of the later Gen 1 Creation story.

²For "God" the present text reads "Yahweh God." As often happens, this is a later intrusion of "Yahweh" into what was at first a Canaanite legend. Canaan's god is El.

Adam

He is the world's first farmer. As we start, he inhabits a garden at the center of the world, from which four world-defining rivers originate.³ Grass and grain *do not grow*; only trees, from which food can be gathered without any effort. As with all myths of earthly paradise, the only question is how it will be lost.

Eve

Through her comes the temptation to eat the forbidden fruit; to seek the knowledge of good and evil. This is not an *aetiology of work*, as with the man; it is an *aetiology of sin*. Thus does the Eden story acquire a second meaning.

The Serpent

In the Eden story, he is a deceiver, tempting mankind unto death, but there is more to the serpent than that. Serpents can kill, but as doctors know (for whom serpents are a symbol), what can kill can also heal. Serpent gods are common. One Biblical serpent is the one hung up by Moses in Numbers 21 – not, as some say, to be an object of worship, but for its healing power:

Num 21:6. And Yahweh sent fiery serpents among the people, and they bit the people, and much people of Israel died. [7] And the people came to Moses, and said, We have sinned, because we have spoken against Yahweh and against thee; pray unto Yahweh, that he take away the serpents from us. And Moses prayed for the people. [8] And Yahweh said unto Moses, Make thee a fiery serpent, and set it upon a standard, and it shall come to pass, that every one that is bitten, when he seeth it, shall live. [9] And Moses made a serpent of brass, and set it upon the standard, and it came to pass, that if a serpent had bitten any man, when he looked unto the serpent of brass, he lived.

In this early story, the healing serpent is ordered by Yahweh, but it was most likely set up by Moses himself. Later, the serpent *did* become an object of worship, and Yahweh condemns it, as he does throughout the Book of Kings:

2 Kgs 18:1 . . . Hezekiah the son of Ahaz, King of Judah, began to reign . . . [3] And he did that which was right in the eyes of Yahweh . . . [4] He removed the high places, and brake the pillars, and cut down the Asherah; and he brake in pieces the brazen serpent that Moses had made, for unto those days the children of Israel did burn incense to it, and he called it Nehushtan.⁴

Burning incense (the yield of the land, rather than the produce of the pasture) had always been the basic form of Canaanite worship. As for Moses the magician, he recurs often, though usually better disguised than in this 2Kgs revision of the old serpent story. We will meet him again in §17.

³We need not guess at their location; one of the rivers is the Euphrates. Here as elsewhere, Canaan has borrowed an old tradition from Babylon. It may be that when they first arrived in Canaan, most likely as refugees from Ugarit (see §2), the Canaanites were already acquainted with some of the lore of nearby Mesopotamia.

⁴Not a name, but a pun on Hebrew *nehôshet* “bronze” and *nâhâsh* “serpent.”