

## Israelite Reflections on Mortality

### 1. Adam, Eve, and the Serpent

#### What happens in Genesis 2-3:

- The earth is barren, so God molds a man (Hebrew *adam*) out of the dust from the ground (Hebrew *adamah*) to tend the ground. He “breathes into his nostrils the breath of life” (Hebrew *nefesh*), and the man is a “living being” (Hebrew *nefesh hayah*).
- God plants a garden in the East and “out of the ground the LORD God made 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.” (2:9).
- He puts the man in the garden to tend and guard it. He gives him one rule: “You may freely eat of every tree of the garden; but of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil you shall not eat, for in the day that you eat of it you shall die” (2:16-17)
- God then determines that “It is not good that the man should be alone; I will make him a helper as his partner” (2:18). He creates animals, and the man names them, but none are found fit to be Adam’s partner.
- God thus causes a sleep to fall on the man, removes one of his ribs, and creates a being like him. He brings him to the man, and the man names her too: “This at last is bone of my bones and flesh of my flesh; this one shall be called Woman (Hebrew *isha*), for out of Man (Hebrew *ish*) this one was taken.” The text explains that this is how marriage came to be; it is noted that both humans are naked but not ashamed.
- All seems well until the serpent enters the scene. He approaches the woman and asks whether they can eat of all of the trees of the Garden. She notes that there’s one exception, stating that “God said, ‘You shall not eat of the fruit of the tree that is in the middle of the garden, nor shall you touch it, or you shall die’” (3:3; note the difference from God’s formulation to the man).
- The serpent questions the rule: “You will not die; for God knows that when you eat of it your eyes will be opened, and you will be like God [or gods; Hebrew *Elohim*], knowing good and evil” (3:4-5)
- Finding the fruit pleasant and wanting wisdom, the woman eats and gives fruit to her husband to eat too. “Then the eyes of both were opened” (3:7); they realize that they are naked and sew together fig leaves for clothes.
- They then “heard the sound of the LORD God walking in the garden at the time of the evening breeze” (3:8), and hide from Him. He calls out, “Where are you?” (3:9), and the man tells him that “I heard the sound of you in the garden, and I was afraid, because I was naked; and I hid myself” (3:10).
- God asks, “Who told you that you were naked? Have you eaten from the tree of which I commanded you not to eat?” (3:11). The man responds: “The woman whom You gave to be with me, she gave me fruit from the tree, and I ate” (3:12; note passing of blame), so God asks the woman, “What is this that you have done?” (3:13). She too passes the blame: “The serpent tricked me, and I ate.”
- God curses the serpent, fating him [1] to crawl on his belly and eat dust and [2] to have enmity with women forever. To the woman, He increases pain in childbirth, even as “your desire shall be for your husband, and he shall rule over you” (3:16).
- To the man, He says, “Because you have listened to the voice of your wife, and have eaten of the tree about which I commanded you, ‘You shall not eat of it,’ cursed is the ground because of you” (note that He doesn’t curse the man).
- This curse of ground (Hebrew *adamah*) on behalf of man (Hebrew *adam*) results in a breach of the harmony between the two, which means that agricultural work (the purpose of man’s creation in the first place) is now difficult: “in toil you shall eat of it all the days of your life; thorns and thistles it shall bring forth for you; and you shall eat the plants of the field.” The only return to the harmony between man and the ground from which he was made comes in death: “By the sweat of your face you shall eat bread until you return to the ground, for out of it you were taken; you are dust, and to dust you shall return” (3:17-19).
- The man names his wife “Eve,” since she is the “mother of the living” (3:20). God makes new garments for the couple, out of animal skins.
- God then says (the text does not make clear to whom He speaks): “See, the man has become like one of us, knowing good and evil; and now, he might reach out his hand and take also from the tree of life, and eat, and live forever” (3:22).
- Because of this, He sends him from the Garden of Eden, “to till the ground from which he was taken” (3:23). He places Cherubim to guard the garden and a sword to guard the way to the tree of life.

### What does not happen:

- The serpent is not identified as Satan (the concept of “Satan” as a figure is a much later one; the term in the Hebrew Bible is used to describe a role, the “accuser” (*ha-satan* = the satan), a legal term (equivalent to our notion of a prosecutor, who is part of the legal system and who acts not from any ill will but rather to ensure justice) that is applied sometimes to a figure in the heavenly court [see e.g., Job])
- The type of fruit is not identified (the Christian idea of the fruit as apple comes from a much later [fourth century CE] Latin pun on the term *malum*—which can mean apple but also evil; in Jewish traditions, for instance, it is often identified as the fruit of the vine [i.e., the grape]).
- Eve is never said to bring sin into the world—sin, in fact, is never mentioned! The term for “evil,” likewise, only occurs in these chapters in the phrase the “tree of the knowledge of good and evil.” The concept of this event as the “Fall of Humankind” that brought sin and death into the world is a much later (and exclusively Christian) interpretation, the seeds of which are first found in the NT (i.e., at least 600 years later) and which is not developed in full form until Augustine (fifth century CE = at least 1,100 years later).
- Mortality is not a punishment: God warns the man that transgression of the rule will lead to death “in that day.” Likewise, He notes that human immortality would result from eating from a different tree, “the tree of life,” which the man, woman, and serpent never encounter. This, however, is why Eden is guarded, so humans will not eat from that tree and “become like God/gods.” The result of their transgression is far more limited: moral discernment from eating of the tree, plus increased pain in childbirth and difficulty in agricultural work, from God’s punishment of it.

### What is left unexplained:

- Why does God not want humankind to know the difference between good and evil? And why does God not want humankind to be “like God/gods”? The tacit reason is that they are not yet ready, having shown themselves to be too immature even to take on a small responsibility of abiding by a single rule.
- Interesting is the comparison with tablets 6-11 of the *Epic of Gilgamesh* (an ancient Near Eastern epic, the literary history of which goes back to ca. 2000 BCE): Gilgamesh the great king of Uruk angers the goddess Ishtar by rejecting her romantic advances; she sends the Bull of Heaven to destroy Uruk, but Gilgamesh and his friend Endiku destroy it. Endiku is fated to die because of this. Gilgamesh poignantly mourns the death of his friend and goes on a quest for immortality, having heard that one man, Utnapishtim, gained immortality. Gilgamesh makes the journey to the man, hears from him of the Flood and how he alone survived and was granted immortality by the gods. He tells Gilgamesh how to gain immortality too, but he fails. The lesson, in the end, is that human life is a journey towards wisdom, not a quest for eternal life; rather than being fixated with the inevitable death fated for humans, one should cherish life and friendship and seek wisdom and growth.

## 2. Theodicy: The Book of Job

- Concept of different fates for the righteous and wicked is not found within the pre-exilic and exilic materials in the Hebrew Bible.
- Some texts betray an acceptance of the universality of the fate of death for all. There are positive views of death, such as rest and return to ancestors. There is a stress on life and on continuance through children.
- Others betray more anxiety about death. Some consider this theme in terms of theodicy (= discussion of the justice of God – i.e., why do the innocent and righteous suffer? Why do the wicked succeed?)
- Books like Job ask, among other things, whether it is fair that all share the same fate (i.e., death and a shadowy afterlife in Sheol). The answer, however, is that God’s ways are inscrutable to humankind.