

SUNDAY MORNING BIBLE STUDY
Week 2: Genesis 3:1-24

From last week:

The Adam and Eve story is about Israel, even though Israel isn't even mentioned. It's not even primarily about the creation of the first humans (though it has etiological elements), because as we will see later in the story of Cain and Abel, the assumption is that there are other humans outside the garden; east of Eden.

ETIOLOGY

What is an etiology? It is a story about causation. It is a story that explains how things came to be or why things are the way they are. Genesis, and this story in particular, is full of etiological elements.

These Etiological Elements answer the following questions:

- Where humans came from?
- Why don't snakes have legs?
- Why don't snakes and humans like each other?
- Why is childbirth painful?
- Why is work hard?
- Why do people get married?
- Why do people wear clothes?
- Why are human males missing a certain bone (the 'baculum') that is found in most other mammals and why do they have an additional 'raphe' (or seam)?

As a story of origins, this story teaches people a lot. But is this story primarily a story about the creation of the first and only humans? If it is a story about the first humans, then where does Cain get his wife (see Genesis 4:17)? This question has baffled people for a long time. The simplest explanation is that there were other people living outside of the Garden of Eden all along. The more challenging answer is that he married a sister. But are these even good and appropriate questions? Or does this story have a different truth to tell?

When we understand this story in the context of the Pentateuch, we begin to see that the story of Adam and Eve is story about Israel in miniature; a preview of coming attractions. Think about the plot of the story and how it relates to Israel's story.

THE PLOT

- Adam is created by God outside of the garden and then put into a garden *paradise* (Eden means something like "abundance").
- When he enters paradise, he is given a command to follow—not to eat of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil.
- On the day he eats of it, God warns, Adam will die (2:17)

THE THREAT OF DEATH

But! Notice what happens on the day Adam eats the forbidden fruit: he doesn't die! In fact, Adam lives to the ripe old age of 930 (according to Genesis).

So, what does it mean to die "on the day" he eats the fruit of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil? Well, we have to ask what happens to Adam and Eve. What happened to them? What were the consequences that relate to death?

The biggest consequence is that they are expelled, exiled, from the garden. Is this death? Yes! Why? Think about what that means in the Adam and Eve story and think about what that means in terms of Israel's story.

In the Adam and Eve story, being driven out of the garden and not being allowed to return means that they no longer have access and no longer have the ability to eat from the tree of life (3:22-24). If they can't eat from the tree of life, they will die. And so exile means death. In a sense, they "die" from being evicted from paradise—they can't keep eating the fruit that gives them immortality, and so mortality is introduced: they will eventually return to dust (3:19).

As an aside, we then want to ask, "What is the tree of life?" Is it meant to be like the fountain of youth? Or is it something else? What does the rest of scripture say about the tree of life? The tree of life (עֵץ חַיִּים, Etz haChayim). Outside of Genesis, the term "tree of life" appears in Proverbs 3:18; 11:30; 13:12; 15:4 and Revelation 2:7; 22:2,14,19. Also, compare what you find in Revelation 22:2 with what is written in Ezekiel 47:12. The Torah, the way of wisdom, is understood to be the tree of life.

In the story of Israel, exile also means death. Why would Israelites say that exile is death? Because in exile, God's promise of a land was gone, including the Temple. Being in exile meant that the Israelites were completely cut off from God. They felt God had rejected them; God had finally turned God's back and walked away. Without God, Israel is no longer the people of God. Israel ceases to exist. Israel is dead.

EZEKIEL 37

If you look at Ezekiel 37, you see the same connection between death and exile. The prophet Ezekiel has a vision of a valley of dry bones—a mass, uncovered grave. The bones represent Israel in exile in Babylon. They are dead. But then these bones are brought back together, covered with muscle and flesh, and God breathes life back into them.

In Ezekiel, bringing the bones back to life represents Israel returning from captivity. Israel is restored, re-connected with God. Israel is brought back to life. Like Israel in exile, Adam did die the day he ate the fruit—he too was exiled (from Eden). Adam and Israel share the same fate.

Remember the plot line:

Adam was created by God and exiled from paradise for disobeying the command.

Israel was created by God and exiled from Canaan for disobeying the Law of Moses.

And think about what happened to Adam and Eve after they were driven from the garden, God continued to care for them. Now think about what that says to the people of Israel who had been held captive in Babylon. The Adam story is a preview of the story of Israel.

ORIGINAL SIN OR SOMETHING ELSE?

A lot of times when we talk about the story of Adam and Eve, we describe it as "the fall," by which we mean a fall from perfection. But we should ask, "Were they perfect or is it better to describe them as naïve? Did they fall from perfection or did they simply decide to grow up too quickly and apart from God?"

Most of the time we assume that Adam and Eve were these fresh-off-the-assembly-line, shiny new perfect first humans that Got tested by God and failed. And therefore, they lost everything, and all humanity has suffered ever since. For many, this is the concept of original sin. And it has been the case in the western church since Augustine (4th century).

THE EASTERN CHURCH

But, in the history of the church, the Eastern church has looked at the Adam story differently. For them it is not about a fall from perfection, but rather a failure to grow up properly with godly wisdom and maturity. For the Eastern church, Adam and Even were not perfect before the fall, rather they were like young, naïve little children, who were meant to grow into obedience, but were tricked into following a different path.

THE COMMAND AND THE TREE

Eat of any tree, except one—the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. Why that tree? Why does eating from this tree carry the death penalty? Doesn't God want humanity to know the difference between good and evil?

If it's the story about the first humans, then it's strange that eating from that tree carries the death penalty. You would think that this is what God would want. But if this story functions more as a preview of the story of Israel, then this makes a lot of sense.

Knowing the difference between good and evil is the point of the law in the Old Testament. The law, given to Moses at Mt. Sinai, tells Israel what is good and what is evil. And if they obeyed what the law says, it went well with them, which we already saw means that they would be able to stay in the land. If they disobeyed, it would lead to consequences, ultimately exile from the land. This is the big choice Israel faces throughout its history: obey the law and be blessed with land and abundance or disobey and forfeit the land and God's blessing.

THE CONNECTION TO PROVERBS

The entire book of Proverbs is based on a similar idea. It takes nine chapters setting up a similar choice. Israel is advised in Proverbs to follow wisdom and to flee from foolishness. What is wisdom? Obeying God and following God's instruction. Following the path of God leads to wisdom and life but following foolishness leads to death. Knowing right from wrong, knowing wisdom from foolishness, is what was expected of Israel. And to gain that knowledge, they needed to learn to obey God.

God didn't command Adam and Eve not to eat from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil because such knowledge is wrong. It's not that God doesn't ever want Adam and Eve to know good and evil. That is precisely what God does want for them—but they have to go about gaining such knowledge God's way. Obedience to God is the prerequisite for knowing good and evil. Proverbs 1:7 puts it this way: "The fear of the Lord is the beginning of knowledge; fools despise wisdom and instruction."

To use the language of Proverbs, Adam and Eve were fools. They spurned God's instruction and took the short cut to get to what was intended to be a good thing. But true knowledge can only be gained by submitting to God, trusting, revering, and loving God (all included in that phrase 'fear the Lord'). And following God's path to wisdom brings life, which is what we read in Proverbs 3:18: "She (wisdom) is a tree of life to those who lay hold of her." Pursuing wisdom God's way leads to a "tree of life"—for Israel and for Adam. Failure to follow God's path to wisdom leads to death, estrangement from God, exile for Israel and for Adam.

THE SERPENT

The serpent is described as 'more crafty' than any other animal that the Lord God had made. In Proverbs 1:4, we read that God's wisdom gives 'shrewdness to the simple.' 'Shrewdness' in Proverbs and 'crafty' in Genesis are the same Hebrew word.

In English, crafty is the negative way of putting it and shrewdness is the positive way. Think of shrewdness as 'street smarts'. Someone who is shrewd won't be taken in by every shell game and card trick he passes on the street corner. Much of Proverbs is about preparing the young, the simple, the naïve, to make it in the world, where around every corner there is a potential temptation to drive you away from wisdom (and life) and toward foolishness (and death).

The brief dialogue that follows the serpent's entrance shows the crafty serpent outwitting simple Eve like a veteran car salesman manipulating a young first-time buyer with a wad of cash. The serpent is the crafty salesman and Eve the naïve customer. The serpent gets her talking and within two verses he has her wrapped around his finger and doubting God. "Trust me, lady. God's lying to you. He's even a bit jealous." It's a clever half-truth.

Yes, if they eat of the tree they will be like God, which is exactly what God wants. God wants his human creatures to look more and more like him, but the wise God must lead them in his way, in God's time. They are not ready to know good and evil.

TO GROW UP PROPERLY

We all know from the movie *Big* what happens when we “grow up” without all the experiences that come with maturity. In the same way, the serpent tricks naïve Eve to grab for wisdom by bypassing God’s instruction—to grab for a good thing the wrong way. After they eat, Adam and Eve instantly become aware of their nakedness and are ashamed. Of all things that could have happened (the earth opening up and swallowing them whole or being struck by lightning) why this?

Think of young children. They tend to run around the house naked, without a care in the world. They don’t know they’re supposed to feel shame. The serpent tricked Adam and Eve into gaining wisdom too soon, apart from God’s way. They were naïve children who did not have the shrewdness to withstand the serpent’s craftiness. They should have just trusted their maker.

The knowledge of good and evil isn’t wrong, but getting it free from God’s direction is death. Without the maturity that comes from obeying God, Adam and Eve can’t handle the truth.

THE POINT

This is the point of the story: the choice put before Adam and Eve is the same choice put before Israel every day: learn to listen to God and follow in God’s ways and then—only then—you will live. The story of Adam and Eve makes this point in the form of a story; Proverbs makes it in the form of wisdom literature. Israel’s long story in the Old Testament makes it in the form of history writing.

Therefore, in conclusion, the story of Adam and Eve is a preview of Israel’s long journey in the Old Testament as a whole.

Adam did not get back into the garden, but the Old Testament doesn’t dwell on that story. In fact, Adam is not mentioned again in the Old Testament except for 1 Chronicles 1:1 where he is the first name in the long nine-chapter list of names. The Old Testament focuses on Israel itself. And Israel does come back to the garden, back to Canaan, in 539 BC after about 50 years of captivity in Babylon.

As Ezekiel wrote, the death of exile is reversed and Israel’s dead bones are brought back to life. Israel’s estrangement from God is over. As the prophet Isaiah puts it, “Jerusalem has served her term, her penalty is paid, she has received from the Lord’s hand double for all her sins.” (40:2).

At the end of the day, Israel’s story is less about the people and more about the God who never fully lets go of them, always moving to bring them back to paradise.