

Genesis 2–3: A Case of Inner-Biblical Interpretation

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The biblical story about paradise and the fall was already subject to interpretation in biblical times. As everywhere in the Bible, the present text shows many traces of textual growth or, we might say, signs of a *Wirkungsgeschichte* that is part of the biblical tradition itself. “*Sacra scriptura suae ipsius interpres*” — “Holy Scripture is self-interpreting,” and this is true even in terms of literary history. If we can talk about the biblical text’s final shape at all — which may be doubted in view of the divergences within the textual tradition — then this shape is for the most part unintentional; it has rather grown out of many later ideas based on and added to an already existing text. The idea that the present text is the outcome of a deliberate redactional shaping is not only unnecessary; it is certainly wrong. Canonicity is not primarily the end result of the Bible’s history; from the very beginning it provided the necessary condition for the development of the biblical text. In the light of literary history, what Erich Zenger calls “the final shape as theological concept”¹ is an error that brings theological hermeneutics to a dead end. Abraham Kuenen in 1885 rightly stated: “The redaction of the Hexateuch, then, assumes the form of a continuous diaskeue or diorthosis, and the redactor becomes a collective body headed by the scribe who united the two

1. Erich Zenger, Heinz-Josef Fabry, and Georg Braulik, *Einleitung in das Alte Testament*, 2nd ed. (Stuttgart: Kohlhammer, 1996), p. 34.

Thanks to Margaret Kohl for translating this essay into English.

works . . . into a single whole, but also including the whole series of his more or less independent followers.”² In St. Andrews it is appropriate to remember the late Professor William McKane and his famous concept of the “rolling corpus,” a concept shared to some degree by Professor Robert P. Carroll of Glasgow University (who died much too early).³ This is true not only of the book of Jeremiah, on which both these scholars worked; it applies to the whole of biblical literature.

The following observations about the story of paradise and the fall cannot cover the whole development of today’s text. They are confined to four topics: (1) the earliest discernible form of the narrative, and its relationship to the mythologies of the ancient Near East; (2) the fundamental anthropological viewpoints; (3) the nature of sin; (4) the question about the origin of mortality and the possibility of eternal life.

The Earliest Form of the Narrative

The text shows the existence of different literary strata. For this assertion it may be sufficient to draw attention to the most important clue. The man’s reaction after God has hurled his curse at him is quite incomprehensible: “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. And the man named his wife Eve, because she was the mother of all who live” (3:19-20). Julius Wellhausen pinpointed the paradox: “After 3:19 we should expect to find the man distressed and cast down, waiting to see what else God is going to do with him . . . instead he takes the opportunity to name his wife Eve, for which there was really no occasion at this point.”⁴

Wellhausen got over the unevenness by excluding the verse as a later addition. J. G. Herder had already considered that it might be an interpolation.⁵ But the suggestion only avoids the problem; it does not solve it. No ed-

2. Abraham Kuenen, *An Historico-Critical Inquiry into the Origin and Composition of the Hexateuch*, trans. Ph. H. Wicksteed (London: Macmillan, 1886), p. 315.

3. William McKane, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on Jeremiah*, 2 vols., ICC (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1986-1996), 1:1-lxxxiii; Robert P. Carroll, *Jeremiah: A Commentary*, OTL (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1986), p. 46.

4. Julius Wellhausen, *Die Composition des Hexateuchs*, 4th ed. (Berlin: de Gruyter, 1963), p. 10.

5. Johann Gottfried Herder, “Über die ersten Urkunden des Menschlichen Geschlechts. Einige Anmerkungen” (1764-69), in R. Smend, ed., *Schriften zum Alten Testament*, Werke 5;

itor would have been so blind as to create the sequence of scenes as it stands. Moreover, the naming of the woman is indispensable. Her name, Eve, is presupposed in what follows (4:1). Since the difficulty cannot be overlooked, the only solution is the converse: the naming of the woman is not later than the surrounding passage — it is earlier.

This conclusion is supported by a second observation. The sequence of the woman’s creation and her naming follows the same sequence as that between the creation and the naming of the animals:

2:19And . . . God formed . . . every animal of the field and every bird of the air, *and brought them to the man*. . . . 20*And the man gave names to all the birds of the air, and to every animal of the field*. . . . 21Then . . . God caused a deep sleep to fall upon the man, and he slept; then he took one of his ribs and closed up its place with flesh. 22And . . . God made the rib into a woman *and brought her to the man*. . . . 3:20*And the man named his wife Eve*, because she was the mother of all who live.

The possibility of this connection is self-evident. It suggests that we can skip the greater part of chapter 3 without detriment to the sequence of events.⁶ The conclusion is far-reaching: there was once a creation narrative without a fall.⁷

This differentiation is not without foundation, as is endorsed by the beginning of the narrative. We are first told: “God planted a garden in Eden, in the east; and there he put the man whom he had formed” (2:8). But then the proceeding is repeated, and now the details that are important for the fall are added:

2:9And out of the ground Yahweh God made to grow every tree that is pleasant to the sight and good for food, . . . and the tree of the knowledge

Bibliothek deutscher Klassiker 93 (Frankfurt am Main: Deutscher Klassiker Verlag, 1993), pp. 9-178, esp. 116.

6. This includes the first naming of the woman in 2:23, which competes with 3:20. It has been added later.

7. Werner H. Schmidt, *Die Schöpfungsgeschichte der Priesterschrift*, 3rd ed., WMANT 17 (Neukirchen-Vluyn: Neukirchener Verlag, 1973), pp. 194-229, judges similarly. Admittedly he maintains that the unevennesses “can only derive from the preliterate stage of textual development” (p. 195), and he also fails to see the key significance of 3:20-21; he goes along with received opinion in considering that they have been interpolated (p. 218). An interpolation of this kind can only be a literary one.

of good and evil. . . . ¹⁵Yahweh God took the man and put him in the garden of Eden to till it and keep it. ¹⁶And Yahweh God commanded the man, saying, “You may freely eat of every tree of the garden; ¹⁷but 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.”

The original story that emerges on the basis of such indications ran roughly as follows:

²⁵When no plant of the field was yet in the earth, . . . ⁷then . . . God formed man . . . and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life. . . . ⁸And . . . God planted a garden in Eden, in the east; and there he put the man whom he had formed. . . . ¹⁹And . . . God formed . . . every animal of the field and every bird of the air, and brought them to the man. . . . ²⁰And the man gave names to all the birds of the air, and to every animal of the field. . . . ²¹Then . . . God caused a deep sleep to fall upon the man, and he slept; then he took one of his ribs and closed up its place with flesh. ²²And . . . God made the rib into a woman and brought her to the man. . . . ^{3:20}And the man named his wife Eve, because she was the mother of all who live. ²¹And . . . God made garments of skins for the man and for his wife, and clothed them. . . . ^{4:1}Now the man knew his wife Eve, and she conceived and bore Cain.

The story begins with the previous status quo, a condition in which the earth certainly existed but nothing else. For the time before creation the inhabitants of Palestine had in their mind’s eye the desert of sand, flint, and rocks. On the fringes of the cultivated land the desert merged into the steppe covered with sparse tufts of grass. It was thought that this change from the desert to the steppe had not yet taken place, the steppe being the scantiest form of vegetation that makes the raising of small animals in a modest way possible, and thus human life on its poorest level. The account stands for the absence of any foundation for living at all — for the world before creation.

The description exposes a dilemma that is characteristic of the ancient creation narratives. People were unable to think of nothingness. The imagination was dominated by the world that was present. As a makeshift, the condition before creation was conceived of as the negation of that which is present here and now, as that which is “not yet.” In several Egyptian and Mesopotamian texts we find the world before creation described

with almost identical “not yet” statements.⁸ The most famous of them is the beginning of *Enuma Elish*, the Babylonian epic about the creation of the world (I 1-9):

When on high the heaven had not been named, firm ground below had not been called by name, naught but primordial Apsu, their begetter, and Mummu-Tiamat, she who bore them all, their waters commingling as a single body; no reed hut had been matted, no marsh land had appeared, when no gods whatever had been brought into being, uncalled by name, their destinies undetermined — then it was that the gods were formed within them.⁹

The Babylonian parallel shows something else in addition: the importance of naming. Creating and naming are virtually one and the same. For a name is a definition, a delineation, and therefore means order in contrast to undefined, uncreated chaos. The ancient world had a distinct feeling for the necessity of a world order. Only the ordered, defined world is the habitat in which being is possible. We find the close connection between creation and naming in the first three works of the first creation narrative too (Gen. 1:5, 8, 10). In the second account, the motif recurs in the creation of the animals and the woman (2:20; 3:20). This time it is the man who confers the names. He participates in the ordering formation of the world. The world of life is certainly God’s prevenient gift; but it is also the space of civilization, and as such belongs within the responsibility of the human being.

The man’s particular position also emerges from the sequence of the acts of creation. According to *Enuma Elish* (which in this respect is representative of a number of creation myths), after the introductory “not yet” condition, the gods are created first of all. It is only after all kinds of entanglements and conflicts that the gods create human beings, who are intended to serve and nourish them. In Genesis this is different: “When no plant of the field was yet in the earth, then God formed *man*.” Here the man is the first work of creation. He alone is God’s counterpart. Whereas in Israel’s environment the world is interpreted as the outcome of conflicting forces — that is, in ancient terms, it proceeds from the struggle of the gods — here every-

8. For Egypt see Hermann Grapow, “Die Welt vor der Schöpfung,” *ZÄS* 67 (1931): 34-38. For Sumer Willem H. P. Römer presents two examples in *TUAT* III/3: *Mythen und Epen I* (Gütersloh: Mohn, 1993), pp. 353-56.

9. *ANET*, 61 (trans. E. A. Speiser); cf. *COS* 1:391 (text 1.111; trans. Benjamin R. Foster).

thing divine is absorbed by the *one* God, who performs his work as potter and gardener unrivalled.¹⁰

That the Creator acts like a potter rests on a simple analogy. Images, especially figurines of gods such as could be found in every considerable household, were made of clay.¹¹ The Gilgamesh Epic tells on its first tablet how the goddess Arura creates Enkidu (I ii 33-35): She thinks out a concept, wets her hands, nips off clay, and forms the figure: “When Aruru heard this, a double of Anu she conceived within her. Aruru washed her hands, pinched off clay and cast it on the steppe. On the steppe she created valiant Enkidu, offspring of . . . , essence of Ninurta.”¹²

We do not possess such obvious parallels for every detail of the biblical story. But there is no doubt that the way the Deity cares for the first human being also echoes widespread ideas: the laying out of the garden, the creation of the animals and of a companion similar in kind; the invention of clothing, without which the human being is not human, and before which his creation is not complete.

After this, the primal man mates with the primal woman (Gen. 4:1). With the birth of Cain, a genealogical list begins that reaches as far as Noah, and is adorned with all kinds of basic inventions belonging to the history of civilization, such as the laying out of towns, the raising of cattle, music, forged weapons, and lastly alcohol (4:17-22; 9:20). Following Noah’s three sons, Shem, Ham, and Japheth, the whole human race is described, according to their peoples, dwelling places, and languages (10:2-18*, 20-25, 31).¹³ The mythical primeval era passes swiftly into history.

10. I have described this picture of God as “integrative monotheism.” See Christoph Levin, “Das Alte Testament auf dem Weg zu seiner Theologie,” *ZTK* 105 (2008): 125-45, esp. 141-42.

11. Illustrations may be found in Othmar Keel and Christoph Uehlinger, *Gods, Goddesses, and Images of God in Ancient Israel*, trans. Thomas H. Trapp (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1998), pp. 325-36, regarding the so-called pillar figurines (§§190-95).

12. *ANET*, 74 (trans. E. A. Speiser).

13. The connection of the anthropogeny with the table of nations is the foundation for the pre-Yahwistic primal history; see Christoph Levin, “Die Redaktion R^{1P} in der Urgeschichte,” in Martin Beck and Ulrike Schorn, eds., *Auf dem Weg zur Endgestalt von Genesis bis II Regum: Festschrift H.-Ch. Schmitt*, BZAW 370 (Berlin: de Gruyter, 2006), pp. 15-34, esp. 17-18. The basic form of the table of nations probably reflects the world of the 7th century.

The Fundamental Anthropological Viewpoints

In the biblical context, this anthropogeny has been interpreted as the beginning of God's history with humanity, and with Israel especially. It continues with the election of the patriarchs and leads on to the liberation of the Israelites from oppression in Egypt, after which Yahweh brings them through the wilderness into the land of Canaan. The interweaving of such essentially disparate material has to be the work of a redaction that we can call "Yahwist" in accordance with the earlier Documentary Hypothesis because of the name for God used, and also according to its literary extent.¹⁴ This redaction has left pronounced traces in the narrative. It is due to this redaction that the Israelite divine name, *Yahweh*, is regularly added to the mention of God (Hebrew *Elohim*). But above all, this redaction has crafted the earliest description of the fall, and in doing so has added to the creation of humanity the counterpoise that is theologically so important.¹⁵

The fall acquires its contours against the background of a particular anthropology. Fundamental to it are the ties between man and the earth.¹⁶ In Hebrew the roots of the two terms are related: אָדָם, "man," and אֲדָמָה, "ground, earth." Even before creation begins, it is said that the man's task will be "to till the ground" (2:5). That is the purpose for which God has created him. And just as the earth is the purpose of his existence, it is also his origin. The description of the way God makes the man is accompanied by a declaration about the material he uses: "out of the ground" (2:7). In the earlier account the material is tacitly taken to be clay. In the case of the animals too it is subsequently emphasized that they have been formed "out of the ground" (2:19). And of course the plants have the same origin: "Out of the ground Yahweh God made to grow every tree" (2:9).

For the whole term of his life, the man is there to cultivate the earth. This is the commission with which Yahweh sets him in the garden, "to till it and keep it" (2:15).¹⁷ And it is with the same commission that Yahweh expels

14. See most recently Christoph Levin, "The Yahwist: The Earliest Editor in the Pentateuch," *JBL* 126 (2007): 209-30.

15. See Christoph Levin, *Der Jahwist*, FRLANT 157 (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1993), pp. 82-86.

16. This has often been described. See esp. Joachim Begrich, "Die Paradieserzählung," in *Gesammelte Studien zum Alten Testament*, TB 21 (Munich: Chr. Kaiser, 1964), pp. 11-38, esp. pp. 26-27. The key word אָדָמָה runs right through the primeval history of the Yahwist (Gen. 2:5, 7, 9, 19; 3:17, 19, 23; 4:3, 10, 11, 12; 5:29; 6:1, 7; 7:4, 23; 8:8, 13, 21; 9:20) and connects it via 12:3 with the history of the patriarchs.

17. The curious feminine suffixes refer to אֲדָמָה.

him from it: “Yahweh God sent him forth from the garden of Eden, to till the ground from which he was taken” (3:23). At the end of his life the man will return to his origin: “Until you return to the ground, for out of it you were taken” (3:19). The details are blended together into an overall statement: according to God’s will, the man is by nature a settled farmer.

This lets us realize what it means when, as the punishment for disobedience, the earth is cursed because of him. Certainly lightning does not strike him dead, as one might have expected. But when it strikes the ground beside him,¹⁸ he is touched to the depths of his being: his origin, the commission given him, and his finite goal are all affected. From that time on he lives as if he had been torn away from his roots. So his existence becomes toil and trouble, a drudgery ending only with death.

A second fundamental anthropological element is the close mutual bond between woman and man. This motif is already latent in the earlier account, where the woman is created from the man’s rib; now it is emphasized. Other than at the creation of the man, which God goes about without further explanation, here Yahweh makes a resolve: “It is not good that the man should be alone” (2:18). According to this, the purpose of the woman’s existence is to be the man’s “helpmate” or companion, the cohuman being *per se*. The unique character of this relationship is effectively staged. Yahweh makes the resolve even before he begins to create the animals. When he brings these to the man, he meets with a setback in the light of what he intends. “The beasts are living witnesses of the failure of His experiments.”¹⁹ It is only when he takes the woman from the man, as he has previously taken the man from the earth, that what he has in mind succeeds. The man’s cry of rejoicing confirms the success, and again the close bond between the two human beings: “This at last is bone of my bones and flesh of my flesh” (2:23). Man and woman act before God as a unity. Together they commit the sin leading to the fall. And, just as in the man’s case, the purpose of the woman’s existence is affected by the punishment inflicted on her: as the man’s companion, she is also subjected to him (3:16). The man’s supremacy counts, not as an order of creation, but as an unnatural curse — a revolutionary assertion for the ancient world.

18. See Walther Zimmerli, *1. Mose 1–11: Die Urgeschichte*, 3rd ed., ZBK 1/1 (Zurich: Theologischer Verlag, 1967), p. 175.

19. Julius Wellhausen, *Prolegomena to the History of Ancient Israel*, trans. J. S. Black and A. Menzies (1885; repr. Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1994), p. 306.

The Nature of Sin

According to the narrative, we are supposed to think of the newly created human pair as being like children, not immediately in possession of their ability to judge; for nothing other is meant by the phrase that they “do not know good and evil” (see Deut. 1:39; Isa. 7:15, 16; also Jonah 4:11). The narrator illustrates this when he lets them lack the sense of shame (2:25), which as we know only develops naturally from about the age of five. After the fall, the two suddenly rediscover themselves as adults who are conscious of their nakedness, and consequently hide when Yahweh approaches, thereby showing him what has happened (3:7-8). With the famous question “Where are you?” they are called to account.

What constitutes the fall? The story does not provide a definition. Its aim is no more than to show generally an initial disobedience and its consequences. For this a commandment was needed. A subject for this commandment was found in something that belonged to the scene in addition to God and the man: the garden, or rather its trees. Since the result of the disobedience is the knowledge of good and evil, the forbidden tree became “the tree of the knowledge of good and evil” (2:9).

In spite of all the rigor of later theological interpretation, the disobedience has the features of a tragic misunderstanding. The woman triggers it. She has hardly come into existence when she sees that what the tree bears is good to eat (3:6) — that is, she perceives what was said about the trees at the beginning: God made them “pleasant to the sight and good for food” (2:9). Unsuspectingly, she reaches out for the fruit; for when God uttered the prohibition she was not yet in existence. But the man’s offense is not against the tree; he takes the fruit from the woman. Whether he knows what he is eating is left open. His protestation that the woman gave him the fruit from the tree (3:12) suggests that he did not. And God seemingly accepts the excuse, for when he gives his reason for cursing the man, he points to the woman (3:17). Irrespective of this, the full responsibility is laid on man and woman alike. “Thus there appears externally and fortuitously what has to be recognized as inward and necessary.”²⁰ The Babylonian Talmud (*Sanhedrin* 38b) tried to soften the objectionable passage by maintaining that the narrative sequence does not reproduce the sequence of events: God pronounced the prohibition only after the creation of the woman, indeed — since we are all affected by

20. Friedrich Tuch, *Kommentar über die Genesis* (Halle: Buchhandlung des Waisenhauses, 1838), p. 48.

the fall — after the birth of her children. Accordingly, the event of the creation of human beings and the event of the fall took place on a single day. In the seventh hour the woman was created, in the eighth the first human couple were given their offspring, in the ninth the prohibition was promulgated, in the tenth it was infringed, in the eleventh the judgment was pronounced, and in the twelfth man and woman were driven out. Otherwise the punishment would not have been lawful.

It was only later reflection that elucidated the deeper character of the sin, paradoxically because of the attempt to exonerate the human being from direct guilt. The tempter enters the stage:

3:1The serpent was more crafty than any other wild animal that Yahweh God had made. He said to the woman, “Did God say, ‘You shall not eat from any tree of the garden?’” 2The woman said to the serpent, “We eat of the fruit of the trees of the garden; 3but 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, lest you die.’” 4But the serpent said to the woman, “You will not die; 5for God knows that when you eat of it your eyes will be opened, and you will be like God, knowing good and evil.”

It has always been recognized that this scene differs from the rest of the story. The most noticeable feature is that instead of the usual term “Yahweh Elohim,” a simple “Elohim” is used four times. Since there is no discernible reason for the change, here another author was probably at work, with “handwriting” of his own. His intention is obvious. By introducing the character of the seducer, he wishes to some extent to exonerate the human beings. When the woman justifies herself: “The serpent tricked me, and I ate” (3:13), this too God accepts. He turns without hesitation to the serpent and curses it, as the author of the transgression.

Of course this subsequent interpretation could not prove successful. Talk about the serpent does not do away with the fact that the initiative to the disobedience comes from the woman — at the decisive moment the serpent has disappeared — nor is the punishment mitigated in the slightest because the serpent is cursed beforehand. Although man and woman have been tempted to the sin, that sin is entirely their own responsibility. This remaining unevenness is one of the features that lends the story its profound truth.

The serpent is described when it is introduced. It is “more subtle” than all the other animals. This characteristic is by no means a negative one. In

Old Testament wisdom, cleverness is accounted a high-ranking attribute, worth striving for. We are not told that the serpent was an evil beast — only that it was a clever one. It proves that this is the case: it can talk. Talking beasts are a fairytale motif. Nevertheless, the woman is not taken aback for a moment. Nor is the reader really surprised. The serpent has a function to fulfill, but does not in itself embody a separate entity. The woman has to have an interlocutor; but on the stage of world history, except for her, only two beings were endowed with reason: God and the man.

There may have been other reasons as well for the choice of the serpent. Because of its closeness to the earth, and because it sheds its skin (which is interpreted as an enigmatic relationship to death and life), and not least because it can be poisonous, it can appear as a being of ambivalent power. That is the basis of its veneration as an earthbound deity, as representative of forces that are annihilating and healing, evil and good.²¹ In our passage the mythical background has retreated. We might almost say that the serpent is merely something like the woman's alter ego, for it hardly puts forward anything that in these circumstances the woman might not have said for herself. That is one reason for the casualness that is so surprising a mark of the dialogue between woman and serpent.

This dialogue is the most cleverly contrived scene to be found in the Old Testament.²² It “has always excited the delight of sensitive readers through its mastery of psychological description. In the few words and actions with which he describes his characters, the narrator makes their inner lives clear.”²³ Everything that is about to come is already implicit in the first sentence: “Did God say, You shall not eat from any tree of the garden?” The allegation is absurd. Why should God have issued a prohibition that would have denied the human being the foundation for living? On the contrary, right at the beginning was his generous permission: “You may freely eat of every tree of the garden” (2:16), permission given with only a single stipulation: “Of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil you shall not eat” (2:17). The truly devilish thing about the hypothetical question is that it reverses the proportions between God's goodness and God's prohibition, as if the fact that this single prohibition exists turns the generosity as a whole into its opposite. It is an all-or-nothing attitude, which spoils everything: if God for-

21. See R. S. Hendel, “Serpent שָׁרָפָה,” *DDD* 744-47.

22. See the sensitive description in Gerhard von Rad, *Genesis*, trans. John H. Marks, rev. ed., OTL (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1972), pp. 87-90.

23. Hermann Gunkel, *Genesis*, trans. Mark E. Biddle (Macon, Ga.: Mercer University Press, 1997), p. 16.

bids the one, it is just as if he had forbidden everything — simply because a prohibition at all exists that makes clear to the human being that he is not the lord of the world but is the recipient of what God gives him. Basically speaking, the test of obedience requires only one thing: recognition of the difference between God and man. The Babylonian Talmud (*Sanhedrin* 56b) records that R. Judah read the introduction to the speech, **אלהים על-האדם, ויצו יהוה** (usually translated: “And Yahweh God commanded the man”), in such a way that **אלהים** is the object: “And the LORD commanded *God* to the man [i.e., that the man remember the Godhead].” It is this requirement that the human being fails to meet.

Here the serpent is free of all responsibility. One question must be permitted, however hypothetical it may be; it is only that it requires an answer from the woman. She takes up the challenge, and falls into the trap laid for her by the serpent and by herself. For the woman does not confront the serpent with the prohibition as it stands. She makes a momentous mistake: instead of talking about what *God* has done and commanded, she talks about the human act: “We eat of the fruit of the trees of the garden.” In this assertion two details are missing. First: “all.” This allows a stipulation to stand that contradicts God’s generosity. Second, and most important: the woman omits to mention that this eating is in accord with God’s permission. There is no reference to the fact that when the human beings live from the fruits of the trees they are in relation to God, who gave the trees to them. Under these circumstances it need not surprise us that the “all” is missing — the enjoyment of what is more than necessary, what is more than the mere eking out of existence.

With this reply, which — so forgetful of God — is fixated on human action, the woman has nothing more with which to counter the serpent. She should have recollected God’s generosity. But, blinkered as she is, she does not look beyond her own restricted view. The bare answer, “We eat of the fruit of the trees of the garden,” is not a rejection of the serpent’s insinuation. It is still possible that by eating, man and woman really are setting aside that absurd, total divine prohibition (which neither does nor can exist) — that therefore life is not a gift but a robbery. But in this way for the woman the total prohibition also comes into effect. This is the beginning of the undue dominance of the misunderstood commandment, on which man founders under the actual limitations set for him by God, limitations that, however, he is not prepared to recognize (Rom. 5:13, 20; 7:10-13).

Suppressing God’s permission, the woman goes on to talk instead about the prohibition. She even repeats it accurately, and in so doing cor-

rects the serpent's rendering. Only she calls "the tree of the knowledge of good and evil" "the tree in the middle of the garden," as if she wants to avoid putting a name to its true meaning. But because the tree is characterized not according to its attributes but according to its place in the garden, the prohibition at once appears to be arbitrary, as if God simply wanted to vex human beings.

The woman changes the prohibition in a second way as well. She expands it: "neither shall you touch it." God had by no means forbidden them to touch the fruit, and had no need to do so, for his prohibition was clear enough. By intensifying the prohibition on her own initiative, the woman shows that she has already allowed herself to be drawn into the undertow of the totality of the prohibition that the serpent has alleged. She makes God much stricter and more precise than he is. Yet at the same time she has already thought about touching the fruit, and thus about violating the prohibition — a possibility that she has now to forbid for herself. And in this way the prohibition suddenly becomes more rigorous than God had meant.

At the end the woman also cites the threat of punishment that went with the prohibition. But she avoids the formula about the death penalty: "you shall die" (2:17), and formulates a negative final, or purpose, clause instead: "lest you die." Whereas the prohibition is intensified to a nonsensical degree, the threat of punishment is softened.

At this point the serpent begins again, and directly contradicts the woman by disputing the threat of punishment. The contradiction of God is now an open one. But at the same time, according to the rest of the story, what the serpent puts forward is nothing other than the truth. It is true that the fall was not immediately followed by death. But preservation from the death penalty, which has to be called an act of God's grace, is made the occasion for disputing the efficacy of the commandment. It is the alteration that constitutes the blasphemy.

The rest too is no less than the truth: "God knows that when you eat of it your eyes will be opened, and you will be like God, knowing good and evil." It is true that after the fruit has been eaten the eyes of man and woman are opened and they arrive at an adult ability to judge — what the Hebrew calls the "knowledge of good and evil": the ability to weigh up and decide on reasonable grounds. It is this attribute that distinguishes the human from the animal, the adult from the immature child, and the wise from the incorrigible fool. It is not in itself in contradiction to God's will. The case is not being put for a religious or romantic hostility to reason. On the contrary, for Old Testament wisdom, the ability to judge rightly is a divine attribute (Job

21:22; 28:23-24; 37:16; Prov. 3:19-20; Qoh. 2:26; etc.). Consequently it is also correct to say that inasmuch as the man can distinguish between good and evil, he is like God. At the end of the story this is stated quite simply by God himself: “Behold, the man has become like one of us, knowing good and evil” (3:22).

The essential point, however, is the way the human being acquires this attribute. The ability to judge is ruined from the outset if it is not received as a gift with which God makes man like himself, but is seen as a claim with which man makes himself like God. The difference seems to be a small one, hardly more than a sophism, and yet it signifies the fundamental distinction between God and man, between the Creator and the created, between the one who gives and the one who receives. If the ability to judge ignores this fundamental distinction, it is compromised to its very roots. It is then no longer innocent but, as the true capacity for judging, is itself called into question.

The Origin of Mortality and the Possibility of Eternal Life

Finally, the serpent’s words raise the question: What has the story to say about death? In this connection Christian readers think of Paul: “Sin came into the world through one man, and death came through sin” (Rom. 5:12). “The wages of sin is death” (Rom. 6:23). That interpretation is not covered by the Old Testament text. And this is so not because we should then have to say that the serpent was right in saying “You will not die” (which after all was true only in the short run) but because the author of the story thought of human existence from the outset in no other way than as being mortal. Being-toward-death belongs together not with sin but with creation.

The threat “in the day that you eat of it you shall die” (2:17) is easily read in the sense: “You shall become mortal.” But such an interpretation is contrary to its intention. The statement “you shall die” or — more correctly — “you shall be put to death” is in Old Testament law a customary formula for the punishment threatened in the case of capital offenses. The way the formula is used in Genesis 26:11 shows that this form of case or casuistic law should be understood as the law of royal promulgation. It was the king who had the power to issue and to enforce punitive sanctions in general. The earliest instances have to do with circumstances in the family, in which the paterfamilias was the guilty person. When the prohibition against eating from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil is subjected to this sanction, the premise is that the person threatened is mortal. Indeed, the curse is not fol-

lowed by death but, for both man and woman, by the toil and trouble of life: “Cursed is the ground because of you; in toil you shall eat of it all the days of your life . . . until you return to the ground, for out of it you were taken” (3:17-19*). Death here is named not as punishment but as the end of life. It is only afterward that we find a postscript — too late, in view of the importance that the motif later acquired — that includes transitoriness as well: “for you are dust, and to dust you shall return” (3:19b). It seemed obvious to interpret the human being’s forfeiture to death particularly as part of the tribulation, indeed as its profoundest point — although for the Israelite it is not death as such that is the terrible thing; it is the irreversible separation from God that it means: “When you hide your face, your creatures are dismayed; when you take away their breath, they die and return to their dust” (Ps. 104:29). *Dust* is the image of transience (see Ps. 103:14; Job 10:9; 34:15; Qoh. 3:20; 12:7). It is such laments that later gave rise to the idea that it was from dust that man was created.

How little the text starts from the assumption of a lost immortality is shown by the *tree of life*. The description of the trees given in the course of the narrative is confusing. We are told at the beginning that among the trees in the garden, God planted two that were special: “the tree of life in the midst of the garden, and the tree of the knowledge of good and evil” (2:9). But in what follows the tree of life is never mentioned again, neither in God’s prohibition nor in the conversation with the serpent. It is only at the end that it provides the reason why man is expelled, “lest he reach out his hand and take also of the tree of life, and eat, and live forever” (3:22). After that, God sets the cherubim and the flaming sword in front of the garden in Eden, “to guard the way to the tree of life” (3:24). The motif is not carried through the narrative consistently.

Its proper place can be found at the end. We become witnesses of a kind of epilogue in heaven. God sums up the consequences of the fall and wishes to avert the perils it has led to: “Behold, the man has become like one of us, knowing good and evil; and now, lest he reach out his hand and take also of the tree of life, and eat, and live forever.” In content, this speech casts back to the words of the serpent: “You will be like God.” It seems as if this assertion is the source of the theological reflection.

Its purpose is to establish the difference between God and human on a new foundation. The boundary that humans have overstepped is laid down for them with conclusive force.²⁴ God does this by blocking the way to the

24. Gen. 3:22 forms part of an edition that according to Markus Witte, *Vom Leiden zur*

tree of life with mythical beings who act as guards.²⁵ The “sword flaming and turning” is the weapon of the weather god, a synthesis between lightning and spear. It symbolizes the mighty presence of God. *Cherubim* are composite beings with human faces who unite the power of the lion or the bull with that of the griffin. Giant cherubim guard the entrance to the king’s palace and to the sanctuary. We several times find the tree of life flanked by cherubim.

The motif of the tree of life is widespread in Canaanite-Syrian iconography. The symbol stands for the divine power of order and life. But we can also think of the fa&rmakon a)qanasi/aj. At the command of Utnapishtim, Gilgamesh fetches from the underworld a prickly herb that confers immortality, but loses it to the serpent when he stops to bathe on the way, since which time the snake has been able to rejuvenate itself by sloughing off its skin. Gilgamesh laments his fate with tears.²⁶

We, on the other hand, do well not to take the frustrated snatch at eternal life in a tragic sense. It is no more than logical that the frontier that the human being transgressed but that God restored for his own sake and for the sake of the human being should be felt as a painful end.

But it is rather the limitation of life that now challenges us to accept that limitation from God as our destiny. For it is not the jealous envy of the gods before which we now stand helpless; it is the God who in his death on the cross has himself overstepped the border to us, and by so doing has once again thrown open the gate to paradise. So it can be that the still remaining frontier, in spite of its irrefutable harshness, proves a gracious limitation — for the person who perceives in it not a tragic fate but the almighty and merciful God himself, and who thereby proves that he is indeed able to distinguish between good and evil.

Lehre: Die dritte Redegang (Hiob 21–27) und die Redaktionsgeschichte des Hiobbuches, BZAW 230 (Berlin: de Gruyter, 1994), p. 230, may be named the “humility edition” (“Niedrigkeitsbearbeitung”). Other instances of this edition are Gen. 2:7 (only עֶפֶר, “dust”), 9bα; 3:16 (only וְהָרִנָּה, “and your childbearing”), 18a, 19aα, b, 24b (from אֵת onward); 6:3aα, b; and 11:6a. See Levin, “Redaktion R^{IP},” 23; and Markus Witte, *Die biblische Urgeschichte*, BZAW 265 (Berlin: de Gruyter, 1998), pp. 79–99.

25. See Hartmut Gese, “Der bewachte Lebensbaum und die Heroen: zwei mythologische Ergänzungen zur Urgeschichte der Quelle J,” in *Vom Sinai zum Zion*, BEvT 64 (Munich: Chr. Kaiser, 1974), pp. 99–112.

26. Gilgamesh XI 263–96; *ANET*, 96.