And Their Eyes Were Opened: The Call to Paradox

Bruce L. Jacobson
Luther Seminary

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And Their Eyes Were Opened:

The Call to Paradox

by

Bruce L. Jacobson

M.A. Thesis, Systematic Theology

Presented to Professors Padgett & Throntveit

Luther Seminary

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STATEMENT ON LANGUAGE

I have labored not to attribute name or gender pronoun to The Divine Presence in writing that is my own. When quoting others’ work, where a name was used, it was replaced with G-d. No effort was made to remove gender pronouns from historical quotes.
DEDICATION

To Anita, my other
PART I: HISTORICAL INTERPRETATION OF THE ADAM AND EVE SAGA
Introduction

I am using saga in the sense of an intuitive and poetic picture of a pre-historical reality of history which is enacted once and for all within the confines of time and space. Legend and anecdote are to be regarded as a degenerate form of saga: legend as the depiction in saga form of a concrete individual personality; and anecdote as the sudden illumination in saga form either of a personality of this kind or of a concretely historical situation. If the concept of myth proves inadequate—as is still to be shown—it is obvious that the only concept to describe the biblical history of creation is that of saga. –Karl Barth

The saga of Adam and Eve has delighted and tortured humanity for thousands of years. Brilliant in both its simplicity and its complexity, it is accessible to the youngest children, yet impenetrable to the wisest scholars. Impenetrable because the very truth the tale strives to illustrate obscures its meaning and derails attempts at interpretation.

The subject of the saga, humanity’s identity before The Lord, coupled to the author’s narrative genius, has inspired artists and theologians from DaVinci to Dali and Augustine to Barth. At the same time, noted Old Testament theologian Walter Brueggemann is correct in pointing out that, “No text in Genesis (or likely in the entire Bible) has been more used, interpreted, and misunderstood than this text.”

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4 Brueggemann, Genesis, 1:41.
Brueggemann’s asserts correctly that, “A beginning in exposition is to see the text in its actual role in the Bible,” but may be overreaching when, in the introductory remarks to his commentary on Genesis 2:4b-3:24, he asserts that contrary to popular belief, “this is an exceedingly marginal text,” and its “role is limited.” Labelling the saga of Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden “a marginal text” is comparable to describing the Mona Lisa as a small painting of an unattractive woman. Rather, as the first chapter of a greater work culminating in the election of Abraham, and the proceeding to the exodus from Egypt, the giving of the law at Sinai, the saga of Adam and Eve is foundational to our understanding of humanity’s identity before The Lord.

In philosophy, foundations seminal to systems of thought are called axioms. An axiom is a statement or proposition that is regarded as being established, accepted, or self-evidently true. Specifically, in mathematics, an axiom is a statement or proposition on which an abstractly defined structure (e.g. Euclidean or non-Euclidean geometry) is based. For example, one of the most disconcerting moments in a young mathematician's life is the introduction to non-Euclidean geometry. A student first learns Euclidean geometry, and the axiom that parallel lines do not cross. This axiom is consistent with experience and therefore inherently comfortable. Non-Euclidean geometry, posits parallel lines that do cross. Changing axioms demands that we reconfigure our perceptions while opening a new world of possibilities.

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5 Brueggemann, 1:41.
6 Brueggemann, 1:41.
7 Wenham, Genesis 1-15, 1:xxii.
Theological axioms are based on human interpretation of scripture which, at this fundamental level, demands a decision. Those decisions can be exegetic and salvific, such as the apostle Paul’s realization that justification is by faith alone, or they can be presumptive like Augustine’s assertion that it is “self-evident that human nature as now constituted could not be normal, could not be as the Creator originally intended.”

His perception of humanity’s identity as fallen from original righteousness has tainted the interpretation of scripture for over 1600 years.

Just as greater understanding of the formation of the universe required biblical depictions of creation be re-examined, Darwin and modern genomics demonstrate that the Genesis account of human creation is not historical. Liberating the text from evolutionary biology it was never intended to explain allows return to proper theological reading of Scripture, not as our primary source of technical information but of insight into God’s means of dealing with us and G-d’s creation.

In contrast to Augustine’s portrayal of the original state of humanity, this paper suggests that humans were complex creations, set apart (raised up) to be priests of unscripted creation and co-creators, capable of good and evil, prepared to abound in The Lord’s hesed, capable of giving The Lord great delight, but in need of occasional, and sometimes profound intervention.

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Statement of the Problem

In the “Preliminary Considerations” section of his commentary on Genesis 2:4b-3:24, Brueggemann asserts, “five large misunderstandings that need to be cleared away as a beginning in our interpretations.”\(^\text{10}\)

1. Genesis 2:4a-3:24 is a decisive text
2. It is an account of the fall of humanity
3. It is an explanation of how evil entered the world
4. The origin of death.
5. It is about sex

The first point was addressed above and the last is “not faithful to the narrative”\(^\text{11}\).

As for characterization of this text as the account of the fall Brueggemann declares, “Nothing could be more remote from the narrative itself.”\(^\text{12}\) Of evil he claims,” …the Old Testament is never interested in such an abstract issue.” And as for the connection to death, Brueggemann explains, “That assumption is in turn based on the mechanistic connection of sin and death. But again, the Bible does not reflect on such a question in any sustained way.”\(^\text{13}\)

While it may be true that these misunderstandings are recognized at the level of Biblical scholarship, belief in the myth of humanity’s original righteousness and fall from grace into evil, sin and death remains firmly entrenched in Christian doctrine. As a result, Darwin’s *Origin of Species*\(^\text{14}\), with its assertion that humans evolved from lesser beings,

\(^{10}\) Brueggemann, *Genesis*, 1:41.

\(^{11}\) Brueggemann, 1:42.

\(^{12}\) Brueggemann, 1:41.

\(^{13}\) Brueggemann, 1:42.

rather than falling from perfect ones, has been unable to replicate the success of Galileo who, by championing Copernicus’ *De revolutionibus orbium coelestium*, compelled the Church to question the geocentric model of the universe.

A recent poll\(^{15}\) conducted in the United States by Jonathan Hill, Ph. D. finds “37 percent of the population can be considered creationists, 16 percent can be considered theistic evolutionists.” Of the theistic evolutionists, approximately half hold a literal belief in Adam and Eve. Even in mainline, non-Fundamentalist denominations the church clings to original righteousness and the doctrine of a fallen humanity with profound tenacity. Scripture may not be held under any tyranny by this text\(^{16}\), but the church, to its increasing detriment, has found its misinterpretation inescapable. We cling to the myth of original righteousness because it has become seminal to our understanding of The Lord’s redemptive work in Christ as stated formally in the Book of Concord quoted below.

*The Book of Concord: The Confessions of the Lutheran Church*

2] 1. We believe, teach, and confess that there is a distinction between man's nature, not only as he was originally created by G-d pure and holy and without sin, but also as we have it [that nature] now after the Fall, namely, between the nature [itself], which even after the Fall is and remains a creature of G-d, and original sin, and that this distinction is as great as the distinction between a work of G-d and a work of the devil.\(^{17}\)

3] 2. We believe, teach, and confess also that this distinction should be maintained with the greatest care, because this doctrine, that no distinction


\(^{16}\) Brueggemann, *Genesis*, 1:41.

is to be made between our corrupt human nature and original sin, conflicts with the chief articles of our Christian faith concerning creation, redemption, sanctification, and the resurrection of our body, and cannot coexist therewith.¹⁸

**Thesis Statement**

This paper will explore the thesis that doctrines of *original righteousness* and *fall from grace* are not sustainable nor are they essential to redemption in Christ. They in fact encumber the Christian witness with unsubstantiated mythos, imperil the Gospel, and obscure the true meaning of Christ’s death and resurrection for humanity. It will then present a new interpretation of Genesis 2:4b-3:24 and argue that our hope is not to return to the Garden of Eden through restoration of original righteousness but in new creation through the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. Genesis does not depict humanity’s fall from paradise, but our call to paradox.

¹⁸ “The Epitome of the Formula of Concord - Book of Concord.”
Exegesis

The ancient humans who first told this story were not constrained to our post-Enlightenment divisions in the academy; history, poetry, science and theology were not isolated disciplines but interrelated perspectives of life. Therefore, two mistakes should be recognized and avoided when interpreting these texts. The first is to presume they represent an unbiased historical account of purely scientific observations and events. The second is to exclude the truth that these writers were astute observers of nature and humanity. Any interpretation of this text must respect both the scientific integrity and artistic creativity of the authors.

Genesis 2:7

7 then the Lord G-d formed man from the dust of the ground, and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life; and the man became a living being.

(Genesis 2:7, NRSV)

The verb יָצָא, translated formed in the NRSV, is distinct from the verb בָּרָא (created) used in Genesis 1:27 and has connotations of a potter shaping clay (cf. Isa 49:5 and Jer 1:5). Shaping, according to Wenham\(^\text{19}\), is not a mundane repetitive activity but “an artistic, inventive activity that requires skill and planning” and connotes intention and purpose.

\(^{19}\) Wenham, *Genesis 1-15*, 1:59.
ha-adam (the man) is an obvious word play on הָאָדָם, ha-adam-ah (the ground).

But this pun stretches beyond simple paronomasia. The ha, is the physical sound of breathing, suggesting the breath of the Lord, and is a recurring theme throughout the narrative (e.g. ish, ha-ish, ish-ah, ha-ish-ah). Hence breathing can be included with eating as identified by Fretheim as essential but symbolically different aspects of human life utilized by the narrative (cf. Deut 8:3, Matt 4:4, Luke 4:4).

It is noteworthy that Adam is not formed from ha-adam-ah (the ground) but rather from עפר מן האדמה which refers to dust from the ground, or dry earth, with emphasis on being un-watered. Although the mist/flow watered the surface of the ground (cf. Gen 2:6), ha-adam was formed from the dry dust (cf. Ezek 37) and received the breath of life directly from The Lord. This differs from the animals in Genesis 2:19 which were formed מן האדמה, though not all commentators make this distinction.

In this short passage, the Yahwist has conveyed six critical scientific and theological truths:

1. Humanity is intimately connected to creation. As a scientist, the Yahwist observed that bodies decay to dust after death and reasoned backward to conclude dust is the raw starting material.
3. Water is required for human life. The requirement for water is not a surprising observation for desert dwellers, but the theological connection to The Lord’s spirit (breath is air and water) is significant.
4. Humanity is unique, different from all animals (cf. Gen 2:19)
5. That difference is directly related to a special relationship with The Lord. We received our nephesh directly from The Lord

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20 Wenham, 1:59.


22 Wenham, Genesis 1-15, 1:68.
6. Humanity occupies a special place as a creature within whom abides the spirit of The Lord

The church fathers did reasonably well interpreting this passage, as exemplified by Gregory of Nyssa below, identifying both humanity’s uniqueness and connection to creation. However, Augustine’s language betrays his negative view of creation, and Luther’s his fantasies concerning humanity before the fall that extend far beyond the text. Underlying both Augustine’s and Luther’s prejudices is the misconception that The Lord not only created humanity unique, but perfect, an assertion that is not supported by the text.

"G-d took of the dust of the earth and fashioned man" In this world I have discovered two affirmations that man is nothing and that man is great. If you consider nature alone, he is nothing and has no value; but if you regard the honor with which he has been treated, man is something great. (On the Origin of Man, Gregory of Nyssa, emphasis added)

After his resurrection, when he first appeared to his disciples, he said to them, "Receive the Holy Spirit." About this giving, then, it was said, "The spirit had not yet been given because Jesus had not yet been glorified." "And he breathed upon their face." The One who first gave life to man by breathing and raised him up from the mire and by breathing gave a soul to his members is the same One who breathed upon their face that they might rise up from the slime and renounce filthy works. (Tractates on the Gospel of John 32.6.3, Augustine, emphasis added)

Luther usually defines the image of G-d purely in terms of contrast to the present state of sin. He, more than any reformation theologian, is confused by the mythical aspects of the state of perfection before the Fall, though all of them accepted the historicity of this state. He allows his imagination to run riot in picturing this state of perfection and insists that it included remarkable attributes of physical perfection as well as of mental and spiritual endowments. Adam "had powers the vision exceeding those of the lynx" and "handled lions and bears, being stronger than they, as we


24 Louth, 52.
handled the young of any animal.” (Commentary on Genesis, Luther, emphasis added)²⁵

**Genesis 2:8-9, 15**

8 And the Lord G-d planted a garden in Eden, in the east; and there he put the man whom he had formed. 9 Out of the ground the Lord G-d 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. (Genesis 2:8-9, NRSV)

15 The Lord G-d took the man and put him in the garden of Eden to till it and keep it. (Genesis 2:15 NRSV)

The Hebrew for most of verses 8-9 is straightforward and relatively easy to translate. The exception is the awkward syntax²⁶ of the passage describing the trees. Historically, it has been presumed there are two distinct trees, but alternative interpretations have been proposed that include one tree representing both life and the knowledge of good and evil²⁷ or the combination of two stories with different trees²⁸. In addition to this ambiguity, two misconceptions, one lingual and one cultural, have led to difficulty with interpretation. First, the LXX translated גן as paradise²⁹ which led the church fathers into a realm of imagination not intended by the Hebrew authors. Similarly, the tree of life (signifying fullest possible life³⁰) became mistakenly associated with the Greek concept of eternal life, a concept unknown to the ancient Hebrew people. Together

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²⁵ Reinhold Niebuhr, *The Nature and Destiny of Man* (Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1941), 160.


²⁷ Brueggemann, *Genesis*, 1:45.


these two errors have led to a portrayal that Adam and Eve were created to live an eternal, toil-free life in paradise, a plotline never intended by the ancient writers of this text. This presupposition, imposed on the rest of the developing narrative, led the church fathers increasingly astray.

If the “Tree of Life” is not the source of eternal life, what does it symbolize? Brueggemann suggests it is an ancient royal symbol, imported into this tale. He and Fretheim both point to other references in scripture to clarify its meaning. Proverbs connects it to “anything which enhances and celebrates life” including righteousness (Proverbs 11:30), desire fulfilled (Proverbs 13:12), and a gentle tongue (Proverbs 15:4) while Revelation 2:7 connects it to fellowship with The Lord. Fretheim draws an additional connection to Proverbs 3:18 and wisdom.

The phrase The Lord planted “every tree that is pleasant to the sight and good for food” has historically been presumed to mean the garden is free of the thorns and thistles mentioned in 3:18. But the text speaks only of what The Lord planted in the garden without defining what required Adam’s presence to till it and keep it (cf. Gen 2:15). And though the Yahwist may have appropriated a tale that addressed the difficulties of cultivating and tending crops in the ancient world, its interpretation in the saga should be theological, not applied agronomy. The church father’s presumption that the Garden of Eden is a weed-free paradise is not supported by the text. Rather, the assertion that

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31 Brueggemann, Genesis, 1:45.
33 Brueggemann, Genesis, 1:45.
34 Fretheim, “Genesis,” 352.
creation resists The Lord’s will and humanity’s vocation includes agrarian and theological responsibility in creation must be explored.

In his book, *The Lost World of Adam and Eve*, John Walton argues that, “Adam is assigned as priest in sacred space, with Eve to help”. This role conflicts with the picture that the church fathers and therefore many modern Christians carry in their imagination: Eden as a paradise, fulfilling all Adam’s needs without toil. In Walton’s Eden, Adam has a job, a job that sets humanity apart from the rest of creation and carries associated responsibilities and privileges.

Walton argues that the Hebrew words translated serve and keep “convey priestly tasks rather than landscaping and agrarian responsibilities.” He supports his thesis with semantic studies of the Hebrew words תהר and שמיר. The verb teh̄er, though used in connection with farming practice in other parts of Genesis (Gen 2:5, 3:23), requires a direct object (ground) for the agricultural meaning. With a personal object, the word is “often connected to religious service deemed worship” or “priestly functionaries serving in the sanctuary precinct.” The question becomes, is the garden the direct object of the verb, in which case teh̄er would constitute agricultural work, or a personal object (e.g. The Lord, Baal, Egypt) which would imply sacred service. Walton admits garden could fit either category.

The case is made by extending the analysis. Though teh̄er is ambiguous, שמיר is not. Walton argues:

*The verb שמיר is used in the contexts of the Levitical responsibility of guarding sacred space, as well as in the sense of observing religious commands and responsibilities. This*

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verb is only used in agricultural contexts when crops are being guarded from those people or animals who would destroy or steal. When the verb applies to Levitical activity, it could involve control of access to the sacred precinct, although it is often applied more generally to performing duties on the grounds. To conclude, then, I would propose the following line of logic: **Since**

1. there are a couple of contexts in which שמר is used for Levitical service along with עבד (e.g., Num 3:8-9), and

2. the contextual use of שמר here favors sacred service, and

3. עבד is as likely to refer to sacred service as to agricultural tasks, and

4. there are other indications that the garden is being portrayed as sacred space,

**then** it is likely that the tasks given to Adam are of a priestly nature: caring for sacred space.36

So, Adam is a priest and not just a gardener. How does this impact our thinking about Genesis 2:4b-3:24? Walton goes on to say that “Adam’s role must then be understood in the light of the role of the priests in the ancient world.” Though we often associate priests with sacrificial rituals and religious instruction, Walton argues those tasks are only part of a larger picture. “The main task of the priest was the preservation of sacred space.” This was accomplished by:

- instructing people regarding what sacred space requires of them (purity standards for each zone of sacred space, behavior appropriate to sacred space) so that its sanctity can be maintained
- offering sacrifices in the appropriate ways at the appropriate times and with appropriate gifts so that sanctity will be preserved
- guarding sacred space and the sacred objects found therein so that their sanctity is preserved
- keeping out anything that would compromise or corrupt the sanctity of sacred space

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36 Walton, 106.
• **serving as mediators who make the benefits of sacred space available to the people (thereby extending sacred space) and who assure that the gifts of the people get to G-d**

In his book, *Raising up a Faithful Priest*[^38], Richard Nelson outlines the cultural setting and social/theological responsibilities associated with Israel’s priesthood. Of fundamental importance were the delineations between holy/profane and clean/unclean. Both these categories could be applied to space, people and objects[^39]. Additionally, holy/profane could be applied to time and offerings. Nelson’s understanding of the role of priests goes beyond Walton’s “preservation of sacred space.” Priests played a critical role in defining, maintaining, and traversing the boundaries between holy/profane and clean/unclean. The job was inherently dangerous (approaching holiness inappropriately could be fatal, cf. Lev 10:1-3) and performed for the sake of the greater community[^40]. These concepts, unknown to the church fathers, will become more important in the reinterpretation below.

**Genesis 2:16-17**

16 And the Lord G-d commanded the man, “You may freely eat of every tree of the garden; 17 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.” (Genesis 2:16-17, NRSV)

Something truly surprising happens in 2:16, but it is so taken for granted in theology that it often goes unnoticed. The Lord speaks, and humanity hears. Although we

[^37]: Walton, 108.


[^39]: Nelson, 19.

[^40]: Nelson, 83.
will learn later in the narrative that humanity struggles to understand The Lord, the ability to hear The Lord is a fundamental characteristic of humanity that sets us apart from the rest of creation.

Brueggemann⁴¹, Fretheim⁴² and Wenham⁴³ interpret this passage in terms of vocation, permission and prohibition with Wenham focusing more on prohibition, Fretheim on the tension between permission and prohibition, and Brueggemann noting need for all three and complaining that historically, prohibition has received the greatest attention. The syntax of the prohibition “resembles in its form the ten commandments: ךות ‘not’ followed by the imperfect.”⁴⁴ This form in Hebrew denotes very firm prohibition with connotations similar to the English word “never”. It is therefore perhaps not surprising that, consistent with Brueggemann’s complaint, the church fathers focus on the prohibition given to Adam. But embedded in their interpretation is the presumption of original righteousness, and a retributive god. Under those presumptions, the narrative reveals what the interpreters placed in it: A god who expected Adam to behave according to the law or be punished.

Knowing once more how the will of man could sway to either side, in anticipation G-d secured the grace given them by a command and by the place where he put them. For he brought them into his own garden and gave them a law, so that if they kept the grace and remained good, they might still keep the life in paradise without sorrow or pain or care, besides having the promise of incorruption in heaven. But if they transgressed and turned back and became evil, they might know that they were incurring the corruption in death that was theirs by nature, no longer to live in paradise.

⁴¹ Brueggemann, Genesis, 1:46.
⁴² Fretheim, “Genesis,” 351.
⁴⁴ Wenham, 1:67.
but cast out from it from that time forth to die and abide in death and corruption. (On the Incarnation 3.4, Athanasius, emphasis added)\textsuperscript{45}

The phrase “you shall die” has received significant attention, mostly because, in the prevailing interpretation, it does not happen (cf. Gen. 3) creating a need to explain/rationalize the unexpected outcome as a miracle of The Lord’s mercy.\textsuperscript{46}

Augustine, whose presumption of Adam and Eve’s original immortality begins to lead him further from the mark, provides an explanation of the threatened death that is more Greek than Hebrew and requires advanced theological training to decipher. Presumably, the more frightening the punishment, the greater the perceived mercy.

\textit{G-d, referring to the forbidden fruit, said to the first man whom he had established in paradise: “In the day that you shall eat of it, you shall die the death.” His threat included not only the first part of the first death, that is, the soul's deprivation of G-d; not only the second part of the first death, that is, the body's deprivation of the soul; not only the whole of the first death in which the soul, separated from both G-d and the body, is punished; but whatever of death is up to and including that absolutely final and so-called second death… in which the soul, deprived of G-d, but united to the body, suffers eternal punishment. (City of G-d 13.12, Augustine)\textsuperscript{47}}

Modern commentators maintain the integrity of the prohibition and the severity of the associated punishment but reject the conclusion that Adam and Eve were immortal prior to partaking the forbidden fruit.\textsuperscript{48,49,50} As we shall argue later, the difficulty in


\textsuperscript{46} Brueggemann, \textit{Genesis}, 1:49–50.

\textsuperscript{47} Louth, \textit{Ancient Christian Commentary on Scripture: Old Testament I, Genesis 1-11}, 62.

\textsuperscript{48} Brueggemann, \textit{Genesis}, 1:46.


\textsuperscript{50} Fretheim, “Genesis,” 352.
properly interpreting this passage is in realizing that, what The Lord means when The Lord says “you shall die”, differs substantially from what Adam, and commentators in the Augustinian tradition, understood.

**Genesis 2:18-20**

18 Then the Lord G-d said, “It is not good that the man should be alone; I will make him a helper as his partner.” 19 So out of the ground the Lord G-d formed every animal of the field and every bird of the air, and brought them to the man to see what he would call them; and whatever the man called every living creature, that was its name. 20 The man gave names to all cattle, and to the birds of the air, and to every animal of the field; but for the man there was not found a helper as his partner. (Genesis 2:18-20, NRSV)

Ancient and modern commentators recognize that this passage underscores the placement of humanity in a special position, higher than other creatures but lower than the angels. Augustine’s commentary on this passage emphasizes this aspect of the text but also reveals his reverence for Greek philosophy (virtue of reason) and his faith in the triumph of the rational mind.

*G-d first showed man how much better he was than cattle and all irrational animals. This is signified by the statement that all the animals were brought to him that he might see what he would call them and give them names. This shows that man is better equipped than the animals in virtue of reason, since only reason that judges concerning them is able to distinguish and know them by name. The one idea is an easy one to grasp, for man quickly understands that he is better equipped than cattle. The other idea is a difficult one to grasp, namely, that by which he understands that the rational part in him that rules is distinct from the animal part, which is ruled.* (Two Books on Genesis Against the Manicheans 2.11.15, Augustine)\(^{51}\)

Modern theology focuses on how this passage defines humanity’s role in creation independent from The Lord. The Lord will not be the helper; the helper must come from

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creation, and “creation is left to its own resources and expected to honor its vocation, explore its freedom and respect the prohibition”\textsuperscript{52}. Commentators also go to great lengths to reject any implications of subjugation in the word \textit{עזר}, typically translated helper. Wenham notes that “To help someone does not imply that the helper is stronger than the helped; simply that the latter’s strength is inadequate by itself.”\textsuperscript{53} Fretheim, in a clear criticism of the ancient commentators’ conclusions regarding the anticipated value of a female helper (see discussion of Gen 2:21-23 below) states, “The notion of Eve as ‘helper’ cannot be collapsed into procreation.”\textsuperscript{54}

Wenham\textsuperscript{55} notes that the compound prepositional phrase \textit{כנגדו} is unique and literally means “like opposite him” and cites Delitzsch’s argument\textsuperscript{56} that if the authors wished to convey identity, a more natural phrase would be \textit{כמוהו}. This distinction will become significant as we reinterpret this saga below. Similar to Fretheim, Wenham stresses that Eve is not just a helper for daily work or procreation but for mutual companionship and support.

**Genesis 2:21-23**

21 So the Lord G-d 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. 22 And the rib that the Lord G-d had taken from the man he made into a woman and brought her to the man. 23 Then the man said,

\textsuperscript{52} Brueggemann, *Genesis*, 1:47.

\textsuperscript{53} Wenham, *Genesis 1-15*, 1:68.

\textsuperscript{54} Fretheim, “Genesis,” 352.

\textsuperscript{55} Wenham, *Genesis 1-15*, 1:68.

“This at last is bone of my bones and flesh of my flesh; this one shall be called Woman, for out of Man this one was taken.”

It is generally, though not universally, recognized that the church fathers’ reading of this passage has been destructive to the body of the church by excluding women from significant roles. The two excerpts below from Ambrose and Augustine demonstrate how cultural bias against women was imposed upon the text. Ambrose attempts magnanimity toward women, recognizing the value of enlisting “the help of people who are below them in rank and esteem”. Augustine’s comments reflect his admiration for Aristotle, whose view of women as inferior derived from not only physical characteristics, but from perceived differences in their very soul, “the soul lacking sovereignty in its deliberative part, and the body having a different role in the activities and relationships in the household, such as reproduction and child-rearing.” The Aristotelian understanding of reproduction, man as giver of the seed and woman as the passive receptacle is apparent in both.

Not without significance, too, is the fact that woman was made out of the rib of Adam. She was not made of the same earth with which he was formed, in order that we might realize that the physical nature of both man and woman is identical and there was one source for the propagation of the human race. For that reason, neither was man created together with a woman, nor were two men and two women created at the beginning, but first a man and after that a woman. G-d willed it that human nature be established as one. Thus from the very inception of the human stock he eliminated the possibility that many disparate natures should arise. He said, ”Let us make him a helper like himself.” We understand that to mean a helper in the generation of the human family---a really good helper. If

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we take the word helper in a good sense, then the woman's cooperation turns out to be something of major import in the process of generation, just as the earth by receiving, confining and fostering the seed causes it to grow and produce fruit in time. In that respect therefore woman is a good helper even though in a position of lesser strength. We find examples of this in our own experience. We see how people in high and important offices often enlist the help of people who are below them in rank and esteem. (Paradise 10.48, Ambrose)  

Now suppose the woman was not made for the man to be his helper and begetting children, then how would she be able to help him. It would hardly be the case that she would be made to till the earth with him, for there was not yet any labor required to make her help necessary. In any case, if there were any such need, a male helper would be better, and the same could be said of the comfort of another's presence if Adam were perhaps weary of solitude. How much more agreeably could two male friends, rather than a man and a woman, enjoy companionship and conversation in a life shared together. And if they had to make an arrangement in their common life for one to command and the other to obey in order to make sure that opposing wheels would not disrupt the peace of the household there would have been proper rank to assure this, since one would be created first and the other second, and this would be further reinforced if the second were made from the first as was the case with the woman. Surely no one will say that G-d was able to make from the rib of the man only a woman and not also a man if he had wished to do so. Consequently, I do not see in what sense the woman was made as a helper for the man if not for the sake of bearing children. (On the Literal Interpretation of Genesis 9.5.9, Augustine)  

Modern commentators vary significantly in their interpretation of this passage. Wenham, representing the more conservative perspective quotes Cassuto, “Just as the rib is found at the side of the man and is attached to him, even so the good wife, the rib of her husband, stands at his side to be his helper-counterpart, and her soul is bound up with his.”

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60 Louth, 68–69.

Brueggemann and Fretheim occupy the middle ground with Brueggemann stressing the man and woman represent community and Fretheim stressing the human role in the process of finding a helper and addressing several other esoteric interpretations of the text. One interpretation Fretheim argues against is the translation of צלעת as “side”, preferring “rib”. We favor “side” over “rib” and will return to this in the reinterpretation below.

Niditch, proposes a protagonist role, where the woman acts as “the curious one, the seeker of knowledge, the tester of limits” and places her with the “culture-bringing heroes and heroines of Genesis”. This interpretation is insightful and will be revisited below.

**Genesis 2:24-25**

24 Therefore a man leaves his father and his mother and clings to his wife, and they become one flesh. 25 And the man and his wife were both naked, and were not ashamed. (Genesis 2:24-25, NRSV)

One could assert that Augustine’s preoccupation with pre-fall human sexuality and Chrysostom’s certainty that sin and sex were indelibly linked, as demonstrated in the passages below, have obscured the Yahwist’s subtle artistry for 1600 years.

[Man and woman] were aware, of course, of their nakedness, but they felt no shame, because no desire stirred their organs in defiance of their deliberate decision. The time had not yet come in the rebellion of the flesh was a witness and reproach to the rebellion of man against his Maker. (Augustine, City of G-d 14.17)

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63 Fretheim, “Genesis,” 352.

64 Fretheim, 353.

“They were both naked,” the text says, remember, “and they were not ashamed.” You see, while sin and disobedience had not yet come on the scene, they were clad in that glory from above which caused them no shame. But after the breaking of the law, then entered the scene both shame and awareness of their nakedness. (Chrysostom, Homilies on Genesis 15.14)

However, since humanity’s fixation on sexuality is universal, they may be excused as examples rather than instigators of this error. Even modern commentators find themselves caught up in the biological and psychological, rather than theological, interpretations of this statement.

**Genesis 3:1**

*Now the serpent was more crafty than any other wild animal that the LORD G-d had made. He said to the woman, “Did G-d say, ‘You shall not eat from any tree in the garden’?”* (Genesis 3:1, NRSV)

The burden placed on Augustine by his decision to interpret Genesis as narrative history is clear from the excerpt below as he strives to rationalize the symbolism he attributes to the serpent (Devil) with his concept of paradise, and its place in history as he imagined it, of Satan’s fall from heaven.

*The serpent signifies the devil, who was certainly not simple. His cleverness is indicated by the fact that he is said to be wiser than all the beasts. The serpent was not said to be in paradise, though the serpent was among the beasts that G-d made. For paradise signifies the happy life, from which the serpent was absent, since it was already the devil. He had fallen from his beatitude because he did not stay in the truth. And we must*


not be confused as to how the serpent could speak to the woman, when she was in paradise and it was not. The serpent entered the paradise spiritually and not bodily, as the apostle suggests: “You were living by the principles of this world, obeying the ruler who dominates the air, the spirit who is at work in those who rebel.” (Augustine, Two Books on Genesis Against the Manicheans 2.14.20)

Modern commentators do not generally dwell on the identification of the serpent as Satan. Fretheim, while acknowledging that the idea of the serpent as Satan developed during the intertestamental period, suggests the serpent is a metaphor for “anything in The Lord’s good creation that could present options to human beings, the choice of which can seduce them away from The Lord⁶⁹. We find Fretheim plausible but not comprehensive and will take this up in our reinterpretation.

Wenham and Fretheim both identify Hebrew punning on the word ערם, translated in the NRSV as more crafty and the Tanakh as shrewdest though their interpretations of the pun differ. Wenham points out that ערם (shrewd) sounds like ערהים (naked) in 2:25. He concludes, “They will seek themselves to be shrewd (cf. 3:6 but will discover that they are ‘nude’ (3:7,10)”⁷⁰. Taking another tack, Fretheim asserts, “The link suggests that human beings may be exposed at times to shrewd or crafty elements in the world, language often associated with temptation.”

Considerable ink has been spilled speculating if/how the serpent knew what The Lord said. Fretheim’s assertion that the serpent was eavesdropping on a conversation⁷¹

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seems not unreasonable if one must have an explanation. One might also argue that the
serpent has this knowledge because it is essential for the plot of the story.

**Genesis 3:2-3**

2The woman said to the serpent, “We may eat of the fruit of the trees in the
garden; 2 but G-d 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.’”
(Genesis 3:2-3, NRSV)

Brueggemann identifies a significant change in the relationship with The Lord.
The discussion is “…about G-d. G-d has been objectified.”72 However he does not seem
to recognize that this outcome follows logically from his earlier assertion that The Lord
did “not intend to be the man’s helper.”73 The Lord cannot expect creatures to experience
creation and not “practice theology in the place of obedience”74 His assertion that such
behavior is contrary to The Lord’s will is an assertion we will challenge below.

Despite considerable speculation, exemplified by Ambrose’s comment below, the
text does not explain how the woman knows what The Lord said.

[The Devil] aimed to circumvent Adam by means of the woman. He did
not accost man who had in his presence receive the heavenly command.
He accosted her who had learned of it from her husband and who had not
received from G-d the command which was to be observed. There is no
statement that G-d spoke to the woman. We know that he spoke to Adam.
Hence, he must conclude that the command was communicated through
Adam to the woman. (Ambrose, Paradise 12)75

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73 Brueggemann, 1:47.
74 Brueggemann, 1:48.
We only know that what she conveys to the serpent does not match what The Lord said (cf. Gen 2:17), an error strictly forbidden in Deuteronomy.

52You must diligently observe everything that I command you; do not add to it or take anything from it. (Deut 12:32, NRSV)

**Genesis 3:4-5**

4 But the serpent said to the woman, “You will not die; 5 for G-d knows that when you eat of it your eyes will be opened, and you will be like G-d, knowing good and evil.” (Genesis 3:4-5, NRSV)

Historical interpretation of this passage has been dominated by Augustine’s focus on immortality in paradise, and human pride as the cause of the fall. Hence the words of the serpent which have received the most attention are, “You will not die;”, and, “you will be like G-d”.

The conclusion is that the devil would not have begun by an open and obvious sin to tempt man into doing something that G-d had forbidden, had not man already begun to seek satisfaction in himself and consequently to take pleasure in the words, “you shall be as gods.” The promise of these words, however, would much more truly have to pass if, by obedience, Adam and Eve had kept close to the ultimate and true source of their being…. Whoever seeks to be more than he is becomes less. Whenever he aspires to be self-sufficing, he retreats from the One who is truly sufficient for him. (City of G-d, Augustine)76

Note the different interpretation of the dialogue in Ambrose’s account below, The Lord is present at the temptation of Eve, strengthening the audaciousness of the disobedience.

It is temperance that cuts off desires. G-d commanded the first humans to hold to it, for he said, "What is in the middle of the garden, you shall not eat, neither shall you touch it lest you die.” And because they did not preserve temperance, the transgressors of this signal virtue were made exiles from paradise, with no share in immortality. For the law teaches

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76 Louth, 77.
temperance and pours it into the hearts of all. (Jacob and the Happy Life 2.8, Ambrose)\textsuperscript{77}

However, the Yahwist’s subtle distinction between the knowledge of good and evil and knowing good and evil has gone virtually unscrutinized.

**Genesis 3:6-8**

\begin{quote}
So when the woman saw that the tree was good for food, and that it was a delight to the eyes, and that the tree was to be desired to make one wise, she took of its fruit and ate; and she also gave some to her husband, who was with her, and he ate. Then the eyes of both were opened, and they knew that they were naked; and they sewed fig leaves together and made loincloths for themselves. They heard the sound of the Lord G-d walking in the garden at the time of the evening breeze, and the man and his wife hid themselves from the presence of the Lord G-d among the trees of the garden. (Genesis 3:6-8, NRSV)
\end{quote}

In his comments on this passage, Origen vainly attempts to connect his interpretation to Christ but is defeated by his presumption of original sin; one’s eyes being opened can be good or bad but not both without overburdening the metaphor.

\begin{quote}
The eyes of sense were then opened, which they had done well to keep shut, that they might not be distracted and hindered from seeing with the eyes of the mind. It was those eyes of the mind which in consequence of sin, as I imagine, were then closed. To that time they had enjoyed the delight of beholding G-d and his paradise. This twofold kind of vision in us was familiar to our Savior who said, "For judgment I have come into this world, that those who see not might see and that those who see might be made blind." ---meaning by "the eyes that see not" the eyes of the mind, which are enlightened by his teaching; and "the eyes that see" meaning the eyes of sense, which his words render blind. (Against Celsius 7.39, Origen)\textsuperscript{78}
\end{quote}

\textsuperscript{77} Louth, 77.

\textsuperscript{78} Louth, 80–81.
Augustine preaches about human pride and demonstrates again his preoccupation with evil flesh.

As soon as our first parents had disobeyed G-d’s commandment, they were immediately deprived of divine grace and were shamed of their nakedness. They cover themselves with fig leaves, which perhaps were the first thing noticed by the troubled pair. The parts covered remained unchanged except that previously they occasioned no shame. They felt for the first time a movement of disobedience in their flesh, as though the punishment were meant to fit the crime of their own disobedience to G-d. The fact is that the soul, which had taken perverse delight in its own liberty and disdained the service of G-d was now deprived of its original mastery over the body. Because it had deliberately deserted the Lord who was over it, it no longer bent to its will the servant below it, being unable to hold the flesh completely in subjection as would always have been the case, if only the soul had remained subject to G-d. From this moment on them the flesh began to lust against the spirit. With this rebellion we are born, just as we are doomed to die and because of the first sin to bear, in our members and vitiated nature, either the battle with or defeat by the flesh. (City of G-d 13.13, Augustine)79

Wenham eloquently describes how the structure of vv. 6-8, an inversion around the key verb “eat” with the hopes on one side of the verb (good to eat, delight to the eyes, giving insight/wisdom) balanced by the reality on the other (eyes opened, being nude, hiding in the trees), within the larger inversion of the entire saga (ABCDCBA)80, exemplifies the art of Hebrew prose.81 Brueggemann sees a transition from “trust and obedience” to “crime and punishment”.82 Fretheim just misses the mark asserting, “Only G-d has a perspective that can view the created order as a whole; human beings (even with their new knowledge) will never gain that kind of breadth, for they make their

79 Louth, 81.

80 Wenham, Genesis 1-15, 1:50.

81 Wenham, 1:75.

82 Brueggemann, Genesis, 1:48.
decisions from within creation.” But, having gone into their interpretations expecting disobedience and punishment, all found what they expected and there now must be a trial and punishment to conclude the saga.

83 Fretheim, “Genesis,” 361.
PART II MODERN THEOLOGY AND ORIGINAL RIGHTEOUSNESS
Niebuhr

As axioms fail, adherents constrain them to ever-shrinking spheres of influence. This has been the approach modern theology has employed to sustain the myth of original righteousness. One method, exemplified by the doctrinal statement of the Orthodox Church in America below, is to reduce the axiom’s existence to such an ephemeral and transient state that its impact becomes insubstantial.

_The Genesis story is the divinely-inspired description in symbolic terms of man’s primordial and original possibilities and failures. It reveals that man’s potency for eternal growth and development in G-d was turned instead into man’s multiplication and cultivation of wickedness and his transformation of creation into the devil’s princeton, a cosmic cemetery “groaning in travail” until saved once more by G-d (Rom 8.19–23). All the children of Adam, i.e. all who belong to the human race, share in this tragic fate. Even those born this very minute as images of G-d into a world essentially good are thrown immediately into a deathbound universe, ruled by the devil and filled with the wicked fruit of generations of his evil servants._

Another approach is exemplified by Reinhold Niebuhr. His book, _The Nature and Destiny of Man_, has influenced the political and philosophical landscape from the moment of its publication by appealing to believers and non-believers alike. In it he presents his solution, extracting original righteousness from history and giving it a transcendent existence in humanity’s imagination. As his critics point out, _Niebuhr_

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85 Niebuhr, _The Nature and Destiny of Man._

makes hard reading, and his answer is either brilliant theology or walking psychosis. It is sometimes difficult to decipher his argument as he refers to original righteousness both as something seemingly real, the “virtue and perfection which would represent the normal expression of that [essential human] nature,” and as imagination in that “It is in this moment of self-transcendence that the consciousness and memory of original perfection arise.” His answer is not unlike Dumbledore’s reply to Harry Potter in the Deathly Hallows, Of course it is happening inside your head, Harry, but why on earth should that mean that it is not real?

He attempts to sustain both imagination as the source of original righteousness and the Augustinian commitment “that human nature as now constituted could not be normal, could not be as the Creator originally intended.”

No man, however deeply involved in sin is able to regard the misery of sin as normal. Some memory of a previous condition of blessedness seems to linger in his soul; some echo of the law which he has violated seems to resound in his conscience. Every effort to give the habits of sin the appearance of normality betrays something of the frenzy of an uneasy conscience.

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88 Niebuhr, The Nature and Destiny of Man, 270.

89 Niebuhr, 277.


91 Chadwick, Augustine: A Very Short Introduction, 118.

92 Niebuhr, The Nature and Destiny of Man, 265.
At the same time, Niebuhr cannot fully embrace Luther’s bound will. He believes strongly in the accomplishments of humanity and therefore feels compelled to reject theologians like Barth who assert the ultimate religious fact of the sinfulness of all men.

The difference between a little more and a little less justice in a social system and between a little more and a little less selfishness in the individual may represent differences between sickness and health between misery and happiness in particular situations. Theologies such as that of Barth which threaten to destroy all relative moral judgments by their exclusive emphasis upon the ultimate religious fact of the sinfulness of all men are rightly suspected of imperiling relative moral achievements of history.  

We will argue below that this is largely a linguistics issue with humanity appropriating the terms good and evil, which they cannot discern without The Lord’s infinite wisdom, when they should apply adjectives such as beneficial or horrifying which are applicable within human purview. This may appear to conflict with Luther’s Heidelberg Disputation, but in fact we are simply reserving the terms good and evil for The Lord’s use.

Niebuhr was also heavily influenced by Kierkegaard’s concept of angst and its psychological children, pride and sensuality, which themselves harken back to the Augustinian vs. Orthodox description of the fall. His over-emphasis on pride, while disregarding sensuality, prompted critique that the approach is inappropriate for women. However, Niebuhr’s real failure was in moving forward from Kierkegaard,
riding the Augustinian tradition of damning the sin of pride rather than asking if there
might be a different story that explained humanity’s anxiety.

Although shocking, given his conservative theological position, his justification
of original righteousness skirts dangerously close to atheism. For, if original
righteousness is a creation of humanity’s imagination, what is The Lord? The small jump
from this theological position to the less encumbered disciplines of ethics and politics
perhaps explains his broad appeal.

In placing the consciousness of “original righteousness” in a moment of
the self which transcends history, though not outside of the self which is in
history, it may be relevant to observe that this conforms precisely to the
myth of the Fall when interpreted symbolically. The myth does not record
any actions of Adam which were sinless, though much is made in theology
of the perfection he had before the Fall. Irenaeus, with greater realism
than most theologians, observes that the period was very brief, sin
following almost immediately upon his creation. Adam was sinless before
he acted and sinful in his first recorded action. His sinlessness, in other
words, preceded his first significant action and his sinful nature came to light
in that action. This is a symbol for the whole of human history. The
original righteousness of man stands, as it were, outside of history. Yet it
is in the man who is in history, and when sin comes it actually borrows
from this original righteousness. For the pretension of sin is that its act is
not in history but an act of impartiality, a deed of eternity.

The underscored statement, Adam was sinless before he acted, is Niebuhr’s fatal
presumption, denying for Adam the second half of the confession intoned every week in
churches worldwide, by what we have done, and by what we have left undone. Limiting
sinfulness to actions, even actions of characters you consider fictional, confuses
Christianity and ethics.

Rejecting original righteousness will allow us to comprehend Adam’s sinful
nature in the simplest terms: Adam is not The Lord.
The Upward Fall, Not!

In 1993, Barr published a book entitled *The Garden of Eden and the Hope of Immortality* in which he presented a reading of the story of the Garden of Eden, not as a tale of the origins of sin and death, but as a tale of a chance of immortality, briefly accessible to humanity but quickly lost.

Fretheim engaged Barr’s reading in a 1994 article in Word & World where he compared Barr to Irenaeus.

*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?*

Fretheim defends the description of the Genesis 2-3 saga asserting that *fall language of some sort is an accurate reading of the text* and effectively dismantles Barr’s assertion. Throughout his argument, I find myself in an odd dance with Fretheim. He identifies and effectively rebuts Barr’s presumptions of childlike innocence and often seems on the verge of breaking through to new understanding.

*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*

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97 Barr.


99 Fretheim, 145.
depravity. Adam and Eve leave the garden with a certain integrity, still the bearers of the divine purposes for the world.\textsuperscript{100}

He playfully skewers Barr’s assertions that human beings underwent a \textit{sudden, drastic and catastrophic change}, and \textit{instantly came under the total dominion of sin},\textsuperscript{101} but his arguments against the assertion that the test is bizarre, and the ascribed punishment does not fit the crime, lack both foundation and substance. Because no matter how strenuous or elegant the argument, the presupposition that this saga represents a pass/fail test of humanity miscarries as inconsistent with the G-d of scripture. But unable to break free from the need for punishment\textsuperscript{102}, Fretheim concludes \textit{a basically positive view is difficult to sustain}\textsuperscript{103}.

The difficulty lies, as it has for 1600 years, in discerning a difference between the \textit{knowledge} of good and evil and \textit{knowing} good and evil. Obscured by the theological requirement for a fall from original righteousness of some sort, the truth of this saga has repeatedly eluded theologians. But it is not about the loss of immortality nor punishment for our disobedience. Nor is it about the corruption of our souls which, having fallen, are no longer able to make the choices which lead to salvation and, as a result, are held captive by Satan\textsuperscript{104}. It is not a test at all, it is a rite of passage. And it is not G-d’s justice and mercy being experienced, it is G-d’s \textit{hesed}.

\textsuperscript{100} Fretheim, 149.
\textsuperscript{101} Fretheim, 148–49.
\textsuperscript{102} Fretheim, 148–49.
\textsuperscript{103} Fretheim, 148.
PART III: REINTERPRETATION OF THE ADAM AND EVE SAGA
Introduction

If someone asks, therefore, why G-d allowed man to be tempted when he foreknew that man would yield to the tempter, I cannot sound the depths of divine wisdom, and I confess that the solution is far beyond my powers. There may be a hidden reason, made known only to those who are better and holier than I, not because of their merits but simply by the grace of G-d. But insofar as G-d gives me the ability to understand or allows me to speak, I do not think that a man would deserve great praise if he had been able to live a good life for the simple reason that nobody tempted him to live a bad one. For by nature he would have it in his power to will not to yield to the tempter with the help of him, of course, who "resists the proud and gives his grace to the humble." Why then would G-d not allow a man to be tempted, although he foreknew he would yield? For the man would do the deed by his own free will and thus incur guilt and he would have to undergo punishment according to G-d's justice to be restored to right order. Thus G-d would make known his will to a proud soul for the instruction of the saints in ages to come. For wisely he uses even bad wills of souls when they perversely abuse their nature, which is good. (On the Literal Interpretation of Genesis 11.4.6, Augustine)¹⁰⁵

Augustine stumbled badly in his rationalization of the dilemma posed by his interpretation of the Adam and Eve saga, admitting first that the solution was beyond him, then asserting, in defiance of the gospel, that man deserves great praise only through overcoming temptation. The hard truth is that the doctrine of humanity failing a bizarre test and fallen from a state of original righteousness can no longer be sustained. Darwin’s theory of evolution and modern theology have reduced it to a theoretical abstraction that hangs by a nearly non-existent thread.

Falsification, the scientific criteria sufficient to refute a hypothesis, is insufficient to reject a central doctrine of the church. We must present a viable alternative, which in

¹⁰⁵ Louth, Ancient Christian Commentary on Scripture: Old Testament I, Genesis 1-11, 80.
Christian theology must include a need for the redemptive work of Jesus Christ. It is that task we undertake below.

**Exegetical Approach**

The text of Genesis 2:4b-3:24 is not explicit; there are gaps where the reader is forced to impose hypotheses, derived from their own experience, questions and beliefs, on the text. In contrast to the Fundamentalist approach to scripture interpretation, which has misinterpreted the meaning of Biblical inerrancy, this process is healthy. Scripture is not inerrant in the way a carefully edited scientific text is without mistakes in content. Scripture is inerrant in what it does to the reader. Judaism, with its tradition of midrash, embraces this approach.

*We tend to think of revelation as a highly restrictive term. The fate of a revealed text is to be immutable. We humans have no right to alter what G-d has given. But in Judaism, precisely because the Torah is revered as divine, it becomes susceptible to unending interpretation. It would be a denigration of G-d’s word to saddle it with just a single meaning.*

*In contrast to human speech, which carries a finite range of meanings, the language of G-d was deemed to be endowed with an infinity of meanings. This theology freed the Rabbis to do midrash, creating the anomaly of a canon without closure. The vessels kept changing their contents. New challenges elicited new insights into a text inviolable only on the surface.*

Rejecting the presumptions of a retributive god and the original righteousness of humanity dramatically changes the interpretation of the saga of Adam and Eve. Genesis 2:4b-3:24 depicts a transition point in the history of humanity and the subtlety with which the authors pondered and presented this transition has not been appreciated.

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The Yahwist recognizes three distinct stages in evolving (raising up) human creatures into human priests:

1. Awareness of The Lord. Humanity can hear The Lord speak (understanding is not implied)
2. Awareness of The Lord’s Will at work in creation and that our behaviors can be characterized relative to that will (having knowledge of good and evil)
3. Personal experience of attempting to discern and obey The Lord’s will (knowing good and evil)

Translated into modern evolutionary language and borrowing Niebuhr’s terminology, at some point in our evolutionary history humanity became capable of seeing beyond our immediate needs of food, water, air and sex, and developed the capability to remember the past, imagine the future, realize potential consequences, and ponder something greater than ourselves. The Yahwist’s heroes are between creature and The Lord, raised up for a purpose by The Lord whose defining characteristics are not justice and mercy, but creativity and hesed, about to embark on a rite of passage that marks the beginning of a journey for humanity: learning what it means to execute our priestly vocation. The seminal insight of the Yahwist is that the outcomes of that initial transition were fear and confusion.

Adam Formed

7 then the LORD G-d formed man from the dust of the ground, and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life; and the man became a living being.
8 And the LORD G-d planted a garden in Eden, in the east; and there he put the man whom he had formed. (Genesis 2:7-8, NRSV)

Adam is shaped outside the garden, where only the primordial water below has bubbled up to water the face (thin surface layer) of the earth. This contrasts with the garden of Eden. Traditionally, the favored derivation of the name "Eden" was from the Akkadian edinnu, derived from a Sumerian word meaning "plain" or "steppe". Eden is now
believed to be more closely related to an Aramaic root word meaning "fruitful, well-watered."\(^{107}\)

The distinction is critical. The symbolism here is that The Lord’s presence in creation is not absolute but a variable continuum associated with orderly watered-ness (cf. Gen. 1, Rev 21 & 22). In this context, the meaning of the intruding verses\(^{108}\) (Gen 2:10-14) becomes apparent. Rivers flowing from the garden of The Lord are “symbolic of the life-giving presence of G-d,”\(^{109}\) The mixture of recognizable and unrecognizable locations support both the continuity and the separation of Eden from the world outside\(^{110}\), physically and metaphysically. Though the historical existence and geographical location of Eden are not addressed,\(^{111}\) recognizably fruitful regions outside of Eden provides proof for readers that The Lord’s presence has been increasing in creation.

**The Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil**

\(^9\) Out of the ground the LORD G-d 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. (Genesis 2:9, NRSV)

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\(^{108}\) Brueggemann, *Genesis*, 1:45.


\(^{110}\) Fretheim, “Genesis,” 351.

\(^{111}\) Fretheim, 351.
Wenham provides an extended analysis of the potential interpretations of “the tree of knowledge of good and evil”.  

1. A description of the consequences of not obeying the commandments  
2. Moral discernment, knowing the difference between right and wrong  
3. Sexual knowledge  
4. Omniscience  
5. Wisdom  

Options 1-4 are discounted, and Wenham argues for wisdom as the meaning. But he fails to discern between הדעת טוב ורע, a noun conveying conceptual awareness of good and evil and ידעי טוב ורע signifying intimate experience (cf. Gen 4:1, 17, 25; 1Sam 1:19). As a result, he misses a sixth possibility, a variation of option two: a story that combines the event of gaining awareness of good and evil without discernment with a plot twist that illustrates the complexity of discerning The Lord’s will and the experiential aspect of obtaining wisdom.  

15 The LORD G-d took the man and put him in the garden of Eden to till it and keep it. 16 And the LORD G-d commanded the man, “You may freely eat of every tree of the garden; 17 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.”  

(Genesis 2:15-16)  

We have addressed the misinterpretation, based on the LXX mistranslation of Garden of Eden, that humanity was intended to live a leisurely life in paradise. Now we must undertake to interpret the purpose of placing Adam in the Garden of Eden and of The Lord’s instruction to Adam.  

Adam is placed in the Garden of Eden, but no mention is made that he is intended to dwell there. The verb in 2:15, ינח, differs in its connotations (e.g. rest, allow to stay)
from שלח, translated sent forth, used in 3:23, and אתה, the verb typically translated dwell (cf. Exod 25:8, Gen 26:2). This difference supports the assertion that Adam is temporarily brought to a holy location for a specific purpose. Furthermore, the structure of the narrative shares characteristics with the priestly rite of passage ceremony described by Nelson and suggests that purpose may be initiation into a priestly role.\textsuperscript{113} Adam is:

- Separated from his former situation
- Subject to deprivation and special rules (though in this case the opposite of deprivation)
- Returned to society in a new status, clothed in new vestments (skins actually)

We asserted earlier that the Yahwist recognizes three distinct stages in evolving (raising up) human creatures to human priests:

1. Awareness of The Lord. Humanity can hear The Lord speak (understanding is not implied)
2. Awareness of The Lord’s Will at work in creation and that our behaviors can be characterized relative to that will (having knowledge of good and evil)
3. Personal experience of attempting to discern and obey The Lord’s will (knowing good and evil)

The first, awareness of The Lord (the characteristic that separated Adam from the animals), was granted when Adam received the breath of life directly from The Lord. Stages two and three will be accomplished through the rite of passage ritual.

It is presumed, but not stated in the text, that Adam knew which tree was the tree of knowledge of good and evil. Under this presumption, The Lord’s instruction can only be interpreted as a single prohibition amid bountiful provision\textsuperscript{114,115} underscored even by

\textsuperscript{113} Nelson, \textit{Raising up a Faithful Priest: Community and Priesthood in Biblical Theology}, 50.

\textsuperscript{114} Brueggemann, \textit{Genesis}, 1:46.

\textsuperscript{115} Fretheim, “Genesis,” 351.
the grammar. But, what if that presumption is erroneous? If Adam does not know which tree is the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, The Lord’s instruction is simply descriptive of the paradox of human life: we live in a world of bounty and unknown danger. The paradox is deeper if one dares to ask, “What did the Yahwist believe was The Lord’s will for Adam and the tree of the knowledge of good and evil in this story?” Was it that Adam obey the command, and not eat anything for fear of eating of the forbidden tree? There is no story there, that is a dead-end plot. Perhaps Adam was expected to bring each piece of fruit to The Lord before eating and ask permission. Neither The Lord nor man would delight in such a relationship. Instead, perhaps the Yahwist has created a situation in which The Lord’s will was that Adam acquire knowledge (דעת) of good and evil by partaking of the fruit (this would explain why The Lord would plant such a tree); and know (ידע) good and evil through the experience of disobeying The Lord’s command. Such a story would illustrate the difficulty of discerning The Lord’s will, and that life sometimes demands breaking The Lord’s command. Niebuhr described this as the conflict between the absolute natural law and the relative natural law. This is the dangerous position priests are called to, uncomfortable but consistent with the rest of the biblical narrative, and in humanity’s experience, accurate.

But what of the threatened punishment, “you shall die”? As noted above, this phrase has received significant attention, mostly because, in the prevailing interpretation,

116 Wenham, Genesis 1-15, 1:47.


118 Nelson, Raising up a Faithful Priest: Community and Priesthood in Biblical Theology, 84.
it does not happen (cf. Gen. 3) creating a need to explain/rationalize the unexpected outcome as a miracle of The Lord’s mercy.\(^{119}\) Although the type of death to which this statement refers has been analyzed\(^{120,121,122,123}\) to the point one could hardly imagine a death, theological or biological, that hasn’t been considered, the mistake has been trying to understand that death from a human perspective and not asking if it might mean something different to The Lord.

For The Lord and creator, death cannot be separated from resurrection, and not only the biological death of the body, but spiritual growth demands death and resurrection (cf. 1Cor 15:31). But Adam could not comprehend resurrection. Though humanity would not know resurrection except through Christ, we find examples in the Hebrew Bible that associate change with symbols of death such as being thrown into a pit/prison (cf. Gen 37) or cistern (cf. Jer 38). We will develop this further below in the section dedicated to the exegesis of the phrase, “And their eyes were opened.” This interpretation dispels the need for rationalization when Adam and Eve do not experience biological death, and from the untrue assertion that they experience Augustine’s smorgasbord of deaths.\(^{124}\) The Lord’s faithfulness to the relationship is never lost.

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\(^{120}\) Louth, *Ancient Christian Commentary on Scripture: Old Testament I, Genesis 1-11*, 62.

\(^{121}\) Brueggemann, *Genesis*, 1:46.


\(^{123}\) Fretheim, “Genesis,” 352.

The Helper

Then the Lord G-d said, “It is not good that the man should be alone; I will make him a helper as his partner.”

Why is it not good for man to be alone? At this point, to break free of Augustine, we must commit to a new foundation. As Niditch points out, “readers come to Genesis weighed down by Augustine’s or Milton’s interpretation of the story.” We must again remind ourselves that the authors of this story drew on sources that explained everyday life in the ancient near east, but they used them to construct a text about theology. Therefore, when The Lord says, “It is not good that the man should be alone; I will make him a helper as his partner.” that statement should be interpreted theologically.

We have asserted that The Lord has presented Adam with a paradox: a bounteous but dangerous garden. The text does not tell us how Adam responds. Historically, commentators have presumed that Adam went about his assigned duties, avoiding the prohibited tree and eventually The Lord noticed Adam becoming lonely and felt sorry for him. This interpretation is based on information not provided in the text. We are equally justified in making different assumptions. Perhaps Adam, faced with a choice between venturing into the garden with its inherent risk and remaining stationary, chose to remain stationary. Or perhaps Adam obeyed The Lord’s law, effectively thwarting The Lord’s will that he obtain knowledge of good and evil. In either case, The Lord’s observation, “It is not good that the man should be alone;” reflects a concern about Adam as an individual creature faced with a decision.

What therefore does it mean “It is not good that the man should be alone.”? It means that alone, an individual human being is spiritually stagnant. Adam, faced with the paradox of a potentially deadly garden, could only explore one option and one outcome.
The helper/other is essential to life. The role is not biological, sociological, or agrarian; it is theological. Others provide different, even opposing options and possibilities for change and growth. They, as the psalmist writes, *magnify the Lord* (cf. Ps 34).

**Ha-Ish, Ish-ah**

19 *So out of the ground the LORD G-d formed every animal of the field and every bird of the air, and brought them to the man to see what he would call them; and whatever the man called every living creature, that was its name.* 20 *The man gave names to all cattle, and to the birds of the air, and to every animal of the field; but for the man there was not found a helper as his partner.* (Genesis 2:19-21)

In contrast to Adam, who was formed of the dry dust and given life by The Lord’s breath, the animals are created from ha-adam-ah (Genesis 2:6, JSB). Beyond this observation, there is little to add to the classical interpretation of this passage. The Yahwist seeks to underscore two things: The Lord does not intend to be Adam’s helper; and the animals cannot fulfill the role.

21 *So the LORD G-d 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.* 22 *And the rib that the LORD G-d had taken from the man he made into a woman and brought her to the man.* 23 *Then the man said,*

“This at last is bone of my bones  
and flesh of my flesh;  
this one shall be called Woman,  
for out of Man this one was taken.”

24 *Therefore a man leaves his father and his mother and clings to his wife, and they become one flesh.* 25 *And the man and his wife were both naked, and were not ashamed.*

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125 Brueggemann, *Genesis*, 1:47.
We have noted above that assertion by the church fathers that this passage suggests woman is a derivative man and therefore inferior should be rejected as an imposition of Aristotelian views onto scripture. Of modern commentators, we are most closely aligned with Niditch who suggests Eve acts as “the curious one, the seeker of knowledge, the tester of limits” and places her with the “culture-bringing heroes and heroines of Genesis”.  

Contrary to Fretheim, Walton argues that אט הצלע should be translated “from the side”. We agree with Walton and incorporate Wenham’s observation that the compound prepositional phrase כנגדו typically rendered “partner” in Genesis 2:18 is unique and literally means “like opposite him” and cites Delitzsch’s argument that if the authors wished to convey identity, a more natural phrase would be מזאקה. We believe the Yahwist, in forming woman from the side of Adam, wished to 1) Assert definitively that woman was like man not animals and 2) was equivalent to man, but being made from his side would be his mirror image or opposite. The Yahwist wishes to convey that Adam, spiritually stagnant alone, did not need someone to agree with him, he needed someone to explore other options.

**Good and Evil**

*Now the serpent was more crafty than any other wild animal that the LORD G-d had made. He said to the woman, “Did G-d say, ‘You shall not eat from any tree in the garden’?” 2 The woman said to the serpent, “We may eat of the fruit of the trees in the garden; 3 but G-d said, ‘You shall not eat of the fruit of the tree that is in the middle of the garden, nor shall you

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128 Delitzsch, *A New Commentary on Genesis*, 1:140.
touch it, or you shall die.'” 4 But the serpent said to the woman, “You will not die; 5 for G-d knows that when you eat of it your eyes will be opened, and you will be like G-d, knowing good and evil.” 6 So when the woman saw that the tree was good for food, and that it was a delight to the eyes, and that the tree was to be desired to make one wise, she took of its fruit and ate; and she also gave some to her husband, who was with her, and he ate. (Genesis 3:1-6, NRSV)

We asserted above that the Yahwist’s subtle distinction between the knowledge of good and evil and knowing good and evil has gone virtually unscrutinized. But what is the difference between knowledge of good and evil and knowing good and evil?

The Hebrew word translated “knowledge”, הָדַע, is a noun, signifying a product, whereas the word translated knowing, יָדַע, is a verb signifying a process. Can such a small change make a significant difference? Absolutely! "knowing someone" biblically is to have ultimate intimacy (Gen. 4:1, 17, 25; 1Sam 1:19). To have knowledge of someone is to have vague awareness of their existence. The Yahwist strove to illustrate that the philosophical awareness of good and evil differs significantly from the experiential (wisdom).

What do we mean by the terms good and evil? For the purposes of this discussion, we begin by defining good as The Lord’s will moving through creation in time and evil as opposition to The Lord’s will moving through creation in time. That definition is insufficient. What is The Lord’s will? Framed in the Lutheran tradition, is The Lord’s will Law, or Gospel? We reject the idea that The Lord’s ultimate will is perfection of the law and humanity’s obedience thereto, therefore we will define The Lord’s will as the gospel. But, what is the gospel? Historically, emphasis on humanity’s fallen state has focused attention on the redemptive or atoning work of Jesus and his intercessory role with the Father. The import of these facets of the gospel should not be ignored for the
whisper of retributive theology cannot be silenced without The Lord's infinite wisdom, and humanity needs every assurance. But forgiveness is only part of the work of Christ. Ricouer\textsuperscript{129} argues that sin is not an abstract intellectual construct, but physical reality which manifests itself in the experience of a power that lays hold of man. Humanity cannot, as Dostoyevsky explores in Crime and Punishment\textsuperscript{130}, simply compartmentalize sin as an abstract, external, moral imperative which can be set aside or risen above. Forgiveness alone does not address the full devastation of sin. We must couple Christ's final words in John's Gospel, "It is finished." with Paul's assertion in 2Corinthians:

\begin{quote}
\textit{So if anyone is in Christ, there is a new creation: everything old has passed away; see, everything has become new! (2Corinthians 5:17, NRSV)}
\end{quote}

\textbf{And Their Eyes Were Opened}

\textit{7 Then the eyes of both were opened, and they knew that they were naked; and they sewed fig leaves together and made loincloths for themselves.}

The phrase, translated, "the eyes of both were opened" is rare in scripture. Composed of a vav consecutive and 3fp impf niph of the verb פֹּקַח, this grammatical form of פֹּקַח occurs only twice in the Hebrew Bible, here and in Isa 35:5.

\textit{Then the eyes of the blind shall be opened, and the ears of the deaf unstopped;} (Isa 35:5, NRSV)

Isa 35:5 will be familiar to Christians as the messianic prophecy fulfilled in Jesus, proclaimed to the messengers of John the Baptist in Matt 11:5 and Luke 7:22, through the

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healing of the man born blind in John 9, and Jesus’ appearance to Paul described in Acts 26:12-18. But commentators have been unable to escape the presuppositions of original righteousness and the vision of a retributive deity.

It was not in order to see outward things that "their eyes were opened" because they could see such things already. It was in order that they might see the difference between the good they had lost and the evil into which they had fallen. That is why the tree is called the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. They had been forbidden to touch it because if they did it would bring on the experience of this distinction. It takes the experience of the pains of sickness to open our eyes to the pleasantness of health. (City of G-d 14.17, Augustine)\textsuperscript{131}

The first of “the working theologians” has done his work: “and she ate…and he ate…” The couple stands exposed beyond the safe parameters of vocation/permission/prohibition, now having taken life into their own hands. […] Their interest has focused completely on self, on their new freedom and the terror that came with it.\textsuperscript{132}

The very way the story is told forces the reader to ask again what G-d meant by “dying” and what the serpent meant, and what the significance was of “their eyes being opened” and “becoming like G-d.”\textsuperscript{133}

Augustine and Brueggemann represent the typical negative reading of this passage.

Wenham is suggestive of an unexplored meaning; but unable to escape his presuppositions and actually ask the questions posed, still sees the following passage as a trial.\textsuperscript{134} Niditch comes nearer the mark, ascribing some value to the phrase, but mislabels

\textsuperscript{131} Louth, \textit{Ancient Christian Commentary on Scripture: Old Testament I, Genesis 1-11}, 81.

\textsuperscript{132} Brueggemann, \textit{Genesis}, 1:48.

\textsuperscript{133} Wenham, \textit{Genesis 1-15}, 1:89.

\textsuperscript{134} Wenham, 1:89.
the transformation by connecting knowledge of good and evil with things in the created world, the “marks of social life and culture”. 135

Commentators historical and modern fail to explore the possibility that “Then the eyes of both were opened” signals a deliberate, intentional change, in humanity’s relationship to The Lord. It is the moment that humanity becomes aware that The Lord has a will for creation. The Yahwist understands that to be morally aware but utterly incapable of discernment can only produce fear and confusion in the man and woman.

Standing on the assertion that the Yahwist was a keen observer of nature and humanity, we scrutinize the classical interpretation of the man and woman’s shame at their nakedness. The unashamed nakedness of the man and woman prior to the fruit categorizes their behavior as closer to animals who are naked and unashamed all the time. Therefore, contrary to the assertion of commentators who assume a fall from some higher state, partaking of the fruit did not separate the man and woman from The Lord, it drew them closer, they were raised up. The distinction is that “closer to The Lord” does not cause confidence, it causes anxiety. Adam and Eve have been changed and do not know how to react to their new knowledge or wisdom. Herein lies the error in Kierkegaard’s source of anxiety which is based on The Lord as retributive judge of a humanity responsible for every decision of faith.

Faith is the most important task to be achieved by a human being, because only on the basis of faith does an individual have a chance to become a true self.\textsuperscript{136}

This self is the life-work which G-d judges for eternity, for the individual creates through temporal choice a self which will be judged for eternity.\textsuperscript{137}

This is Kierkegaard's error. The transcendent self is not created by the creature but is being raised up by The Lord who is not retributive, but faithful. The Yahwist suggests a very different source for human stress: confusion.

The Yahwist sets out to illustrate the first of two very important concepts in the Wisdom tradition: Humanity has no idea what The Lord wants. Noticing their nakedness creates the first crisis of discernment for the man and woman: \textit{Is it improper to be naked before The Lord and each other?} In a courtroom, such a question is subject to objection on two grounds: it is compound and calls for speculation. A compound question cannot be addressed by a single answer. Separating the question into two separate inquiries resolves this issue, but the second remains unsettled. The answers require knowledge and experience the couple does not have. But the mere possibility it might be wrong leads to shame, and in that shame, they grab the first thing they see to cover themselves: fig leaves.

Although the church fathers erred in equating the fig leaves with penance (Irenaeus, Against Heresies 3.23.5)\textsuperscript{138}, they were correct in their observation that fig


\textsuperscript{137} McDonald, 5.

\textsuperscript{138} Louth, Ancient Christian Commentary on Scripture: Old Testament I, Genesis 1-11, 82.
leaves were a poor choice for covering intimate areas. The ancient Yahwist may not have known that latex in the sap of fig trees can cause phytophotodermatitis, but fig trees were cultivated by humans as early as 9400 B.C. and it is quite likely that the awareness that the leaves could cause blisters and rashes was commonplace. The choice of fig leaves by the man and woman, to the ancient near east audience, would be a humorous example of panic-induced poor judgment.

The Beginning of Wisdom

They heard the sound of the Lord G-d walking in the garden at the time of the evening breeze, and the man and his wife hid themselves from the presence of the Lord G-d among the trees of the garden. But the LORD G-d called to the man, and said to him, “Where are you?” He said, “I heard the sound of you in the garden, and I was afraid, because I was naked; and I hid myself.”

Here the Yahwist illustrates a second concept of the Wisdom tradition: The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom (Psalm 111:10, NRSV). Prior to eating of the tree of knowledge of good and evil the man and woman were not capable of obtaining wisdom; one must be aware of a concept to experience its implications. In modern terms, the Yahwist seeks to illustrate the transition point in humanity’s development where we transcended our own present-limited existence and became aware of the future, the possibility of something greater than ourselves, and potential consequences of our actions. Only from that foundation can The Lord begin the work of teaching discernment and humility through experience.

José G. B. Derraik and Marius Rademaker, “Phytophotodermatitis Caused by Contact with a Fig Tree (Ficus Carica),” The New Zealand Medical Journal 120, no. 1261 (2007)
The Debriefing

11 He said, “Who told you that you were naked? Have you eaten from the tree of which I commanded you not to eat?” 12 The man said, “The woman whom you gave to be with me, she gave me fruit from the tree, and I ate.” 13 Then the LORD G-d said to the woman, “What is this that you have done?” The woman said, “The serpent tricked me, and I ate.” 14 The LORD G-d said to the serpent,

“Because you have done this,
cursed are you among all animals
and among all wild creatures;
upon your belly you shall go,
and dust you shall eat
all the days of your life.
15 I will put enmity between you and the woman,
and between your offspring and hers;
he will strike your head,
and you will strike his heel.”

16 To the woman he said,

“I will greatly increase your pangs in childbearing;
in pain you shall bring forth children,
yet your desire shall be for your husband,
and he shall rule over you.”

17 And to the man he said,

“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;
in toil you shall eat of it all the days of your life;
18 thorns and thistles it shall bring forth for you;
and you shall eat the plants of the field.
19 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.”
Freed from the presupposition of a retributive god, we can explore other settings for the dialogue captured in Genesis 3:11-19. Perhaps we are hearing The Lord debrief Adam and Eve, explaining the implications of their experience. If so, what do we learn?

First the snake, to reiterate, is a metaphor not a character in history. Hence the question is: What might the Yahwist hope to illustrate through The Lord’s condemnation of the snake? The first observation is that The Lord does not engage in dialogue with the snake.\(^{140}\) The snake (as a metaphor) is still a creature and cannot hear or speak to The Lord. What does the snake represent? Fretheim asserts, and we agree that the snake represents dangerous aspects of creation\(^{141}\) and can be extended (cf. Num 21) to include an excessive focus on earthly things. We further believe that it teaches that interaction with creation can twist our understanding of The Lord’s word. However, we do not agree these can separate humanity from The Lord but only, in our confusion, make us believe they can. We argue, based on John’s retelling of creation in his prologue, that Paul’s assertion in Romans held then as it does now.

\[\text{38 For I am convinced that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor rulers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, 39 nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of G-d in Christ Jesus our Lord. (Romans 8:38-39, NRSV)}\]

Nelson points out that priests, due to the perilous nature of their duties at the interface between the boundaries established by Hebrew culture, lived in a perpetual

\(^{140}\) Fretheim, “Genesis,” 362.

\(^{141}\) Fretheim, 360.
liminal state. Such is the fate for the Yahwist’s heroes. The woman and man will act as priests, living between The Lord they fear and don’t understand, and a creation comprised of potential bounty that they are charged to discover and make available for all and danger from which they are to protect the community. To make things worse, their experience with the snake has demonstrated that to interact with creation further muddles their perception of The Lord.

It is in the words to the woman and the man our interpretation differs substantially from that presented ever since the church fathers first imposed original righteousness and a fallen humanity on the text. The foundation of this claim is the assertion that creation did not change, only the man and woman’s perception of creation before and after the fruit changed. In partaking of the fruit of the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil, humanity gained awareness of good and evil without The Lord's infinite wisdom, resulting in self-obsession to discern/characterize good and evil. The awareness of the existence of good and evil without the infinite perspective of The Lord's wisdom left humanity with an obsession to attempt to characterize everything and everyone: creation, ourselves, others, our relationship with The Lord, and The Lord's assessment of humanity. All scrutinized through rubrics we create but do not understand, or as Niebuhr asserts:

All human knowledge is tainted with an ideological taint. It pretends to be more true than it is. It is finite knowledge, gained from a particular perspective; but it pretends to be final and ultimate knowledge. Exactly analogous to the cruder pride of power, the pride of intellect is derived, on the one hand, from ignorance of the finiteness of the human mind and on

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142 Nelson, Raising up a Faithful Priest: Community and Priesthood in Biblical Theology, 84.
the other hand from an attempt to secure the known conditioned character of human knowledge and the taint of self interest in human truth.\textsuperscript{143}

Historically, Gen. 3:9-13 has been interpreted as an inquest, with The Lord as judge and prosecutor (cf. Job 9:33, Mark 16:19) interrogating the perpetrators. The answers are interpreted as evasive attempts at rationalization and blame-shifting. But again, the presupposition of originally righteous, but now fallen, individuals standing before a retributive G-d has derailed the obvious revelation: the man and woman now connect motivation to action and perceive it matters to The Lord! The change is not that they offer rationalization where prior to the fruit they would have answered truthfully. The change is the perception that not only the action, but the reason behind the action might matter to The Lord.

Similarly, Genesis 3:16-19 has historically been interpreted and illustrated by artists as The Lord cursing the man and woman and the land because of their sin. But the text does not follow the curse formula \{oath, curse\}\textsuperscript{144}. The Lord was simply explaining the implications of their change in perception. The experiences of pain in childbirth and toil in the field did not suddenly come into existence because creation changed when they ate the fruit. Now able to imagine a different existence The Lord recognizes they will make Augustine’s error believing their lives could not be as the Creator originally intended.\textsuperscript{145}

\textsuperscript{143} Niebuhr, The Nature and Destiny of Man, 194.


\textsuperscript{145} Chadwick, Augustine: A Very Short Introduction, 118.
The Priests’ New Clothes

20 The man named his wife Eve because she was the mother of all living.
21 And the LORD G-d made garments of skins for the man and for his wife, and clothed them.

We are approaching the end of our rite of passage saga and preparing for our priests to return to “the real world” and take up their duties. But first, Adam names his wife. Fretheim labels this passage intrusive\(^1^{46}\) but that is only because of the perceived trial setting. As a conclusion to the debriefing, it represents Adam’s understanding and acceptance of his priestly role in creation and Eve’s essential contribution to it: to cultivate and guard The Lord’s presence in creation. The name Eve, though certainly having biological or sociological roots, is again theological. “Mother of all living” signifies the importance all others will play in magnifying the Lord (cf. Ps 34). Niebuhr describes this interaction with the other in this way:

> This person, this “Thou” cannot be understood until he speaks to us; until his behavior is clarified by the “word” which comes out of the ultimate and transcendent unity of his spirit. This word, spoken from beyond us and to us is both a verification of our belief that we are dealing with a different dimension than animal existence; and also a revelation of the actual and precise character of the person with whom we are dealing.\(^1^{47}\)

Following Adam’s profession of understanding, the rite continues and The Lord clothes them in their new garments\(^1^{48}\) of animal skin. Commentators have offered many

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\(^{146}\) Fretheim, “Genesis,” 364.

\(^{147}\) Niebuhr, *The Nature and Destiny of Man*, 130.

\(^{148}\) Nelson, *Raising up a Faithful Priest: Community and Priesthood in Biblical Theology*, 50.
explanations for meaning of the animal skins including mercy, life, and salvation.

Wenham again demonstrates insightful interpretation without commitment when he notes that clothing, besides its obvious protective function, is one of the most pervasive of human symbols through which a person’s position and role in society is signaled.

Following Nelson, who points out the role of clothes in the priestly initiation ritual (cf. Lev 8), we suggest the Lord clothes the man and women in humble skins as vestments of their priestly role in creation.

**Neither The Lord nor Angel, but Honored**

3 When I look at your heavens, the work of your fingers, the moon and the stars that you have established;
4 what are human beings that you are mindful of them, mortals that you care for them?

5 Yet you have made them a little lower than <divine beings> and crowned them with glory and honor.
6 You have given them dominion over the works of your hands; you have put all things under their feet,
7 all sheep and oxen, and also the beasts of the field,
8 the birds of the air, and the fish of the sea, whatever passes along the paths of the seas. (Psalm 8:3-8, NRSV)

22 Then the LORD G-d said, “See, the man has become like one of us, knowing good and evil; and now, he might reach out his hand and take

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also from the tree of life, and eat, and live forever”—

23 therefore the LORD G-d sent him forth from the garden of Eden, to till the ground from which he was taken. 24 He drove out the man; and at the east of the garden of Eden he placed the cherubim, and a sword flaming and turning to guard the way to the tree of life.

To complete the saga and set the stage for what is to come, the man and woman’s new place in the cosmic order along with an explanation for man’s mortality must be defined. Humanity is a little lower than the angels (cf. Ps 8 and Heb 2:7) but higher than creation (cf. Gen 3:21). Again, presumption of a trial has imposed itself on the narrative. The vav translated “therefore” which begins v. 23 in the NRSV translation is an interpretation based on the presumption of a judicial setting. It could simply be a narrative vav and be translated as “and” or even left untranslated\(^\text{154}\). The forcefulness with which humanity is driven from the Garden of Eden and extraordinary level of security at the gates can be interpreted as a finality to the rite of passage. Humanity was not created to dwell in the Garden of Eden (cf. Gen 2:15) but לעבד (to serve) in creation; they are not gods and will not be allowed to return to the Garden of Eden.

PART IV: REBUTTAL
Adam and Eve were not Intended to Live in Eden

It is almost universally believed that the Yahwist’s heroes were intended to live in the Garden of Eden. But is that assertion, which stems from hermeneutics which demand a fall, truly supported by the text?

**Point 1:** Adam was not created in Eden

Most readers are surprised to learn that the sequence in the text is:

- Man created in wilderness (2:7)
- Garden planted in Eden (2:9a)
- Man placed in the garden (2:9a, action)
- Man put in the garden to till and guard it (2:15, description of purpose)

The verb used in 2:9,=root, is distinctly different from both the Hebrew words used to depict long-term settlement, יָשָׁב or שָׁכַן, typically translated “dwell” in English. Nor does the Hebrew word, יָנַח, used in 2:15 denote dwell; rather it has connotations of allowed to stay. The implication is that Adam’s presence in the Garden of Eden was temporary but purposeful.

**Point 2:** Adam sent from the Garden but not from Eden

Historically, commentators and artists have concentrated on the verb, ꜃וּכ, translated “drove out” in 3:24. But this ignores 3:23 and the verb,שלח, translated sent forth. The text establishes three locations: chaos, Eden (Divine Presence), Garden (Inner Sanctum) This structure, depicted in the figure below, is reminiscent of the community/temple structure of Israel’s cult and is supported by the use of hithpael

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participle of חלח in 3:8 which is used subsequently (cf. Lev 26:12, Deut 23:15, 2 Sam 7:6-7) for *God’s presence in the Israelite tent sanctuary* 156. Adam is created outside Eden, brought into the Garden of Eden for the rite of passage ceremony, clothed in new vestments and sent forth into creation. In this scenario, the need for verb, נשא, in piel form, may have more to do with Isaiah’s assessment of humanity (cf. Isa 53:6) than Augustine’s.

The lingual and grammatical arguments are hardly sufficient to dispel two millennia of tradition. However, the structure of the text also contains elements that support the new interpretation. Below (see page 71) is an analysis of the distribution of

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*adam, ha-adam* and *ish* in the text. There four instances of *adam* are arranged in a chiastic pattern with the inversion marked by the sole narrative use of *ish* in 3:6-7 (I argue the poem in 2:23-24 is dialogue or quote, not narrative). In addition to the chiastic structure, the grouping by number of instances of the *ha-adam* occurrences denotes a 7-5-3-1-2 pattern. The pattern (odds, primes, bookended by the sacred numbers seven and one) is suggestive as is the 3+1 number cluster which signals fulfillment of The Lord's plans. The position of that cluster in the text suggests the end of the rite of passage ritual and is followed by their being clothed in new vestments. Taken together, the lingual and structural elements lend credence to the rite of passage interpretation of this saga. However, patterns are readily over-interpreted, and it is beyond the scope of this thesis to undertake a critical analysis of potential underlying numerology for this text.

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Chiastic Structure: The following passages contain *adam*.

A: Problem presented, no humans to cultivate (2:5)

B: Problem presented, no helper for Adam (2:20b)

C: Eyes opened (marked by *ish*) (3:6-7)

B’: Problem resolved, Adam listened to the woman (3:17)

A’: Problem resolved, Adam and Eve are clothed in their new vestments, and ready to assume their duties. (3:21)

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Wilderness, no humanity to cultivate (2:5)

A

Man created in wilderness (2:7)

B

Man brought to garden (2:15)

C

Command given (2:16-17)

D

Not good to be alone (2:18)

E

Animals created and brought to Adam (2:19a)

F

To be named (2:19b)

G

Animals named (2:20a)

No Helper for humanity (2:20b)

H

Adam sleeps (2:21)

I

Woman created (2:22a)

J

Woman presented (2:22b)

K

Adam poem (2:23) (use of *ish* is quoted not narrative)

L

Naked and not ashamed (2:25)

M

Only narrative use of *ish* (3:6)

N

Hide (3:8)

O

The Lord calls man (3:9)

P

Adam responds (3:12)

Q

God debriefs man (3:17) Adam has someone to listen to

R

Adam names Eve 3:20

S

Clothed by The Lord, Adam and Eve are ready to assume their roles (3:21)

T

Heavenly council (3:22)

U

Sent forth from Garden, still in Eden (3:24)
PART V: SUMMARY
When my children were young, a favorite television show was *Reading Rainbow* hosted by Levar Burton. One episode had a segment that explored the effect of background music on how a movie scene was perceived. The video was of an alligator walking. The first time, the scene was played with ominous, suspenseful music. The second it was accompanied by dance music. The alligator was frightening in the first scene and comical in the second.

The analogy translates readily to how presuppositions influence our interpretation of scripture. The presupposition of a retributive god and originally righteous humans imposes certain interpretations on the saga of Adam and Eve and excludes others. Changing those presumptions can dramatically change the interpretation.

This paper has suggested that original righteousness as a doctrine of the church is no longer sustainable and explored the possibility that a new reading of Genesis 2:4b-3:24 without that presupposition allows us to reject the conclusion that Adam and Eve fell from paradise, punished by The Lord for failing a bizarre test and transforming themselves, their progeny, and creation into something wretched and unworthy. Rather, it opens a new understanding of The Lord’s relationship with humanity and our intended vocation, consistent with biological and social evolution and the biblical narrative. The saga, in framing the transition point in history where humanity became aware of The Lord’s will as a *rite of passage*, has depicted humanity as raised above creation into the liminal space between the natural and the divine to serve as priests in creation. The result is a contradictory existence, a *Call to Paradox*, that maintains the need for both aspects of
The Lord’s work in Christ: *everything old has passed away; see, everything has become new!* (2Corinthians 5:17, NRSV) with emphasis on resurrection, new creation and the priesthood of all believers under Christ.