

REVISITING EDEN

storytelling & truth-telling in Genesis 2-3

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I think many who are unfamiliar with the Bible might find it surprising that only three chapters into the first book of the Old Testament, one of the characters is a talking snake. If you were helping a person like this make sense of the story we find in Genesis 3 (a person whose only experience with talking snakes was from a children's storybook or a Disney movie), how would you explain this unusual character? Here are some of the explanations others have offered down through the centuries:

1. **A talking (and tree-dwelling or undulating upright?) snake was part of God's original creation**, but as the story goes on to reveal, it was judged and became the forebearer of the non-verbal, ground slitherers we know and love today.
2. **The serpent spoke because he was controlled by the devil.** This is a commonly held idea based on certain Jewish traditions and certain passages from the New Testament.
3. **Since there is no such thing as a talking snake (or any animal, for that matter), the story is best understood as a primitive *fairy tale*.** This is a common approach to many passages in the Bible for those eager to explain away the sometimes strange and supernatural elements Scripture contains.

While each of these approaches has its backers,¹ in light of the immediate context and the testimony of all Scripture,

1. It's important to note that the first two options (or a combination of the two) are held, and have been held, by faithful, Bible-committed Christians down through the centuries.

none of these options ultimately proves to be a satisfactory explanation for the presence of a talking snake in this story.² Let me suggest a better way to make sense of both this snake, and the story of Eden as a whole.

We'll call this approach a *storyteller's take on history*.

2. Problems with each of these explanations include: 1) The serpent is clearly identified in Genesis 3:1 as a “beast of the field that the LORD God had made.” But his ability to speak and his craftiness make very little sense in light of the universally-recognized distinction between people and animals present in every other part of the Hebrew Bible (cf. Psalm 73:22; Daniel 5:21). The issue is not whether God could have made a talking and “crafty” snake—he certainly could have—but rather, is that the best explanation for this oddity in light of the immediate (Genesis 2-3) and broader (ultimately, all Scripture) contexts of the passage? 2) There is no indication in Genesis 3, or anywhere else in the Old Testament, that the serpent is Satan (who appears only three times in the Hebrew Bible—I Chronicles 21:1; Job 1-2; Zechariah 3:1-2). Some see an identification of this serpent as the devil in the New Testament, specifically in Romans 16, II Corinthians 11, and Revelation 12. While Romans 16:20 is often associated with Genesis 3:15, it's more likely that Paul is simply using Old Testament language of conquest (II Samuel 22:39; Psalm 47:3) in light of Jesus' words in Luke 10:19. In II Corinthians 11:3, Paul simply refers to the story of the serpent from Genesis as a well-known example of deception leading to sin. Though he mentions Satan later in verse 14, the devil is not directly linked with the serpent, but instead with the image of “an angel of light” and the very tangible “false apostles” mentioned in the previous verse. In Revelation 12:9, “serpent” does not identify the dragon, but rather, is used as a synonym, as verses 14 and 15 of that chapter demonstrate (cf. Revelation 20:2). In the context, the adjective “ancient” could simply be a designation of his antiquity, or a reference to Isaiah 27:1, where both “serpent” and “dragon” refer to Leviathan, a mythical creature used (as in Revelation) to represent frightening earthly powers set in opposition to God's people. Given that *serpent* is a synonym for *dragon* in both Isaiah 27 and Revelation 12, John could have just as easily referred to Satan as the “ancient dragon” in Revelation 12:9. 3) In light of the “these are generations of” formula used in Genesis

A Storyteller's Take on History

I believe it's clear to even the casual reader that Genesis is a book concerned with conveying history. Its numerous genealogies are just one example of this concern (5:1-32; 10:1-32; 11:10-32; 36:1-43). So it's not surprising that there are good reasons to believe that this book, like so many other parts of the Bible, is the work of an ancient historian. Unlike some of their modern counterparts, these ancient historians were, as so much of Scripture makes clear, also excellent storytellers. But in this distinct section we know as Genesis 2-3,³ I don't think we're reading the work of a historian who's borrowing from the storyteller's toolbox. Instead, I would suggest we find a storyteller⁴ who is borrowing the historian's objective. Here's what I mean: to tell us something important about actual people, places, and events, I will attempt to

2:4 (and throughout the book: 5:1; 6:9; 10:1; 11:10; 11:27; 25:12; 36:1; 37:12) and Adam's ongoing role in the narrative beyond chapters 2 and 3 (especially as the original ancestor of the succeeding generations), it's clear the author of Genesis is concerned about transmitting actual history and not simply fairy tales.

3. Gordon Wenham describes the story of the garden as a “highly organized unit... carefully constructed” into seven scenes (based on the analysis of Jerome T. Walsh, with refinements by Pierre Auffret). These chapters are also distinct in the book of Genesis in that they are the only place where the title “the LORD God” (in Hebrew, *Yahweh Elohim*) is used (in fact, the only place in the whole Pentateuch—apart from Exodus 9:30). This title is used twenty times in Genesis 2-3. Only the serpent-dominated dialogue in 3:1-5 veers from this usage.

4. Given his prominent role in hearing and recording God's word, Moses is traditionally considered the 'author' of the the first five books of the Bible (Exodus 17:14; 24:7; Leviticus 1:1; Numbers 1:1; Deut. 28:58; Joshua 1:8; 8:31; Luke 24:27; John 5:45, 46). If he was not the storyteller behind Genesis 2-3, then he likely situated this ancient story into the text of Genesis, as we know it today.

demonstrate that the ancient storyteller behind Genesis 2-3 has creatively employed a number of literary tools, tools we find in use throughout the Old Testament. And the result is an incredibly memorable tale, to the degree that even children, in every generation, have remembered the key details and main ideas regarding the garden of Eden.⁵ So when it comes to Genesis 2-3, the main question need not be whether we're talking about actual history. The better question would focus on *how* actual history is being conveyed in these chapters.

Recognizing the Storyteller's Touch

In many Old Testament passages, it's usually clear when someone is recounting a dream or vision, or using allegorical language to make a point. But Genesis 2-3 doesn't contain any explicit affirmation that the writer is switching away from the *historical narrative* that dominates this book. That means we have to proceed with caution. It would be a serious error to default to a *storyteller* explanation every time we found something in the biblical text we considered overly strange or somehow offended our modern sensibilities. So how can we be sure these chapters are more of an ancient storyteller's take on history, rather than just a historian's *story-ish* recounting of ancient events? I believe the storyteller has left us clues in the text itself, clues that would have alerted, and should alert readers in every generation to the kind of story being presented here.

5. "...Perhaps this is the greatest tribute that can be paid to the writer: he communicates to all—young and old, the educated and the unsophisticated. He describes God's relations with men, not in high-flown abstract theological jargon that needs special linguistic aptitudes and a long training to acquire, but in a simple vocabulary drawn from peasant life. Yet the ideas he puts so clearly in story form have theological ramifications that have stretched the minds of the greatest thinkers down the ages." (Gordon Wenham)

Consider these seven clues from the text:

The God who spoke becomes the God who sculpts. What's striking about the shift from Genesis 1 to Genesis 2 is how the Creator himself is depicted. The Creator in chapter 1, who is above all things and outside of all things, simply speaks (e.g., "Let there be...") to bring every part of the universe into existence. But the Creator in chapter 2 is presented as a kind divine craftsman, working at the job site, using the dust, the ground, and even a rib to shape his creatures into existence. Are these conflicting creation accounts? Not at all. I believe this shift should simply alert the reader to a change in the storytelling approach.

Flesh is not like dust and dirt. Genesis 2:7 tells us that "the LORD God formed the man of dust from the ground". But even the first readers of this story would have known that people are not really made of dust or dirt, or anything like dust or dirt.⁶ Dust is dry and the ground is hard. But for the most part, we are slimy and soft. This is clearly figurative language, and most people recognize it as such. So what's meant by this depiction? It's simply a poetic way of 'grounding' man in his proper place as a material and fragile creature who must depend on God (cf. Psalm 103:14), the very God who not only fashioned him, but also 'breathed' life into him.

And a river runs through it. Contrary to traditional usage, Eden wasn't the name of God's garden. It was the name of the land in which the garden was planted. And 2:10 tells us that God provided a river

6. In contrast to Exodus 8:16, where a cloud of gnats is very much like a cloud of dust, and the contextual unit is clearly an historical narrative (albeit describing supernatural interventions).

“to water the garden” (or “planted” the garden to straddle this river), a water-course that then split into four different rivers. But the original readers of Genesis may have considered the description of 2:10-14 to be geographically odd. Many would have been familiar with the rivers of Mesopotamia, the Tigris and the Euphrates, with their headwaters in the far north. The lands of Havilah and Cush were also familiar to the readers of Genesis (10:7; 25:18) (Moses (see footnote #4) even had a Cushite wife according to Numbers 12:1), but they were hundreds of miles away from Mesopotamia, to the west and south. But if Eden was “in the east” (2:8), then maybe the depiction of these rivers was less about providing readers with an accurate map, and more about presenting a kind of spiritual geography; about marking out (using the four points of the compass) the reach of the divinely-given and life-giving river that flowed through and out from God's garden.

Not an olive, fig, or fir. The first readers of Genesis would have recognized and depended on many of the trees found in the ancient Near East and mentioned in the Bible. That's one of the reasons I believe they would have recognized the trees labeled “life” and “the knowledge of good and evil” in Genesis 2:9 as storytelling devices rather than actual flora.⁷ In various places throughout the Old Testament we find

7. It's interesting to note that, like common usage regarding the storied “fountain of youth”, the “tree of life”, in its other appearances in Scripture, is always used figuratively or proverbially or symbolically to represent something that gives life, especially eternal life (Proverbs 11:30; 13:12; 15:4; Revelation 2:7; 22:2, 14, 19). Unlike the “fountain of youth”, no one in the biblical record ever talks about attempts to find this “tree of life”, as if it were a real object that could be and should be sought out. This isn't evidence against an actual tree, but simply evidence for how ancient people might have understood the original story.

objects being employed to represent people (Numbers 17:1-11; Ezekiel 37:15-28; Zechariah 11:7-11)(even trees in Zechariah 4:12-14), or people being named to represent ideas (Isaiah 7:14; 8:3; Hosea 1:2-11; Zechariah 3:8; 6:12), or prophetic stories or visions with characters whose names are significant in this same way (Ezekiel 23:1-4; Zechariah 5:5-11). None of these are exactly like the story of Eden, but they are helpful reminders of the tools commonly found in an ancient storyteller's toolbox, tools that I would argue were in use when the trees of Genesis 2-3 were named.

That talking snake. Whatever you believe about the worldviews of ancient peoples, I think it's safe to say that the Israelites understood the distinction between people and animals.⁸ They knew that animals do not talk. Yes, Numbers 22:22-30 does feature a talking animal, but God's supernatural intervention is explicit in that narrative passage, and the surprise and significance of that account flows from the reality that donkeys (and every other animal) are always non-verbal. There is no doubt that God, in the beginning, could have created a clever and conversant snake. But in light of other clues in the story,⁹ and the fact that

8. It is important to point out that Genesis 1 describes the creation of our world, not another world where people and animals are fundamentally different.

9. The curse placed upon the serpent in 3:14-15 is a curse on snakes in general ("above all livestock... above all beasts of the field"). This curse (applied to every snake after it—"your offspring") is not the loss of its ability to speak or be clever, but its position in the dirt and its contentious relationship with human beings ("her offspring")(a fact well attested throughout the Bible—cf. Nu. 21:4-9; Acts 28:1-6). The transition from *this* serpent to all snakes makes more sense as a storyteller's choice to use the familiar lot of snakes (in the "dust"—Ps. 72:9; Micah 7:17) to remind us of God's judgment against sinful deceivers (cf. Deut. 13).

serpents were a routine threat for the first readers of Genesis, it's far from unreasonable to suggest that the imagery of a shrewd snake was wisely chosen and creatively crafted to serve the storyteller's ultimate aim. For in the very next chapter of Genesis we find something similar: sin is figuratively described in 4:7 in terms of a lurking and deadly animal.

It's not called an apple, but it is described as 'magical'.¹⁰ Genesis 2:17 records God's warning about "the tree of the knowledge of good and evil". But far more interesting than the name of this tree were the properties of its fruit. Several bites from this prohibited produce and the "eyes of both [the man and the woman] were opened" (3:6-7).¹¹ The other named tree in Genesis 2-3, "the tree of life", is described as having similar fruit; not similar in its effect (for it brings life not death), but similar in terms of its mystical properties. To drive this idea home,

10. *Magical* is to be distinguished from *supernatural*. A *magical* worldview presents a world where common objects can secretly contain power, secret spells can conjure mysterious but always present forces, and fantastical creatures (like talking snakes) might be hiding in the rocks and hills. The worldview of the Bible, in contrast, is based in the reality of an all-powerful God who created the *natural* order (the order we all recognize and inhabit on a daily basis), but who, as the Creator, can intervene in *supernatural* ways, when and how he sees fit. Thus the 'magical' elements present in this text are not meant to promote a *magical* worldview, but are simply clues we are reading a storyteller's take on history.

11. "Eyes... opened" indicates that a significant change has taken place. Most Christians would argue this was the point at which the man and woman became sinners, moving from spiritual light into spiritual darkness; from life to death. But given what we're told about the woman in 3:6, she would have already been guilty of sinful desire or coveting (Exodus 20:7; Colossians 3:5) before eating the fruit. This simply highlights the storytelling nature of the scene, where actually eating the fruit triggers the radical change.

Genesis 3:22-24 describes how God assigned a 'security detail' to the garden's entrance, to block Adam and Eve's access to "the tree of life". Think about it: even though the Almighty himself had decreed death, even though he is the same God who simply spoke all things into existence in chapter 1, he had to physically keep these errant humans from eating this special fruit and clinging to immortality. As was the case with talking animals, the first readers of Genesis surely knew God's world was not a world of magical trees or of fruit imbued with more power than even the Creator's word.

The presence of celestial security guards. If we linger at that last story beat in 3:22-24, the presence of cherubim should catch our attention. Contrary to popular belief, cherubim are never described as angels in the Bible. In fact, these mystical creatures are never once depicted in Scripture outside of a representational or figurative or visionary setting (Exodus 25:18; 26:1; I Kings 6:23; Psalm 18:10; Ezekiel 10:1; Revelation 4:6). If that tells us something about ancient conceptions of cherubim, then their presence here as characters in the narrative could be one more clue alerting the original audience to (and confirming for them) the kind of story being told in Genesis 2-3.

The consistent witness of the Old Testament is to a world like ours; a world where God can and has supernaturally intervened, but not a world of dust-constructed people or fantastical creatures or 'magical' trees. What is true of most people today was true of ancient Israel as well: they could recognize the work of a storyteller. They understood that the presence of elements like these was an indication that someone was telling a tale. But unlike many today, they understood the absolutely critical idea that storytelling could also be truth-telling.

Understanding the Storyteller's Intent

But if the story of Eden bears all the hallmarks of a storyteller's tale, why are so many Christians uncomfortable with talking about it in these terms? The challenge, I believe, is that we often associate storytelling with fiction and fantasy, not history. Sure, a well-told tale might communicate truth in terms of a moral lesson or insights into the human experience. But when it comes to conveying historical truth, we're usually suspicious of such stories. And yet Scripture contains many examples of creatively-crafted stories that tell us important things about real people and actual events. For example, Jotham's story in Judges 9:7-15 (which we could call, "The Trees Went Out to Crown a King") communicates important ideas about Abimelech's character and the listeners' treachery (Judges 9:1-6; 16-21). In the same way, the context demonstrates how the prophet Nathan's story in II Samuel 12:1-4 (which we could call, "Two Men and a Little Lamb") was both historically grounded (regarding David, Uriah, and Bathsheba) and powerfully convicting. Even Jesus' parable of "The Wicked Tenants" (Matthew 21:33-46) can be viewed as a storyteller's take on the history of the Jewish leadership's rejection of both their prophets and their Messiah.¹²

Since this approach is not common in our modern methods of preserving history, consider the following *storyteller's* take on a well-known and recent event:

Many years ago, on the scattered islands of the world, something awful happened. You see, on the island of America, the people there, called "Us?"

12. In his *Concise Theology*, J.I. Packer talks about the storytelling and historical features in these terms, "Though telling the story [of the garden] in a somewhat figurative style, Genesis asks us to read it as history..."

(spelled U-S), built a very tall wooden tower. From the top of this tall tower they could see how big and blessed their island really was. In fact, this tower was so tall that the other islands could also see it. Did that bother Us? No! They welcomed others to come to their island and enjoy these blessings. But on another island, an island called "Middle East", some people saw that tower and hated it. They thought it was too tall. And at certain times, and in certain ways, they didn't like the shadow it cast over the other islands. One of the people who hated that tower was named "Al Qaeda", and he came to America to do something about that tower. When he arrived he told a lie about his visit, and secretly brought termites to America; the biggest and hungriest termites ever. And when he secretly scattered those termites at the bottom of one side of that tower's base, they quickly ate up all the wood. And so, even more quickly (and tragically), that very tall tower... toppled over! And when it did, many people died. It even fell on another place called "the Pentagon", and many people died there as well. This is why we have to be extra careful today and watch out for this same kind of deception and this same kind of danger.

This certainly doesn't sound like what we'd find in a U.S. History textbook. It sounds instead like something we'd tell a child about September 11th, 2001. But please don't miss how the story is rooted in real people, places, and events (with historically-accurate names preserved). Yes, it does include fantastical elements, like a tower that can be seen from and cast a shadow over far-off countries. But that storytelling element is meant to communicate something important about American influence around the world. Also consider how this tale includes symbolic or allegorical elements to make the story more

memorable, like termites representing terrorism or terrorist acts.

While this storyteller's approach to history may seem foreign to us today, it certainly wasn't in the ancient Near East.¹³ Though teasing out and verifying the actual history is not always easy, there are numerous examples of this kind of writing among Israel's neighbors.¹⁴ But what does that mean for the ancient story found in Genesis 2-3? It means we, in light of many other passages in the Bible, don't need to doubt that this tale is rooted in real people and actual events. For example, the historicity of our first father is confirmed by the fact that Adam (a name that simply means "man") is listed in three biblical genealogies, two in the Old Testament (Genesis 5:1; I Chronicles 1:1) and one in the New Testament (Luke 3:38). In Matthew 19:4-5, Jesus spoke clearly about our first parents when he described how the God who "created them from the beginning made them male and female"; he then went on to talk about marriage in light of Genesis 2:24. The Apostle Paul would later confirm that God "made from one man every nation of mankind to live on all the face of the earth" (Acts 17:26). In I Corinthians 15:45, Paul clearly identifies this man as "Adam", and in several places makes it crystal clear that "though the [first] woman was deceived and became a transgressor" (I Timothy 2:14),¹⁵ "by a man came death", for "in Adam all

13. "The ancient Near East did not historicize myth (i.e. read it as imaginary "history"). In fact, exactly the reverse is true—there was, rather, a trend to "mythologize" history, to celebrate actual historical events and people in mythological terms." (Egyptologist Kenneth Kitchen)

14. Well known examples include the *Epic of Gilgamesh* (Sumerian/Babylonian), *Adapa and the South Wind* (Akkadian), and *The Story of Sinhue* (Egyptian).

15. In light of a passage like I Timothy 2:12-14, we might ask, "Did

die” (I Corinthians 15:21-22). According to Paul in Romans 5, it was the “transgression of Adam” (v. 14) that sank our world into sin and death: “...sin came into the world through one man, and death through sin, and so death spread to all men because all sinned”. (v. 12)

Hearing the Storyteller's Point

So if the story of the garden of Eden is the work of an ancient storyteller, what are we supposed to take away from this storyteller's well-known take on history? Though there are many important lessons here,¹⁶ ironically, the key to understanding this tale is found in the forbidden knowledge first mentioned in 2:9. The tree mentioned there represented “the knowledge of good and evil”. But what is meant by that phrase? Clearly our first parents had a knowledge of what was good and evil, for 1) God had explained it to them (2:16-17), and 2) they could explain it to others (3:2-3). So the knowledge prohibited here must somehow be different. If we search the key words in that tree's name (i.e., knowledge, good, evil), we find two passages in the Old Testament that help shed

someone like the Apostle Paul believe the story of Eden was a 'storyteller's take on history'?" I'm not sure we can know what Paul believed about the 'storytelling' elements of Genesis 2-3, only that (in light of his references) he regarded the account as authoritative in the lessons it was written to communicate; about creation (man, then woman), command, temptation (man, then woman), and curse.

16. For example, as the storyteller clearly explains in Genesis 2:24, the story in 2:18-23 teaches us something foundational about marriage. Even simple elements in the story may represent meaningful choices by the storyteller. The 17th century pastor and writer Matthew Henry may have found one of these in that same story about God creating the woman, who was, “not made out of his head to top him, not out of his feet to be trampled upon by him, but out of his side to be equal with him, under his arm to be protected, and near his heart to be beloved.”

light on this question. Both Deuteronomy 1:39 and Isaiah 7:15-16 speak about this knowledge in relation to children.¹⁷ Like the first man and the first woman, children often know the particulars of what is right and wrong, having received some kind of moral instruction from their parents. But Isaiah 7:15-16 speaks more specifically about knowing “how to *refuse* the evil and *choose* the good”. That’s not simply understanding the content of “good and evil”. It’s also understanding something about the nature and consequences of “good and evil”.

So when the two named tree of Genesis 2-3 are considered together, along with God’s revelation about these trees, the point of the story begins to come more clearly into view:

Will we trust what God has revealed about the goodness of what is good and the dangers of what is evil, or will we listen to the voice of temptation, and obtain that knowledge the hard way: by stepping out, believing we can stand on our own, only to find 'quicksand' under our feet?

Instead of *knowing by trusting*, the first human beings chose *knowing by trespassing*. Genesis 3:6 emphasizes how the woman’s choice was informed by what *she* saw rather than what she heard from God. Similarly, and equally foolish, the man’s choice was driven by what he heard from his wife, rather than what he first heard from God (3:17). Though God had made a world that was “very good” (1:31), a world in which his presence and provision were wonderfully abundant, our first parents, in an effort

17. The connection between ‘knowing good and evil’ and children fits nicely into this story about God’s garden. Not only are the first man and woman depicted as being days old, but they are also described as “naked”, and like little children, they “were not ashamed” of their nakedness (2:25).

to become like God, but apart from God (3:5), rejected him and his word; and in so doing, were cut off from his wonderfully abundant presence and his wonderfully abundant provision of life. In terms of devastating consequences, Genesis 3 also serves as what's called an *etiology*, a story that explains something about why this or that, or why the world as a whole, is the way it is today. In Genesis 3, we learn about a number of these realities: the struggle between human beings and nature (3:15, 17-19), a woman's struggle in childbirth (3:16), the struggle between men and women (3:16), and even a clever connection between a snake's humiliating position in the "dust" (like a defeated enemy, cf. Micah 7:17) and God's judgment of sinful deceivers (see footnote #9).

Now clearly the point of this enduring story is powerfully universal. As the Christian pastor and thinker Augustine wrote over 1600 years ago, "Even now, when any of us slide into sin, nothing happens other than what occurred between the serpent, woman, and man." That being said, it is also incredibly helpful to think about this story in light of the audience for whom the first five books of the Bible (also known as the *Pentateuch*) were originally composed. Given his central role in most of the material, Moses is generally recognized as the ancient historian behind these books (see footnote #4). If so, then the second generation of Israelites to have left Egypt, who had grown up wandering in the desert because of their parents' unbelief (Numbers 14:26-30), were the original readers/hearers of Genesis. Why is it helpful to know that? See if you can hear 'echoes from Eden' in the final lines of Moses' final appeal in the final book of the Pentateuch:

"For this commandment that I command you today is not too hard for you, neither is it far off. It is not in heaven, that you should say, 'Who will ascend to

heaven for us and bring it to us, that we may hear it and do it?’ Neither is it beyond the sea, that you should say, ‘Who will go over the sea for us and bring it to us, that we may hear it and do it?’ But the word is very near you. It is in your mouth and in your heart, so that you can do it. “See, I have set before you today life and good, death and evil. If you obey the commandments of the LORD your God that I command you today, by loving the LORD your God, by walking in his ways, and by keeping his commandments and his statutes and his rules, then you shall live and multiply, and the LORD your God will bless you in the land that you are entering to take possession of it. But if your heart turns away, and you will not hear, but are drawn away to worship other gods and serve them, I declare to you today, that you shall surely perish. You shall not live long in the land that you are going over the Jordan to enter and possess. I call heaven and earth to witness against you today, that I have set before you life and death, blessing and curse. Therefore choose life, that you and your offspring may live, loving the LORD your God, obeying his voice and holding fast to him, for he is your life and length of days, that you may dwell in the land that the LORD swore to your fathers, to Abraham, to Isaac, and to Jacob, to give them.” (Deuteronomy 30:11-20)

Why was this story, the storyteller's take on history that we find in Genesis 2-3, so important for the original audience of Genesis? Because it taught them about the ancient roots of their sin and suffering. It reminded them about the devastating consequences of rejecting the commandment (or word) of God. Best of all, it pointed them to the One who is our “life and length of days”. This God was about to give them a “land” in which he would “bless” them, a land described in Genesis 13:10 as “well

watered everywhere like the garden of the LORD". But if they would "not hear", and were "drawn away to worship other gods", they would be expelled from that place of abundance (Leviticus 20:22, 24). The story in Genesis 2-3 confirmed for them that God had, and indeed, would again bring this kind judgment upon any who, by rejecting his word, foolishly rejected his incomparable presence and provision.

It's worth making one more observation about the story's final form in Genesis and its original audience. The ancient Israelites for whom Moses wrote were told that because of the Tent of Meeting (the mobile temple God instructed them to build in Exodus), "God *walks* in the midst of your camp" (Deuteronomy 23:14; cf. Leviticus 26:12).¹⁸ This was a figurative (and Edenic) way of talking about God's presence dwelling among them because of the Ark of Covenant, the golden chest over which God would meet and speak with Moses, from between two carved cherubim (Exodus 25:17-22).¹⁹ The cherubim represented here are just one of the many connections between God dwelling among the Israelites through the

18. Another interesting connection between the garden story and the Tent of meeting is the Pentateuch's repeated instructions or warnings about putting the immoral or unclean "outside the camp" (Leviticus 13:46; Numbers 5:3; 12:14; 15:35; Deuteronomy 23:10).

19. Most of the Bible's 57 instances of the word *cherubim* refer to these gold cherubim on the Ark's "mercy seat", or the carved or woven cherubim that adorned the Tent of Meeting, and later the Temple in Jerusalem. God is often addressed as "O LORD, the God of Israel, enthroned above the cherubim" (II Kings 19:15; cf., I Samuel 4:4; II Samuel 6:2; I Chronicles 13:6; Psalm 80:1; 99:1; Isaiah 37:16). The cherubim symbolically represented in Ezekiel 1:4-25 are also connected with God's throne (vs. 26), as are the similar "living creatures" in Revelation 4. This association is fascinating when applied to cherubim present in the garden story (Genesis 3:24), apparently indicating his enthroned presence there.

Tent, and God dwelling in the garden with our first parents.²⁰ In light of these connections, the Israelites would have understood that one function of the Eden story was to point them to God's presence in the Tent (and later the Temple in Jerusalem), and the implications of that awesome reality for their lives as his people. I believe this Garden/Tent connection was simply one more mark of the storyteller's genius and intent.

Seeing the Storyteller's Savior

Undoubtedly, this storyteller's approach leaves us with many unanswered questions: "Was there really a garden? If so, where was it? If not, does it matter? If they didn't eat forbidden fruit, how did the first humans turn from God? If there wasn't a talking, tempting snake, how did evil first enter God's good world?"²¹ Honestly, until we behold God

20. Connections between the garden story and the Tent/Temple include: 1) the seemingly random mention of "gold" and "onyx" in Genesis 2:12, materials used throughout the Tent/Temple, 2) the "tree of life", that may connect to the golden lampstand (menorah) with its "branches" and "blossoms" (Exodus 25:31-40), 3) the presence of God (Genesis 3:8; Exodus 25:8), 4) attended by cherubim (Exodus 25:22), 5) covering the man and woman in Genesis 3:21, that their newly-recognized nakedness not be exposed (Exodus 20:26; 28:42), and 6) the eastern facing entrance of the garden (Genesis 3:24), just as with the Tent (Numbers 3:38), and later the Temple (Ezekiel 43:4; 44:1; 47:1). Given these connections, it's not surprising that the next chapter in Genesis, chapter 4, is concerned with bringing appropriate sacrifices to God.

21. Though the Bible doesn't clearly confirm a connection between the serpent and Satan, and though his origins remain a mystery, it is clear that the devil has been active from at least the creation of the world. Jesus told us in John 8:44 that he "was a murderer from the beginning". In one of his letters, John clarifies this statement by reminding his readers that "Cain... was of the evil one and murdered his brother." (I John 3:12) Therefore, there's a strong case to be made that Satan was critically involved in mankind's 'original sin'.

“face to face” (I Corinthians 13:12), I don't think we'll be able to fully answer those questions. But if we believe that “all Scripture is breathed out by God” (II Timothy 3:16), then we can trust that what God has provided for us is enough. If Genesis 2-3 is an ancient storyteller's take on history, than we should rejoice that that storyteller was inspired by the Great Storyteller to provide countless generations of God's people with exactly what we needed to understand the origins of our desperate condition.

But God's word gives us more than just a memorable story about what was lost. It also provides us with a beautiful picture of eternal gain. And it uses this same, ancient story to reassure us in light of the believer's future reality! Though Eden is referred to in several other Old Testament texts,²² the most important reference to this timeless tale is found at the exact opposite end of holy Scripture. In Revelation 22:1-2, John tells us this about his vision of (and inside) the New Jerusalem:

Then the angel showed me the river of the water of life, bright as crystal, flowing from the throne of God and of the Lamb through the middle of the street of the city; also, on either side of the river, the tree of life with its twelve kinds of fruit, yielding its fruit each month. The leaves of the tree were for the healing of the nations.

Like the divinely-inspired story of the garden in the first book of the Bible, here in the final book of the Bible we

22. While “Eden” is mentioned again in Genesis (4:16), references to the garden are surprisingly rare in both the Old and New Testaments. Beyond Genesis, it is always used in a idealized sense, rather than as a geographical location or a topic to be 'unpacked'. It is the ideal of earthly beauty and abundance, and thus, is used in comparisons (Joel 2:3) or as an idealized setting for hyperbolic, prophetic speech (Ezekiel 28:13; 31:8-9, 16, 18).






find a divinely-inspired vision that includes several of the very same elements: “the river”, “the tree of life”, and its life-giving “fruit”. Is this a visionary glimpse into the future, where a real river and actual trees will be restored to mankind? Not quite. While it is telling us something about our future, like most of Revelation, this is simply a message communicated through the language of symbolic images. For example, the New Jerusalem is not an actual golden cube-city that will one day descend from the sky (Revelation 21:10-16). It is instead a symbolic representation of the wedded Bride, that is, Jesus and his Church finally entering into the blessed and eternal union for which “the Lamb” died (Revelation 21:9). And what will characterize that blessed and eternal union? According to Revelation 22, things like life, healing, divine provision, and the wonderfully abundant presence of a God who reigns with his Son in glory.

Though it was conveyed through a different kind of storytelling, the closing images of the New Testament serve to emphasize the opening images of the Old Testament. For those familiar with all Scripture, literary devices like 'magical' trees and talking snakes may at first seem out of place. But once we recognize those as traces of the storyteller's touch, we're able to let those creatively-crafted elements do what they (along with the symbolic imagery of Revelation) do best: powerfully point us to the very real, historical, and spiritual realities made clear throughout both Testaments.

So let us remember the first man, the man who fell and died. But let us cling to the “last” man, the man who died and rose. Let us “choose life” by choosing to fix our eyes daily on the One who said, “I came that they may have life and have it abundantly” (John 10:10). For He, and he alone, withstood the “deceitfulness of sin” (Hebrews 3:13), being “tempted as we are, yet without sin”

(Hebrews 4:15); dying for us “outside the camp” (Hebrews 13:13), rising to become “the last Adam” (I Cor. 15:45). Wonderfully, he is the same One who made this potent promise, “To the one who conquers I will grant to eat of the tree of life, which is in the paradise of God.” (Revelation 2:7)

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