

# Earnest

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Interdisciplinary Work Inspired by the  
Life and Teachings of B. T. Roberts

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## From Primal Harmony to a Broken World

*Distinguishing God's Intent for Life from the  
Encroachment of Death in Genesis 2-3*

—J. RICHARD MIDDLETON

There are few texts in the Bible as important as Genesis 2-3. The seemingly simple story of the garden, the first couple, and the original disobedience, constitutes a profound articulation of God's intent for human life (Genesis 2) and how things have gone terribly wrong (Genesis 3). Yet this seemingly simple story is actually a highly complex piece of literature, containing a structured plot, nuanced rhetorical patterns, and Hebrew puns or wordplays that make theological points. Plus, the text is laced with a variety of lacunae or gaps that cry out for explanation.

The placement of Genesis 2-3 at the outset of the larger biblical story that stretches from Genesis to revelation suggests it is paradigmatic for understanding human life, both in its ideal state and in its present, distorted reality. Yet this text has often been interpreted in ways that constrict human life and that are at odds with what it actually says. For example, Christians (both past and present) have often understood Genesis 2-3 to teach the God-ordained subordination of women to men, the essentially fallen nature of work, and a generally pessimistic view of the human condition, where a "sin nature" is thought to be genetically passed on to every person born

in the world.<sup>1</sup> Yet none of these notions can be supported from a careful reading of the text.

A partial explanation for such misreadings might include the deceptive simplicity of the story, along with the fact that later Scripture does not provide much guidance for understanding its meaning. Yet, by far the most significant explanation is that interpreters have brought extraneous cultural assumptions and paradigms to the text and then made the text conform to these assumptions. One of the things that unites many of these assumptions is the tendency to merge *creation* (God's original purpose for life) with *fall* (the distortions that presently pervade human life).<sup>2</sup>

As far back as 1891, B. T. Roberts published a booklet in favor of the ordination of women, where he addressed one of the historic misreadings of Genesis 2–3 in a particularly prescient way.<sup>3</sup> In the course of responding to objections to women's ordination based on what the Old Testament supposedly teaches, Roberts effectively refuted in brief compass the idea that Genesis 2–3 supports the subordination of women. His attention to nuances in the text and especially to the fundamental distinction between God's intent (Genesis 2) and the subsequent corruption of that intent (Genesis 3) is a model of theologically informed biblical interpretation.<sup>4</sup>

1. This interpretation, known as "original sin," is usually thought to originate with Augustine, and has decisively influenced both Roman Catholic and Protestant Christianity. See especially Augustine, *City of God*, book 14. This is not the view of the Eastern fathers, who were able to affirm the reality of sin without postulating an inherited "sin nature."

2. It may be objected that the very idea of reading the garden story as a narrative about the "Fall" is an extraneous assumption that interpreters have brought to the text. Although the text does not use the metaphor of a "Fall" to describe the primal sin, I have no problem with the term so long as we do not allow this metaphor to control our reading of Genesis 3. While a "Fall" might be an appropriate metaphor to describe the Orphic myth of the soul's descent from heaven and entombment in a body, Genesis 3 portrays the primal sin more in terms of a *transgression* or *fracture*—a relational *falling out*.

3. Roberts, *Ordaining Women*, 33–36.

4. B. T. Roberts proposed a formal resolution for the ordination of women to the pastoral office as early as 1890 at the General Conference of the Free Methodist Church (which he helped found in 1860), but it was defeated by a mere four votes (37 to 41). The denomination granted various levels of authority and ordination to women in pastoral ministry throughout the years, from serving as lay delegates to the General Conference in 1890, to becoming Evangelists or lay preachers in 1894, then ordination as Deacons with authority to pastor in 1911 (though this excluded serving as senior pastor of a congregation). It was not until 1974 that the General Conference unanimously passed a resolution for the full ordination of women as Elders (with the possibility of serving as senior pastor). For more details, see the "FMC Statement on Women in Ministry," adopted by the 1995 General Conference; see also Winslow, "Wesleyan Perspectives on Women in Ministry."

This essay will build on Roberts's brief insights through a careful literary and theological reading of Genesis 2–3 as a coherent, though complex, narrative. Focusing initially on the two embedded subplots of Genesis 2 (reinforced by two parallel sets of Hebrew wordplays), this essay will clarify the Creator's normative intent for flourishing in two fundamental human relationships, namely, the relationship of human and earth (*ʾādām* and *ʾādāmā*), which is relevant for understanding the dignity of work, and the relationship of man and woman (*ʾiš* and *ʾiššā*), which is relevant for understanding male-female equality.

Then the essay will sketch the larger plot traversing Genesis 2–3, which begins with the prohibition of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil (chapter 2) and climaxes with human overreaching to grasp this knowledge illegitimately, with disastrous consequences (chapter 3). These consequences include distortions of both sets of relationships elucidated in Genesis 2, which sets up another narrative tension, since human life does not reflect God's purposes for flourishing by the end of Genesis 3.

In light of the vision of earthly flourishing portrayed in Genesis 2 (which begins to be distorted in Genesis 3), the larger canonical story of Scripture can be seen as aimed at the restoration of God's creational intent, which involves the equality of men and women, the dignity of work and stewardship of the earth, and the renewal of the image of God in humanity—all of which are dimensions of what B. T. Roberts (following John Wesley) would call *social holiness*.<sup>5</sup>

### God's Intent for Flourishing: The Two Major Plotlines of Genesis 2

It is well recognized by biblical scholars that there are two plotlines in Genesis 2, each organized around a tension or lack followed by a two-fold resolution. The first plotline is centered on *the ground*, which lacks vegetation and a human to work it (Gen 2:4–15), while the second is centered on *the human*, who lacks a companion or "helper" (Gen 2:18–25).<sup>6</sup> Each of these lacks is signified by the presence of negations in the text at 2:5 and 2:18 (the words "no" and "not" in English translations represent various Hebrew ways

5. Wesley is famous for the following words (published in 1739) in critique of the solitariness of desert monasticism: "The gospel of Christ knows no religion, but social; no holiness but social holiness." Wesley, "Preface," 321.

6. My analysis of the two plotlines in Genesis 2 is indebted to the classic study by Tribble, "A Love Story Gone Awry," in her *God and the Rhetoric of Sexuality*, 72–143 (see esp. 75–105).

of expressing negation). These lacks can be understood as articulating plot tension that requires resolution.

Each of these plotlines constitutes a subplot in the larger, overall garden narrative of Genesis 2–3, and each subplot comes to resolution with the portrayal of an ideal relationship of primal harmony that embodies YHWH God's intentions from the beginning.<sup>7</sup> So if we want to understand the Creator's desire for human flourishing we need to attend carefully to these two plotlines that articulate how YHWH God resolved the narrative tensions in two fundamental human relationships—the relationship of humans and the earth and inter-human relationships (especially that between men and women).

### The Dignity of Work in God's World (Genesis 2:4–15)

After an introduction or heading in Genesis 2:4a (“These are the generations [*tôlēddôt*] of the heavens and the earth when they were created”), the narrative proper begins in 2:4b.<sup>8</sup> Then comes the first subplot. In a complex sentence that builds up then thwarts the reader's expectations, the narrator begins by signaling the initial lack, which thus functions as a narrative tension (Gen 2:5). The earth or ground had no vegetation whatsoever (it did not yet have anything growing) because God had not yet sent rain to water the ground and because there was no human (*ādām*) to work it.<sup>9</sup>

7. Whereas the opening creation story (Gen 1:1–2:3) consistently uses the word “God” (*ēlohīm*) for the Creator, and the narrative from Gen 4:1 onwards uses the covenantal divine name YHWH (usually thought to be pronounced Yahweh), the narrative of Gen 2:4–3:24 uses the compound name YHWH *ēlohīm* for the deity. There will come a time when a *different* name is used in the garden story (but not by the narrator), and that difference will be significant.

8. The book of Genesis is divided into ten units, each of which is introduced by a heading that uses the term “generations” (*tôlēddôt*). Except for the first heading (2:4a), all the rest name a person and focus on their descendants (in the sense of what was “generated” from—or came of—that person; we might think of translating *tôlēddôt* as “developments”). These ten units consist either of a genealogy or a narrative about one or more of the descendants (though some include both a genealogy and a narrative). The headings occur at Gen 2:4a; 5:1; 6:9; 10:1; 11:10; 11:27; 25:12; 25:19; 36:1 (and 9); 37:2. The first *tôlēddôt* heading (2:4a) introduces a narrative that describes what developed from (or came of) “the heavens and the earth,” which God created.

9. This analysis suggests a translation of Gen 2:4b–5 as follows: “In the day that the LORD God made the earth and the heavens, when no plant of the field was yet in the earth and no herb of the field had yet sprung up—for the LORD God had not caused it to rain upon the earth, and there was no one to till the ground—” (NRSV adapted). Translations of the Bible will usually be from the NRSV. I will, however, will sometimes give my own, more literal, rendering. All italics in biblical quotations are my own emphases.

While it makes sense to delay the origin of plants until there is a water source, the second requirement (a human worker) may initially seem counter-intuitive. This is probably because we are thinking of what we would call “nature” (vegetation in the wild), which does not require human presence. That the ground needed someone to work it suggests that what the Creator had in mind was not “nature” pure and simple, but a garden that needed human care. The garden that YHWH God intended was thus an *agricultural project*.<sup>10</sup>

Having set up the first plot tension in Genesis 2:5, the narrative then moves to the first stage of resolution of this tension, as water is supplied. A stream or mist<sup>11</sup> rises from the ground (instead of the expected rain from the sky) and begins to provide water (Gen 2:6). Thus, we have a partial fulfillment or resolution of the plot.

| Subject    | Tension/Lack<br>(Negations)  | Attempt At<br>Resolution/<br>Fulfillment                               | Resolution/<br>Fulfillment   | Wordplay/<br>Resonance                           |
|------------|--|--|--|--|
| The ground | No plants or grass—because no rain and no human to work the ground (2:5) | A stream/mist to water the ground (2:6) [ <i>partial fulfillment</i> ] | YHWH God formed the human—from the dust of the ground (2:7)—to work and protect the ground/garden (2:15) | Ground ( <i>ādāmā</i> )<br>Human ( <i>ādām</i> ) |

Figure 1: The Subplot of Human and Ground in Genesis 2

Then comes the second (and climactic) stage of plot resolution (Gen 2:7), when *also* from the ground (technically, from the *dust* of the ground) YHWH God forms “the human being.” Not only is *ādām* the generic word for “human” and not the word for “man” as male (that will follow, in a later stage of the narrative), but this word is given with the definite article, thus “the human” (*haādām*). This is not yet the name Adam (for that we must wait until Genesis 4 or even Genesis 5).<sup>12</sup>

10. As we shall soon see, this is more than an agricultural project. But it is *at least* that.

11. This latter is the meaning of the term *ēd* in its only other biblical occurrence, Job 36:27 (there we are told that God distills rain from the mist up in the sky).

12. There are four places in the narrative of Genesis 2–3 where *ādām* appears without the definite article, but none of these is a proper name. According to 2:5, “there was no-one [lit. no *ādām*] to till the ground.” In Gen 2:20, 3:37, and 3:21 we have *lēādām*

Having formed the human from the dust of the ground, YHWH God breathes into the human's nostrils the breath of life, with the result that the human becomes a living being (*nepes hayyah*)—the King James Version says that the human becomes a “living soul.” We should pause to note the text's understanding of being human.

First, instead of *having* a “soul” (as later Christian tradition came to claim, under the influence of Platonism), here a human *is* a “living soul” or organism (the identical phrase *nepes hayyah* is used for animals in Gen 2:19).<sup>13</sup>

The second point of note is that to be human is to be created *mortal*; this is the import of being made from the “dust” of the ground (note that Gen 3:19 speaks of returning to the ground, “for out of it you were taken; you are dust, and to dust you shall return”).<sup>14</sup>

So, having provided for the two primary needs of the ground, namely a water source and a human worker, YHWH God then “planted a garden in Eden” (Gen 2:8). The Creator is thus portrayed as the first gardener; he initiates the first cultural project, which turns out to be an *agricultural* project, which the human (as God's image) will continue.

There is much that could be said about the garden, including its being well-watered by a river (did this derive from the primordial stream or mist?), which then divides into four rivers (literally, four “heads,” in the

(to/for the human); here the preposition *le* (to or for) is appended to *ādām* without the vowel change that usually indicates a definite article (*lāādām*). However, in the first case (2:20), the same verse also uses *haādām* (the human); and it should be remembered that there would have been no distinction in the original Hebrew consonantal text (so the vowel pointing that the Masorites introduced, which we have in our current Hebrew Bibles, may be idiosyncratic). Gen 4:25 is the first clear use of *ādām* without the definite article (“Adam knew his wife again”). Yet Gen 4:2, which first mentions the man knowing his wife, has *haādām*. In Gen 5:1, which begins a genealogy, we finally have the proper name *Adam* clearly intended.

13. The phrase *nepes hayyah* is used for animals also in Gen 1:20, 24, and 30. Both the NIV and the NRSV translate *nepes hayyah* as “living being” in Gen 2:7 and as “living creature” in Gen 1:20, 24; and 2:19 (in Gen 1:30 *nepes hayyah* is translated as “breath of life”). To use “living” (*hayyah*) with *nepes* is not redundant, since a dead *nepes* refers to a corpse (an organism after the life has left it; as in Num 5:2; 6:6; 9:6–7).

14. The poignant reference to human mortality in Ps 103:14 uses the very words “formed” and “dust” found in Gen 2:7. Paul also calls Adam a “man of dust,” referring to his having been created mortal, in 1 Cor 15:42–49. Even John Calvin understood that the first humans were created mortal. Commenting on “you are dust, and to dust you shall return” (Gen 3:19), he notes that “what God here declares belongs to man's *nature*, not to his *crime* or *fault*” (emphases in original). For Calvin (who believed in an immortal soul, something never taught in Scripture), the punishment meant that we do not directly proceed from death to eternal blessedness, but experience the violent sundering of soul and body. See Calvin, *Commentaries on the First Book of Moses*, 1:180.

sense of headwaters). Whereas two of the rivers (the Tigris and the Euphrates) are well known and thus locate Eden in the geographic region of Mesopotamia (part of the Fertile Crescent), two of them (the Pishon and the Gihon) are unknown, and serve to *disassociate* Eden from any recognizable geography.<sup>15</sup>

We are also told that gold and onyx stone are found in one of the lands that the first river (the Pishon) flows around (Gen 2:10–14).<sup>16</sup> While the presence of rivers suggests a potential for irrigation agriculture (and possibly river travel), the presence of gold and onyx suggests the potential for mining, with accompanying technology, and perhaps even decorative art. Such potentials for human development cohere with this being a *garden* that YHWH God planted, and not “nature” pure and simple. The world of Genesis 2 is thus a cultural reality, requiring cultivation through human agency.

But this world is also sacred space. This garden, with its trees, rivers, and mention of precious and semiprecious stones, is reminiscent of a royal garden or sacred grove in the ancient Near East, a locale fraught with divine presence.<sup>17</sup> Such gardens would include a river or stream, landscaped terraces, a fruit orchard or arboretum, and a variety of animals (possibly even some exotic ones, in effect, a miniature zoo). These gardens were typically attached to the royal residence (the palace), where the king lived (in this case, the king is YHWH God, and humans will be tending his garden).

Whereas Genesis 1 draws on the conceptuality of heaven and earth as a cosmic temple, with humanity as God's “image” or cult statue in the temple, meant to mediate God's presence and rule from heaven to earth (heaven functioning as the cosmic Holy of Holies), the garden in Genesis 2 is the locus of divine presence on earth, where YHWH God “walks” in proximity to humanity.<sup>18</sup>

15. The name Gihon does show up in 2 Chr 32:30 for a spring near Jerusalem. But this is nowhere near Mesopotamia (where the Tigris and Euphrates are located), and it may be an attempt to echo the sacred character of Jerusalem, associating it with Eden.

16. We are told that the Pishon “flows around the whole land of Havilah” (Gen 2:11) and the Gihon “flows around the whole land of Cush” (Gen 2:13). While Havilah is unknown, the name Cush occurs in the Old Testament, suggesting a known geographical region, though it refers to Nubia, not Ethiopia, as is often thought. See Yamauchi, *Africa and the Bible*, chap. 6: “Why the Ethiopian Eunuch Was Not from Ethiopia” (161–81). Yet the legendary quality of the description is suggested by the fact that rivers don't actually flow *around* geographical areas. The desire to make the text sound more realistic leads some translations (like the NIV) to render “flow around” as “wind through.” But the Hebrew verb used in Gen 2:11 and 13 clearly means to “surround.”

17. See Wenham, “Sanctuary Symbolism in the Garden of Eden Story.”

18. On the motif of the cosmos as temple, see Middleton, “The Role of Human Beings in the Cosmic Temple.”

It is also significant that a sacred grove beside a primeval river is the typical setting for the *mis pi* (mouth washing) or *pit pi* (mouth opening) ritual, known from Mesopotamian texts. This was the ritual process through which a humanly constructed cult image was vivified and transformed (“transubstantiated,” says one scholar<sup>19</sup>) from an inert wooden statue into a living breathing “image” of a god.<sup>20</sup> So when YHWH God forms the human being from the dust of the ground and breathes into the earth creature the breath of life (Gen 2:7), the text narrates God’s consecration of humanity to bear the divine image, or—more forcefully put—to become the cult-image of YHWH God on earth, a distinctive site of divine presence.<sup>21</sup>

And, indeed, having planted a lush, rich garden (Gen 2:10–14), YHWH God places the human there in order to *work* it and to *protect/guard* it (Gen 2:15).<sup>22</sup> The human is thus granted the vocation of continuing the creative task that the divine gardener had begun. The continuity between YHWH God’s original planting of the garden and the human’s ensuing vocation vis-à-vis the garden is an echo of the *imago Dei* theme that is explicit and prominent in Genesis 1:26–28.<sup>23</sup> It suggests that humanity is granted a sacred task, a vocation of great dignity, that reflects or images something of the Creator’s own work.

The sacredness of human work (including agricultural labor) is further communicated by the connotations of the Hebrew verbs for “work” (*‘abad*) and “protect” or “guard” (*šamar*). Whereas *‘abad* is used elsewhere for priests *servicing* YHWH in the tabernacle and temple, *šamar* is the verb the used for *keeping* (that is, obeying) the Torah (and we might also think of the priestly task of *guarding* the sanctity of the temple). However, we should not think that the text means for us to “serve” or “obey” the ground.

19. For “transubstantiation,” see Jacobsen, “The Graven Image.” For the application of Jacobsen’s analysis of the Mesopotamian ritual to Genesis 1, see Herring, “A ‘Transubstantiated’ Humanity.”

20. For a detailed study of Genesis 2–3 and the Mesopotamian (and equivalent Egyptian) ritual, see McDowell, *The Image of God in the Garden of Eden*.

21. Note that Genesis 1 and 2 thus convey the same theological idea (humans as God’s image) through quite different literary motifs.

22. Whereas Gen 2:5 had said that there was no human to work the *ground*, in Gen 2:15 the human is put in the *garden* to work it (and also to protect it). We should not, however, make an absolute distinction between the ground and the garden. In fact, the “it” in the phrase “to work it and protect it” is feminine singular, which therefore refers back to the feminine singular word for “ground” and not the masculine singular word for “garden.” Working the garden (which YHWH God planted) is working the *prepared ground*.

23. For a thorough discussion of humanity created as image of God (*imago Dei*), see Middleton, *The Liberating Image*; for a summary, see Middleton, *A New Heaven and a New Earth*, chap. 2: “Why Are We Here?”

That would be a non sequitur, since *‘abad* can simply mean to “work” (the cognate noun *‘abôdâ* means “work” or “labor”) and *šamar* can simply mean “protect” or “watch over.”<sup>24</sup>

The use of these two verbs together to describe the human task in the garden suggests what we might call sustainable agriculture, as we both *develop* (work) and *conserve* (guard/protect) our earthly environment. And since this earthly realm is also God’s temple, the cultic or religious *connotations* of *‘abad* and *šamar* carry over into their use in Genesis 2:15, allowing the reader to overhear distinct echoes of sacredness in the vocation granted humans at creation.<sup>25</sup>

What happens when humans work the primitive landscape of a garden throughout history? The implication would be that as the human race faithfully tended this garden or cultivated the earth, the garden would spread, until the entire earthly realm would be transformed into a fit habitation for humanity—and also for God. Based on this original commission, humans will, indeed, go on to develop complex cultures (the beginnings of cultural development are recorded in Genesis 4), until we find the redeemed urban reality of the New Jerusalem, the holy city (Revelation 21–22), portrayed as the culmination of history. The description of this city is intertwined with aspects of Eden, such as the tree of life (Rev 22:2) and a river, designated the “water of life,” flowing from God’s throne, which is in the midst of the city (Rev 21:6; 22:1).<sup>26</sup>

This first subplot of Genesis 2 thus conveys (prior to the origin of sin) the God-intended relationship of humans to the ground from which we are taken. It is fundamentally a relationship of *work* (humanity’s contribution) and *sustenance* (the ground’s contribution); human and ground are made for each other. In God’s ideal world, humans are interdependent with their earthly environment.

This mutual relationship is signaled by a wordplay or pun in Hebrew between the word for human (*‘ādām*) and the word for ground or soil (*‘ādāmâ*). Biblical scholars have suggested various equivalent English puns, such as the *groundling* from the *ground*, the *earth creature* from the *earth*,

24. The noun *‘abôdâ* is used for ordinary human labor in Ps 104:14 and the verb *šamar* is used for God protecting or guarding the psalmist from danger in Ps 121:7–8.

25. Overhearing the *connotations* of other uses of these two verbs is not the same as what James Barr called “illegitimate totality transfer,” which would import the *meanings* of these verbs from their cultic or religious usage. See Barr, *Semantics of Biblical Language*, 218.

26. The fulfillment of Eden in the New Jerusalem is discussed in Middleton, *A New Heaven and a New Earth*, chap. 3: “The Plot of the Biblical Story,” and chap. 8: “The Redemption of All Things.”

the *human* from the *humus*.<sup>27</sup> The point is that the aural resonance (the similarity of sounds) of *ādām* and *ādāmā* suggests a primal ontological resonance (a shared reality) between the human and the ground.<sup>28</sup> Not only is the *ādām* taken from the *ādāmā* (a matter of derivation or origin), but the very purpose of the *ādām* is to work (and protect) the *ādāmā* (a matter of calling or vocation).<sup>29</sup> This suggests the high dignity of human work, even of agricultural labor, upon which all of complex human society and culture depends.

### The Equality of Men and Women (Genesis 2:18–25)

The second subplot of the garden story begins in Genesis 2:18, when YHWH God affirms that it is “not good” for the human to be alone, and so proposes to make “a helper as his partner.” Here, as before, the negation (“not”) signals plot tension (things are *not yet* as God intended).<sup>30</sup>

As is well known to students of Hebrew, the term “help”/“helper” (*‘ezer* in this case; but often the participle *‘ozēr*) is typically used in the Old Testament for someone with superior power or status who comes to the aid of an inferior (Ps 22:11 [MT 22:12]; 72:12; 107:12; Isa 31:3; 63:5; Jer 47:7; Lam 1:7; Dan 11:34, 45). Thus, God is regarded as the helper (= savior) of Israel (see Ps 30:10 [MT 30:11]; 54:5).<sup>31</sup>

In Genesis 2:18 and 20 the word “helper” is immediately followed by *kēnegdō*, a compound word meaning “as his partner” or “as his counterpart” or possibly “as one suitable for him.”<sup>32</sup> This word *kēnegdō* qualifies “helper”

27. See Brown, *Seven Pillars of Creation*, 81–88.

28. For a fuller exploration of the centrality of the *ādām*–*ādāmā* connection not only in Genesis 2–3, but throughout the Primeval History (Genesis 1–11), see Miller, *Genesis 1–11*, chap. 3: “The *ādāmāh* Motif” (37–42; nn49–50).

29. Whereas the human was initially to *work* the ground (Gen 2:5), once YHWH God planted the garden the human task is expanded to include *guarding* the garden (Gen 2:15). While working the ground could certainly lead to the development of a garden, the fact that humans were given a head start, so to speak, by the Creator means that their task now includes *protecting* what he started.

30. Although no further explanation is given at this point, we may surmise that the human needed not only companionship but also help in the vocation of working and guarding the garden.

31. The use of MT with biblical references stands for the Masoretic Text (the Hebrew Bible used by Jews), which sometimes has different versification from that found in Christian Bibles.

32. The core of the compound word *kēnegdō* is *neged*, which means “before,” “opposite,” “corresponding to,” or “in front of.” The word conveys the sense of being face-to-face with an equal.

so it will not be taken as a superior helper, but rather (in this particular case) as *an equal*.<sup>33</sup>

| Subject   | Tension/Lack<br>(Negations)                                   | Attempt At<br>Resolution/<br>Fulfillment  | Resolution/<br>Fulfillment   | Wordplay/<br>Resonance         |
|-----------|---|---|--|--------------------------------|
| The human | Not good to be alone—needs a helper as his counterpart (2:18) | Animals brought to the human—he named them, but found <i>no</i> helper as his counterpart (2:19–20) [continuing lack] | YHWH God built the woman—from the rib/side of the human (2:21–22)—to be a helper as his counterpart (cf. 2:18) | Man ('îš)<br><br>Woman ('iššā) |

Figure 2: The Subplot of Woman and Man in Genesis 2

As with the previous subplot of human and ground, the resolution of this new plot tension proceeds in two stages. The first step towards resolution occurs when YHWH God forms animals from the ground (from which the human was also formed) and brings them to the human “to see what he would name them” (Gen 2:19). The fact that YHWH God does not bring the animals to the human *to see if any of them would be a suitable helper* suggests that this is not trial-and-error on the Creator’s part, as commentators sometimes suggest. YHWH God is aware that the animals will not fulfill the basic human need specified in Genesis 2:18. But it is not enough for the Creator to know this; *the human* needs to recognize this for himself. The text thus suggests that humans need to be active participants in our own flourishing (even though such flourishing is ultimately a gift from beyond ourselves)—such is the dignity of the human creature in relation to our Creator.

The dignity of the human creature is also signaled by the statement: “whatever he called each living creature that was its name” (Gen 2:19). In other words, YHWH God simply allows every name the human comes up with to stand (without correction or prodding); the human’s choices are respected.

An interesting detail is that whereas the Creator brings two categories of animals (in Gen 2:19) to the human, namely, “birds of the sky” and

33. This, of course, is almost the opposite of the common misreading of the woman as subordinate to the man. The woman’s subordination is sometimes tied to her being the man’s “helpmate” (meaning something like a *sidekick*). “Helpmate” is here a bastardization of the phrasing of the KJV, which has “an help meet for him” (where the older English “meet” means “suitable” or “appropriate”).



“beasts of the field” (this latter is a term for wild animals), the narrator notes that “the human gave names to *all the livestock*, the birds of the sky, and all the beasts of the field” (Gen 2:20). Where did *livestock* come from?

It is fascinating that *prior* to naming, there were only *wild* land animals. But naming is coincident with a category of *domesticated* land animals. This change (the introduction of the category of *livestock*, through the act of naming) adds something significant to the original human vocation to work the ground. The human task in the world has been expanded. And, indeed, in Genesis 4 we find, in the second generation, Cain working the ground (horticulture) and Abel keeping flocks (animal husbandry), in fulfillment of this new dimension of the human task in the world.<sup>34</sup>

So not only does YHWH God desire the human to participate in the decision-making process, by deciding whether the animals could be helpers suitable for him and what their names will be, but human naming has now effected a significant transformation in the human vocation; it has introduced a new *relationship* of humans to animals, thus resulting in an entirely new *category* of animals.

The text also notes that although the human named the animals, he could not find a helper as his partner (Gen 2:20). This negation (the continued use of “not”) signals that the narrative lack continues.

It is important to understand the logic of the disjunction between naming and partnership. Naming is predicated on an asymmetry of power, an inequality between the one named and the one doing the naming. We name animals (pets, some farm animals), inanimate objects (boats, buildings), and newborn children. But once our children are grown into adults and become equal to us in status, we no longer have the authority to change their names at our whim (I don’t envy any parent trying that!). By contrast, oppressors and slave masters often re-name those they subjugate, which expresses an unequal power differential between them. In all cases, whether naming is legitimate (as with children) or illegitimate (as with slaves), naming is incompatible with finding an *equal* helper.

The fact that the human named the animals thus functions as evidence that they did not qualify as the appropriate “helper” that God had intended. So, the narrative lack continues; the human is still fundamentally alone.

34. This addition of *livestock* is evident also in the contrast between the initial description of the snake as more shrewd than any of the wild animals that YHWH God made (Gen 3:1) and the later statement that the snake is cursed beyond any of the livestock and wild animals (Gen 3:14). In the narrative world of Genesis 2–3 YHWH God did not technically *create* any livestock. Some wild animals (which YHWH God created) *became* livestock when the human domesticated them.

Then YHWH God acts a second time, to bring about resolution to the second subplot. He puts the human into a deep sleep<sup>35</sup> and takes one of the ribs (or sides) of the human, from which he makes (literally, “builds”) a woman (Gen 2:21–22).

This term for “rib” (*šēlā*) is not an anatomical term in Hebrew. It is an architectural term (hence the appropriateness of God “building” the woman). Since *šēlā* tends to be used for one of two *sides* of a structure (a building, a cabinet, or the altar), it is entirely possible that the text is saying that YHWH God split the (previously un-gendered) human in half, with the result that the human now becomes a man (ʾīš) for the first time. However, it may be that “the human” was always male and only came to gender *awareness* when confronted by his appropriate partner.<sup>36</sup>

However, if we follow the text carefully, the narrator continues to refer to the human as *haādām*, with some exceptions. It is in *the human’s own speech* (when YHWH God brings the woman to him) that we find the first use of the term *ʾīš*, the Hebrew term for man as male. In other words, the term for man as male (ʾīš) occurs in the human’s *self-recognition* when confronted with his *neqed*, his vis-à-vis, the one in whom he sees himself, yet with a difference.<sup>37</sup>

In this first speech attributed to a human being in the Bible (which is in Hebrew poetry), *haādām* exclaims:

This at last is bone of my bones

and flesh of my flesh;

this one shall be called Woman [ʾīššā],

for out of Man [ʾīš] this one was taken. (Gen 2:23)

35. The Hebrew word for “deep sleep” (*tardēmā*) is often associated with visionary experiences in the Old Testament, as in the revelation given to Abram in Gen 15:12. It is, therefore, possible that we should understand what comes next as something revealed to the human in a vision. See Walton, *Lost World of Adam and Eve*, 80.

36. Even if we do not think that *haādām* prior to the creation of the woman was meant to be understood as generically human (either pre-gendered or androgynous), everything said up to this point about “the human” (*haādām*) applies to *both* men and women. All people are mortal, all are living organisms, all have the God-given vocation to work in God’s world, all need companionship, etc. This is why Walton (*Lost World of Adam and Eve*, 80, 200), suggests that *haādām* should be understood not only as an individual but also as an archetype of all people (after all, this person’s name is later given in Gen 5:1 as “Human” [=Adam]).

37. In contrast to YHWH God bringing the animals to the human *to see what he would name them*; no purpose is explicitly stated for bringing the woman in Gen 2:22. The bringing is thus open ended; what will the human’s response be?

Here we have the second Hebrew pun or wordplay in Genesis 2. The man recognizes the woman that YHWH God has brought to him as one similar-yet-different from himself. This is indicated both by the resonant pun he makes (*'iššā* taken out of *'iš*) and by his description of her as “bone of my bone and flesh of my flesh” (this is kinship terminology, as 2 Sam 5:1 makes clear). The man recognizes his true soul- and body-mate (2:23). This *at last* is his equal.<sup>38</sup>

Now, it might be objected that verse 23 is an example of naming, so it suggests an asymmetry of power (the subordination of the woman to the man). However, “woman” is not her name (the name *Eve* will come later). Prior to the man’s use of the term, the narrator (in 2:22) noted that YHWH God made the *šēlā'* into a woman (*iššā*), which is clearly not intended as a name.

Beyond this, the man’s *recognition* of this other as “woman” deviates from the common pattern of naming in the narratives of Genesis. In Genesis naming is typically indicated by the use of the verb *qārā'* (to call) and the noun *šēm* (name); both *qārā'* and *šēm* are used in the naming of the animals in Genesis 2:20 (literally, he *called their name*). Here, however, we have the verb *qārā'* without the noun *šēm*. Beyond this, the text uses the passive (the Niphal stem) of *qārā'* (“this one *shall be called* [or *is called*] woman”), which further suggests recognition of her character, rather than naming *per se*.<sup>39</sup>

As in the case of the wordplay between the *ādām* and the *ādāmā*, the aural resonance of *'iššā* with *'iš* suggests a deep ontological resonance between the man and the woman—a primal harmony of being. Just as the *ādām* is taken *from* the dust of the *ādāmā* and is made *for* the *ādāmā*, so the *'iššā* is taken *from* the side of the *'iš* and is made *for* the *'iš*. These two sets of wordplays suggest that primal resonance or harmony is God’s original intent for human life.

38. The phrase “flesh of my flesh” might also serve to support the view that *šēlā'* is not “rib” but “side,” in that the woman is created both from the bone *and the flesh* of the human. And then later we are told that in marriage the two become “one flesh” again (Gen 2:24). But perhaps that is thinking too literally about the matter.

39. I have counted some seventy-three uses of *qārā'* in naming formulas in the book of Genesis, in which sixty-five occur with *šēm*. Of the eight that occur without *šēm*, three are used in reference to naming places (Gen 16:14; 21:31; 25:7), while five occur in Genesis 1, where God names realms of creation—*day, night, heaven, earth, and seas* (Gen 1:5, 8, 10). It would be too tedious to list the seventy-three occurrences of *qārā'* with *šēm*; suffice it to say that nowhere in Genesis is any person named with just the use of *qārā'*.

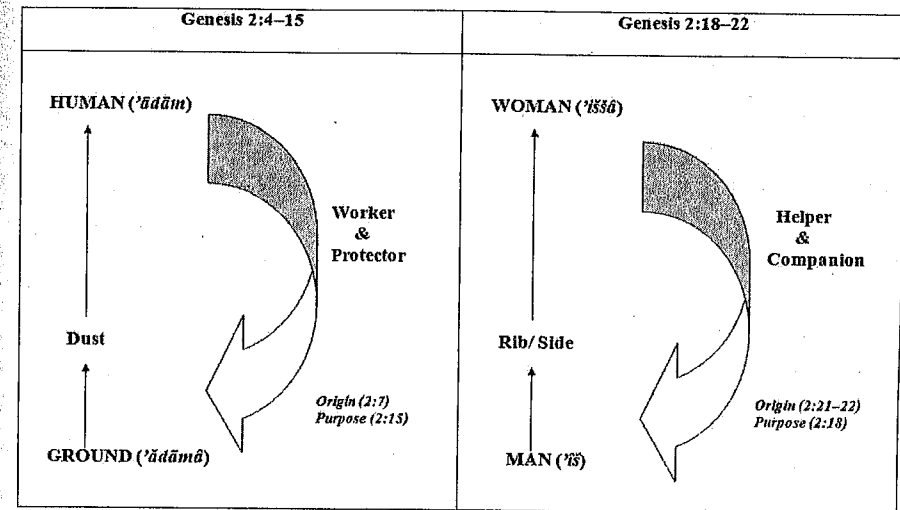


Figure 3: Parallels between the Creation of Human and Woman in Genesis 2

The very pattern of the text works against the notion of the superiority of men or the subordination of women. Here we simply need to look at the formal parallel between *the human taken from the ground* and *the woman taken from the man*. Given the pattern of derivation and purpose in both cases, we have three choices. If we claim that the woman is subordinate to the man, then humans must be subordinate to the ground. If, on the other hand, we start with the western bias of thinking that humans are superior to the earth, this would imply that women are superior to men. However, perhaps Genesis 2–3 is not advocating superiority at all—in any direction. Rather, the text affirms nothing less than *mutuality*; just as humanity and the earth are made for each other and need each other, so it is with women and men. That is how creation was meant to function—in mutual harmony and shalom.

The trouble is that this harmony doesn’t last.

### The Overarching Plot of Genesis 2–3: From Creation to Fall

Beginning in Genesis 3 the narrative shifts precipitously towards the complex process of temptation and resulting disobedience—an episode involving the woman and the man, the snake (a new character in the story, introduced in 3:1), and “the tree of the knowledge of good and evil” (which



had been mentioned by the narrator in Gen 2:9).<sup>40</sup> This unusual tree becomes the central topic of conversation between the woman and the snake in Genesis 3:1–5.

Back when YHWH God planted the garden, two specific trees in the midst of the garden were singled out—the tree of life” and “the tree of the knowledge of good and evil” (Gen 2:9). The latter tree is mentioned again, when YHWH God places the human in the garden with the commission to tend it. The human is given permission to eat from any tree in the garden (Gen 2:16), with a single exception, accompanied by a dire warning—“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 [surely] die” (Gen 2:17).<sup>41</sup>

### The Two Trees and the Choice of Life or Death (Genesis 2:9, 16–17)

What is the meaning of the two trees and the warning about death?<sup>42</sup> Here it is important to note that in both the Torah (especially Leviticus and Deuteronomy) and the wisdom literature of the Old Testament (especially Proverbs), two covenantal paths are set before Israel (and all humanity)—the paths of life and death, also described as the ways of blessing and curse.<sup>43</sup> In these texts *life* refers to fruitfulness, flourishing, security, and blessedness in the land (we might call this *abundant life*; see John 10:10), while *death* refers to living a life constricted by danger, anxiety, violence, and exile from the land.<sup>44</sup> These divergent paths are linked in the Torah to obedience to God versus disobedience, and in Proverbs they are further connected to wisdom versus folly. Life or blessing is the outcome of wisely choosing to obey God (which is equivalent to going with the grain of the universe), whereas death or curse flows from the folly of disobedience (going against the grain).<sup>45</sup>

40. Given the characterization of the snake as one of the wild animals that YHWH God made (thus one of the animals the man named), I have avoided the more mythical sounding “serpent.”

41. I have added the word “surely” to the NRSV translation. The Hebrew for “you shall *surely* die” in Gen 2:17 is a distinctive verbal formulation that repeats the verbal root in an infinitive followed by a finite form of the verb (“to die you will die”). The result is emphatic. Thus, Robert Alter translates it as “doomed to die” (Alter, *Genesis*, 8).

42. For a fuller discussion than I can give here, see Middleton, “Reading Genesis 3,” esp. the sections entitled “The Tree of Life and the Warning about Death” and “The Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil.”

43. The two contrasting paths are summarized in Deut 30:15–20 and Prov 2:20–22.

44. A series of covenantal blessings and curses linked to obedience and disobedience can be found in Leviticus 26 and in Deuteronomy 28.

45. The significance of the two covenantal paths is explored in more detail in

This begins to help us understand the warning about death in Genesis 2:17. Death should not be understood here as the introduction of human mortality (as if humans were previously immortal); this is a traditional interpretation in the history of Christian thought, but we have already seen that humanity was created mortal (“from the dust”) in Genesis 2:7. The warning could, conceivably, be taken to mean that the moment the fruit of the forbidden tree was eaten, the eater would drop down dead (something that does *not* happen). But if we take seriously the Old Testament background of the divergent paths of life and death, blessing and curse, it makes more sense to see the consequence of disobedience as the gradual diminishing of the fullness of life (death will have begun to encroach on life). Thus, at the end of the garden narrative humanity is exiled from the garden, with access to the tree of life blocked (Gen 3:24).

So much for the tree of *life* and the warning about *death*; but what does “the tree of the knowledge of good and evil” represent, and why is its fruit prohibited? Biblical interpreters have proposed various interpretations of this tree, including sexual “knowledge” (since in Gen 4:1 the man “knows” his wife and she conceives) or the attempt to grasp total knowledge of all things (where the phrase “good and evil” is understood to mean *everything*, whether it is good or evil).<sup>46</sup> However, the most obvious meaning comes from examining the entire phrase “knowledge of good and evil” (or “knowing good and evil”) in the rest of the Old Testament. The phrase is primarily used to describe the normal human ability to make ethical decisions (Deut 1:39; 1 Kgs 3:9; Isa 7:15).<sup>47</sup> This usage suggests that the tree of the knowledge of good and evil represents a normative and valuable human trait. So why would it be prohibited?<sup>48</sup>

Middleton, *A New Heaven and a New Earth*, chap. 5: “Earthly Flourishing in Law, Wisdom, and Prophecy”

46. “Good and evil” is thus understood as a merism or *merismus*, the use of two extremes to signify not only the extremes but also everything in-between, as in the exhortation to “do good or do evil” (Isa 41:23), which means *Do something, anything!*

47. In one case the phrase refers to the ability to discriminate between “good and bad” with the senses, which has diminished in old age (2 Sam 19:35 [MT 19:36]). The Hebrew words “good” and “evil/bad” have a wide range of meaning, and can refer to any sort of valuation.

48. We should note that there is a negation (“not”) used in the prohibition against eating from this tree, which is reflected in the proliferation of negations in the conversation the snake and the woman have about the tree (Gen 3:1–5) and also in YHWH God’s later mention of the tree (Gen 3:11, 17). When read with the two other sets of negations (about the *lack* of vegetation on the land; the *lack* of a companion for the human), we might think that this negation about eating from the tree likewise indicates a lack *that should be remedied*. And some interpreters have, indeed, read the story as a Fall “upwards” or “forwards,” into maturity, as if the humans *needed* to eat from this

This question becomes especially pointed when we consider Proverbs 3, which states: “Blessed is the person (*ādām*) who finds wisdom, / and the person (*ādām*) who gets understanding; / . . . She [wisdom] is a *tree of life* to those who lay hold of her; / those who hold her fast are called blessed” (Prov 3:13, 18).<sup>49</sup>

To call wisdom “a tree of life” clearly has bearing on Genesis 2. Proverbs 3 is making the point that the consistent choosing of wisdom (*holding fast* to her) results in a blessed and full life. We could even say that a pattern of wise choices grows into a tree, the fruit of which is life in its fullness. Yet, strangely, in Genesis 2 the tree of *life* is separated from the tree of the *knowledge of good and evil* (which is equivalent to choosing wisdom).

This is because the first humans do not yet have enough experience to be able to make *wise* ethical decisions for themselves. They are like children, who initially need to trust their parent (in this case, YHWH God) about what is good and evil. We don’t allow young children to have the option of taking hard drugs or to make the choice between abstinence and sexual promiscuity. Once they have sufficiently internalized what is good by living according to their parents’ direction, they will have their character formed in the direction of virtue. At that point, ethical decision-making can begin. The Eastern Orthodox tradition (along with C. S. Lewis, in his novel *Perelandra*) has therefore understood that the tree of the knowledge of good and evil was only *temporarily* forbidden; it was not permanently off-limits.<sup>50</sup> There would come a time when the first humans would be equipped to make their own ethical decisions (they would be allowed to eat of this tree). But to allow this too early would sear their conscience and result in disastrous consequences for themselves and for others (which is exactly what happens in Genesis 3 and following).

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tree in order to attain their full potential as adults. This is a tempting reading, but it is contradicted by the tragic outcome of the eating, where human life becomes diminished and constricted; this diminishing of life confirms that the prohibition should have been respected.

49. This is my own translation (many modern translations have “happy” instead of “blessed,” which misconstrues the force of the Hebrew). The “she” in verse 18 is a reference to “wisdom,” which in Hebrew is a feminine noun (the Hebrew for “understanding” is a masculine noun).

50. In *Perelandra*, spending the night on the Fixed Land is Lewis’s equivalent to eating of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil in Genesis 2–3. After the period of testing, the Perelandrian equivalent of Adam and Eve are given the Fixed Land as their permanent home.

### The Process of Temptation and Sin (Genesis 3:1–6)

The fascinating episode of temptation and sin deserves an extended exposition in its own right. But given the parameters (and length requirements) of this essay, I need to forgo a full discussion here, so that we can move to the consequences of disobedience—the effects of the Fall on the two originally harmonious relationships that YHWH God established.<sup>51</sup>

For our purposes, it is sufficient to note some of the ways the woman’s discussion with the snake constitutes a profound study in the phenomenology of temptation. For a start, both the snake and the woman refer to the Creator merely as *God* (*ēlohîm*) rather than as *YHWH God* (they consistently avoid the unique covenant name that the narrator uses, perhaps as a distancing tactic). Beyond that, the prohibition against the forbidden tree is softened from a *command* (Gen 2:16) to simply what God *said* (this change is introduced by the snake in Gen 3:1 and followed by the woman in Gen 3:3); and then the prohibition against *eating* from the forbidden tree is made more onerous than it originally was, when the woman adds “nor shall you *touch* it” (Gen 3:3). Finally, the woman softens the warning that YHWH God had given concerning the consequences of disobedience. The original warning was that *in the day* you eat the fruit of the forbidden tree you will *surely die* (Gen 2:17). But the woman omits reference to *in the day* (which suggested immediate consequences) and describes the consequence simply as “you shall die” (Gen 3:3).<sup>52</sup>

From initially questioning the woman about whether eating of any of the trees in the garden was permitted (Gen 3:1), the snake finally denies outright that they will die, while trying to make the Creator seem stingy, “for God knows that when you eat of it your eyes will be opened, and you will be like God, knowing good and evil” (Gen 3:5). And the woman buys it. She becomes convinced that the forbidden fruit is desirable for gaining wisdom (which it is, though the timing is wrong); so, she eats, as does the man “who was with her” but said nary a word (Gen 3:6).

51. One important dimension of the temptation narrative is the Hebrew pun or wordplay between the word for “shrewd” or “crafty” or “intelligent” (applied to the snake) and “naked” (applied to the man and woman). Like the negation about the forbidden tree, which differs from the negations that introduce the two subplots about the human and the ground and the man and the woman, this wordplay is different from the puns that designate primal harmony between humans and ground and between men and women. For an extended discussion of the temptation narrative, including the wordplay concerning the snake, see Middleton, “Reading Genesis 3,” esp. the sections on “The Snake” and “The Process of Temptation and Sin.”

52. Thus, omitting the Hebrew construction that indicated the certainty or seriousness of the consequence (see earlier note).

### Consequences of the Fall: From Life to Death

True to the warning that YHWH God had given, death begins its incursion into life, diminishing and inhibiting human flourishing. This is portrayed most clearly in the formal judgments YHWH God pronounces (Gen 3:14–19); but life begins to be constricted even before these pronouncements.

#### The Beginning of Death's Encroachment (Genesis 3:7–13)

The result of their disobedience is an immediate existential change in the man and woman (which fulfills the warning about “in the day” they eat of it). The man and the woman become aware of their nakedness and—in contrast to their previous lack of shame (Gen 2:25)—they make clothing to cover themselves (Gen 3:7), thus providing protection from exposure to each other (there is no-one else around). Nakedness (with its implied vulnerability) is no longer safe; and from here on in the Bible nakedness is portrayed negatively (“uncovering” someone's nakedness symbolizes exposure to being violated).

Beyond this immediate sense of shame, the text reports their newfound fear of YHWH God, evident in their hiding when they hear him walking in the garden (Gen 3:8), something the man admits to when questioned (Gen 3:10). So, even prior to the formal passing of judgment, the transgression generates (via nakedness, with its vulnerability) both shame and fear, which distances the transgressors not only from each other, but also from their Creator.

When YHWH God questions the man about whether he ate from the prohibited tree (Gen 3:11), he blames the woman “whom you gave to be with me” (Gen 3:12), who in turn blames the snake for deceiving her (Gen 3:13). This refusal to take blame for one's actions is a further aspect of the phenomenology of sin that reads true to life in the fallen world we know. And this finger pointing generates a formal declaration of judgment on the snake, the woman, and the man—in reverse order of those blamed.

These declarations of judgment are not technically punishments (in a legal sense), but rather the natural *consequences* of human evil. Nor are they normative; they do not *prescribe* what *must* be. Rather, the judgments *describe* ways in which life becomes distorted from what God originally intended. Further, these distortions are consequences of the Fall that men and women *usually* experience. These consequences not only admit of exceptions (as we shall see), but they are culturally conditioned, describing what is typical in the ancient agricultural social order that Israel was part of (we

could easily think of further consequences that apply more specifically to current western society). Finally, although these judgments have often been thought of as a series of “curses,” neither the man nor woman is technically “cursed”—that word is used only of the snake and the ground in Genesis 3.

#### Diminishing of Life for the Woman (Genesis 3:16, 20)

The typical consequences for the woman are twofold (Gen 3:16).<sup>53</sup> First, YHWH God declares: “I will greatly increase your pangs in childbearing; / in pain you shall bring forth children.” If we follow most modern translations, which take these two lines of Hebrew poetry to be saying essentially the same thing, there will be an increase of pain in childbirth; that this is an *increase* of pain and not pain's origin suggests that the text understands pain as a normal response of living organisms (it does not originate with sin). But the incursion of death into human life means that childbirth (a normal part of most women's lives) will become more difficult.

This is a solid interpretation of the second line, which clearly refers to bringing forth (*yālad*) children. However, a good case can be made for taking the word rendered “pangs” (*iṣābôn*) in the first line to mean “sorrow” (as the KJV does); it can refer to emotional (and not just physical) pain. Likewise, the word for “childbearing” (*hērôn*) more usually refers in the Old Testament to “conception,” the first stage of the childbearing process. To have women's “sorrow in conception” (or possibly “sorrowful conception”) multiplied would thus be a reference to the emotional grief many women have over infertility (the inability to conceive) or possibly miscarriage (line 1), in addition to the physical pain of bringing forth children (line 2). And if we read on in Genesis, the emotional pain of “barrenness” is, indeed, a problem for many of the women (such as Sarah, Rebekah, and Rachel) whose stories are recounted there.<sup>54</sup>

The second consequence for the woman is that the man will rule her, despite her desire for him (Gen 3:16). This could mean that her yearning for intimacy (which is part of the good order of creation) will not be reciprocated. But the woman's “desire” might be linked to the previous line about

53. Given the scope of this essay (with its focus on how sin has affected the human-ground relationship and the woman-man relationship), I will need to pass over the judgment on the snake. For that, see Middleton, “Reading Genesis 3,” esp. the section on “The Formal Declaration of Judgment.”

54. A persuasive argument for this translation (and interpretation) of the consequences for women is given by Curley and Peterson, “Eve's Curse Revisited.” I would not, however, refer to this consequence as either a punishment or a “curse” (as the authors do), since this language is not used in Genesis 3.

“sorrow in conception”; in that case, it could refer to the sort of desperate yearning for children exhibited later in Genesis by women (such as Leah, Tamar, and Lot’s daughters) who sought to become pregnant by men, by any means necessary (some of these stories are particularly tragic).<sup>55</sup> Whether “desire” is viewed positively or negatively, the original mutuality between the woman and the man (signified by the wordplay between *’iššâ* and *’iš*) will now be replaced by an asymmetry of power between them, as men begin to rule women; primal resonance has become dissonance.<sup>56</sup>

When the narrative resumes (after the formal proclamations of judgment), the first thing the man does is to *name* the woman, thus exhibiting his rule over her; the name he gives her is *Eve* “because she was the mother of all living” (Gen 3:20). Although the wordplay between “Eve” (*havvâ*) and “living” (*hai*) suggests something beautiful and even tender, this initially positive point is contradicted by the fact of naming, which enacts an asymmetry of power (he had previously named the animals, thus proving that animals were not equal partners).

Do all women experience great difficulty (with accompanying grief or pain) in conception and childbirth? Do all men dominate women? The answer to these questions is clearly *no*. These are *typical* human experiences in a fallen world, but they admit of exceptions. And, like all consequences of the Fall (ways in which death has encroached on flourishing), they should be resisted, with remedial measures, where possible. Indeed, Christ has come to set right all human relationships that are out of whack with God’s original intentions. The tragedy is that so many in the Christian tradition have read the fallen reality of male superiority (or even domination) as if it were God’s normative intent from the beginning.

### Diminishing of Life for the Human/Man (Genesis 3:17–19)

Following the judgment on the woman, God pronounces consequences for the man. Although the text does not use the word for man as male (*’iš*), but the word for human (*’ādām*), the *’ādām* is treated as male in Genesis 3:17 (he listened to the woman). Nevertheless, everything said here is relevant to both men and women.<sup>57</sup>

55. For an analysis of these examples in Genesis, see Curley and Peterson, “Eve’s Curse Revisited,” 168–70.

56. This contrasts with the mutuality of rule granted to *both* male and female in Gen 1:26–28; there the only divinely authorized human rule was *over the non-human*.

57. It is curious that even after the creation of the woman the narrative continues to use the word *’ādām* both for the man (Gen 2:22, 23, 25; 3:8–9, 12, 17, 20–21) and for humanity generally (Gen 3:22–24).

Due to the sin of the *’ādām*, the *’ādāmâ* is “cursed,” and the relationship of the *’ādām* with the *’ādāmâ* becomes difficult (Gen 3:17–19). There is mention of “thorns and thistles” and “sweat”; and what was earlier described as “work” (*’ābad*) is redescribed as painful “toil” (*’išābôn*). The Hebrew word for “toil” was already used for the woman’s “pain” in conception and/or childbearing; here we might follow the KJV and also translate it as “sorrow,” in the sense of the emotional pain that will accompany the physical difficulty of farming the land (for example, when crops fail). And if we read on in Genesis, we will see that famine is a particularly recurring problem for Abraham and his family, which leads to two separate migrations (of Abraham, then of Jacob and his sons) to Egypt in search of food.<sup>58</sup> The point is that the harmonious relationship of human and ground (which was God’s original intent for work) has been disrupted; primal resonance has become dissonance.<sup>59</sup>

Given that this encroachment of death into ordinary human work (which renders it toilsome and sorrowful) applies to both men and women (women were certainly involved in agricultural labor in the ancient world), we are justified in treating this as a consequence of the Fall for all people generally (hinted at by the continued use of *’ādām*), and not just for men. Just as everything said of *ha’ādām* prior to the creation of the woman is true for all people (all are mortal, all are living organisms, all have the God-given vocation to work in God’s world, all need companionship), so it makes sense to think that this consequence is meant to apply to the human race generally.

This sorrow and toil is applicable, beyond agricultural labor, to all forms of work. We may think of the working conditions of factory workers in the Third World or even the exploitation of cheap labor in the service sector in the First World (with wages that often make it impossible to survive, much less to raise a family). It is relevant to top down management styles that give workers little voice, and to the workaholicism of many who are well-paid in the financial and tech sectors, which often leads to the breakdown of families.

Nevertheless, while work in a post-Fall world is often burdensome and even oppressive, work is not simply an evil to be endured. It is part of the

58. Note the parallel between the barrenness of the land (addressed to the man) and the barrenness of the womb (addressed to the woman). Both themes are picked up in the narrative of Genesis. For this interpretation, see Curley and Peterson, “Eve’s Curse Revisited,” 170.

59. Interestingly, it is not only humans who suffer the consequences of the transgression; God is also affected. Because the human heart has become evil (Gen 6:5) God is “grieved” or “pained” in his heart (Gen 6:6); the verb here is *yāšab*, from which the noun *’išābôn* (“pain” or “toil” or “sorrow”) is derived.

Creator's good purpose for humanity, and it is thus subject to the renewal that Christ brings.

Finally, we are told that the *ādām* will ultimately return to the dust of the *ādāmā* from which he was taken (Gen 3:19). This raises the question of why returning to the dust of the *ādāmā* is mentioned as a consequence of sin if humans were created mortal in the first place (and so would be expected to have a finite life span). This leads us to consider the conclusion of the story narrated in Genesis 2–3, which contains an important clue to a further meaning of the tree of life.

### Brokenness and Grace Outside the Garden (Genesis 3:21–24; Genesis 4–6)

The final consequence of the Fall, narrated at the end of Genesis 3, is that *haādām* is exiled from the garden (Gen 3:23), something clearly meant to apply to both the man and the woman. The reason YHWH God exiles them from the garden is to prevent them eating from the tree of life and thus *living forever* (Gen 3:22). This means that while eating from the tree of life initially symbolized human flourishing in God's world (living life to the fullest), at some point the Creator would have made this flourishing permanent (perhaps continual eating from this tree was necessary to live forever). Human disobedience, however, intervened and prevented them from reaching this goal. So, humans *continue* in their mortality.<sup>60</sup>

Just as God graciously clothes the naked humans with skins (Gen 3:21), even though this required the death of animals, so exiling them from the garden is not purely tragic; it is a remedial act of grace, which prevents the sinful human state from becoming permanent.<sup>61</sup> God's grace is further evident in his accompanying the exiled humans outside the garden, helping Eve to bring forth a child (Gen 4:1) and conversing with Cain—even putting a mark of protection on him (Gen 4:9–15).<sup>62</sup>

60. The Eastern Orthodox tradition (along with C. S. Lewis, in his novel *Perelandra*) has seen that there would have been a movement from initial mortality to immortality if the original humans had not sinned. Given the reality of sin, which has corrupted and distorted human life, we needed the intervention of God in Christ to lift the burden of sin and death ("the sting of death is sin"; 1 Cor 15:56) by the introduction of resurrection life (see 1 Cor 15:42–57).

61. The idea of sinful immortals might remind us of the character of Q in *Star Trek: The Next Generation*. A member of the Q Continuum (a group of immortal beings), with no sense of innate morality, Q toys with mere mortals (especially Captain Picard) for his own amusement and intellectual stimulation (to alleviate his boredom).

62. The fact that God speaks to Cain after the Fall suggests that the often-heard

Whereas *haādām* was originally created to work (*ābad*) and guard (*šāmar*) the garden (Gen 2:15), the human role is now limited to working (*ābad*) the ground *outside* the garden (Gen 2:23). This is a significant diminution of the original human task, which was never actually portrayed as fulfilled in the narrative of Genesis 2–3 (an episode describing that would need to be inserted between chapters two and three). Beyond that diminution, it is tragic that YHWH God must station cherubim with flaming sword to guard (*šāmar*) the garden—specifically the tree of life—from humans (Gen 3:24), who were its original guardians.

While life outside the garden is clearly difficult (the human-earth *relationship* has been somehow disrupted), the text does not say that "nature" was changed because of the Fall. The realism of the "thorns and thistles" (Gen 3:18) would simply be the world outside the garden; and this fits well what we know of the world in its natural state.

Nor does human nature suffer any sort of immediate and radical corruption, as the classical doctrine of "original sin" might suggest. The only change specifically mentioned at the end of Genesis 3 is that *haādām* "has become like one of us, knowing good and evil" (Gen 3:22), which is a fulfillment of what the snake had promised (Gen 3:5). Yet, according to Genesis 1 humans were *created* in God's image (Gen 1:26–27). They were *already* like God; it was not something they needed to attain (as the snake suggested). And this God-likeness was not connected to their knowing good and evil, but rather to their being granted dominion over the earth.<sup>63</sup>

So, when YHWH God affirms the truth of the snake's claim, that God-likeness has resulted from eating the forbidden fruit (Gen. 3:22), it has an ironic sense. They have indeed become like God, but in an inappropriate way—which will not be good for them. And their eyes were indeed opened, with the result that they knew they were naked and so they tried to cover their nakedness (Gen 3:7).<sup>64</sup>

Here it is helpful to counterbalance the classical notion of original sin (which assumes that all post-Fall humans come into the world enslaved to sin, by a quasi-genetic inheritance) with the actual narration of the development of sin in Genesis 4, and later in Genesis 6. The initial transgression

Christian definition of sin as *separation from God* is overly simplistic. It does not fit the narrative of Genesis (or the rest of Scripture, where God is often present to people despite their sin).

63. For an analysis of the relationship of human dominion over the earth and being created in God's image, see Middleton, *The Liberating Image*, esp. chap. 2: "The Symbolic World of Genesis 1."

64. The sort of knowledge of good and evil they acquired was: naked = *bad*; covered = *good*.

(the “originating sin”<sup>65</sup>) by the parents develops in the next generation into murder (Cain kills Abel). But this is not a necessary progression; the narrative portrays Cain’s struggle with anger and even depression (Gen 4:5) leading up to the murder, including God’s claim that he can “do well” and that although “sin is lurking at the door” he “must master it” (Gen 4:7). God’s words to Cain suggest that *sin* (the first use of this word in Genesis) is not inevitable for human beings; it can (initially, at least) be resisted.

It turns out that part of the problem with the classical notion of original sin (which assumes that everyone is born with a “sin nature”) is that Augustine misunderstood Paul’s point in Romans 5:12. Augustine rightly understood that “sin came into the world through one man, and death came through sin”; fair enough—this fits Genesis. But Augustine used an Old Latin translation of the New Testament (which shows up later in the Latin Vulgate); this translation goes on to say “and so death spread to all, *in whom* all have sinned” (where *in whom* means *in Adam*).<sup>66</sup> Augustine thought that because we (somehow) sinned *in Adam*, we genetically inherit a sinful nature from our parents. And many Christians since Augustine have followed his lead in thinking that everyone born after Adam is automatically a sinner, which often leads to a pessimistic view of human nature.

However, the NRSV better represents the original Greek of Paul’s formulation when it translates the contested phrase as “*because* all have sinned.” (Rom 5:12). The point is not that all humanity mysteriously sinned *in Adam*, but simply that we have all sinned, which is an empirical fact.

Indeed, rather than an immediate change in human nature, the narrative of Genesis portrays a *process* by which humans come more and more under the sway of sin. After Cain’s murder, we find Lamech’s revenge killing of a young man who injured him, a killing that he boasts about to his wives (Gen 4:23). Yet even here the growth of sin is intertwined with positive cultural innovation, such as the building of cities, the invention of new forms of livestock tending, musical instruments, and metal tools (Gen 4:17, 20–22). But sin continues to grow and infect the human race, until every “inclination of the thoughts of [the human heart] was only evil continually” (Gen 6:5), and the earth was destroyed or ruined (*sāḥat*) by the violence with which humans had filled it (Gen 6:11).

Here we finally have something as pervasive as “original sin” in the later theological sense of the term—that is, a situation of communal and systemic evil we are all born into (but this is a historical progression and

65. This is Fretheim’s term for what happens in Genesis 3; see Fretheim, *God and World in the Old Testament*, 70–76.

66. Augustine’s use of the Old Latin for Rom 5:12 is clear in his *On the Merits and Forgiveness of Sin* 1.10–11.

not a genetic inheritance). Such a developmental (and communal/systemic) view of sin as narrated in Genesis is true to human experience.

### The Restoration of Flourishing through Jesus Christ

Contrary, then, to how many Christians have interpreted Genesis 2–3, the text does not teach the subordination of women to men or the essentially fallen nature of work. Rather, it affirms the original equality of men and women and the dignity and value of work in God’s world. Human sin has, indeed, corrupted and distorted the mutuality of male-female relationships that God intended; and it has inhibited the ability of people to find meaning and sustenance from engaging the world with their gifts and abilities, which was God’s original purpose.

Indeed, sin has so permeated our world that we are all born into a social order that indelibly bears its marks (and our families of origin are not exempt either); the result is that sin becomes a lived, empirical reality for all people. And yet humans do not thereby lose the image or likeness of God, as Genesis 5:1 and 9:6 make clear by applying these terms to post-Fall human beings. A proper balance of human dignity (in God’s image) and human brokenness is necessary to understand the biblical picture of life in the contemporary world.

A beautiful articulation of this balance is found in C. S. Lewis’s *Prince Caspian*: “You come of the Lord Adam and the Lady Eve,” said Aslan. “And that is both honour enough to erect the head of the poorest beggar, and shame enough to bow the shoulders of the greatest emperor on earth.”<sup>67</sup>

But beyond distinguishing between God’s *creational* intent for the flourishing of human beings (the path of life and blessing) and the *fallen* reality of human brokenness (the path of death and curse), we also need to grasp the amazing *redemption* that is possible through Christ, a redemption that is applicable to every dimension of our lives that has been touched by sin.

In the words of the Christmas carol “Joy to the World,” “He comes to make his blessings known far as the curse is found.”<sup>68</sup> Perhaps this is why Paul is so excited in 2 Corinthians 5:17 that he leaves out a verb: “If anyone is in Christ—new creation! The old has passed away; behold, the new has come!”<sup>69</sup> And that “new creation” affects all relationships. As Paul says in Galatians

67. Lewis, *Prince Caspian*, 211–12.

68. “Joy to the World,” lyrics by Isaac Watts (1719).

69. This is my own literal translation.



3:28, "There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus."

Indeed, this new creation extends beyond human beings to the earth itself, and ultimately to all God has made. So, Colossians 1 tells us that that through Christ "God was pleased to reconcile to himself all things, whether on earth or in heaven, by making peace through the blood of his cross" (Col 1:20). And the apostle Petër (in a sermon in Jerusalem) connects Christ's second coming with "the time of universal restoration that God announced long ago through his holy prophets" (Acts 3:21). This leads to the Bible's expectation of nothing less than "a new heaven and a new earth" (Rev 21:1), a world "where righteousness is at home" (2 Pet 3:10).<sup>70</sup>

Beyond reading Genesis 2–3 in light of this vision of God's intent for flourishing, it is even more important that we *live towards* this vision, seeking to incarnate God's purposes for flourishing in every dimension of life—including our treatment of others (whether male or female) and our work and creative engagement with God's world. Then we will be on the road to manifesting B. T. Roberts's vision of social holiness.

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