

Why on earth? Genesis 2-3 and the Snake

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Abstract

Genesis 2-3 narrates the creation and fall of humankind. This narrative is generally acknowledged as myth, while earlier Ancient Near-Eastern traditions embedded in the story are often overlooked. This article focuses especially on the role of the trees and the snake in the garden. It will be demonstrated that the garden narrative is connected to the Sinai Covenant and the Mosaic Laws, as well as to the wisdom traditions in Proverbs and Ecclesiastes. Eventually conclusions are drawn about 'living in exile', wherever, whenever.

A INTRODUCTION

The narrative of Genesis 3, strongly influenced by Christian understandings, also bears the popular title: 'The narrative of the Fall' (Magonet 1992:39). In the Christian tradition this biblical chapter is about sin. Sin, in the form of the serpent seduced the woman to eat the forbidden fruit; the woman in turn seduced the man to do likewise. They consequently fell from the grace of God, were expelled from the garden, and were exposed to the hardship and suffering of the world.

However, this interpretation is post-biblical (Donaldson 1997:28), mainly resting on the writings of St. Paul and the later fifth-century theologian Augustine of Hippo. Paul (cf. Rom 5:12ff.) and Augustine ('City of God' 14:13) read this narrative allegorically in order to explain humanity's sin and redemption in Christ (see also Blenkinsopp 2004:99 and Kapelrud 1993:50). Furthermore, the New Testament, most conspicuously in Rev 12:9, directly links the 'serpent of old' to the 'Devil and Satan', thereby confirming to many Christians today that the snake in Genesis 3 is evil, sinister and without doubt the Devil and Satan of the New Testament. This notion is still accepted by some scholars. Oosterhoff (1972:220) of the late twentieth century proclaims that Genesis 3 pertains to the sin of disobedience and consequently explains why suffering and death came into the world. Also Ansell (2001:35) in the early twenty-first century follows what he calls an 'anthropocentric interpretation' of the story of the Fall and the origin of Satan.

This Christian doctrine of original sin does not hold the central place in Jewish readings of the Garden narrative (Morris 1992:117). Fortunately, today most Old Testament scholars following in the footsteps of Gunkel and Von

Rad, see this narrative against the backdrop of the Ancient Near East and Israel in dialogue with its neighbours. Von Rad (1972:87; see also Hanson 1972: 43) explicitly states that the serpent – or snake – ‘is not the symbol of a “demonic” power and certainly not of Satan’. Still working with the notion of the Yahwist, Von Rad agrees that the material of Genesis 3 contains a number of traditions common to the rest of the Ancient Near East, however, the Yahwist appropriates these mythological ideas in such a way that the biblical narratives are completely deprived of myth (Von Rad 1972:98). Yet, in demythologising the myth, Von Rad’s Yahwist may have created a problem that he never anticipated. Modern readers often take this narrative in a literal sense: there really was a garden, a forbidden tree, a man, a woman and a talking snake.

Common sense rebels against such a reading. Yet, if the Genesis 2-3 account is neither myth nor reality, how may these texts be interpreted alternatively?

Scholars differ vastly on this question. The only points of agreement seem to be that the serpent is not the Devil and that the narrative is one of suffering and loss. But there it ends. Consequently this article will address some interpretations of the Garden narrative and will point out those symbolic and mythological concepts attached to the objects in the garden.

B IN THE GARDEN THERE ARE...

1 Trees

In the Ancient Near East trees (and snakes – but for now the focus is on trees) were common yet simultaneously mythological objects. The ‘Tree of Life’ was a cosmological tree (O’Reilly 1992:170) with its roots in the underworld and the trunk passing through the centre of the earth. The branches reached out to the heavens to support the constellations. The fruit that it bore, offered healing and immortality. Gen 3:22 specifically mentions the ‘tree of life’ and the possibility to live forever if one should eat from it.

However, not the ‘tree of life’, but the so-called ‘tree of knowledge of good and evil’ caused the trouble in the first place. This tree holds two possibilities: who eats from it, shall die, according to the LORD God (Gen 2:17); also, who eats from it will become like God, knowing good from evil, according to the snake (Gen 3:5). Leaving aside for the moment the nature of the snake and the many questions surrounding this creature, Von Rad’s famous quotation may be cited: ‘We are not to be concerned with what the snake is but rather with what it says’ (Von Rad 1972:88). The serpent *speaks* to the woman, and it does so very cleverly. It probes her intellect (Carmichael 1992:51) by means of several suggestive questions. God’s words are subjected to doubt. His commandment is reduced to a mere saying. His authority is di-

minated. Furthermore, 'for the first time in the Old Testament God's words become subject to interpretation' (Emmrich 2001:13).

What happens?

The snake radicalises God's prohibition to eat from one tree, suggesting to the woman that God had forbidden them all trees (Gen 3:1). The woman on her part answers, apparently correcting the snake: the humans are not only prohibited from eating from the tree (Gen 2:16-17), but also from touching it (Gen 3:3). This is not quite what God had said – He only forbade them to *eat* from the tree. The snake takes away, the woman adds on to what God has said.

a Some observations concerning the Sinai Covenant and the Mosaic Laws

As has been said: the snake takes away, the woman adds on. Deut 4:2 explicitly states: *You shall not add to the word which I command you, nor take anything from it, that you may keep the commandments of the LORD your God which I command you.* Both snake and woman transgress this command (Emmrich 2001:14).

What is significant about the woman's adding to what God has said? The dietary prescriptions concerning clean and unclean food are expounded in Lev 11 and Deut 14:8b (Townsend 1998:406). The latter text is specific: *you shall not eat their* (i.e., unclean animals') *flesh or touch their dead carcasses.* Both eating and touching are forbidden. The food of the surrounding peoples, just like the fruit of the tree, looks tempting to touch and to eat, yet it is forbidden for the chosen people of YHWH. Thus, for the later Israel the tree of knowledge in the garden may have represented the prohibition regarding unclean food, and may have been unclean itself.

The snake, on the other hand, takes away everything the YHWH has said. It tempts the woman by suggesting something completely different. It does the same as the false prophet of Deut 13:1-3 (Emmrich 2001:16). It gives the woman a sign that does come true (v. 2): she does not die – contrary to what YHWH had forewarned in Gen 3:4. She is introduced to other insights, she is tempted towards another way of thinking and acting, contrary to the orders and commandments of God. And this is exactly what happens in Deut 13.

However, in the garden there were not one but at least two trees of significant value: the tree of knowledge of good and evil and the tree of life. The Lord God had promised life and abundance provided that his commandments are obeyed, but threatened the humans with a curse and death if they would transgress. They also seem to have had a choice between life and death. Deut 30:15-19 sets both these possibilities before the covenant people (Emmrich 2001:8). (Ansell (2001:41-43), despite his very conservative ap-

proach, acknowledges the covenantal aspects of the trees.) Love the Lord, serve him and live; follow other gods, serve them and die. Once again, a choice can be made, for the Lord, or for other gods. These components of life and death, of blessing and curse as well as the freedom to choose between good and evil are already present in the garden.

These observations lead to the proposition that the author of Gen 2-3 were well-acquainted with traditions of the exodus and exile which he consequently appropriated in a unique and creative manner. The garden portrays an ideal world, however, not one without restriction or temptation (Emmrich 2001:4). The ideal state can be realised and maintained on the condition that YHWH's commandments are adhered to. These YHWH makes clear: 'thou shalt' ... 'thou shalt not'. Temptation lurks in the form of the snake, false prophets who lure Israel away from the path of their Lord God.

Jewish interpretations – albeit allegorical - also view the Garden as the land of Israel; the 'Tree of Life' becomes the Torah; the expulsion from the Garden becomes the exile; the serpent becomes Samael or any evil inclination; 'tending' the garden becomes the study of the Torah and 'keeping' the commandments – and so forth (Morris 1992:117).

2 But in the garden also lurks...

a A snake...

What about the snake?

This is not an ordinary snake. It does not frighten the woman; it can speak; it has persuasive abilities; it has superior knowledge; it has insight into God's plans; yet it is only a creature that God created. Why would the biblical author choose a serpent for a decisive role in his narrative and not a lion or a crocodile or any other creature?

The snake in Gen 3 is not to be confused with the mythical monsters elsewhere in the Bible, for example, Leviathan in Is 27:1. It is a common, well-known animal like a fox or a crow (Sawyer 1992:66). Furthermore, in the hot, dry and desert like ancient Palestine and surroundings, snakes were plentiful (Pilch 2001:239), although many species mentioned in the Bible today cannot be recognised. Yet the ancient people knew perfectly well that some snakes were deadly poisonous and others completely harmless.

Snakes were feared for their deadly poison, yet at the same time they were believed to have regenerative, even life-giving potential. Both the lethal and healing capacities of serpents are revealed in the biblical account of Num 21:6-1, the so-called narrative of the 'bronze snake'. Israelites, bitten by poisonous snakes in the desert were resuscitated by looking up to a bronze snake that Moses had made on God's instructions. Even today medical doctors

have as their emblem a staff around which snakes are twisted. The Bible itself also refers to serpent worship in ancient Israel. The book of 2 Kings 18:4 links the bronze serpent of Moses directly to the cult of Nehushtan which king Hezekiah of Judah had effaced. Idols of snakes that attest to a serpent cult elsewhere in the Ancient Near East were discovered in Hazor, Bet-Shan, Bet Shemesh, Shechem and Geser (Kapelrud 1993:56).

Although the serpent of Gen 3 has nothing to do with any serpent cult and appears to be an ‘ordinary’ animal, one that God created, the mythical aspect may be worthwhile examining. Apparently humans were fascinated by these creatures that would glide on their bellies and cast off their skins. Ancient myths often connect a snake casting off its skin with the potential to rejuvenate, even to live forever (Van Selms 1979:64).¹ More or less during the eighth to the sixth centuries B.C.E. – but probably going back even further – Ancient Near-Eastern traditions held that humankind once had had the possibility to live forever. However, everlasting life was the privilege of the gods only, therefore humans had to be prevented from living forever. Between gods and humans a certain distance existed: humans were not allowed to attain the same level as the gods.

This implied that the interests of the gods needed protection and only the gods themselves would and could do so. In this regard snakes were observed as being ‘different’ from other creatures: they could live under the ground, they were quick, humans could not stop them, and they (seemingly) had the ability to rejuvenate. Consequently snakes came to be regarded as chthonic deities, their almost supernatural attributes making them suitable par excellence to protect the interests of the gods. Humans lose the possibility to live forever, not because they committed some kind of sin, but because they were tricked out of it by chthonic powers, usually in the form of a serpent (Kapelrud 1993:60; see also footnote 1).

In Jewish monotheism, Gen 3 deprives the snake from its divine-like powers (see also Penchansky 1997:47) by calling it an ‘animal of the field that the Lord God made’, yet it maintains supernatural abilities, especially its insight into God’s plan (Emmrich 2001:3; Penchansky 1997:48; Kapelrud 1993:58-60). The serpent appears to be natural and supernatural simultaneously. However, when it is cursed, it becomes less than a creature, the most despised of all (Carmichael 1992:49): it moves on its belly and eats dust. Whatever chthonic powers it once may have had, are taken away.

¹ The Standard Babylonian Epic of Gilgamesh (see Blenkinsopp 2004:96-97; George 1999 and George 2003) relates toward the end of Tablet XI how the hero lost his last chance of obtaining everlasting life due to a snake that snatched away a precious plant with rejuvenating capacities. Gilgamesh is just in time to see the creature casting off its old skin and sailing away young and new.

Read in this light, the thrust of the Gen 3 narrative is not a matter of sin, but about the question of the loss of everlasting life. Human beings are tricked by a power beyond their understanding (just like in the Gilgamesh Epic – cf. De Villiers 2006:29-30). The consequent suffering, hard work, labour pains and so forth are not a ‘curse’ on humanity, but part and parcel of life (Kapelrud 1993:60).

The symbolic function of serpents also drew attention in some former interpretations of the Gen 3 text. Earlier scholars (like M. Görg and W. von Soden in 1974 – see Holter 1999:111) were aware that Egyptian religion regarded serpents as symbols of wisdom and read Gen 3 against the background of J’s criticism against Solomon’s foreign policy and its open internationalisation (Holter 1999:111). Texts like 1 Kings 7:8 and 9:24 would indicate the leading position of the Pharaoh’s daughter in Jerusalem and the power that she had over Solomon. The serpent of Gen 3 thus represents Egyptian wisdom, independent of YHWH. Adam’s lack of resistance and almost meek compliance to Eve’s suggestion is the Yahwist’s way of indirectly criticising Solomon and his Egyptian wife. Holter (1999:109-111) takes this reasoning a step further. He notes that Is 14:29, Jer 8:17 and 46:22 appropriate נחש as a metaphor for Israel’s religious enemies. The criticism in Gen 3 is much wider than directed only at Solomon’s foreign policy. All Israel’s neighbours are included. The warning is that Israel might become too dependent upon and therefore vulnerable to all her neighbours. Holter (1990:109) states: ‘Even though these texts are younger than Genesis 3, they make it clear that the “serpent” might act in the Old Testament as a metaphor for the political enemies of Israel, a phenomenon which of course is linked to the important religious function serpents had among Israel’s surrounding peoples.’²

Thus, the Garden-narrative is interpreted in many and diverse ways, yet the outcome is clear: exile from the Garden implies lifelong suffering. One may even say that the first three chapters in their canonical form deal with the theodicy question (Veenker 2003:265).³

C WISDOM AND KNOWLEDGE

Driven from the garden, for whatever reason, the humans find themselves in exile. Yet they manage to survive. How is this possible? The nature of snakes may provide a clue.

² Von Rad 1972:102. ‘No prophet, psalm or narrator makes any recognisable reference to the story of the Fall’ – Holter’s earlier dating of the Isaiah-Jeremiah texts may be questioned.

³ Veenker 2003:265-272 sets aside Near Eastern connections of these narratives. The role of the snake is simply to exonerate YHWH from blame in order to maintain his status as ‘righteous, benign and omnipotent deity’ (p. 267).

The aspect of ‘wisdom’ connected to serpents should surely not be overlooked. ‘Subtle, shrewd, clever’ are the common translations for the Hebrew word עָרוּם. Most English translations interpret this attribute of the snake negatively and render it with ‘cunning’. However, this interpretation should not be taken for granted: subtle, shrewd and clever also carry positive connotations that may be linked to wisdom. Furthermore עָרוּם regularly occurs in the Wisdom Literature, especially in Proverbs (e.g. 12:16, 23; 13:16; 14:8, 15; Sawyer 1992:68), translated in these cases with ‘prudent’. Furthermore, the New Testament (Matth 10:16) is even positive about snakes: Jesus sends his disciples out with the words to ‘be as wise as serpents and harmless as doves’.

Given the idea that serpents carry a certain amount of ‘wisdom’ with them, what might this imply?

The wisdom of serpents represents ‘the power to succeed, the ability to survive, resourcefulness, shrewdness’ (Sawyer 1992:68), the same qualities that human beings also need for survival. These attributes are introduced when the woman eats from the ‘tree of knowledge of good and evil’. They become aware that they are naked. However, nakedness and the consequent shame that humans experience are those aspects that distinguish humans from animals. Humans are set above the animal world by means of acquired *knowledge* that enable them to *till the ground*, in other words, to pave the way towards civilisation and to cope with its demands.

The Eden story depicts an untrue-to-life existence (Carmichael 1992:49). There is no death, no sorrow, no hardship, no fear, no enmity. Humans, beasts and nature seem to be in perfect harmony. However, this peaceful scene is also an uncivilised one of humans going about naked and living day by day from hand to mouth (Westenholz & Westenholz 2000:443). Conquering nature by tilling the soil was a sign of civilisation for the Ancient Near-Eastern imagination (Westerman 1984:58). The Genesis-garden thus represents the pre-civilised unreal world of an artificial mythical past. Yet this garden also contains the very seed of civilisation: *knowledge*.

What type of *knowledge*?

Initially a negative shadow is cast over the beautiful garden: the man and the woman *fear* because they become aware that they are naked. But is fear necessarily a bad thing? Prov 1:7 explicitly states: The *fear* of the Lord is the beginning of *knowledge*. That is totally different from becoming ‘wise in one’s own eyes’ (Sawyer 1992:68), which means to seek wisdom knowledge apart from the *fear* of the Lord. *Fear* of the Lord calls for an attitude of profound respect (Hanson 1972:25).

However, the wisdom reflected in the Genesis-narrative seems more in line with the book of Ecclesiastes than with the optimistic knowledge of Pro-

verbs (Carmichael 1992:53). The dark side of wisdom and knowledge is expressed in Eccl 1:18: *For in much wisdom is much grief, and he who increases knowledge increases sorrow*. Civilised life is conscious of its achievements, but also of its burdens. Animals do not ask ‘why?’ They graze if they have food available, they go hungry if not. They take labour pains in their stride and do not worry about their death. Humans continuously question the meaning of life and never seem to arrive at a satisfactory answer. Did God perhaps forbid humans to eat from this tree because he wanted to save them from the pains of a conscious awareness of existence?

D CONCLUSION

The garden story may be interpreted in several ways. It is possible to draw direct links to the reasons for the exile and consequent suffering. On the other hand, the Gen 2-3 narrative may also be a philosophical guide about how to live in exile. Exile does not necessarily imply physical, geographical alienation, it may also be psychological, even amongst friends, family and colleagues. This is suffering at its worst.

Survival in miserable circumstances calls desperately for wisdom, for knowledge.

Paradise may be lost for ever; however, knowledge is gained.

Somehow the Gen 2-3 narrative challenges every reader to reinvent paradise with the knowledge and wisdom gained, to cast off the old skin of suffering and to glide forth...

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