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What Really Happened in the Garden of Eden

The primordial man and woman *may believe* they ate from the Tree of Knowledge, but they actually ate from the Life-Giving Tree. This causes a chain reaction leading to the emergence of sexuality, procreation, and continuity for the human species.

Prof. Jack M. Sasson



Adam and Eve in Eden, Jan Bruegel the Younger, ca. 1640 (detail). Wikimedia

Interconnected Etiologies

The narrative about the first human couple (Gen 2:4–3:24) is commonly referred to as the “second creation story,” but this is not really a good designation.^[1] In antiquity, and especially in Mesopotamia, creation accounts have comprehensive goals: While animals, humans, and their institutions, occasionally feature in such rehearsals, their main thrust is to explain why, how, and in what order under divine guidance the cosmos—heaven, earth, seas, and (rarely) underworld—came to be.^[2]

In contrast, dozens of “creation” stories from Mesopotamia have more limited objectives, offering anecdotal expositions of how specific objects, institutions, organisms, or professions originated. The purpose of such etiological stories is to give humans better control of conditions by detailing how they

came to be.^[3] Genesis 2–3 fits with this genre of tales; it is a series of nestled etiologies that, in perfect compliance with ancient tenets, anchors specific past events to their origins. The parable will have three earthly characters.

The Earthling

YHWH's first creation is a divinely quickened creature shaped from dirt/soil/earth, the material that covers much non-watery surfaces:

בראשית ב:ז וַיִּצְרֶה יְיָהוָה אֱלֹהִים אֶת הָאָדָם עָפָר מִן הָאֲדָמָה וַיִּפַּח בְּאַפָּיו נִשְׁמַת חַיִּים וַיְהִי הָאָדָם לְנֶפֶשׁ חַיָּה. Gen 2:7 YHWH God formed the earthling (*ha'ādam*) out of soil from the earth (*ha'ādāmā*, הָאֲדָמָה). He blew into his nostrils the breath of life, and the earthling became a living being.

The name “earthling” is explained based on his origins from the “earth”; such wordplays are essential to biblical literature, especially when establishing identity or predicting characteristics. To give Earthling purpose, an Edenic (in most senses) garden (גֶּן־עֵדֶן) is set for him to work and guard. It is full of remarkable trees, among them the “Life-giving Tree” described as planted at the center of the garden, and the “Tree of Knowledge, good or bad,” whose exact placement in the garden is not specified:

בראשית ב:ט וַיִּצְמַח יְיָהוָה אֱלֹהִים מִן הָאֲדָמָה כָּל עֵץ נָחֵמָד לְמַרְאֶה וְטוֹב לְמַאֲכָל וְעֵץ הַחַיִּים בְּתוֹךְ הָגֶן וְעֵץ הַדַּעַת טוֹב וָרָע. Gen 2:9 And from the ground YHWH God caused to grow every tree that was pleasing to the sight and good for food, **with the life-giving tree in the middle of the garden**, and the tree of knowledge, good or bad.^[4]

“Good or bad” is a merism (“contrastive elements that stand for the whole”), likely equivalent to “The Tree of (Total) Knowledge.” Potentially confusing, in Proverbs (3:18 and elsewhere) a “Tree of Life” (*‘ēṣ ḥayyîm*, עֵץ חַיִּים) is commonly a metaphor for wisdom. In this story, however, the Life-Giving Tree (*‘ēṣ ḥayyîm*, עֵץ חַיִּים), has another potential: to rejuvenate if not also to confer immortality.^[5]

Earthling is only forbidden to partake of the Tree of Knowledge lest he face immediate death:

בראשית ב:טז וַיֹּצֵא יְיָהוָה אֱלֹהִים עַל הָאָדָם לֵאמֹר מִכָּל עֵץ הָגֶן אָכַל תֹּאכַל. בִּיֹּזָה וּמִעֵץ הַדַּעַת טוֹב וָרָע לֹא תֹאכַל מִמֶּנּוּ כִּי בְיוֹם אֲכָלְךָ מִמֶּנּוּ מוֹת תָּמוּת. Gen 2:16 And YHWH God commanded the man, saying, “Of every tree of the garden you are free to eat; ^{2:17} but as for the tree of knowledge, good or bad, you must not eat of it; for as soon as you eat of it, you shall die.”

YHWH does not explain why Earthling should not eat this fruit nor clarify the reason and manner of death.

The Woman

Having created Earthling, YHWH realizes that it is not good for Earthling to be alone. Once again, YHWH acts as artisan, shaping a slew of creatures from the ground but leaving it up to Earthling to establish their characteristics and nature by imposing names on them.

YHWH's aim is to create for Earthling an עֶזֶר כְּנֶגְדּוֹ (*‘ezer kěnegdô*, Gen 2:18, 20), a much-debated phrase that might be rendered “matching partner.”^[6] Earthling proved discerning enough, however, not to ascribe to any of the creatures, from aardvark to zebra, traits that would make it a suitable companion. In this way, Earthling sets himself apart from the animal world. Neither divine nor animal, however, Earthling remains in generic limbo.

YHWH places Earthling into an imposed coma, and when he awakens, he meets Woman, divinely confected from Earthling's own anatomy but with a role as yet undefined. At this point, the narrator becomes obtrusive, first by crafting a pun to link אִישׁ (‘iš) Man to אִשָּׁה (‘iššā) Woman (2:23), then by foretelling how men will abandon their parents when sharing new homes with women (2:24).^[7]

We then learn that the two humans are naked (*‘ărûmmim*).

Gen 2:25 The two of them were naked, the man and his wife, but they did not shame each other.^[8]
 בְּרֵאשִׁית בָּכָה וַיְהִיו שְׁנֵיהֶם עֲרוּמִים הָאָדָם וְאִשְׁתּוֹ וְלֹא יָתְבַשְׁשׁוּ.

In ancient Semitic lore, nudity is rarely metaphoric for promiscuity, symbolic of childlike behavior, or a source for guilt. Rather, it connotes vulnerability due to lack of protection or wealth.^[9] Here it also highlights the couple's indifference to the procreative potential in their bodily differences so long as they remain in the Garden. This situation will soon change.

The Snake

The last main character is introduced through a word play on the previous verse:

Gen 3:1 Now the snake was the most *‘ārûm* of all the wild beasts that YHWH God had made...
 בְּרֵאשִׁית גִּ: אֵת הַנָּחָשׁ הָיָה עָרוּם מְכֹל חַיַּת הַשָּׂדֶה אֲשֶׁר עָשָׂה יְהוָה אֱלֹהִים...

The word *‘ārûm* is an adjective that derives from a different lexical root ע.ר.מ but aurally recalls that the pair were naked, *‘ărûmmim*, a word that derives from a different the root ע.ר.ו/ו.ר. The two words are thus not etymologically related but are homonyms. Snake's attribute gets many translations, from sinister (“cunning, shrewd, crafty, deceptive”) to potentially propitious (“astute, subtle, wise, intelligent”).^[10] Certainly, this creature was something beyond the animals in Earthling's naming spree, for it had language, limbs, awareness of a divine injunction, and is adept at persuasion. Consequently, whether to cast Snake as a satanic figure (as do Christian and early Jewish thinkers) or as a promethean enabler of human history is endlessly debated.

The Dare

Snake opens with the provocative intimation that the humans are forbidden to eat from *any* fruit of the garden:

בראשית ג:א ... ויאמר אל האשה אף כי אמר
Gen 3:1 ... He said to the woman, "Could God really have
אלהים לא תאכלו מכל עץ הגן. said: You must not eat of any tree of the garden....?"

The insinuation appears to be purposeful, baiting Woman into a response:

בראשית ג:ב ותאמר האשה אל הנחש מפרי עץ
Gen 3:2 The woman replied to the snake, "We may eat of
הגן נאכל. ב:ג ומפרי העץ אשר בתוך הגן אמר
the fruit of the other trees of the garden. ^{3:3} It is only
אלהים לא תאכלו ממנו ולא תגעו בו פן
about fruit **of the tree in the middle of the garden** that
תמתו. God said: 'You shall not eat of it or touch it, lest you
die.'"

Woman has creatively enlarged here. As commentators have long noted, she says it is forbidden to touch the tree whereas the only prohibition is to eat from it.^[11] More consequentially, she has identified the wrong tree! Woman identifies the forbidden fruit as belonging to "to the tree in the middle of the garden," which, as noted above, is where YHWH planted the "Life-Giving Tree," from which eating is not banned.

At this slip, Snake pounces. Knowing that this is not the forbidden tree, Snake tells Woman that they will not die by eating from it. Instead, Snake claims:

בראשית ג:ה כי ידע אלהים כי ביום אכלכם ממנו
Gen 3:5 For God knows that as soon as you eat of it your
ונפקחו עיניכם והייתם כאלהים ידעי טוב ורע. eyes will be opened and you will be like divine beings,
knowing good and bad.

Snake's assertion here is misleading, but not exactly a lie. In his conversation with Woman, Snake had deduced that Woman, and ostensibly Man, already could distinguish between what is good or bad for them. Otherwise, how could God have entrusted Earthling with establishing the nature of each animal, granted both the capacity to speak, or expected them to determine that violating God's command is bad while keeping it is good? Confirming Snake's inference, the next verse tells us that Woman surveys the tree independently and makes an intelligent observation, judging the fruit's potential to increase discernment:

בראשית ג:ו ותרא האשה כי טוב העץ למאכל
Gen 3:6 When the woman saw that the tree was good for
וכי תאוה הוא לעינים ונחמד העץ להשכיל
eating and a delight to the eyes, and that the tree was
ותקח מפריו ותאכל ותתן גם לאישה עמה
desirable as a source of wisdom, she took of its fruit and
ויאכל. ate. She also gave some to her husband, and he ate.

Believing it was forbidden to touch the fruit, the woman takes it in hand; in so doing, she tests the validity of YHWH's threat. Failing to drop dead, she takes a bite and shares it with the man who, whether he spotted Woman's mistake or not, eats and likewise survives. In fact, because neither one of them had actually violated YHWH's prohibition, they continue to live.

Disobedience and Punishment

The consequence of their having eaten the fruit of the Life-Giving Tree leads the pair into a reaction that may seem incongruous:

בראשית ג:ז וַתִּפְקַחְנָה עֵינֵי שְׁנֵיהֶם וַיֵּדְעוּ כִּי עֲרֻמִּם הֵם וַיִּתְּפְרוּ עָלֶיהָ תְּאֵנָה וַיַּעֲשׂוּ לָהֶם חֲגֹרֹת.
Gen 3:7 Then the eyes of both were opened and they realized that they were naked; and they sewed together fig leaves and made themselves loincloths.^[12]

Concealing their nakedness, they seek an identity that distances them from the animal world. Soon, Earthling and Woman hear YHWH strolling in the garden; they run and hide. When YHWH calls out, looking for Earthling, the latter has an excuse:

בראשית ג:י וַיֹּאמֶר אֶת קִלְדִּי שָׁמַעְתִּי בְּקוֹל וְאִירָא כִּי עֵרֹם אָנֹכִי וָאֶחָבֵא.
Gen 3:10 He replied, "I heard the sound of You in the garden, and I was afraid because I was naked, so I hid."

This, however, is a lie: Earthling is no longer naked and is now hiding when previously he had no reason to do so. The dissembling is manifest, prompting YHWH's largely rhetorical interrogation:

בראשית ג:יא וַיֹּאמֶר מִי הִגִּיד לְךָ כִּי עֵרֹם אָתָּה הֲמִן הָעֵץ אֲשֶׁר צִוִּיתִיךָ לֵבִלְתִּי אֲכָל מִמֶּנּוּ אֶכְלֹתָ.
Gen 3:11 Then He (YHWH) asked, "Who told you that you were naked? Did you eat of the tree from which I had forbidden you to eat?"

They ate from the Life-Giving Tree; but Earthling and Woman act as if they had sampled the forbidden tree. YHWH confronts them with their defiant act, neither denies it though each accuses someone else—Earthling blames Woman who in turn blames Snake (3:12–13)—thus confirming that a breach of trust had come to be between God and the pair.

Death and Immortality

YHWH's solution to this dilemma was to shape new configurations of identities; these are clarified in the section generally mislabelled "punishments" (3:14–19). The fate God assigns each of the characters skillfully locks all three in a cycle of perpetual linkage:

Cursed, **Snake** loses its extraordinary attributes, becoming a snake, the slithery reptile familiar to us. Its brood survives on the gritty remains (עפר) of the pair, now its mortal enemy. (Gen 3:14–15)

Woman is not cursed. Through miraculous albeit painful birthgiving she will henceforth guarantee the perpetuity of humankind rather maintain an individual permanence in the garden. Not the “matched partner” as predicted at 2:18 (*‘ēzer kěnegdô*) but now a full mate, Woman is blessed with generative power as well as endowed with an instinctive drive and desire (*těšûqâ*, תְּשׁוּקָה) for mating and procreation.

As for **Earthling**, the instant death that God had threatened now morphs into the certain death that over time will overtake him, his mate, and each of their descendants. Their living space, Earth, is now grounded in a curse, requiring labor and toil to sustain mortal flesh. And when they die, their corpses crumble into the soil (עפר) that keeps snake alive. (Gen 3:17)

The etiologies are now fully formulated. Woman has now acquired her full potential:

בראשית ג:כ *Gen 3:20* The earthling named his wife *Havvâ* (Eve),
וַיִּקְרָא הָאָדָם שֵׁם אִשְׁתּוֹ חַוְוָה כִּי הִוא הִיְתָה אִם כָּל חַי. because she was the mother of all the living (*hay*).^[13]

Earthling names Woman “Eve” (*Havvâ*) because she has become the ancestress for all human beings. With the introduction of sexuality and fertility into humanity, clothing comes to accentuate the distinctiveness of the new beings. In turn, Earth has become a demanding habitat for Earthling, better known to us as Adam. In addition to imposing the penalty of sweat and toil on Earthling, YHWH introduces two new elements to the human condition: Death and regeneration.

YHWH had threatened Earthling that if he eats from the Tree of Knowledge, he will die. While they ended up biting into the fruit of the Life-Giving Tree, the punishment for disobedience stands. Yet YHWH grants them the immortality they had achieved, not as permanence for each of them, but as perpetuity for the entire species. Death is now fated for all future individuals, a persistent punishment for defiance and disobedience.

Preventing Divinity

Earthling and Woman were created with the ability to have knowledge; but YHWH had imposed obedience as a partition between them and divinity. The prohibition from eating the forbidden fruit had become a test for compliance, one that the two had miserably failed. YHWH has now set the new order to maintain a distinctive hierarchy of power.

בראשית ג:כא *Gen 3:21* And YHWH God made garments of skins for
וַיַּעַשׂ יְיָהוָה אֱלֹהִים לְאָדָם וּלְאִשְׁתּוֹ כִּתְנוֹת עוֹר וַיַּלְבִּשֵׁם. Adam and his wife, and clothed them.

They are now dressed, but the garbing of animal skins that they are made to wear gives them a semblance to the animal order they had sought to escape.^[14] Still, this symbolic difference could hardly be sufficient, as God concedes:

בראשית ג:כב וַיֹּאמֶר יְיָהוָה אֱלֹהִים הֵן הָאָדָם הָיָה
 כְּאַחַד מִמֶּנּוּ לְדַעַת טוֹב וָרָע וְעַתָּה פֶּן יִשְׁלַח יָדוֹ
 וְלָקַח גַּם מִעֵץ הַחַיִּים וְאָכַל וְחַי לְעֹלָם.
 Gen 3:22 And YHWH God said, “But the earthling has
 been like one of us, knowing good and bad, what if he
 should stretch out his hand and take also from the Life-
 Giving tree and eat and live forever!”

In acknowledging that he had already bestowed on humans some capacity for knowledge, YHWH recognizes that a multiplying humanity that deepens its foray into wisdom even as it continues to access the life-giving fruit might lead to a profusion of divine beings. God’s final moves, therefore, is to remove the pair from the garden and to establish fierce guardians (*kěnīvīm*, כְּנִיבִים) to deny it access to Life-giving Tree (Gen 3:23–24)

The Human Drama

Together, Eve and Adam have now initiated human history, a never-ending tale of defiance and submission in which people grow, accumulate knowledge, strive for wisdom, but still die. The new species is neither divine nor animal but holds elements from both. In the future, their offsprings may imagine that building towers will storm heaven; but their only sure path to everlasting life though the Life-giving Tree is now blocked forever.

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Footnotes

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[1] For a fuller version of this note, with adequate references, see Jack M. Sasson “Time and Mortality: Creation Narratives in Ancient Israel and in Mesopotamia,” in *Papers on Ancient Literatures: Greece, Rome and the Near East*, eds., Ettore Cingano & Lucio Milano (Padova: S.A.R.G.O.N / Editrice e Libreria, 2008), 489–509 [495–501].

[2] *Enuma Elish*, frequently mislabeled “The Mesopotamian Creation Epic,” certainly falls in this category. It is a sprawling chronicle that primarily aimed to enhance the reputation of Babylon and of Marduk, its chief god. Genesis 1–2:4 belongs here too, and it too has the alternative goal to affirm a link between Israel and God. I present this succinctly in Jack M. Sasson “Genesis of Time,” *TheTorah* (2019).

[3] Often reproduced is “The Worm and the Toothache,” an etiology in which a whittled down order of creation culminates in the formation of Worm. It proves to be the cause of human pain when it disobeys divine instruction and lodges itself in the jaw. For its temerity, Worm is fated to be mercilessly (but not ouchlessly for the sufferer) yanked out by practiced hands. In some cases, etiologies open on conditions that

have not yet come to be. Such negatively stated situations are teasers, promoting expectations of reversals that need to happen before attaining a satisfying conclusion. In Genesis, vegetation had not yet sprouted on Earth and a human being was not yet formed. Their reversal will come at the close of these narratives, at Gen 3:17-20.

[4] Several verses (2:10-13) follow with a topographical description of the garden. They might well have had a function in the core narrative; yet, aside for encouraging scholars to bravely fix the garden on current maps (Southern Iraq is a favorite), no adequate explanation for its location or purpose has emerged.

[5] Both these arboreal phrases are unique to our passage from which are derived Revelation 2:7 (and elsewhere there). Mesopotamian literature tells only about plants that rejuvenate (as in the *Gilgamesh Epic*) and potions that confer immortality (as in the *Adapa* legend).

[6] Editor's note: For some discussion of this phrase, see Raanan Eichler, "Gender Equality at Creation," *TheTorah* (2015); Tamara Cohn Eskenazi, "Non-Gender Equality at Creation," *TheTorah* (2015); Gary A. Rendsburg, "Woman: Helpmate No Longer," *TheTorah* (2021).

[7] The narrator's explanations are clever but not sustained either grammatically or anthropologically. In the first case, "Woman" ('iššā, אִשָּׁה, pl. נָשִׁים) is more likely to share lexicographic affinity with "human being" ('ēnôš, אָנוֹשׁ) rather than with "Man" ('iš, אִישׁ). In the second, in almost all ancient Near Eastern marriages it is the woman who moves into her groom's household. Editor's note: See discussion in Ziony Zevit, "Does a Man Need to Leave His Parents to Cling to His Wife?" *TheTorah* (2016).

[8] The verbal form יִתְּבוֹשְׁשׁוּ (yitbôššāšû), Gen 2:25) is an imperfect, so connoting a continuous action. In the Hitpolel conjugation, it formulates a factitive ("to make something or someone perform an act") as well as a distributive or reciprocal ("to do something for or to each other"). As a result, different renderings of the elements are possible, among them "they did not embarrass each other." See my discussion in Jack M. Sasson "wēlō' yitbôššāšû (Gen 2,25) and Its Implications," *Biblica* 66 (1985): 418–421.

[9] A Sumerian poet speaks of primordial days when humans behaved as beasts: "They did not know about wearing clothes; they went about with naked limbs in the Land. Like sheep they ate grass with their mouths and drank water from the ditches." From, "The debate between Grain and Sheep."

[10] In Job 5:12 and 15:5 the adjective is pejorative. The remaining references occur in Proverbs and are mostly about prudence and circumspection.

[11] Traditional exegesis suitably reminds that the ban against sampling it was set before her creation. Still, according to 3:6, Earthling stood by her during the exchange but chose not to interfere.

[12] It is surely trivial of me to note that fig leaves would not make for sensible covering as their surface contains furocoumarins, a skin irritant. The couple obviously has yet to attain total wisdom.

[13] Ironically, in some Semitic languages the lexical root for Eve's name stands for "snake."

[14] In my reading, YHWH's dressing them is by no means simply a sign of God's solicitude for a punished couple. People ordinarily wore textile, with only their sandals, belts and headgears made of leather. In

Mesopotamian lore, defeated enemies are clothed in skin as a form of humiliation. When Grief-stricken, Gilgamesh dons animal skins as he embodies the feral days of his dead partner, Enkidu.



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