

Evolution and the Fall

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4 Reading Genesis 3 Attentive to Human Evolution

Beyond Concordism and Non-Overlapping Magisteria

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Let us begin by reimagining the scripture/science conversation. Although there are divergences of opinion on details (since the science is always being refined), most paleo-anthropologists date the first hominin remains to some six or seven million years ago, with the Australopithecines appearing about four million years ago and the genus *Homo* about two million years ago (*Homo habilis*).¹ The most likely current hypothesis for the evolution of anatomically modern *Homo sapiens* places their origin some 200,000 years ago, with a minimum population of anywhere from 2,000 to 10,000.²

Many skeptics and committed Christians alike have judged this scientific account incompatible with the biblical version of the origin of the humanity recounted in the early chapters of Genesis. From the skeptical side, the Bible has often been dismissed because its mythical or prescientific account of origins (both cosmic and human) is thought to contradict what we know from modern science. This skeptical approach is most evident in the “warfare” model of science and religion made famous by John W. Draper and Andrew Dickson White in the nineteenth century, and perpetuated by the

1. Contemporary anthropologists have come to use the term *hominin* (rather than *hominid*) to refer to the grouping of humans with their prehuman relatives (this includes the genus *Homo*, as well as distant relatives, such as the *Australopithecines*). The term *hominid* now refers to the larger grouping, including all monkeys and apes.

2. Nothing in what follows is determined by these particular estimates; science is a fallible, ever-changing project, and it is to be expected that details of these estimates will be disputed, and indeed will change over time.

new atheists like Christopher Hitchens and Richard Dawkins in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries.³

Many Christians (especially evangelicals and fundamentalists in North America) have bought into the warfare model, with the difference that they assume the “literal” truth of the biblical account—taking “literal” in the sense of necessitating a one-to-one correspondence between details of this account and events and actualities in the empirical world.⁴ This approach, which often goes by the name “scientific creationism” or “creation science” (or, more recently, “origin science”) assumes that the Bible intends to teach a true scientific account of cosmic origins—including a young earth and the discontinuity of species (particularly the discontinuity of humans from other primates).⁵

Since this way of reading biblical creation accounts clearly contradicts the understanding of origins provided by modern science (both in cosmology and in evolutionary biology), proponents of “creation science” typically dismiss the putative claims of modern science (at least in the case of cosmic and biological origins) as ideologically tainted. The result is a concordist attempt to force science to fit what the Bible is thought to say about these topics.⁶

3. John W. Draper, *History of the Conflict between Religion and Science* (1874); Andrew Dickson White, *A History of the Warfare of Science with Theology in Christendom* (1896); this latter is an expanded version of an earlier and shorter work by White, titled *The Warfare of Science* (1876). Christopher Hitchens, *God Is Not Great: How Religion Poisons Everything* (New York: Twelve Books, 2007); Richard Dawkins, *The God Delusion* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 2006).

4. There is another sense of “literal,” from the Latin *ad litteram*, equivalent to reading according to the intended genre of the work.

5. Both the skeptical and Christian assumption of a “warfare” model can be understood as versions of the “conflict” model of relating religion and science propounded by Ian Barbour in his famous fourfold typology of their possible relationships (Barbour, *Issues in Science and Religion*, first published in 1966).

6. A more recent concordist approach works in the opposite direction, attempting to harmonize the Bible with the conclusions of modern science. This approach, spearheaded by Hugh Ross and the organization called “Reasons to Believe,” attempts to make the Bible agree with modern cosmology (the Reasons to Believe website is: <http://www.reasons.org/>). In this approach, the Bible’s statements about the nature and origin of creation are not understood in their ancient conceptual context, but interpreted so as to make them harmonize (anachronistically) with modern scientific claims (including a universe of galaxies billions of years old). Yet at one point this concordist project agrees with that of “creation science”—biological evolution (especially human evolution) is beyond the pale. See, for example, Fazale Rana and Hugh Ross, *Who Was Adam? A Creation Model Approach to the*

One of the most problematic dimensions of affirming both biblical origins and biological evolution is the doctrine of the “Fall,” since the Bible seems to teach (in Genesis 3) a punctiliar event in which an original couple transgressed God’s commandment after an initial paradisiacal period. Whether the classical doctrine of “original sin” is required (in all its specificity) for creedal orthodoxy is an open question. Nevertheless, the Bible itself certainly seems, at first blush, to tie the origin of evil to an understanding of human beginnings that is quite different from what we find in evolutionary biology.

Given the putative contradiction between biblical-theological claims and evolutionary science, what’s an honest Christian to do? Suppose someone wants to do justice both to biological evolution and to the historic Christian faith (“that was once for all entrusted to the saints”; Jude 3), how might one go about affirming both with integrity?⁷

The most common approach has been to utilize some version of Stephen Jay Gould’s proposal of Non-Overlapping Magisteria (NOMA), which would separate biblical and theological truth from scientific truth as belonging to distinct conceptual domains, which therefore guarantees no contradiction between them.⁸

Variants of NOMA can be found, with or without the explicit terminol-

Origin of Man (Colorado Springs: NavPress, 2005). Among Ross’s many books is his early *The Fingerprint of God* (Orange, CA: Promise Publishing, 1989; 3rd ed. 2005). For Ross’s more recent attempt to harmonize science and the Bible, see *Hidden Treasures in the Book of Job: How the Oldest Book of the Bible Answers Today’s Scientific Questions* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2011). The advertising for this book states that “Job is filled with rich insight into both ancient and modern questions about the formation of the world, the difference between animals and humans, cosmology, dinosaurs and the fossil record, how to care for creation, and more.”

7. From here on all biblical quotations will be from the New Revised Standard Version unless otherwise noted.

8. Stephen Jay Gould, “Non-Overlapping Magisteria,” *Natural History* 106 (March 1997): 16–22. Gould proposed this way of conceiving the relationship of theology and science in the aftermath of Pope John Paul II’s address on evolution and faith to the Pontifical Academy of Sciences in 1996, although he traces his reflections on the issue back to a 1984 trip to the Vatican City (sponsored by the same Academy) during which he discussed evolution and Christian theology with a group of Jesuit scientists. Gould makes the point that he is not inventing the approach of NOMA, only the terminology. Gould explains that this has been the *de facto* approach of the Catholic Church since at least Pope Pius XII’s 1950 encyclical, *Humani generis*, and that John Paul’s 1996 address was a self-conscious attempt to address a certain reticence on the part of Pius regarding the *factuality* of evolution (even though he had proposed that there was, *in principle*, no contradiction between evolution and faith).

ogy, among many writers on the subject of Christianity and evolution, since it provides a helpful methodological alternative to the warfare model.⁹ In contrast to the assumption of many evangelical or fundamentalist Christians that an evolutionary account of human origins is incompatible with the biblical account of “Adam,” increasing numbers of scientists and theologians today are attempting positively to affirm an orthodox Christian faith along with scientific findings about biological evolution. Whether described as “theistic evolution” (the older term) or “evolutionary creation” (the more recent term, used, for example, by BioLogos), this attempt to honor both the non-negotiable authority of scripture and the cumulative research of more than a century of paleontology, along with the recent contribution of genetics, is commendable.

As an alternative to a naïvely concordist attempt at reconciling scripture with science, the embrace of NOMA by contemporary Christians is fully understandable. It allows evolutionary scientists to get on with their work, without having to compromise their findings with the putative truths of theology. And theologians can likewise reflect on God’s role in the biological processes of life’s development, without being proscribed by science.

But is that all there is to be said? As a biblical scholar, am I to simply bracket the scientific account of human origins (and ignore what I know of hominin evolution) when I interpret Genesis 3? Certainly, the assumptions and presuppositions of the interpreter must affect—in some way—what he sees (and doesn’t see) in scripture. And does the Bible not have any relevance for thinking about evolution? In what follows I intend to think evolution *together* with the biblical account of the origin of evil in Genesis 3.

Here I am emboldened by the work of Old Testament scholar William Brown, especially in his attempt to move beyond both concordism and NOMA to an exploration of possible “resonances” that might arise from a “cross-disciplinary conversation” between the Bible and science.¹⁰

In his brilliant and inspiring work *The Seven Pillars of Creation*, Brown explores the major creation texts in the Old Testament (including Genesis 2–3) in connection with contemporary science, utilizing a three-step method. Beginning with an *elucidation* of each text, Brown then *associates* the theological themes of the text in question with what he discerns might

9. NOMA seems to correspond to Ian Barbour’s “independence” model of the relationship of religion and science. That is, there isn’t any conflict between them, but the nature of the relationship is not clearly specified.

10. William P. Brown, *The Seven Pillars of Creation: The Bible, Science, and the Ecology of Wonder* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), 8.

be relevant aspects of the world we know from science, which he then explores. Finally, he then returns to the biblical text with the insights gained from science in order to *appropriate* the text for its wisdom and relevance for life today. Brown conceives this process as “a hermeneutical feedback loop”¹¹ between the biblical text and contemporary science whereby a variety of “consonances,” “correlations,” “connections,” “points of contact,” or “parallels” between the text and our scientific knowledge may be explored.¹²

What prevents this from simply being a new attempt at concordism or harmonization?¹³ First, Brown is clear that these connections are “*virtual* parallels,” “*analogous* points of contact or *imaginative* associations”—in other words, there is an ineluctable element of interpretive subjectivity here.¹⁴ Second, Brown treats scripture as an ancient text, with no knowledge of contemporary science, and acknowledges that we therefore need to be aware of “claims made by the biblical text about the world that *conflict* with the findings of science”; he thus suggests that we attend to the “*disjunctions*” and “*collisions*” as much as to the resonances.¹⁵ That this is different also from NOMA is clear, since on that model neither discourse, the biblical-theological nor the scientific, is allowed to inform the other. Thus Brown suggests (tongue in cheek) that we might think of his approach as “TOMA or ‘tangentially overlapping magisteria.’”¹⁶

Is Brown then suggesting that contemporary science should shape our theology or our interpretation of scripture? Not quite. His suggestion is that while science should not dictate the direction of biblical interpretation, it may “nudge the work of biblical theology in directions it has not yet ventured and, in so doing, may add another layer to Scripture’s interpretive ‘thickness’ . . . or wondrous depth.”¹⁷

My approach to the relationship of scripture and science in this chapter is similar to that of Brown, with three caveats or differences. First, whereas Brown focuses on the relationship between creation texts and contemporary

11. Brown, *Seven Pillars of Creation*, 16.

12. Brown, *Seven Pillars of Creation*, 9–10.

13. In conversation, Brown has quipped that *completely* overlapping magisteria would result in COMA!

14. Brown, *Seven Pillars of Creation*, 10 (my emphases).

15. Brown, *Seven Pillars of Creation*, 10 (my emphasis).

16. Brown, *Seven Pillars of Creation*, 17. We should note that Gould himself admitted that the two domains of science and theology often rub up against each other in interesting ways, which require negotiation.

17. Brown, *Seven Pillars of Creation*, 16.

science, I will attempt to read the narrative of the “Fall” in Genesis 2–3 in relation to what we know of the evolutionary history of *Homo sapiens*. Second, whereas there are many dimensions of the scientific understanding of the world that Brown is able to draw upon in his interpretation of biblical creation accounts, there is very little that scientists understand about the origin of religion, morality, and ethics among *Homo sapiens*. Finally, whereas Brown is able to move in the scope of his lengthy book from the biblical text to contemporary science, and then back to the biblical text, the space limitations of this chapter preclude any such lengthy three-part exposition.

My approach will be to range over a number of prominent themes or motifs in the garden story of Genesis 2–3, exploring the significance of these themes for human evolution and, alternatively, how an understanding of evolution might help us interpret the themes or motifs in the texts (although sometimes I may simply raise questions to which I don’t have clear answers at the moment). I thus conceive of this chapter as an experimental probe in two directions—to see if the biblical text might help us think about the origin of moral consciousness among *Homo sapiens* and whether our current knowledge of the evolution of *Homo sapiens* might illuminate aspects of the text that readers have previously missed. Along the way, my reading of the biblical text and the evolution of *Homo sapiens* will draw upon a virtue-ethics approach to the development of moral consciousness. My hunch is that a close reading of Genesis 2–3 in connection with human evolution might shed light on conceptualizing the origin of moral evil, including the notion of a “historical” or “eventful” Fall.¹⁸

The ‘ādām–’ādāmâ Connection

Although my focus in what follows will be on Genesis 3, this chapter is part of a larger, coherent literary unit that begins with Genesis 2:4b. It is, therefore, not inappropriate to begin with the origin of humanity as portrayed in Genesis 2.¹⁹

18. Thus I am working with the thesis articulated by James K. A. Smith (in his chapter in this volume) that some notion of a historical origin of human evil is consistent with (perhaps demanded by) orthodox Christian faith.

19. Much more could be said about the relationship between the Bible’s depiction of human origins and what we know from the state of current evolutionary science. Recent works (with slightly different perspectives) include Peter Enns, *The Evolution of Adam: What the Bible Does and Doesn’t Say about Human Origins* (Grand Rapids: Brazos, 2012);

Let us start with the name *Adam*. Is it significant that this name (like many of the names in the early chapters of Genesis) is clearly symbolic? Adam (‘ādām) means “human.” Indeed, Adam becomes a proper name only in Genesis 4 and 5; prior to that he is *hā’ādām* (the human).²⁰ So we seem to be justified in viewing him both as the first human and archetypally as everyman or everyone.

We should also note that the word for the first human (‘ādām) functions as part of a Hebrew pun or wordplay throughout Genesis 2 and 3, where it sounds like (or resonates aurally with) the word for soil or ground (’ādāmâ). Biblical scholars have suggested various equivalent English puns, such as the *earth creature* from the *earth*, the *groundling* from the *ground*, the *human* from the *humus*.²¹ The point is that the aural resonance of ‘ādām and ’ādāmâ suggests a primal ontological resonance between the human and his earthly context. Not only is the human taken from the ground (a matter of derivation or origin), the human purpose is to work the ground (a matter of calling or vocation). Due to human sin, the ground is cursed, in the sense that the human’s relationship with the ground becomes difficult (work becomes toil); primal resonance becomes dissonance. And death is described as returning to the ground from which the human was taken.²²

Throughout this entire storyline, the aural resonance of human and ground (‘ādām and ’ādāmâ), along with the narrated contours of their interdependence, suggests that humans are fundamentally earth creatures or

and John H. Walton, *The Lost World of Adam and Eve: Genesis 2–3 and the Human Origins Debate* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2015).

20. There are four places in the narrative of Gen. 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 *lē’ādām* (to/for the human); here the preposition *lē* (to or for) is appended to ‘ādām without the vowel change that usually indicates a definite article (*lā’ādām*). However, in the first case (2:20), the same verse also uses *hā’ādām* (the human); and it should be remembered that there would have been no distinction in the Hebrew consonantal text (so the Masoretic Text vowel pointing 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 *hā’ādām*. In Gen. 5:1, which begins a genealogy, we finally have the proper name *Adam* clearly intended.

21. For example, Phyllis Tribble suggests the translation “earth creature” taken from the “earth,” in *God and the Rhetoric of Sexuality, Overtures to Biblical Theology* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1978), 76–78; Brown, *Seven Pillars of Creation*, 81–88.

22. For a fuller exploration of the centrality of the ‘ādām–’ādāmâ connection in the Primeval History, see Patrick D. Miller Jr., *Genesis 1–11: Studies in Structure and Theme* (Sheffield: JSOT, 1978), chap. 3: “The ‘ādāmâ Motif.”

groundlings. This—together with the fact that the animals are also taken from the ground (Gen. 2:19)—may be helpful in thinking about how the picture of humanity in Genesis 2 might relate to what we know of human and animal origins from evolutionary history. Might this continuity of human and ground even help us in thinking about the similarity of many traits and abilities found in various animals that were once thought to be unique to humanity?

The Garden of Eden and the Breath of Life

In Genesis 2, the locale for primordial humanity is a garden. 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.²³ 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 divine 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 God "walks" in proximity to humanity.²⁴

It is also significant that a sacred grove beside a primeval river is the typical setting for the *mīs pī* (mouth washing) or *pīt pī* (mouth opening) ritual, known from Mesopotamian texts. This was the ritual process through which a humanly constructed cult image was vivified and transformed ("transub-

23. See Gordon J. Wenham, "Sanctuary Symbolism in the Garden of Eden Story," *Proceedings of the World Congress of Jewish Studies* 9 (1986): 19–25. Reprinted in *I Studied Inscriptions from Before the Flood: Ancient Near Eastern, Literary, and Linguistic Approaches to Genesis 1–11*, ed. Richard S. Hess and David Toshio Tsumura, Sources for Biblical and Theological Study 4 (Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 1994), 399–404.

24. Besides Wenham's pioneering work, see Gregory K. Beale, *The Temple and the Church's Mission: A Biblical Theology of the Dwelling Place of God*, New Studies in Biblical Theology 17 (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2004); T. Desmond Alexander, *From Eden to the New Jerusalem: An Introduction to Biblical Theology* (Grand Rapids: Kregel, 2009); and the essays in *Heaven on Earth: The Temple in Biblical Theology*, ed. T. Desmond Alexander and Simon J. Gathercole (Carlisle, UK: Paternoster, 2004). I have addressed the motif of the cosmos as temple in *The Liberating Image: The Imago Dei in Genesis 1* (Grand Rapids: Brazos, 2005), chap. 2; "The Role of Human Beings in the Cosmic Temple: The Intersection of Worldviews in Psalms 8 and 104," *Canadian Theological Review* 2, no. 1 (2013): 44–58; and *A New Heaven and a New Earth: Reclaiming Biblical Eschatology* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2014), chaps. 2 and 8.

stantiated," says one scholar²⁵) from an inert wooden statue into a living breathing "image" of a god.²⁶ 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), this has nothing to do with infusing a Platonic soul into matter (indeed, the human becomes a "living soul" [King James Version] or organism).²⁷ Rather, the text narrates God's consecration of humanity to bear the divine image, or—more forcefully put—to become the cult-image of God on earth, a distinctive site of divine presence. This motif shows the profound unity-in-diversity of Genesis 1 and 2, since the two texts are able to convey the same theological conceptuality through quite different literary motifs.

What are the implications of this picture of God consecrating and vivifying a lump of dirt in Genesis 2:7 to become the *imago Dei*? Is this picture suggestive for understanding the evolution of *Homo sapiens*, whether their evolution from previous hominin ancestors or their development of religious and moral consciousness (which seems to have occurred long after anatomically modern humans had evolved)?²⁸

However, it isn't clear that the *imago Dei* is equivalent to having a religious or moral consciousness. Indeed, we should be wary of understanding the *imago Dei* in terms of any distinctive human qualities, since almost every human quality has some analogue in other animal species. Contrary to the classical idea that the image of God can be reduced to certain innate faculties of the human "soul" (such as rationality, immortality, conscience, creativity, or a *sensus divinitatus*), which distinguishes us from other animals, most Old

25. For "transubstantiation," see Thorkild Jacobsen, "The Graven Image," in *Ancient Israelite Religion: Essays in Honor of Frank Moore Cross*, ed. Patrick D. Miller Jr., Paul D. Hanson, and S. Dean McBride (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1987), 15–32. Stephen L. Herring has applied Jacobsen's analysis of the Mesopotamian ritual to Genesis 1 in "A 'Transubstantiated' Humanity: The Relationship between Divine Image and the Presence of God in Genesis 1 26f.," *Vetus Testamentum* 58 (2008): 480–94.

26. For a detailed study of Genesis 2–3 and the Mesopotamian (and equivalent Egyptian) ritual, see Catherine McDowell, *The "Image of God" in Eden: The Creation of Mankind in Genesis 2:5–3:24 in Light of the mīs pī, pīt pī and wpt-r Rituals of Mesopotamia and Ancient Egypt*, Siphut: Literature and Theology of the Hebrew Scriptures 15 (Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 2015).

27. The same term (*nepeš ḥayyâ*) is used both of the human (Gen. 2:7) and of animals (Gen. 2:19), rendered by the New Revised Standard Version as "living being" and "living creature," respectively.

28. It is particularly difficult to estimate when *Homo sapiens* began to show evidence of religious or moral consciousness. Some suggest that religion may be correlated with certain types of burial practices, but there is no widespread agreement on this point. Clear evidence of religious relics and altars don't appear in the archeological record until much later.

Testament scholars now understand the *imago Dei* in terms of what might be called a *functional* interpretation. That is, humanity as God's image refers primarily to the human *calling* or *vocation* to represent God in the world; we might even call this a *missional* interpretation.²⁹

We might thus think of the *imago Dei* as analogous to the biblical notion of *election*. Note that prior to their election with a unique vocation, Israel had no particular distinction from other peoples.³⁰ Therefore, whatever hominin species existed prior to, or along with, *Homo sapiens*, could it be that at some point God elected *Homo sapiens* (or perhaps some particular population of them) to bear the divine image?³¹

The Garden as a Localized Cultural Project

There is another important dimension of the garden in Genesis 2–3 that may be significant for our purposes. Here we should note that the garden is not simply equivalent to the growth of plant life, but refers to a cultivated area. This is why God delayed planting the garden until there was both water and a human to work the ground (Gen. 2:5). The garden is therefore not “nature” pure and simple, but rather a cultural project. The description of the human vocation in Genesis 2 as tending (*working* and *protecting*) the garden (Gen. 2:15) is thus parallel to the charge given humanity in Genesis 1 to *subdue* the earth (Gen. 1:26–28).³² Indeed, since God planted the garden (Gen. 2:8),

29. This is the primary argument in Middleton, *The Liberating Image*. More recently, see Middleton, “Image of God,” in *The Oxford Encyclopedia of the Bible and Theology*, vol. 2, ed. Samuel E. Balentine et al. (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2015), 516–23.

30. For the parallel between the royal-priestly calling of humanity created as *imago Dei* to rule the earth and Israel's election to bring blessing to the nations, see Middleton, “A New Heaven and a New Earth: The Case for a Holistic Reading of the Biblical Story of Redemption,” in *Journal for Christian Theological Research* 11 (2006): 73–97.

31. For a version of this interpretation (which, however, attempts a new harmonization or concordism between the Bible and evolution), see Joshua M. Moritz, “Evolution, the End of Human Uniqueness, and the Election of the *Imago Dei*,” *Theology and Science* 9, no. 3 (2011): 307–39. This is based on Moritz's dissertation, “Chosen from among the Animals: The End of Human Uniqueness and the Election of the Image of God” (PhD diss., Graduate Theological Union, 2011).

32. It is further significant that the two verbs describing the human task in the garden, namely to “work/till” it (*abad*) and to “guard/protect/keep” it (*šamar*), are often used elsewhere in the Old Testament for typically “religious” activity. That the former verb can mean “serve,” and is even applicable to priestly service in the temple, has sometimes led interpreters to the fallacious notion that humans are to “serve” the garden (or the ground). But

this means that God initiated the first cultural project, which humans—in the divine image—are to continue.³³

Further, since the narrative of Genesis 2–3 portrays the garden as a localized phenomenon (such that humans could later be exiled from it; Gen. 3:24), it makes sense to think that humanity was meant to extend the cultivated land over the rest of the earth, thus “filling” the earth (Gen. 1:28), not just with their progeny, but with the divine presence manifested in their God-glorifying culture (thus they would fulfill their role as God's cult statue in the cosmic temple). But instead of fulfilling this high calling, we find the ironic statement in Genesis 6 that humans had indeed “filled” the earth, but with violence (Gen. 6:11, 13), which resulted in the corruption of the very earth from which they were taken (Gen. 6:11–12).

One possible implication of this picture of a localized garden is that we might be justified in thinking that the world outside the garden was never idyllic, but already had the thorns and thistles that are mentioned as part of the pain or toil (*ʾiṣābôn*) that will accompany working the ground after human sin (Gen. 3:18). Perhaps the text does not intend to say that the “curse” on the ground (Gen. 3:17) is the origin of such problematic plant life; rather, it is the origin of the pain or toil that will from now on characterize human work outside the garden. The “curse” is thus not an ontological change in the *ʾādāmā*, but rather a changed relationship between the *ʾādām* and the *ʾādāmā*.

Likewise, could it be that other matters that are often distasteful to Christians picturing an ideal primeval world—such as animal predation, and biological death generally—have nothing to do with the “curse,” but are simply the realities of life beyond the garden? Minimally, the call to “work” and “protect” the garden (Gen. 2:15) or “subdue” the earth (Gen. 1:28) suggests that

what are we to make of the fact that the latter verb is often used for “keeping” God's torah? Are we to obey the garden? Rather than importing the meanings of these words from other contexts (thus engaging in what James Barr called “illegitimate totality transfer”), we should allow the verbs to be translated according to the present context, while being attentive to their possible cultic *connotations* (not meanings). That is, these verbs might convey the religious importance of the ordinary human vocation of cultural development.

33. That God delayed planting the garden until he formed and vivified the human being suggests that this picture is not simply equivalent to the Mesopotamian rituals, since in the case of Genesis 2 the site of divine presence (the human being) *precedes* the garden. This prioritizing of humanity as the agent of culture is consistent with the emphasis on human agency found throughout the Primeval History, in contrast to a more passive role of humanity in Mesopotamian myth and legend. See Middleton, *The Liberating Image*, chap. 5: “Genesis 1–11 as Ideology Critique.”

though the world was made “very good,” it was never perfect, in the sense that it could not be improved.³⁴ While the use of the forceful verb “subdue” (*kābaš*) suggests that there would be significant exertion in the agricultural task, might the verb “protect” or “guard” (*šamar*) indicate there was something to guard against? The primeval world was not without danger.

The Tree of Life and the Warning about Death

Ultimately, it will turn out that the garden needed to be guarded against humans themselves (something we will soon see).³⁵ But first we should note the stern warning that God gives about the possibility of death. The man is told that in the “day” that he eats of “the tree of the knowledge of good and evil” he will “surely die” (Gen. 2:17).³⁶ This warning takes on poignancy in contrast to the presence of the tree of *life* in the midst of the garden (Gen. 2:9). The garden is evidently intended to be a place of life, which includes beauty and nourishment; the trees in the garden are described as “pleasant to the sight and good for food” (Gen. 2:9) and—with the exception of one tree—their fruit is explicitly given to humans to eat (Gen. 2:16), something the woman later affirms (Gen. 3:2).

Here we have to discern both what the *tree of life* symbolizes and how this relates to the sort of *death* mentioned in God’s warning. One possible meaning of *death* is simply the ending of biological life, such that when the humans eat of the prohibited tree they would literally fall down dead. The fact that they don’t die in this sense has suggested to some interpreters that the snake was right to say “you will not die” (Gen. 3:4).³⁷ Alternately, *death* could refer to the introduction of mortality, assuming that humans were created immortal. However, this interpretation would contradict everything

34. On the important distinction between the *goodness* of creation and its *perfection*, see Terence E. Fretheim, *God and World in the Old Testament: A Relational Theology of Creation* (Nashville: Abingdon, 2005), 41, 125.

35. But perhaps it was initially the cunning snake that humans needed to be on their guard against? We will get to the snake.

36. This is my translation (the New Revised Standard Version has simply “you shall die”). 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,” in Alter, *Genesis: Translation and Commentary* (New York and London: Norton, 1996), 8.

37. R. W. L. Moberly insightfully addresses this question, moving in a direction similar to my own, in “Did the Serpent Get It Right?” *Journal of Theological Studies* 39 (1988): 1–27.

we know about the evolution of biological organisms, since mortality seems to be intrinsic to biological life. Even Genesis contradicts this interpretation when it portrays God forming the human from the dust of the ground, which is a metaphor for mortality—“you are dust, and to dust you shall return” (Gen. 3:17). Even Paul calls Adam a “man of dust,” referring to his having been created mortal (1 Cor. 15:42–49).³⁸

It is possible, however, that *death* could be taken as a *reversion* to mortality, assuming that the tree of life symbolizes immortality and that humans had eaten of its fruit prior to disobedience. However, the tree of life is more properly a symbol for earthly flourishing, in line with the wisdom literature of the Old Testament, which describes wisdom as a “tree of life” for those who find her (Prov. 3:18). This connection of wisdom with life is not only a pervasive theme in Proverbs (living according to wisdom leads to flourishing), but it might make sense of the garden story with its two trees, one of knowledge/wisdom and one of life.³⁹ This suggests a third meaning of *death*, namely as the antithesis of flourishing. So when the wisdom literature contrasts the two paths of Life and Death, this is not reducible to the contrast between mere existence and the extinction of existence; nor does it refer to immortality versus mortality. Rather, the focus is on the difference between a life that conforms to wisdom, rooted in reverence for God, which results in blessing and shalom, and a life of folly, characterized by rejecting God’s ways, which is thereby deformed and plagued by corruption and calamity.⁴⁰

It is this sense of *death* that allows the writer of Psalm 88 to claim that he is already in the grave (88:3–6). Death has begun to encroach on life; corruption has compromised normative flourishing. In a similar vein, when Jacob thought Joseph was dead, “he refused to be comforted, and said, ‘No, I shall go down to Sheol to my son, mourning’” (Gen. 37:35). Jacob was not

38. Psalm 103:14 describes human mortality using the very words “formed” and “dust” from Genesis 2:7.

39. Since wisdom and life are associated elsewhere in the Bible, the question arises as to why they are separated into two trees in Genesis 2–3. This separation seems to serve the point of distinguishing (1) the initial, childlike wisdom that is equivalent to simply trusting God from (2) the mature wisdom that involves discerning between good and evil. The first sort of wisdom (appropriate to the initial stage of moral development) leads to life (it is compatible with eating from the tree of life); but the way in which one discerns good and evil may lead to life or death (thus exile from the garden). I will return to this distinction.

40. On the two paths, and the relation of wisdom to life, see Middleton, *A New Heaven and a New Earth*, chap. 5: “Earthly Flourishing in Law, Wisdom, and Prophecy.”

planning suicide. Rather, the quality of his life had been compromised; life had become as death to him. This understanding ultimately leads to Paul regarding Sin and Death as powers (which stand in antithesis of life) that are overcome in the cross and resurrection of Christ.⁴¹

If we take the warning about death in Genesis 2 in this light, it not only coheres with the worldview of the rest of scripture, but it allows us to see mortality as an ordinary and even intrinsic component of the world God made. That organisms die, which is essential to evolutionary history, would not be in any sort of tension with the biblical accounts of creation.⁴²

This does not mean that we should exclude immortality as the ultimate result of eating from the tree of life. After all, the reason that sinful humans are later exiled from the garden is because they might in their sinful state eat from the tree of life and “live forever” (Gen. 3:22). This allows us to see a canonical trajectory from the tree of life in Genesis 2 to its culmination in the New Jerusalem (Rev. 22:2, 14). In other words, it seems that God would have, at some point, after humans were *confirmed* in their obedience, made their flourishing (and the flourishing of the world) permanent. This interpretation draws on Paul’s notion of the resurrection body as immortal or incorruptible (1 Cor. 15:50–54). As it turned out, however, the permanent flourishing of the world was disrupted by the intervention of sin, which would require a restorative act (redemption) to bring the world to its intended telos.

The Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil

There have been a number of divergent opinions in the history of interpretation about the significance of “the tree of the knowledge of good and evil,” from which humans are commanded not to eat (Gen. 2:9, 17). Some interpreters appeal to the later narrative context, where the man “knew” his wife (Gen. 4:1; cf. 4:17, 25) and she conceived and bore a child, to suggest that it was sexual “knowledge” that was prohibited.⁴³ This may be taken in

41. See Beverly R. Gaventa, “The Cosmic Power of Sin in Paul’s Letter to the Romans: Toward a Widescreen Edition,” *Interpretation* 58, no. 3 (2004): 229–40.

42. Paul writes that the sting of death is sin (1 Cor. 15:56), which suggests that without sin death might not be regarded as an evil.

43. Thus we speak of “carnal knowledge” today. This reading sometimes appeals to Deut. 1:39, which speaks of children who don’t yet know good and evil; but this may refer not to sexuality but to moral discernment (as is more likely, given other uses of this phrase in the Old Testament).

an Augustinian tone, which denigrates sex because of the lust involved, or in a more modern sense that eating of the tree was a fall “upwards” or “forwards” into maturity (which includes, but is not limited to, sex); the modern approach typically includes a tragic element in this fall upwards. One recent version of the fall into maturity suggests that the “knowledge of good and evil” refers to humanity coming to know from experience the struggle for existence, which includes suffering as part of the growth process (the Hebrew word *ra’* is not limited to moral evil, but can signify disaster or calamity).⁴⁴

Other interpreters appeal to the use of the merism “good and evil” (or “good and bad”) to refer to a totality.⁴⁵ Thus, the exhortation to “do good or do evil” (Isa. 41:23) means *Do something, anything!*⁴⁶ The implication of this line of thinking would be that eating of the tree represents the attempt to grasp knowledge of all things; this can be interpreted in terms of ancient notions of technology being off-limits to humans, or possibly of mantic knowledge, or in more contemporary categories of the quest for autonomy or totalization.

However, the entire phrase “knowledge of (or knowing) good and evil” is used in the Old Testament to refer to the normal human ability to discriminate between good and bad/evil, including the ability to make ethical decisions. Since knowledge of good and evil is precisely what Solomon asked for instead of riches (1 Kings 3:9), some have thought that the king desired what was off-limits in Genesis 2–3.⁴⁷ Yet elsewhere in the Old Testament *knowing good and evil* is taken as the legitimate ability to distinguish right from wrong, which characterizes mature adults (Deut. 1:39; Isa. 7:15), and in one case refers to the ability to discriminate with the senses, which has diminished in old age (2 Sam. 19:35 [Masoretic Text 19:36]).⁴⁸ This usage sug-

44. John F. A. Sawyer, “The Image of God, the Wisdom of Serpents and the Knowledge of Good and Evil,” in *A Walk in the Garden: Biblical, Iconographical and Literary Images of Eden*, ed. Paul Morris and Deborah Sawyer, JSOTSup 136 (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic, 1992), 64–73.

45. A merism or *merismus* is the use of two extremes to signify not only the extremes but also everything in between.

46. In this particular text it is not the (substantive) adjectives “good” and “evil/bad,” but the verbs “do good” and “do evil/harm.” But the point is the same.

47. J. Daniel Hays, “Has the Narrator Come to Praise Solomon or to Bury Him? Narrative Subtlety in 1 Kings 1–11,” *Journal for the Study of the Old Testament* 28, no. 2 (2003): 149–74.

48. The phrase “who today do not yet know right from wrong [lit. good and evil]” is missing from Deut. 1:39 in the Samaritan Pentateuch (but is present in the Masoretic Text and in 4QDeut^b).

gests that the tree of the knowledge of good and evil represents a normative and valuable human trait.

Since the tree seems to represent an important dimension of human maturation, some interpreters argue that Genesis 3 narrates the transgression of the divine prohibition necessary for the development of ethical decision-making. This is another form of a “fall” upwards or forwards, into maturity, becoming like God in moving beyond simple obedience to making independent ethical decisions.⁴⁹ But this interpretation is not a necessary inference.

Given the clear sense in the narrative that eating of the tree led to tragic consequences, it is better to take the tree as representing what was temporarily prohibited (for good reason), yet was not perpetually off-limits to humanity. It did not represent a form of knowledge that was reserved only for God; rather, the prohibition was dependent on timing.⁵⁰

In accordance with what we know of moral development, children (and, by analogy, the first humans) would initially need to trust their (divine) parent, obeying parental directions for what makes for flourishing (and what to avoid), thus learning a pattern of virtue, and being formed into the sort of persons who can then (at a later stage) be allowed to eat from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil (read: decide for themselves).⁵¹ There does, indeed, come a time in the moral development of adolescents when they need to begin making their own decisions (including ethical decisions); this is essential to the maturation process. But it makes no moral sense to allow or foster such decision-making in those without any formative experience of what is good. Eating from the prohibited tree too early would be destructive to the person, searing the conscience of the newly formed humans (we don’t allow young children to “choose” between the good and evil of sexual expression and abstinence or between temperance and alcoholism or drug use). Indeed, it would both corrupt the person and lead to the violation of others (which is what happens in the Genesis account).

49. Jason P. Roberts thus thinks that humans “emerged as fallen creatures who were originally sinful.” See “Emerging in the Image of God to Know Good and Evil,” *Zygon* 46, no. 2 (2011): 478 (entire article 471–81).

50. This is perhaps the most significant change in my own interpretation of the garden story, since I used to think the tree represented the boundaries of finitude, beyond which it was not appropriate for humans to venture.

51. The interpretation of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil as only temporarily off-limits is a minority view in the history of interpretation, but was supported by C. S. Lewis, among others; it is central to Lewis’s retelling of the garden story in his science fiction novel *Perelandra* (London: The Bodley Head, 1943).

Are there implications here for thinking about how sin began among *Homo sapiens*? Did the first humans who began to develop moral and religious consciousness go against the initial prodding of conscience and a primitive *sensus divinitatus*, and thus begin the “fall” into sin? This interpretation would have no problem with thinking that violent behavior was intermittent among (or even characteristic of) *Homo sapiens* prior to the rise of moral and religious consciousness. But such behavior becomes accountable as sin only when it is proscribed by conscience and the proscription is ignored among creatures capable of understanding the hortatory *No!*⁵²

Narrative Time between Creation and Fall

Is it significant that there is no narration in Genesis 2–3 of humans fulfilling their vocation of caring for the garden? True, the *’ādām* names the animals (which partially fulfills the mandate of Gen. 1:26–28), but this is prior to the creation of the woman; she was to be a “helper” to the man, which presumably meant sharing in the task of working and protecting the garden. But instead of portraying the first humans fulfilling their explicit *raison d’être*, tending the garden (Gen. 2:15), the Genesis narrative rushes to tell of their disobedience.

Of course, the archeological record suggests that *Homo sapiens* were engaged in ordinary cultural activities such as hunting and gathering, tool-making, etc. for thousands of years prior to any evidence of the rise of moral and religious consciousness (and thus sin), which does not quite fit the narrative of Genesis.⁵³ In fact, the initial task given to humans in the garden story is agriculture, which bypasses the entire hunter-gatherer stage of human development. So we should not think of a strict correlation of the biblical text and evolutionary history; that would be anachronistic. Nevertheless, could the almost immediate transition from the creation of humans in Genesis 2 to the transgression in Genesis 3 be significant for thinking about the possibly limited time frame between the rise of moral and religious consciousness in *Homo*

52. It would be important to engage Paul Bloom’s argument in *Just Babies: The Origins of Good and Evil* (New York: Crown; London: The Bodley Head, 2013) that even newborn infants seem to come hard-wired with a basic, though primitive, sense of morality (which includes empathy, compassion, and a sense of fairness, along with a perception of the world in terms of *us* versus *them*); this hard-wiring provides the basis for moral nurture and the development of character.

53. Genesis 4 narrates the invention of various cultural practices, including metal tools, after the incursion of sin.

sapiens and the onset of sin? This does not mean that the author of Genesis 2–3 knew anything of hominin evolution, but merely that the text does not actually envision a paradisiacal period. Such a period is more a function of Christian theological assumptions read back into the text than anything clearly narrated.

The Snake

The function of the snake has always puzzled thoughtful interpreters. Although the snake is identified with the devil or Satan in later tradition, in the text the snake is said to be one of the wild animals that YHWH God had made (Gen. 3:1); it is therefore (by implication) one of the animals that the human named (Gen. 2:19).⁵⁴ This point is sometimes obscured since many translations render the identical phrase *ḥayyat ḥaśśādê* differently in Genesis 2:19 and 3:1 (the New Revised Standard Version has “animal of the field” and “wild animal,” respectively).⁵⁵ Yet the point of the story is to portray the snake as a member of the (untamed) animal kingdom toward whom the human had exercised some sort of discernment, and even dominion (which seems implied by the act of naming).

That the snake is not understood as intrinsically evil is further suggested by the adjective used to describe it in Genesis 3:1. This introduction to the snake tells us that it was more “crafty” (New Revised Standard Version) than any of the other wild animals that YHWH God had made. But we must be careful to understand the meaning of this word *‘ārûm*, which is translated variously as “crafty” (New Revised Standard Version, New American Standard Bible, New International Version, English Standard Version), “subtle” (King James Version), “cunning” (New King James Version, Good News Translation, Holman Christian Standard Bible), “shrewd” (New English Translation, New Living Translation), and “intelligent” (Common English Bible). This last, more neutral, rendering is important, since it indicates that the word is sometimes used as a term of approbation, to describe a wise

54. This is why I have intentionally used the ordinary word “snake” and not the more mythic term “serpent,” as is typical in translations of Genesis 3.

55. This is probably because different translators were responsible for chap. 2 and chap. 3. Likewise, the New International Version has “all the beasts of the field” and “any of the wild animals” and the New English Translation has “every living animal of the field” and “any of the wild animals.” Some translations are more consistent, such as the English Standard Version (“every beast of the field” and “any other beast of the field”) and New Living Translation (“every wild animal” and “all the wild animals”).

person (Prov. 12:16, 23; 13; 16; 14:8; 22:3; 27:12), where it can be rendered “prudent” (with “fool” or “simple” as its antonym).

The term does not describe what we would call a moral virtue, but more something like “street-smarts.” Saul describes David’s cunning with this word, since he easily escapes from him (1 Sam. 23:22). The term thus designates what we might call an *instrumental* virtue, since it names a form of intelligence that can be used for either good or evil ends. The snake is thus (initially) morally ambiguous; we don’t know how it will use its intelligence.

It is also important to note that there is a pun or wordplay between this word used to describe the snake (Gen. 3:1) and the word for “naked” (*‘ārûmîm*) that describes the man and woman just one verse earlier (Gen. 2:25).⁵⁶ The chapter division between these two verses should not confuse us about this important literary aspect of the narrative. The pun here is quite different in character from that between the words for human (*‘ādām*) and ground (*‘ādāmâ*). That wordplay indicated a primal ontological resonance between the two realities, echoing the aural resonance of the words. The same is true for the wordplay between the words for woman (*‘iššâ*) and man (*‘iś*), confirmed in the man’s poem about the woman being bone of his bone and flesh of his flesh (Gen. 2:23). These two sets of puns indicate a fundamental unity-despite-difference between the realities named—suggested by two distinct words that nevertheless sound alike.

But the pun between *naked* and *prudent/crafty/intelligent* works in exactly the opposite way. Here we have the identical word (*‘ārûm*) used with radically different meanings; the words are formally homonyms, yet they are semantically (almost) antonyms.⁵⁷ This jarring pun signals, on the seman-

56. The plural *‘ārûmîm* is what would be expected when the adjective *‘ārûm* is applied to more than one person. The singular *‘ārûm* is used for nakedness in Job 24:7, 10; 26:6; Eccles. 5:14; Isa. 20:2–4; Amos 2:16.

57. Imagine a reader who has just read in Gen. 2:25 that the humans were naked (*‘ārûm* in the plural) and not ashamed (already a strange idea, since nakedness in the Hebrew Bible is typically a negative quality, meaning that one is exposed and vulnerable). The reader then meets the same word for the snake just one verse later (3:1). Does this mean the snake was *naked*? Well, snakes don’t have fur or feathers, so that’s possible. But wait, the reader might think; *‘ārûm* also means *smart/prudent/wise*. The realization of this meaning, together with the previous use of *‘ārûm*, would be jarring at the semantic level, since a smart or prudent person would *never* go around naked and vulnerable. We can even see this in the English word “prude,” which suggests someone who covers up and does not go about exposed. And the snake does not initially come out into the open and reveal its true motives, but rather exhibits a covert strategy of hiding and deception. Thus, the snake ultimately shows itself to be in no way “naked.”

tic level, the deception the snake will perpetrate, and its instrumentality in mediating the first sin. This leads to the snake's identification in later Jewish and Christian theology with the devil or Satan, a figure who is absent from the text of Genesis 2-3.⁵⁸

Yet the puzzle is that the snake—which, according to the logic of Genesis 1, would have been created “good”—serves as the foil to introduce temptation (and thus moral evil) into the garden story.⁵⁹ How can the snake both be part of the good created order and yet be the means of temptation or testing? How can the garden story hold *humans* accountable for the introduction of evil in the world and yet require an outside agent of temptation and sin? Perhaps an outside agent is needed to narrate a singularity such as the original sin; how else could we imagine or conceptualize evil arising in a world previously without evil?⁶⁰

Given the above discussion of the snake, I am inclined to think that it represents that aspect of the created order which allows for, or mediates, human ethical choice. It could even be an external representation of some aspect of the human psyche (or the psyche in relationship to the external creation). Certainly, the psychological process of temptation, and the resulting sin, is vividly represented by the dialogue between the woman and the snake.⁶¹

The Process of Temptation and Sin

The snake's craftiness or intelligence is exhibited in the opening question he asks the woman: “Did God say, ‘You shall not eat from any tree in the

58. Indeed, the rise of the figure of Satan as an independent evil persona is technically later than the Old Testament, although the common noun *śātān* (adversary or accuser) is often used of human beings, and in three places as a title, but not a proper name, for an angelic accuser (Job 1-2; 1 Chron. 21:1; Zech. 3:1-2).

59. Of course, there is the further conundrum that the snake speaks (the only other speaking animal in the Bible besides Balaam's donkey). Here its speech seems to be an aspect of its craft or intelligence.

60. Paul Ricoeur has struggled with the function of the snake in the text's narrating the origin of evil, given the text's emphasis on *human choice* as the origin of evil (which, Ricoeur notes, is unique among myths of origins); see Ricoeur, “The Adamic Myth,” in his *The Symbolism of Evil* (Boston: Beacon, 1969).

61. Perhaps we could relate the process of temptation portrayed in the garden story to the phenomenology of temptation recounted in James 1:13-15 (where temptation involves being enticed by one's own desires).

garden’?” (Gen. 3:1). This question admits of no simple reply. Should the woman answer *yes* or *no*? Either answer would distort the truth, since God had given permission for eating of any tree in the garden—except for one. The question is technically unanswerable on its own terms.⁶²

But the snake's craftiness is further shown in two changes we find when we compare the wording of his question with what the narrator says in Genesis 2. Whereas the narrator consistently uses the compound name YHWH *’ēlohîm* to designate the creator, the snake speaks about *’ēlohîm* only, and the woman follows suit in her response; the name YHWH is not used anywhere in their conversation (Gen. 3:1-5). Could this be a distancing tactic, to associate the prohibition with the divine realm in general and not specifically with YHWH, the God of the covenant? And beyond that, the narrator's reference to YHWH God *commanding* (Gen. 2:16) has been softened to God *saying* in the snake's question (Gen. 3:1); here again the woman follows the snake's lead (Gen. 3:3).

Yet the woman's answer to the snake is quite astute: “We may eat of the fruit of the trees in the garden; but God said, ‘You shall not eat of the fruit of the tree that is in the middle of the garden, nor shall you touch it, or you shall die’” (Gen. 3:2-3.) She correctly distinguishes between the permission and the prohibition of Genesis 2:17. However, she adds the phrase “nor shall you touch it,” something YHWH God never said. Is this the inner dialogue of conscience, first questioning God's word, then overstating the prohibition (building a fence around the law, to use a Rabbinic term)? Or is this dialogue suggestive of a prior conversation she may have had with the man? After all, God had given the prohibition to the man before the woman was created, so (in the logic of the story) she would likely have learned of the prohibition from the man. Did the man add the “fence,” just to make it clear that this tree was “hands off”?⁶³ If so, could this conversation with the snake represent *interhuman* ethical deliberation? And could this be applicable to the origin of moral consciousness among *Homo sapiens*?

But there is further slippage in the woman's answer to the snake. Although the woman acknowledges the prohibition about eating from a particular tree in the garden, she vaguely describes it as “the tree in the middle

62. It is similar to the classic: “Have you stopped beating your wife?” The husband is guilty whether the reply is *yes* or *no*.

63. We might note that when instructions are passed on from an authority figure through a subordinate, the subordinate often embellishes the instructions or asserts more authority than needed (think of older siblings babysitting younger children, relaying their parents' instructions about keeping out of the cookie jar).

of the garden" (Gen. 3:3), when there were actually two trees in the middle of the garden (one was the tree of life, which was not prohibited). She also softens the warning YHWH God had given concerning the consequences of disobedience. The original warning was that *in the day* you eat of the forbidden tree you will *surely die*. But the woman omits reference to *in the day* (which suggested immediate consequences) and describes the consequence simply as "you will die" (omitting the Hebrew construction that indicated the certainty or seriousness of the consequence).

After the woman's reply, the snake asserts baldly: "You will not surely die" or (better) "You surely will not die" (Gen. 3:4), using the same construction YHWH God had previously used, but simply negating it.⁶⁴ This outright contradiction of the Creator's words shifts the dialogue to a new level—from questioning to assertion. This assertion may well play on the different meanings of *death* noted above (extinction of existence versus the incursion of corruption into life), another example of the snake's intelligence.

This bald statement is immediately followed by an explanation that impugns the Creator's motives: "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). This is a half-truth, which functions to suggest that the Creator was stingy or self-protective in trying to prevent the humans from achieving knowledge that he had. This entire conversation serves to sow the seeds of doubt in the woman concerning God's generosity, resulting in a lack of trust in God's intentions for humanity.

The half-truth in the snake's final claim is evident in YHWH God's later corroboration, when he acknowledges that the humans have indeed achieved God-likeness (in Gen. 3:22). 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. And this God-likeness was not connected to their knowing good and evil, but rather to their being granted dominion over the earth.⁶⁵ So when 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 component. 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

64. This is my translation; the New Revised Standard Version makes no distinction between the difference in phrasing between God, the woman, and the snake.

65. Even in the garden narrative, the infusion of the breath of life into humanity (Gen. 2:7) evoked the vivification of a cult image. Thus, in both Genesis 1 and 2 divine likeness *preceded* the transgression.

so they tried to cover their nakedness (Gen. 3:7). The sort of knowledge of good and evil they acquired was: naked = *bad*; covered = *good*.

Not only the overstating of the prohibition ("nor shall you touch it"), and the portrayal of God as stingy ("God knows that . . . you will be like God"), but also the distancing of the prohibition from the name YHWH—all these seem to fit the inner deliberation (or even interpersonal deliberation) appropriate to the phenomenology of temptation. And this could be applicable either to an "original" fall or to each person throughout history wrestling with the demands of conscience.

The result of the conversation is that the woman "saw" that the tree was "desirable" (*nehmād*) to make one wise (Gen. 3:6).⁶⁶ This perception is stated along with her seeing that the tree was "good for food" and "a delight to the eyes," both of which correspond to similar descriptions of the trees in the garden given earlier by the narrator (Gen. 2:9). But nothing in the previous description matches the woman's new perception.

When God first animated the human from the dust of the ground (Gen. 2:7) the result was a "living soul," where *nepeš* (traditionally "soul") means something like "organism." But another translation possibility for *nepeš* is "appetite."⁶⁷ God placed the human being in the garden as a living appetite—an organism with an appetite for life; hence the reference to the garden as a source of food and beauty in Genesis 2:9. The same participle for "desirable" (*nehmād*) in 3:6 was used earlier to describe the trees as "pleasant" to look at (Gen. 2:9). Human desire or appetite is thus appropriate and encouraged in God's world. I am inclined to think that the transference of desire from food to wisdom was not in itself wrong; wisdom is, after all, a good thing.⁶⁸ Just as the snake was not intrinsically evil, so the desire for

66. However, the Septuagint (LXX) renders the phrase "desirable to make one wise" as "beautiful to contemplate/observe," thus making it synonymous with the phrase that precedes it.

67. This is a central point in J. Gerald Janzen's analysis of Job's bitterness of "soul" (*nepeš*), in his brilliant study, *At the Scent of Water: The Ground of Hope in the Book of Job* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2009). On Janzen's reading, Job's suffering has led to the loss of his appetite for life (and with it hope for the future), which is restored only with YHWH's theophany in the sirocco/east wind (traditionally, "whirlwind"), which precedes (and portends) the fall rains after a hot, dry summer in the Arabian desert (during which the dialogue with the friends takes place). The very fact that YHWH personally appears to Job, the substance of what YHWH says, and the timing of YHWH's appearance (the Fall sirocco typically brings the scent of rain to come) all conspire to reawaken Job's *nepeš* and thus his lust for life and hope for the future—despite the terrible suffering he has experienced.

68. Indeed, the verb used in Gen. 3:6 for becoming wise (the Hiphil of *šākal*) is used of

wisdom was not in itself wrong; it was simply not the appropriate time for this momentous step.

Nevertheless, both the woman and the man take this step, with dire consequences. Yielding to her desire, the woman ate, and gave some to the man (who was there all along, but had said nothing); and he also ate (Gen. 3:6). *Eating* is here a powerful metaphor for taking something into oneself; ingesting is a participatory mode of existence, which involves making something external a part of oneself.

The Immediate Existential Consequences of the Sin

The result of this eating is an immediate existential change in the man and woman.⁶⁹ They become aware of their nakedness and—in contrast to their previous lack of shame (2:25)—they make clothing to cover themselves (3:7). Is this shame at having committed sin? Does it also represent their distrust of each other? Given that this is shared violation of a boundary God instituted (both ate of the tree), each may be wondering if the other would respect their own personal boundaries. Thus nakedness (with its implied vulnerability) is no longer safe; and from here on in the Bible nakedness is not portrayed positively.

Beyond this immediate sense of shame, the text reports their newfound fear of God, evident in their hiding when they hear God walking in the garden (Gen. 3:8). Note the answer the man gives to God's question: "I heard the sound of you in the garden, and I was afraid, because I was naked; and I hid myself" (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 transgressor not only from others, but also from God.

When 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 (passing the buck) 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 God's formal

the ultimate victory of the suffering servant in Isa. 52:13 (with the translations varying between the servant *acting wisely* and *prospering*); wisdom is meant to lead to a successful life.

69. This fulfills God's warning about "in the day" they eat of it.

declaration of judgment on the snake, the woman, and the man—in reverse order of those blamed.

The Formal Declaration of Judgment

This narration of God's declaration of judgment takes the form of a series of proclamations in poetic form (Gen. 3:14–19), which describe the consequences of the transgression, beyond the immediate existential changes that were generated.

First, the snake is redescribed using language that ironically parallels the prior statement of its cunning or intelligence (Gen. 3:14). Whereas we had been told that the snake was *cunning* (*ārûm*) beyond all the wild animals, now it is *cursed* (*ārûr*) beyond all the livestock and wild animals. This new pun or wordplay signifies the transformation of what was merely a creature into something negative; or perhaps it is the *relationship* between the snake and humans that is transformed. Might this portend the beginning of the process of idolatry, whereby some good aspect of God's world that has become a focus for (or mediation of) human sin is now experienced as alienating? An idol, after all, is something in creation that has become absolutized, and thereby begins to take on a negative, quasi-independent force in human affairs.⁷⁰

The curse is then explained in terms of perpetual enmity between the offspring of the snake and the offspring of the woman (Gen. 3:15). Although an argument has been made for taking this as a protoevangelium, ever since Irenaeus (aided and abetted by the Vulgate's translation), the text clearly suggests an ongoing struggle of some sort—perhaps between humans and snakes. More likely, between humans and whatever aspects of creation become idolatrous? Perhaps even between humans and the demonic. Indeed, it is possible that this "curse" narrates the *transformation* of some aspect of creation precisely into the demonic.⁷¹

After the judgment on the snake comes the proclamation of judgment on the woman and then the man. These proclamations are not techni-

70. Note the paradox that Paul denies that idols exist (1 Cor. 8:4) and questions whether an idol is anything (1 Cor. 10:19), yet goes on to suggest that idols represent demons (1 Cor. 10:20).

71. For the possibility of reading the demonic as an outgrowth of the snake in Genesis 3, see Nicholas John Ansell, "The Call of Wisdom/The Voice of the Serpent: A Canonical Approach to the Tree of Knowledge," *Christian Scholars Review* 31, no. 1 (2001): 31–57.

cally *punishments*, but rather the *consequences* of human evil. Nor are they normative; they do not *prescribe* what must be. Rather, the judgments *describe* generalized consequences that men and women typically experience. These consequences not only admit of exceptions, but they are culturally conditioned, describing what is typical in the ancient social order that Israel was part of. Although the judgments that God proclaims 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.

The typical consequences for the woman are twofold (Gen. 3:16). First, there will be an increase of pain in childbirth; that this is an *increase* of pain and not pain’s origin suggests that pain is a normal response of living organisms (it does not originate with sin). And second, the man will rule the woman despite her desire for him; in other words, her yearning for intimacy will not be reciprocated. 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; primal resonance has become dissonance.⁷²

When the narrative resumes (after the proclamation of judgment), the first thing the man does is to name the woman, thus exhibiting his rule over her; he names her Eve “because she was the mother of all living” (Gen. 3:20). Although the wordplay between “Eve” (*ḥawwâ*) and “living” (*ḥay*) suggests something beautiful and even tender, this initially positive point is contradicted by the fact of naming, which enacts an asymmetry of power.

We name animals (pets), some inanimate objects (boats), 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. An example of illegitimate naming (where naming clearly enacts subjugation) is the common practice of oppressors renaming enslaved and colonized peoples. To better understand the illegitimacy of the man’s naming the woman in Genesis 3:20 we should note the parallel with the naming of the animals. “The man gave names to all cattle, and to the birds of the air, and to every animal of the field; but for the man there was not found a helper as his partner” (Gen. 2:20). Since naming expresses an asymmetry of power (and humans are meant to have dominion over animals), the fact that the

72. Here it is important to contrast this state of affairs with the mutuality of rule granted to both male and female in Gen. 1:26–28, and also to note that the only divinely authorized rule was human rule over the nonhuman.

man named the animals showed that they did not qualify as the appropriate “helper” for him that God had intended.

Earlier God said: “It is not good that the man should be alone; I will make him a helper as his partner” (Gen. 2:18). As is well known to students of Hebrew, the term “help” or “helper” (*’ezer* in this case; but often the participle *’ōzēr*) 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 [Masoretic Text 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 [Masoretic Text 30:11]; 54:5). But in Genesis 2:18 and 20 the word “helper” is immediately followed by *kēnegdô*, a compound word meaning “as his partner” (New Revised Standard Version). This word qualifies “helper” so it will not be taken as a superior helper, but rather in this particular case as an equal. God intends an equality of power between the man and the woman. But naming precludes equality.⁷³

It might be objected that the man previously (before the sin) had already named the woman (Gen. 2:23). Here we need to distinguish between the man’s recognition of the newly created person as “woman” (*’iššâ*) taken out of “man” (*’iš*) and naming proper. The main indicator that the man does not name the woman in Genesis 2:23 is the deviation of this text from the common pattern of naming in the narratives of Genesis.⁷⁴

In Genesis naming is typically indicated by the use of the verb *qārā’* (to call) and the noun *šēm* (name); thus Genesis 3:20 literally says, “the man called his woman’s name Eve.” But Genesis 2:23 uses *qārā’* (to call) without *šēm* (name); this departure from the typical pattern of naming suggests that something else is going on (plus, her name will be Eve, not “woman”).⁷⁵

73. Phyllis Trible is correct in her claim that the man naming the woman was an act of domination (Trible, *God and the Rhetoric of Sexuality*, 72–143). However, Trible muddies the waters by treating naming as *always* equivalent to domination. Rather, it signifies an asymmetry of power between the one doing the naming and the one being named. But some asymmetries of power are legitimate (and even nurturing), such as the relationship of parents and children.

74. George Ramsey has objected both to Trible’s claim that the woman isn’t named in Gen. 2:23 and to her identification of naming with domination; see Ramsey, “Is Name-Giving an Act of Domination in Genesis 2:23 and Elsewhere?” *Catholic Biblical Quarterly* 50, no. 1 (1988): 24–35. While Ramsey is mistaken in his first objection, his second objection is well taken.

75. Trible explains that although different naming formulas are used throughout the Old Testament, the Yahwist always uses the noun or verb for *name*. See Phyllis Trible, “Eve and Adam: Genesis 2–3 Reread,” *Andover Newton Quarterly* 13, no. 4 (1973): 251–58.

Beyond the absence of the word for “name” in Genesis 2:23, the text uses the passive (Niphal) of *qārā* (“this one shall be [or is] called woman”), which further suggests recognition of her character, rather than naming per se. The man recognizes her as one similar-yet-different from himself, 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 in 2 Sam. 5:1).

Do all women experience great pain in 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.

Following the judgment on the woman, God pronounces consequences for the man. Here the text does not use the word for man as male (*’iš*), but the word for human (*’ādām*); yet *’ādām* is treated as male (he listened to the woman; Gen. 3:17). It is curious that even after the creation of the woman the text 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). Does the text rhetorically enact the beginnings of patriarchy? Yet everything said of the *’ādām* is relevant to both men and women. Because the *’ādām* disobeyed God’s word, the *’ādāmā* is cursed. The normative relationship of human and ground has been disrupted; primal resonance has become dissonance. This is explained in terms of the transformation of what was earlier described as “work” (*’ābad*) into “toil” (*’išābôn*). This latter Hebrew word was already used for the woman’s “pain” in childbearing. The King James Version is more democratic in translating both as “sorrow.”⁷⁶

Life and Death outside the Garden

The final consequence of the transgression is that God exiles the humans from the garden. Whereas the *’ādām* 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. 3:23). This is a significant diminution of the original human task—a task that was never actually fulfilled in the narrative of Genesis 2–3. Beyond that, it is tragic that God

76. And here we might note that it is not only humans who suffer after the transgression. Because the human heart has become evil (Gen. 6:5) God is also “grieved” to his heart (Gen. 6:6); the verb here is *yāšab*, from which the noun *’išābôn* (“pain” or “toil”) is derived.

has to station cherubim with a flaming sword to guard (*šāmar*) the garden—specifically the tree of life—from humans (Gen. 3:24), who were its original guardians.

The reason God exiles humans from the garden is to prevent them eating from the tree of life and thus living forever (Gen. 3:22). Just as God will later scatter the builders of Babel (Gen. 11:1–9), which serves to break up an imperial civilization and prevent the further concentration of power used for oppression, so here God does not want to allow the sinful human state to become permanent.⁷⁷ That this is not simple punishment, but rather a remedial act of grace, is suggested by the fact that just prior to this God clothed the naked humans with skins, something that required animal death (Gen. 3:21). And God accompanies the exiled humans outside the garden, conversing with Cain and even putting a mark of protection on him (Gen. 4:9–15).

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. It is significant that YHWH’s speeches in the book of Job celebrate the wildness of the natural order, including animal predation, as glorious examples of the Creator’s design of the cosmos. Many of the church fathers also celebrated natural disasters and animal predation as part of the glory of God’s world.⁷⁸ So the realism of the “thorns and thistles” outside the garden fits well with what we know of the world in its natural state.

The narrative of life outside the garden in Genesis 4 may also be congruent with what we know of hominin and human evolution. Obvious connections are suggested by the often-asked questions of who Cain married (Gen. 4:17); were there other humans (or hominins) around? Perhaps the humans who were called to bear God’s image with a vocation to work and protect the garden were but a representative group of *Homo sapiens*? And

77. The very idea of sinful immortals should 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 is one of the most irritating (even despicable) characters in *Star Trek*. In his immortal (and amoral) boredom, he toys with others (especially Picard) for his own amusement and intellectual stimulation.

78. Jon Garvey documents this surprising claim with abundant quotations from the church fathers, and suggests that it was not until the renaissance, when Christians began utilizing classical pagan ideas of a golden age in the distant past (from which we have declined), that the notion of a general “fall” of nature began to intrude into Christian theological writings. He discerns this shift of perspective beginning with the writings of the Reformers (Garvey, “Creation Fell in 1500” [unpublished essay]).

other questions generate similar ideas, such as why Cain took Abel into a field to kill him (Gen. 4:12) or who God was protecting Cain from when he put his mark on him (Gen. 4:15), and how many people lived in the city Cain built (Gen. 4:17).⁷⁹

In thinking about the origin of evil, it is helpful to counterbalance the Augustinian notion of “original sin” (which assumes that all humans born thereafter 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 (the “originating sin”⁸⁰) by the parents develops in the next generation into fratricide (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 an inevitability for human beings; it can (initially, at least) be resisted.⁸¹

The narrative of Genesis suggests a process by which humans come more and more under the sway of sin. After Cain’s murder, sin grows and snowballs, evident in Lamech’s revenge killing of a young man who injured him, a killing that he boasts about to his wives (Gen. 4:23), until in Genesis 6 every “inclination of the thoughts of [the human heart] was only evil continually” (Gen. 6:5), and the earth was corrupted or ruined (*šāḥat*) 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 born into.⁸² The developmental aspect of how sin is portrayed in the early chapters of Genesis suggests that James is right: “sin, when it is fully grown, gives birth to death” (James 1:15). Such a developmental (and communal/systemic) view of sin as narrated in Genesis might well be

79. But perhaps this is getting too speculative (and answering these questions by appeal to other hominin groups moves too close to a new concordism).

80. This is Terence Fretheim’s term for the narrative of Genesis 3; see Fretheim, *God and World in the Old Testament*, 70–76.

81. This is true even if we follow Michael Morales (with the church fathers) and translate the words for “sin is lurking/crouching at the door” in Gen. 4:7 as “a sin offering is lying at the door” (just outside the gate of the garden), and God is inviting Cain to bring a sacrifice if he fails to “do well.” See L. Michael Morales, “Crouching Demon, Hidden Lamb: Resurrecting an Exegetical Fossil in Genesis 4.7,” *The Bible Translator* 63, no. 4 (2012): 185–91.

82. Suggested by Fretheim, *God and World in the Old Testament*, 70, 79.

suggestive for thinking about the growth of moral evil among early *Homo sapiens*.

Quo Vadis?

I am quite aware that this is only an introductory exploration of Genesis 3 with respect to human evolution. I am under no illusions that I have any clear answers to how we should think about the biblical account of the fall together with the origin of evil among *Homo sapiens*. It is no simple matter to bring together our biblical inheritance and the realities of biological evolution in a Chalcedonian spirit, without confusing or separating the discourses (the “natures”)—“the distinction of natures being by no means taken away by the union, but rather the property of each nature being preserved” (as the Chalcedonian Creed puts it). If crude concordism mingles the natures, perhaps NOMA separates them too distinctly.

At times I have wondered where my exploration of the biblical text was leading. But I judged that we needed a close reading of the text’s theological motifs in order to prevent our being immediately overwhelmed by the claims of contemporary science. Perhaps indwelling our formative narratives of creation and fall, with our eyes open to what we know (or think we know) about human evolution, is an adequate first step.