

The Story of the Garden of Eden

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The story of the Garden of Eden is familiar to most people, readers of the Bible or otherwise. I intend in the present article to look afresh at this story and to raise questions about how it is traditionally understood.

To begin, what does the reader of the first book of the Bible, commonly known as “Genesis”, learn about the garden? We are told that trees grow there (Gen 2, 9), and rivers have their source there (2, 10). Among the trees, three are signalled out for their importance: the tree of life, which stands in the middle of the garden, and which is intimately associated with the tree of the knowing of good and bad. A third tree, which is easily ignored, is a fig tree. When the human couple become aware of their nakedness, we are told that they “sew together fig leaves and make themselves loin clothes” (3, 7). (Never mind how they got hold of needle and thread! The nature of the first two of the above-mentioned trees indicates that the reader is introduced into a world of mythology).

When God creates the human being, Adam, God puts it in the garden to take care of it with the strict injunction not to eat of the tree of the knowing of good and bad as eating of it will lead to death (2, 15-18). The woman in the story, whose name is Eve, is tempted by a third character in the garden: a talking serpent. The serpent persuades Eve that eating the fruit of the tree will not lead to death. On the contrary, it will lead to the acquisition of wisdom, setting the human couple on a par with God (3, 4-5). Consequently, Eve takes of the fruit of the tree and eats. Her man follows her example and eats of the fruit of the tree also (3, 6).

Christian tradition tends to interpret this story as a story about sin, the sin of disobedience. The sin of the first human couple is said to affect us all. We are born with the stain of this original sin on our souls. Hence the cleansing of the baptismal rite, washes away the stain of sin and makes it possible to begin life afresh.

I intend to question this form of interpretation. To do so, I turn to chapter 3 taking as a starting point certain realities of life which are evoked in that chapter. Three characters are involved here: the serpent, the woman, and the man. Chapter 3 tells that the serpent will move on its stomach and eat soil (3, 14), that the woman will suffer pains when she gives birth and that she will be subject to her man (3, 16), and that the man will acquire food from the ground at the expense of hard labour (3, 17). He is also told that human life will end in death and burial (3, 19).

What is the link between the realities of life evoked above and the story of the garden? As the answer to this question is not obvious, the reader is invited to first reflect on the relation of fact and fiction in a completely different context. A comparison is made with the role of those cats known as Manx cats about which there is a fable explaining how this type of cat permanently lost its tail. In fact, the Manx cat in question never had a tail.

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It is suggested here that a similar pattern characterises the first chapters of “Genesis” with their evocation of a serpent, woman’s birth pains, agricultural labour, and death (see above). Moving from fact to fiction, chapters 2 and 3 tell a story which attributes a cause to these realities, namely the sin of disobedience committed by the human couple when they eat the forbidden fruit in the garden of Eden.

The present article thus challenges traditional Christian interpretation.

The validity of this different approach was confirmed by the well-known Jewish philosopher, Armand Ab écassis. When I wrote to him about this question, Ab écassis responded as follows, “Effectively this chapter (chapter 3) must be read, beginning at the end. The situation of woman, the hardship of slave labour at the time of the author led him to raise questions ...

He thought that there must have been a fault at the beginning. Interpreted in today’s terms:

It is always infidelity to moral values and spirituality that lead to suffering in society and in the way it organises our living together”¹.

¹ Note: Armand Ab écassis

En effet il faut lire ce chapitre à partir de sa fin. La situation de la femme, la dureté d’esclavage dans le travail tel qu’il était vécu au temps de l’auteur, l’ont poussé à se poser des questions là-dessus.

Il a pensé qu’il devait avoir une faute à l’origine. Traduisons pour nous aujourd’hui: C’est toujours l’infidélité aux valeurs morales et à la spiritualité qui entraîne la souffrance dans la société et dans sa manière de vivre le vivre-ensemble.