

Did God Really Say?

Genesis 3:1-7

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Origin Stories

When reading the early chapters of Genesis, it is important to remember that the authors were mainly attempting to help their readers answer one question: *Why is life the way it is?*

We have already seen this taking place in the first two chapters of Genesis, which offer what we might call *origin stories* to answer such questions as: why was the world made? Why are there so many different types of creatures? Why is there day and night? Why do we honor Sabbath? Why is there man and woman? Why does marriage exist?

To answer various aspects of this question, they devised stories that have immense power and meaning – especially if we do not read them woodenly or ask them questions not appropriate to their genre.

The origin stories of Genesis 1-11 are fascinating and powerful partly because they are open to a variety of interpretations, can be read on several levels, and sometimes seem intended to leave the reader with questions and not just answers.

That is certainly true of the origin story we are reading today. It is one of the most famous stories in all of world literature and has had an extraordinarily powerful role in shaping Jewish and Christian consciousness. But there has never been one single interpretation of this story of a wily serpent, temptation, and forbidden fruit.

Let's first walk through the text, then think about various broader ways of reading it.

Exposition

Our text opens with a talking serpent. That's not something you see every day, is it? As you listen, think about this: in the ancient world, snakes were a symbol of wisdom, fertility (and therefore sex), and immortality. Only later did the serpent become a symbol of evil, and of the Devil.

Now the serpent was more crafty than any other wild animal that the Lord God had made.

The key word here is *arum*, which can be translated cunning, crafty, clever, or wily. These are all words that communicate a devious intelligence that humans are well familiar with in real life but that has no place in an innocent Garden paradise.

But notice that the text affirms that God made the serpent. God ultimately bears responsibility for all creation. If the Garden has a crafty serpent in it, that serpent came from God. So the Bible

does not respond to the problem of temptation and sin and evil by blaming some alternative god or demi-god or demon.

He said to the woman, Did God say, 'You shall not eat from any tree in the garden'?

The translation from the Orthodox Jewish Bible captures the flavor of the serpent's opening gambit:

Really? Has God said...

Really, Eve? Really? Did God really say you must not eat from any tree in the garden?

Well, no. The serpent's question is itself cunning, crafty, and wily. What God really said was:

You may freely eat of every tree of the garden, but of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil you shall not eat, for in the day that you eat of it you shall die. –Gen 2:17

My kids have an expression about my ability to quote movie lines from memory. They say, "Dad, you never get it exactly right. You never even get it close to right." That comes to mind as we see that the woman also does not quote God accurately as she parries the serpent's question:

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.'

God had referred to a specific tree, not a nameless tree in the middle of the garden. And God had said nothing about touching the tree, only about eating its fruit. If you're going to quote God, you had better get it exactly right.

The serpent comes back at the woman with the direct claim that God has lied to them:

You will not die; for God knows that when you eat of it your eyes will be opened, and you will be like God, knowing good and evil.

The serpent's suggestion is not only that God has lied to them, but that he has done so to keep them from having access to knowledge that will elevate them to godlike status. God wants to hold back something good from them, knowledge that will enrich them and make life more meaningful or better or more godlike. The serpent has cast aspersions on the character of God, suggesting that God cannot be fully trusted to act in the best interests of human beings.

The result is famous:

So when the woman saw that the tree was good for food, and that it was a delight to the eyes, and that the tree was to be desired to make one wise, she took of its fruit and ate; and she also gave some to her husband, who was with her, and he ate.

It is fascinating that the text doesn't simply say:

When the woman heard that the fruit of the tree would give her knowledge of good and evil and that she would not die, she ate.

But that's not what the text says.

The woman is attracted to the forbidden fruit as food, even though we already know that there was plenty of other perfectly wonderful food around. She is attracted to the forbidden fruit because it looks delightful, even though we already know that there was plenty of other delightful looking stuff in the garden.

And don't miss this little line:

And she also gave some to her husband, who was with her, and he ate.

Where you been, Adam? We will look more at the unfortunate dynamics between the first couple next week, but it is fascinating that a silent Adam has apparently been there the whole dang time. There is some serious subtext going on here about husband-wife, male-female relations. I will address that next week.

Finally, we see the first results of giving in to temptation:

Then the eyes of both were opened, and they knew that they were naked; and they sewed fig leaves together and made loincloths for themselves.

The serpent was right about two things: the humans did gain a new kind of knowledge, that odd knowledge that the sexual parts of the human body are of such a character and meaning that they should be covered up in public. This is often called shame. And they did not die. At least, they did not die right away or anytime soon. So does that mean the serpent was not lying?

Temptation Dynamics and the Human Condition

Now I want to move to interpretation, at two levels. First I want us to think about the dynamics of temptation. Then I want to get even more 'meta' and ask about what big picture story about the human condition is being told here.

So, first: ***This story is trying to teach us about how temptation works in human life.***

Three points here:

First: ***temptation involves mistrusting that God knows what is best for us and sets the rules for our lives accordingly.***

The serpent tempts the couple into distrusting God's motives for banning access to that one tree. God's command, says the serpent, is intended to keep them from something good. Sometimes that is precisely how we feel. Why am I not allowed to do this, that, or the other? For our good.

When we distrust God's good will toward us, and see God as arbitrary divine rulemaker, we are prone to temptation.

Second: ***temptation involves bypassing what is good and permissible to get to what is tempting because it is forbidden.***

The story nicely captures how our twisted minds and hearts fall prey to temptation. We have access to all kinds of good things, but we want something different, just because it's different and just because it's forbidden.

It's as simple as the child who is told that he cannot have any cookies from that particular cookie jar, or at least, not now, or not yet, but precisely because it has been banned it is all the more enticing.

It's as tragic as the spouse who has a good marriage but strays just because the forbidden is more enticing, precisely because it is forbidden. Forbidden fruit tastes sweeter, until the poison sets in. This story ingeniously captures this.

Third: ***temptation involves obscuring our motivations to ourselves.***

Instead of just blatantly doing wrong and admitting it, we often *add reasons* to somehow blur our motivations or justify ourselves. The woman wants the knowledge the serpent promises, but what helps her get to disobedience is also thinking about how tasty that forbidden fruit would be and how attractive it looks there on the tree. It's the knowledge plus the taste plus the prettiness that takes her across the line into temptation.

I once knew a perfectly nice Christian lady who handled the accounts at a car repair shop run by a dear friend of mine. Turned out she stole tens of thousands of dollars from her boss. When caught, she said that she did not just wake up one day and say, "I want to steal money today." Instead, she added reasons, or rationalizations: Here is opportunity, I am so underpaid, the boss is making so much money, I have so many debts, and he won't really miss the money anyway. By adding reasons to reasons she justified the unjustifiable. It's just something people do, isn't it?

Now let's go meta. Let's take a step further back and ask whether or what this story is trying to teach us about the human condition or the human journey. Let me offer three somewhat competing interpretations:

First, ***this story can be read morally, as illustrating the clash between the instincts for good and for evil in the human heart.***

This was and is the primary Jewish reading of this story -- that human life is a struggle between the instinct to do good (the *yetzer ha-tov*) and the instinct to do bad (the *yetzer ha-ra*).

The story teaches that human beings always have a choice between doing right and wrong, good and evil. Here the first couple chose to do wrong, and it brought bad consequences. They could

have chosen to obey God and resisted temptation, but they did not. The lesson is that we face many such situations in our own lives, and that often we feel a conflict of drives or instincts, between doing good or bad, acting on a higher or lower impulses. This makes sense, doesn't it?

Second, this story can be read developmentally, to address the stages both of individual human life and of human civilization.

The other day I dropped by my daughter's house to see her and our adorable grandson Jonah. When I arrived he was having dinner. He was wearing socks. That's all. Nothing else.

Now if Jonah was 14, this would be a problem. But Jonah is 2 ½, and is potty training, and so it is not a problem. One way to read both Genesis 2 and 3 is to see it as being about the childhood of the human race.

First we were innocent as children, which is why Adam and Eve could frolic around naked and not notice. But then we grew up, which had many advantages, including greater knowledge of good and evil. But it had many disadvantages, including greater knowledge of good and evil.

Childhood has an adorable innocence, which must be protected. Innocence of sexuality and of shame is part of that. But eventually we grow up. The childhood of the human race, back in the mists of the garden, had a kind of adorable innocence. But we grew up. We learned stuff. We lost our innocence, but in turn fulfilled much of our God-given potential as creatures made in God's image.

Third, this story can be read tragically, as the fall of humanity into sin. This became the primary Christian reading of this story.

It was certainly Paul's reading. Paul taught that Adam and Eve sinned, and humanity ever after was corrupted by sin. Human nature began a rapid descent into viciousness. Since Adam there has not been a single incorruptible or uncorrupted person. "There is none righteous; no, not one." We need a Savior. God provided that Savior in the God-man Jesus, who reverses the effects of what became known as "the fall" and makes possible the salvation and transformation of human beings. Christians thus ended up with a very different reading of Genesis than the Jewish community which originally produced this story.

Conclusion

Maybe the open-endedness of the possibilities here is itself my conclusion. Being a Christian does not require you to read this text in a single way. It is pregnant with meaning. We can hear God's Word in it. We can learn various things that can help us follow Jesus better. And as we make that effort we join our Jewish and Christian sisters and brothers who have been doing the same wrestle with the same text for 2500 years. There's divine truth here. Let's argue about it. Let's live it.