

A Good Word for the Snake, by Daniel H. Kuhn, Jr. L1080210
Genesis 2:15-17, 3:1-7 and Romans 5:12-19, 10 February, 2008

The Bible is not a science book and never was. It is not really a book of historical facts and was never intended to be. The Bible is the story of the relationship between God and human beings. It is a testament to God's loving care.

In Genesis chapters two and three, there is a story of a man, a woman, a snake, and God. It is an important story in the history of humanity because it has been the explanation of the causes of such problems as suffering, pain in childbirth, man's sinfulness, and women's fear of snakes. The story has also been the source of much misinterpretation of our faith. For one thing, the forbidden fruit of the Garden of Eden was not an apple; it was a rotten pair! That is not true either. Actually, if you read the story of the Garden of Eden, you will find no mention of what the fruit of the tree of knowledge of good and evil ever looked like. Somewhere, someone pictured the fruit looking like an apple, and we have been stuck with the misconception ever since.

We have been taught to look upon the serpent or snake as an evil creature. We need to question that thinking. According to the story, it was the snake who told the truth and God who lied. Listen. "God said to the man, '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.'"¹ Later, the snake said to woman, "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."² She and man ate of fruit and didn't die as God had warned. Instead, they became like God, knowing good and bad.

The serpent said this would happen. Who is telling the truth in the story?

If you read on, you will find more problems and further misinterpretations. Now that their eyes were opened, the man and woman knew they were naked and sewed fig leaves together and made themselves aprons. People, since Augustine, therefore, thought of the problem of sin as sexual in nature. That is a misconception. What did happen, was that the man and woman had taken the first step in hiding themselves from each other. Do you know the size of fig leaves and the difficulty of sewing them together? This indicates the lengths to which we go to hide our true selves from each other.

But the hiding does not stop there. They heard the sound of God walking in the garden in the cool of the day, and the man and his wife (that's interesting. I did not read of anyone marrying them!) they hid themselves from the presence of God among the trees of garden. The Lord God did not know where they were and called out to them.

Now, we have a theological problem of a God who is not as powerful and all-knowing as we had been led to believe. Why did God have to look for the man? If God knew everything, God would have known where they were at all times— after all, there were only two people in the whole world then. God should have been able to keep track of them! If God did not know their exact location, God would have had x-ray vision and been able to see them behind the trees. If we look at the events of this story as literal fact, we encounter many difficulties. The important point here is, the first humans tried to hide themselves from the presence of God. That is sin.

We stand before God at all times in the complete nakedness of our intentions and impulses. That nakedness demands our honesty, humility, and confession.

¹Genesis 2:17

²Genesis 3:4

The knowledge of good and evil is not so bad. Ernst Bloch asked the question, “What sort of sin is that, wanting to be like God and know good and evil?”³ He went on: “A paradise of pure obedience was a park where only beasts could stay, not humans.” Our living as true humans can take place only outside of the garden where we are faced with having to work, get along with each other, and make difficult choices. I firmly believe that it is the human being living outside of paradise that God created, not some idiotic robot who knew no difference between good and evil or who followed God like a puppet. Neither Adam nor the story teller here lament the fact that at the end of the story Adam had to toil to eat from the ground all the days his life.

God is not God because God created humanity to be ignorant, but because God created a rational creature, magnificent in ability, but who must yet strive to perfection. The more men and women strive for perfection, the more they know there is only one God.

The Garden of Eden story is a cute one, even quaint, but can not bear the theological weight it has been given throughout the history our faith. The story is thought to have come into the Hebrew faith from ancient Akkadian sources. Like the story of Noah and the flood, it has similar parallels in pagan ancient near-Eastern religions. It was the genius of the Hebrews to take such stories and use them to teach of the relationship between God and humanity.

What is going on in the second chapter of Genesis is not so much the story of people and snakes as it is humans trying to be like God. When we think we know good and evil, we usually botch things up. The first man and the first woman thought they had it so together, they sewed together tiny fig leaves to cover up what they had already seen! It is all so futile. They thought they knew good and evil so well they tried to hide from God because they were full of shame. Yet, it was this God who had created them! They could not hide.

We can not hide from the God who has created us. Neither can we hide from each other. The problem of sin here is not in knowing good and evil, but in over-reaching– in trying to be more than human. It is evil for us to think we can be like God. The creation story speaks of God as breathing God's spirit into human's nostrils. It is God who gives us life, not we to ourselves. Whether it was six days, six million years, or six nanoseconds, it was God who created universe.

It is unfortunate that the Bible begins with the creation stories of Genesis because people think of them as the basis of the rest of Bible. The Genesis creation stories are not really the starting point of the Bible. The starting point of the Bible is the fact of God's love for creation.

During Lent, we celebrate the life of Jesus Christ who put our lives into perspective for us. It is Jesus who tried to teach us the proper relationship between God and humanity. Jesus has been called the new Adam.

During Lent we are taken from one Garden to another. We begin in the Garden of Eden where man blew it by thinking he could take the place of God. All through history we have repeated the original sin by trying to be like God, not really obeying God's will. In the Garden of Gethsemane Jesus prayed to his creator saying, “Yet, not my will but yours be done.”⁴ That is the proper relationship between God and humans.

Paul wrote of the meaning of Christ in his letter to the Romans. He said that as sin came into the world through one person, so life comes to us through another. The doctrine of original sin comes from this passage. I do not believe I am a sinner because of what some people did a million years ago. I do not believe that babies are born full of sin into this world. In fact, Paul

³Ernst Bloch, *The Principle of Hope*

⁴Luke 22:42

said, “Death spread to all people because all have sinned.”⁵ He says explicitly that all people are actively involved in continuing to sin; we all start it over every day. It is not because of a snake or Adam. We all try to be like God, thinking we know what is really right and what is really wrong. We still live in the 1950's where the good cowboys wore white hats and the bad guys had dark hats. We think of issues as clear-cut with few gray areas. It is this god-like self-assuredness that causes wars. It causes disputes between Christians and Muslims, each thinking they have the corner on the god-like knowledge good and evil. It causes legal controversies such as those over abortion and evolution.

Jesus shows us the correct way of relating to God. Do God's will no matter what the consequences. Therefore, this free gift is given by God. This gift of grace gives us new life. The story of the Garden of Eden is that God has given us the gifts of life and free choice. The story of the Garden of Gethsemene is that God has given us the free gift of new life— eternal life. It comes by following Christ's example and restoring the proper relationship with God. It is obedience to God's will, the love for all. God's spirit was breathed into us giving us life. God's spirit is breathed into us again through Jesus Christ, and that gives us new life.

⁵Romans 5:12

