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Earth-creature as the image of God

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1 Preface

Is it possible for us to pursue whether the well-known story of Creation (Genesis 1-3) can be interpreted as a process of human beings obtaining ethical independence? I would like to engage in a re-reading of the literary masterpiece of Chapter 3 and see what new things we can say about our path of gaining autonomy as viewed from an ethical perspective.

The chapter is often titled “the temptation story” or “Eve’s original sin.” Interpreters tend to emphasize the serpent as seducer and Eve as sinner. Historically, interpreters have used the chapter as the main cause for human being’s sinfulness. As a result, a theology of repentance has occupied church teachings and discipline. I have been wondering if there is another way of reading the chapter.

Let us examine the following statements which show Adam in a more positive light, while Eve seems a subservient figure.

Proposition 1: Let a woman learn in silence with full submission.

Proposition 2: I permit no woman to teach or to have authority over a man; she is to keep silent.

Grounds: For Adam was formed first then Eve; and Adam was not deceived, but the woman was deceived and became a transgressor.

Teaching: Yet she will be saved through childbearing, provided they continue in faith and love and holiness, with modesty.

Authority: The saying is sure.

These statements make use of a one-sided interpretation of Genesis 3 in order to show the

predominance of man over woman. Many are surprised to know these statements are found in our Christian Testament (1Timothy 2:11-3:1). This letter was written in the early years of the second century CE. We can thus say the biased interpretation of Genesis 3 began quite early. We do not need to wait for Augustine, who influenced most of the theologians in the middle ages with his binary interpretation.

2 Christian Testament

To our surprise, there are only two places that refer to “Eve” in the New Testament.

First, “For Adam was formed first then Eve; and Adam was not deceived, but the woman was deceived and became a transgressor” (1Tim2:14).

Second: “...as the serpent deceived Eve by its cunning...” (2Cor11:3).

The original Greek “ἐν παράβασει γίνομαι” is translated in 1Timothy “become a transgressor,” which may mislead the readers. The phrase “become a transgressor” usually means “to fall into violation.” For example, we read in Paul’s letter to Romans 4:15 “For the law brings wrath; but where there is no law, neither is there violation.” “ἁμαρτάνω” and its variation are usually used for sin or sinner.

In this case the phrase means “to violate the promise made between God and Eve.” When the violation was connected with transgression of sin, the theory of original sin was born.

3 Genesis Chapter 3: Introduction

First of all, we need to know that there is no reference to “sin (chatt’ at in Hebrew)” within this chapter. In Genesis, the word is first found in 4:7. Secondly, we all know that the chapter is a literary masterpiece. Therefore we may make a mistake if we try to look for some sort of norms, definitions or doctrines in Chapter 3. Careful attention is required to metaphors used as rhetoric. The literary expressions used in the chapter quite often reflect the human condition. The literary treatment of this passage reflects much of the lived experience of human beings. Thirdly, it is clear that the main theme of the chapter concerns the true relationship between God and human beings.

Let’s begin reading the chapter as a literary work.

4 Genesis Chapter 3: Scene 1

1) The Characters: Serpent, God, Woman, and Man

Serpent

There is no nuance of sly or cunning in the term “crafty.” It is used to denote the cleverest character and a trickster in the story.

Serpents were worshipped as gods of life, wisdom, treasure, reproduction, healing, etc. in ancient myths or folklore. In ancient Egypt and Mesopotamia, they were symbols of wisdom. In Canaan, they were deified as bringing rich crops.

In comparison, it is distinctive in Genesis that the serpent is one of the creatures, not one of the many gods. Furthermore, in the Jewish and Christian tradition not until the second century did a more biased interpretation of the serpent appear that made the serpent the symbol of evil. For example, we find the following in The Wisdom of Solomon 2:23-24; “for God created us for incorruption, and made us in the image of God’s own eternity, but through the devil’s envy death entered the world, and those who belong to his company experience it.” And in Revelation 20:2; “He (an angel) seized the dragon, that ancient serpent, who is in the Devil and Satan, and bound him for a thousand years.”

Serpent’s lines

i) “Did God say, ‘You shall not eat from any tree in the garden’?” (3:1)

The serpent’s question is rhetorically ironic, with a clever expression, making the respondent unable to avoid answering. The question expects the simple answer “yes” or “no.” Thus we can see the serpent neither lied nor seduced them to eat. The serpent only inquired what was expressed in God’s prohibition.

ii) “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.” (3:4-5)

The serpent’s line, “You will not die” is apparently in contradiction with what God said. What did the writer think/intend by using the lines? Is there any difference in the meaning of two “deaths” used by the serpent and God? Does the serpent’s line imply eternal life? Or does it mean there will be a difference in the relationship with God? The line “you will be like God, knowing good and evil” sounds like human beings are now capable of knowledge and ethical judgments.

God

God’s line

“...in the day that you eat of it you shall die.” (2:17)

This is the only prohibition given by God. We can say this is an example of a rule to be kept in circumstances where full freedom is granted. If this symbolizes the way to keep in relationship with God, “not eating” implies an action necessary to be under God’s full protection. Therefore “eating” can result in the end of their naïve relationship with God, ending their existence as non-sentient beings.

Woman

The woman never speaks. The story tells only her behaviors.

She was spoken to by the serpent. The reason the serpent chose her is not disclosed. As a result, significant guessing has taken place over time. Augustine made women's secondary position decisive by saying that the woman easily yields to temptation and so is sinful by nature.

Her behaviors

i) " 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..." (3:6a). She observes the fruit, which seems to satisfy her appetite, is attractive aesthetically as well as sensually, and appears most powerful as the source of wisdom. She does so by activating all areas of her senses: observing, analyzing, recognizing and understanding. Then she gives her own judgment. From beginning to end, she is an active agent taking initiative for the whole process.

ii) " she took of its fruit and ate; and she also gave some to her husband, who was with her, and he ate." (3:6b). It is the woman that took the action to eat the fruit. She showed independence in her decision-making. She chose and committed her action to gain wisdom. She never consulted with the man who was with her. She never asked his advice or permission. Rather she ate what she herself judged "good" and shared it with him. Through her independent judgment followed by action, we can see a sense of responsibility rising within her.

Man

His behavior

- i) He was certainly watching the whole process of the woman's actions.
- ii) He never gave advice or attempted to stop her.
- iii) He accepted what she handed him and ate it without hesitation or doubt.
- iv) He seems to have done so with full trust in her.

To sum up

- 1 Behaviors of the woman and man show their responsive, dialogical, relational, collective and social natures.
- 2 Despite the earlier prohibition given by God, they broke the command and chose to eat the fruit.
- 3 The serpent did not urge them to eat. The serpent only posed a question that could be responded to by saying "yes" or "no."
- 4 After weighing God and the serpent in the balance, the two chose to trust the serpent's words. They committed themselves to what the serpent said.

- 5 As a result, they both became losers in God's sight by giving way to their own minds.

5 Genesis Chapter 3: Scene 2

They gained knowledge.

“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.” (3:7)

Through gaining knowledge,

1 The sense of shame has appeared.

“and the man and his wife hid themselves...among the trees of the garden.” (3:8)

2 The two reveal feelings of regret for breaking the promise.

6 Genesis Chapter 3: Scene 3

- 1) The Characters: God, Adam, Woman, Serpent

God's line

“But the Lord God called to the man, and said, 'Where are you?'" (3:9)

Adam's line

“He said, 'I heard the sound of you in the garden, and I was afraid, because I was naked; and I hid myself.'" (3:10)

He is experiencing the sense of fear before God.

God's line

“God said, 'Who told you that you were naked? Have you eaten from the tree of which I commanded you not to eat?'" (3:11)

God's question is simply asking the man to answer with either “yes” or “no.”

Adam's line

“The man said, 'The woman whom you gave to be with me, she gave me fruit from the tree, and I ate.'" (3:12)

His answer is neither “yes” nor “no”. All of his words are spent in defending and excusing himself. By doing so, he betrayed not only the woman but also God.

Woman's line

“The woman said, 'The serpent tricked me, and I ate.'" (3:13)

She defends and excuses herself just like Adam has done.

It may be important to point out here that the original word “trick” used by her for the serpent's action, “nasha,” means “not tell the truth,” or “lie” rather than “deceive.”

The word is used only here in Chapter 3, and it is used only when she excuses or defends herself. From her perspective, it is the serpent that has deceived her and she is not responsible for her behavior. The audience knows that she is “not telling the truth.”

2) Some points made thus far

1 Both Adam and the woman shifted their responsibility onto others. By not telling the truth, they not only lied to God, but avoided recognizing their own faults.

2 Therefore we should say they were both defeated by their own desire, not by the serpent's temptation. They showed their weakness in their lack of willpower.

3 We even glimpse their sense of fear of death which they face in their daily lives. This sense of fear about death may be related to breaking their promise with God.

“And the Lord God commanded 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.’” (3:16-17)

Having listened to the voice warning, “You shall die,” they were attracted by the other voice asserting, “You will not die,” and chose to follow the latter voice. The script depicts very vividly their wavering state of mind.

It is true that they are not free from the fear of death as they face it almost every day. But on the other hand, to gain knowledge or to learn the difference between good and evil is inevitable in anyone's life. This implies the necessity for everyone to live an ethical life.

Now we need to ask what kind of death the two experienced in this scene. The death depicted here seems to show the end of a fully dependent relationship with God. In other words, they are no longer under the complete protection of God. It shows the end of the most naïve relationship between God and them. For them the serpent's words, “you will not die” were too attractive. They weighed God against the serpent and God came up lacking. As a result, they turned their backs on God.

3) Possibility of emerging and developing ethics

Now let us see if it is possible for us to see in the story any glimpse of them deploying ethical disciplines.

1 When they are in their most naïve relationship with God, they both created a community of responding, dialoguing and trusting each other. They showed curiosity as well as the ability to evaluate and judge. They had a sense of responsibility. She valued the fruit and shared what she thought was good with the man.

2 After they gained the knowledge of good and evil, they felt ashamed and sought to hide themselves. Having displayed self-determination, they turned their backs on God. As a result, they lost the sense of being responsible for their behavior. They could not respond to God's question of whether they ate the fruit. Not only that, they put blame on someone else and became accomplices as well. They caused themselves to tremble with anxiety.

They were no longer communal or societal, but broken up and alone. These losses are the result of forgetting, ignoring and giving up God's words to follow as the most basic rule of life.

- 3 However, breaking away from the full and safe protection given by God has brought them into a seemingly favorable state-- the ability to discern good and evil. Without knowing the substance and subtleties of good and evil, they would not know what is sinful, thus this leap might have been necessary in order for them to face and accept the necessity of making choices in their lives. Only when we learn the ethical precepts of discerning what is good and evil, can we get to know whether we are sinful. We can see here the reason why we need to incorporate an ethical perspective to be fully human.
- 4 As humans, we encounter dilemmas that challenge us to choose between becoming an autonomous being on the one hand, and facing the reality of human incompleteness.

7 Genesis Chapter 3: Scene 4

- 1) Asks a new question: cognition of the absolute and unfathomable distance between God and human beings.

Now Adam and the woman need to establish a new relationship with God. They are asked to break away from forgetting, ignoring and renouncing.

- 1 Question 1

Do they really know what is good and what is evil? In other words, they are asked if they are ready to imagine what it means to be autonomous and behave accordingly. Ethical standards are norms for deciding what is good and what is evil. They also function as rules that set guidelines for humans in appropriate relationships.

- 2 Question 2

What did they lack? Their standards/rules to decide good and evil might be deficient. The woman seemed to have individuality, autonomy, and an ability to judge, but we may need to ask if the decision she made was legitimate according to what we think of as ethical. The story seems to provoke our serious rethinking of what we have as ethical standards for words and behaviors.

What they lacked was the sense of responsibility to pursue their decision to the end. In other words, they lacked real cognition of their selfhood. If they had established their ethical selves, they could not deploy any kind of excuse or untruthfulness toward God. In their case, they failed when they started putting their own behavior aside and putting the blame on someone else. If they wanted to make a right decision, one that distinguishes between good and evil, they needed to avoid making any excuse, to pursue their commitment to the end, and to prevent themselves from ruining their communal relationships.

- 3 Question 3

Have they learned to know what is good and evil?

What motivated them to know the difference between good and evil was their own experience that made them realize it was impossible to remain under God's full protection. I interpret the experience as God's invitation to get out of God's earthen creature so that they may gain their own personhood as well as their autonomy as human beings. Earthen creatures are thus asked to establish a new relationship with God.

8 Genesis Chapter 3: the last scene

1) Final words given by God to the man and woman

The words reflect the suffering human beings experience in their lives.

To the woman God said, "I will greatly increase your pangs in childbearing; in pain you shall bring forth children, yet your desire shall be for your husband." (3:16)

And to the man God said, "Because you have listened to the voice of your wife, and have eaten of the tree about which I commanded you, 'You shall not eat of it,' cursed is the ground because of you; in toil you shall eat of it all the days of your life; thorns and thistles it shall bring forth for you; and you shall eat the plants of the field. By the sweat of your face you shall eat bread until you return to the ground, for out of it you were taken; you are dust, and to dust you shall return." (3:17-19)

At the end of the story, the division of roles based on sex appears.

The words given to them by God describe the reality of their lives, which are now limited by death. Thus the huge question of how to differentiate good and evil remains unanswered.

What is good? What are the standards to define good? Why is there suffering, fear, the bad, and sin?

2) God's grace: hope of a life based upon faith

God's love is still working.

"Where are you?" (3:9)

And the Lord God made garments of skins for Adam and for his wife, and clothed them. (3:20)

There is no concrete explanation for the most critical question, that is, why there is suffering in our lives. Nevertheless, there are some suggestive ideas in the story. We may summarize our discussion through the following; (1) Suffering in our life is taken to be the result of our turning our backs to God and not the result of God's anger or punishment. (2) Therefore if our life is haunted by suffering, that suffering is reflective of the disjointed relationship among humans as well as symptomatic of the fractured relationship between humanity and God. (3) Behind the story of Chapter 3, there seem to be powerful messages and challenges given to us: that we should avoid pursuing an individualized/ isolated life, but cooperate together in solidarity so that we may overcome our suffering by

participating in a community seeking peace and justice.

3) The new relationship with God

The story does not give any concrete answer on the question of how to re-gain our relationship with God. Rather it leaves us with a question as well as an invitation. The story leaves us with clues for right behavior, not absolute rules. We are not told how to respond, but must make our own decisions.

As a unique individual, we are to create our distinct worldview. As a person in the communal world, we are to search for the ideal way to live together. And at the most basic level, we are told to be faithful to our relationship with God.

The initial chapters of Genesis have just begun the creation story. The questions we have encountered may be questioned, challenged, or answered in the subsequent stories again and again. The history detailed in the following chapters may show symbolically and rhetorically how human beings tried hard to look for the answers to their basic questions. We also would like to follow them and look for the fountain of life that may inspire and encourage us as we look for a better world with peace and justice for all.

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