

WHAT IS THE GARDEN OF EDEN STORY ALL ABOUT?

The Five Books of Moses address the most important aspects of human existence. That is their main purpose, as opposed to laying out the technicalities of creation or the details of history. The most pressing question we are likely to ask, and therefore the one with which the books must begin, is what being human means. How are we similar to and different from the Creator and the rest of His creation?

In a couple of short chapters, starting with the last three verses of Genesis Chapter 1 and ending with Genesis Chapter 3, some very important aspects of being human are explained. In my thinking, there is much more here than the following simple story: Adam and Eve have a wonderful life in the Garden of Eden but they eat the forbidden fruit and get kicked out, showing that they are weak (you can read here “defective” and/or “hopeless sinners”). As is often the case in the bible, there is the children’s or surface text and the more serious interpretation. I want to offer the latter.

I will examine the chapters verse by verse later in this essay, but first let me mention some of my interests related to the Adam and Eve episode.

What would be the point of starting an inspirational book with a story of humanity badly stumbling? It would be very discouraging although some theologies need that failure (i.e. original sin) to justify a later repair mechanism. These belief systems need to see humanity as an utter disaster waiting for redemption. They believe that the rest of the Five Books cannot erase the stain from the Garden by elevating humanity sufficiently. In my thinking, we are not sinners by inheritance and therefore no remedy for Adam and Eve’s actions are necessary, particularly because these first two adults are merely demonstrating what makes us human, what we are created to be.

Although the text says Adam and Eve disobeyed God by tasting the Tree of Knowledge and the consequences for them and us were very serious, there is much more going on here, as we shall see. There is a whole different way of looking at these events and some of the biggest theological questions also lurk in the background. For example:

1. In what ways are we created in God’s image?
2. Could human minds and personalities function in a prepared paradise?
3. Were Adam and Eve free to choose? Did their nature “doom” them?
4. Did God know that His human creations will disobey or was He “surprised”?
5. How do we handle the discomfort of wrongdoing?
6. What does it mean to partake of the Tree of Knowledge?
7. What is a human’s sense of separation from God, from other humans, from other creatures, and from nature?
8. What does it mean to be self-conscious and how is the acquisition of this sense illustrated by the Garden of Eden events?
9. What is the price of being fully human?

--The first three chapters of Genesis seek to answer these questions for those who are willing to read deeply what is most often taken to be just a simple story of typical human misbehavior. So let's examine selected verses for which I will offer a probably unconventional interpretation.
And God said, "Let us make man...(Gen.1:26)

--This sounds like a King talking to His court. We get a hint that there are intermediate beings, between God and man, but it is not the purpose of these chapters to elaborate on their nature or purpose. These early chapters are intended to show man his position and fundamental characteristics.
in Our image, after Our likeness. (v. 26)

--In what ways are we created after God's likeness?
Is there a physical likeness? Some non-Jewish groups believe that there is, but the material aspects of God are carefully avoided in our bible. In fact we are forbidden graven images; we are simply discouraged from attempting to visualize God. Also, there are serious similarities between the physical characteristics of men and animals, and the latter, we can infer from this verse, were not made in God's likeness. The extent of the similarities between God and man is not made explicit but rather there is the implication that the likeness will become apparent in the chapters to follow. We can find the commonalities and differences as we closely examine the text verse by verse.
They shall rule... (v.26)

--We are like God in that we are meant to rule (i.e. exercise control) but unlike God, of course, in the limits of our domain. We are allowed to use the next lower life forms, the animals, for our benefit. This does not mean they are intended for food. As we shall learn very soon, we are also allowed to manage the plant life in the form of food gathering or production.
God blessed them... (v. 28)

--God wants humanity to succeed.
Be fruitful and multiply, fill the earth and subdue it... (v. 28)

--These words make clear that, from the moment of its creation, humanity was intended to spread over the earth and to use it for constructive happy lives. Thus, the Garden of Eden, introduced later, will be only a temporary stay and a demonstration of certain human characteristics.
I have given you all herbage... for food. And to every beast of the earth... every green herb is for food. (v.29, 30)

--I interpret these two verses to mean a starting intention on the part of God that both humans and animals should eat plants. It seems that human consumption of animals was a later concession. That is very interesting to me because it shows an ongoing, adaptive attitude by God toward humans.
and behold it was very good (v. 31)

--Being satisfied with our creative or constructive work is another way in which we are like God. *there was no man to work the soil.* (Gen. 2:5)

--Again, we see that God expected man ultimately to obtain food by considerable effort. The Garden of Eden will show that a life of no cares, a life of essentially grazing, is not the existence that is appropriate for our nature. Humanity was never meant to live that way permanently. *God planted a garden in Eden....and placed there the man...*(v.8)

--Man is now essentially placed into an experimental situation, where his most important characteristics can be closely followed.

And God caused to sprout from the ground every tree that was pleasing to the sight and good for food; also the Tree of Life in the midst of the garden, and the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Bad. (v.9)

--Man is placed into surroundings that are very pleasing. He is not unlike a small child whose sensual and physical needs are anticipated by a parent.

He is forbidden to taste the Tree of Life and the Tree of Knowledge. The existence of the latter implies that, at creation and for some time thereafter, Adam had no sense of good and bad. He really is like a toddler without a care in the world and no sense of identity. Adam and Eve feel no separation between themselves (i.e. they are not self-conscious) and between humanity and the rest of nature. They have no sense of life versus death, no sense of age or health, and no particular interest in their bodies. They have no difficulties of any sort. They do experience sensual pleasure from beautiful surroundings and from the delicious fruits.

Like small children, Adam and Eve are human but they aren't yet displaying what mature humanity is really like. So a transition is needed. This is provided by the Tree of Knowledge encounter. We need to see what characterizes adult man and woman.

placed him in the Garden of Eden to work it and to guard it
(v. 15)

--There really was no work to be done or any guarding that was necessary. A better translation of the intent, in my opinion, would be to say "use it and appreciate it".

but of the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Bad you must not eat thereof; for on the day you eat of it, you shall surely die (v.17)

--Obviously, Adam did not die and again, a better translation of the intent would be to say "your life shall completely change". Your life as a child will end and there will be a serious transition to adulthood.

It is not good that man be alone; I will make him a helper corresponding to him. (v.18)

--The animal creatures were not suitable company. With them, Adam still felt alone. God didn't make another man because even that would not be the appropriate "correspondence". Certainly the

earth could not be filled that way, but there is much more to the male-female relationship than procreation. Animals, and people of the same gender, can supply many aspects of companionship. They can be one's "helpers" but it is the opposite gender that offers the ultimate partnership for a human being. This is another important part of being human and letting go of it is at our peril. If God made us, then He knows us very well. He knows our needs and He knows what our potential is. The male-female bond allows us to function at our optimum level, i.e. to obtain the greatest possible happiness in our lifetimes. It is perfectly appropriate that man's most important relationship should be mentioned at this early point of the bible.

Therefore a man shall leave his father and his mother and cling to his wife and they shall become one flesh. (v.24)

--All other relationships, while very close and valuable, are secondary to the male-female one. The union that a couple can experience is the ultimate.

They were both naked, the man and his wife, and they were not ashamed. (v. 25)

--Up to this point, Adam and Eve really did think of themselves as "one flesh", almost literally as one body. Their looking at each other was like our being unashamed (i.e. insecure, guarded) when we look in the mirror; we are just seeing parts of ourselves. They did not think of one's body ending and the other's body beginning; it felt to them very much like two sides of one whole. Similarly it takes some experience for a very young child to get a sense of his body, learning where it ends and other objects begin. Adam and Eve were not self-conscious; in other words, they did not feel a separation between themselves and the other person. This separation, this individuality is a fundamental part of adult existence. Adam and Eve do come to it later because identity is a component of human initiative and decision-making.

Now the serpent was cunning beyond any beast of the field...(Gen.3.1)

--The serpent seems to be an intermediate creature between human and animal, marked by an evil nature. He also gives voice to the humans' thinking.

your eyes will be opened and you will be like God, knowing good and bad...(v. 5)

--Eve didn't need much encouragement to act out her own inclination. It's not that she wanted to know the difference between good and bad; she was naturally curious and wanted to know things. Understanding things and asserting ourselves are two ways in which we are the likeness of God. Eve was just demonstrating this fact; she was just being human. It was not a question of sinning (i.e. falling short by disobeying instructions). She was merely doing what she was created to do. She wanted to make a decision all by herself, to take the initiative, to exercise free will. This is where we must pause and examine things closely. First of all, we need to remember that God was pleased by His creation of humans. He wouldn't want to show right away that we are hopelessly defective, that we were too weak to keep a single commandment. No, He wants to show humans of future generations their exact nature.

I like the parent-child analogy. If a parent had a book that he didn't want a child to look at, why would he put it on a coffee-table within easy reach? Also, you don't test a child, especially with consequences he doesn't understand. Instead, you are trying to see how your child is developing and you would not be surprised or really disappointed if he goes for the forbidden book. It's a normal tendency on the part of the otherwise innocent little human being.

Does the child, and did Adam and Eve, really have a choice in the matter? I don't believe so. They are like actors in a drama intended to educate the future, acting out their fundamental characteristics.

Was God surprised by these developments? I can't imagine so. Remember, in the earlier verses He wanted humans to fill the earth and to use it. That cannot be managed by the immature.

Still, it's an interesting theological question whether humans can surprise God. There are numerous instances in the Five Books of Moses where He is clearly disappointed by his human creations. In fact in Noah's and Lot's times, He decides to do serious selection and termination. There are many other situations where wrath and destruction are God's re-actions.

Was God satisfied with Adam and Eve's new maturity? Try to put yourself into the parent's role here. How do you feel when your child's personality and talents are revealed over time. You might say, "Fine, I see what I have. Now how do I handle it?" What actually happens later is that God offers humans some wisdom on how to lead better lives and how to form better societies; this is not that much different than a parent's advice to his older children.

the tree was desirable as a means to wisdom...(v. 5)

--She makes a decision. She doesn't just take the fruit on the basis of appearance or taste. She knows very well that she is stepping into the unknown.

and she gave also to her husband...(v. 5)

--This is, of course, natural. Now it is she who doesn't want to be alone in her newly-found personality. She may also fear the consequences of her act and in that she wants company.

Then the eyes of both of them were opened and they realized that they were naked...(v. 7)

--Their eyes were opened to many things. It's like a rebirth. Along with the desire to know and the willingness to make decisions comes self-consciousness or identity. Adam and Even now come to realize that they are capable of acting independently. This implies that their bodies are their own also and to be shown or used at their discretion.

they heard God.. and.....hid...(v. 8)

--No doubt, all the generations since Adam and Eve have been amused by this child-like behavior. Of course, they fear their Parent, their Creator, having acted contrary to prohibitions, and they prolong the inevitable need to hear the consequences.

God called out... "Where are you?" (v. 9)

--Obviously there is no hiding from God but He wants to give Adam some time and then see how he handles things. Again, it's like a parent asking questions that he knows the answers to.

I was afraid because I am naked and so I hid (v. 10)

--I was afraid because I now see myself as exposed and estranged, having to answer for my behavior.

Who told you that you are naked? Have you eaten of the tree from which I commanded you not to eat? (v. 11)

--God wants to hear Adam's handling of his misbehavior because we can learn from this also. Will Adam be defiant, will he be apologetic, will he show weakness and look for excuses?

the womangave me of the tree and I ate (v. 12)

--Poor Adam panics and tries to shift the blame. Psychologically speaking, he and humanity, then and now, still have a lot of growing up to do.

Adam's hiding indicates that he is frightened at this point. He does not atone and there is no talk of forgiveness. These events had to unfold exactly as they did. His staying in the Garden is out of the question.

And God said to the woman, "What is this that you have done!" The woman said, the serpent deceived me and I ate." (v. 13)

--Now Eve gets her turn to offer some explanation . Sadly, she shifts the blame as well. She is no more psychologically mature than her mate.

And God said to the serpent, "Because you have done this, accursed are you beyond....all beasts (v. 14)

--The serpent is demoted from its elevated position above the other animals to one below them, and literally into the dust. Also, since it sought grief for the humans, it will get grief from them.

To the woman He said, I will greatly increase your suffering (v. 16)

--Adulthood for your gender comes with the pain of childbirth.. You will also suffer from your need for love because it will sometimes mean that your happiness will not be in your control but rather in your husband's.

To Adam He said, "....accursed is the ground because of you; through suffering shall you eat of it..." (v. 17)

--Along with your desire to follow your intelligence and to make your own decisions comes responsibility. The rest of My creation will suffer some of your bad decisions; but it will also make you suffer for comfort. Food won't be available easily like it is in the Garden of Eden. In the next couple of verses, Adam is told that often the earth will not be generous; in fact it will offer every obstruction. Work will be demand the sweat of his brow.

These seem to be punishments but really they were not. We already saw early in this story that man had been expected to work the soil right from the beginning. All we are seeing here is the general rule that adulthood is a series of difficult challenges and that our most prized human characteristics, our creativity, our intelligence, our desire to make decisions for ourselves, bring with them major and sometimes difficult consequences.

He clothed them (v.21)

--This is like a parting gift. Adam and Eve will not start their new lives exposed to harsh nature. A parent doesn't send a child of any age from his protected habitat without proper dress.

Behold man,knowing good and bad... (v. 22)

--My human creations have made the transition and are now like Us in some more ways.

lest he put forth his hand and take also of the Tree of Life and eat and live forever

--This could never happen. It was not part of the creation plan for humans to live forever. Instead we can interpret the words as saying that one way in which we are not like God is our mortality.

So God banished him from the Garden of Eden, to work the soil from which he was taken (v. 23)

--It's time to get on with normal human existence, with work. We also have a reminder that physically we are definitely not like God. We are made of a base substance and we need to return to that when our lives end. We are His likeness only in the few ways that have been enumerated in this story.

He stationed ... the Cherubim...to guard the way to the Tree of Life (v. 24)

--We are barred not only from immortality but also from returning to lives of total child-like dependence and comfort. Humanity can never go back or backwards. That is not what we are made for, it is far short of our potential.

To those who yearn for the Garden of Eden, I would say you are yearning for an end to responsibility, for the easy, thoughtless life. It is time to grow up.

We are humans, we need to know things and to decide things. We need to assert ourselves. We are not rejects. We are capable of wonderful ideas and actions.