

## Redressing the Serpent's Cunning: A Closer Look at Genesis 3:1

“Did God actually say, ‘You shall not eat of any tree in the garden’?” (לֹא תֹאכְלוּ מִכָּל עֵץ הַגָּן) Gen 3:1).<sup>1</sup> The serpent’s well-known opening words in the garden have long exposed the tempter’s main tactic in wrecking the once harmonious relationship between God and people, undermining confidence in God’s instruction. Whether a question or a statement,<sup>2</sup> the serpent speaks directly to Eve and entices her to correct his twisting of God’s words. In the process she is lured into a conversation for which Adam should have taken responsibility but remained culpably silent. But “any tree in the garden” was, if you’ll pardon a pun, just the “low hanging fruit” the serpent dangles before her. Another more subtle distortion of God’s words to Adam in 2:15-16 hides in his opening volley, as he shifts from God’s use of the singular “You shall not eat” (לֹא תֹאכְלֶה in Gen 2:16) to a plural verb (לֹא תֹאכְלוּ). This paper further explores this dimension of the serpent’s words in Gen 3:1 and some of this event’s major reverberations throughout Scripture.

### The Serpent’s Words

By these opening words the woman quickly becomes entangled in a fatal back and forth with the serpent. As is often pointed out, the serpent has set a trap, misreporting God’s words and baiting the woman—later named Eve—to correct him. And so she does, adding a little embellishment of her own, “We may eat of the fruit of the trees in the garden, but God said, ‘You shall not eat (לֹא תֹאכְלוּ) of the fruit of the tree that is in the midst of the garden, *neither shall you touch it* (וְלֹא תִגְעוּ בָּהּ), lest you die” (3:2b–3). Notwithstanding this exaggeration of the command—and her casting it in the plural, Eve’s answer to the serpent presupposes that she has received the command from Adam. Then comes the serpent’s counter-claim, “You will not surely 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” (3:4b–5). Much could be said about this development in the dialogue, but suffice it to say that Eve is now emboldened to draw her own conclusions about the merits of eating or not eating the forbidden fruit.

It is worth pausing for a moment to consider her deliberations more closely. In 3:6 Eve *sees* (ראה) “that the tree was good for food” (כִּי טוֹב הָעֵץ לְמַאֲכָל), that it was, “a delight to the eyes (לְעֵינַיִם),” and “that the tree was to be desired (וְנִחְמָד) to make one wise (לְהַשְׂכִּיל).” This picks up 2:9, where God had made, “every tree that is pleasant to the sight and good for food” (כָּל-עֵץ בְּרֵעַן וְטוֹב לְמַאֲכָל). Few people aspire to “doing evil” and Eve is no exception. She desires the good. But how will she recognize what is truly good? These verses have some powerful things to say on this point, demonstrating the folly of trusting one’s own judgment or “sight” over the word of God, which Eve had learned by the ear. Indeed, the single Hebrew word translated, “to make one wise/give insight” (לְהַשְׂכִּיל), is the first instance of the wisdom term *שכל* in the bible, and its root (“to look at;” Aram. סְכַל) provides an approximate synonym of ראה. It thus underscores Eve’s reliance on her *eye* rather than God’s words learned by the *ear* in

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<sup>1</sup> This and subsequent quotations are taken from the ESV (unless otherwise indicated).

<sup>2</sup> NB the BHS editors’ conjectural addition of a *he* interrogative on the serpent’s opening word (הֲאֵ), which would clarify the serpent’s opening salvo as a question, “*Did* God really say...?” rather than a statement, “God really said...”

her quest to be wise. According to the Wisdom Literature, however, wisdom and insight are through “the fear of YHWH” (Prov 1:7; Job 28:28; Eccl 12:13) and are contrasted with being “wise in one’s own eyes” (Prov 3:7). Isaiah makes the point even more strongly. In Isa 5:21 the prophet utters woe (הוי) upon those who are wise in their own eyes, hot on the heels of denouncing “those who call evil good and good evil”—and other similar inversions—in v. 20. Ironically then, this first appearance of the wisdom term שכל in Gen 3:6 bespeaks the quintessential quality of *fools*: Eve’s reliance on her own judgment makes her wise in her own eyes. Deeming it good to take what was forbidden her, Eve rejects the divine command. She calls what is truly good, evil, and what is actually evil, good.

**Original Disorder.** Nevertheless, the serpent’s subtlety and cunning (cf. עָרוּם in v. 1) go beyond the “low hanging fruit” of this obvious misrepresentation of God’s command. The serpent deliberately singles out the woman, speaking “to her” (אֶל-הָאִשָּׁה), even though God had given the instruction to Adam before Eve was created (2:26–27). Appropriate to that situation, God had commanded (צוה) Adam (עַל-הָאָדָם) in the singular (לֹא תֹאכַל). Although the content of the command clearly applies to both Adam and Eve—i.e., neither are to eat of this tree—responsibility for it is another matter. Indeed throughout chapters 2 and 3 God repeatedly affirms Adam’s singular accountability for the command. When God seeks his fallen creatures in 3:9 he calls out “to the man” (אֶל-הָאָדָם),<sup>3</sup> then asks him in v. 11, “Have *you* eaten (sg.: אָכַלְתָּ) of the tree of which I commanded *you* (sg.: צִוִּיתִיךָ) not to eat?” Although both have eaten, God addresses the man whom he had charged with the command with a twofold singular “you.” And not for the last time. A little later in v. 17 God lays the responsibility at Adam’s feet, “Because *you* have listened (sg.: כִּי-שָׁמַעְתָּ) to the voice of your wife and have eaten (sg.: וְתֹאכַל) of the tree of which I commanded *you* (sg.: צִוִּיתִיךָ), ‘*You* shall not eat of it’ (לֹא תֹאכַל מִמֶּנּוּ), etc.” Again, “you” is singular throughout the verse, as in the original command in 2:16. Adam is accountable for the command in a way that Eve is not; a point confirmed by the absence of any such accountability when God addresses Eve in 3:16. More could be said about 3:16, but suffice it to say that the serpent did not simply disrupt the relationship between God and an undifferentiated humanity. He also disordered the once harmonious, ordered relationship between man and woman, which would now be characterized by tension, hardship, and distrust. Sin corrupts everything, including God’s good ordering in creation between people. Notwithstanding the element of hardship now present, God’s words to Eve in 3:16 sustain the creational order between her and her husband (similarly Wenham 1987, 81).<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> Although אָדָם can have the broader meaning of “human being” or “humanity” (cf. Gk: ἄνθρωπος), Gen 2–3 differentiates the man (הָאָדָם) from the woman (הָאִשָּׁה) throughout the narrative. Thus Adam, male head of humanity, is in view here.

<sup>4</sup> Both key terms, her “desire” (תְּשׁוּקָה) for her husband and his “rule” (משל) over her are repeated in the next chapter (תְּשׁוּקָה occurs once more in Song of Songs 7:10 [MT 7:11] to denote desire in a positive sexual sense). In Gen 4:7 God warns Cain that sin is “crouching at the door” and its “desire” (תְּשׁוּקָה) is for him, but that he “must rule (משל) over it.” In these early chapters of Genesis, then, תְּשׁוּקָה denotes “desire” in a negative sense with connotations of power and influence. Intrinsic to her husband’s “rule” (משל) is his resistance to that desire, hence the tension and disharmony between them. Despite the sin that corrupts it, though, the order inferred from Genesis 2 undergirds God’s words in 3:16; it is *created* order, not a product of the fall. (Cf. Eph 5:22–33 and Col 3:18–19, which provide biblical commentary on loving/serving character of true headship/subordination in Christ).

This emphasis on Adam's accountability for God's command makes it all the more striking when we read 3:1, where the singular gives way to a plural, "Did God actually say, 'You shall not eat (לֹא תֹאכְלוּ) of any tree in the garden'?"<sup>5</sup> Indeed, the serpent *must* change the verb in order to redirect the matter to Eve for her deliberation, which betrays a more subtle—and for that reason more insidious—deception. Again, there is no question the command *applies* to both of them or that both of them were equally capable of breaking it (as both indeed did!), but the serpent's feigned attempt at reporting God's words also misrepresented its primary recipient, hence to whom responsibility for the command properly belonged. Eve seized upon the "low hanging fruit" of the serpent's misquotation concerning "all the trees," but in doing so she spoke for the original couple when that responsibility lay with Adam. The serpent's tactic was not only to foster mistrust of God's word, but also deviation from the divinely ordered means of its oversight.<sup>6</sup>

### Abdication and Accountability

Adam, however, is far from innocent in this affair. This is attested by that one little yet damning Hebrew word in the text translated, "who was with her" (עִמָּה).<sup>7</sup> He stood idly by, abdicating his divinely given responsibility to guard the garden. That vocation given to Adam was—like all valid vocations—an opportunity to love and serve his neighbour, Eve. Thus Adam's vocation was also God's gift to Eve in another sense, but by his abdication Adam robbed Eve of that gift, leaving her to shoulder a burden not meant for her to bear. Eve for her part rushed to fill the silence left by Adam that, one might say, contributed to the temptation before her. Ironically, then, Adam was complicit not only in Eve's *disobedience* by eating, but also in the serpent's *deception* by not speaking up!

Thereupon we return to the singular of אִכַּל once more, as Adam's abdication—if you'll pardon another pun—bears its rotten fruit in disobedience of God's command: "and he ate" (וַיֹּאכַל). True to the serpent's half-truth (cf. 3:5), their eyes are opened. Those who had known only the "very good" of God's creation (1:31) and though naked knew no shame (לֹא יָתַבְּשׁוּ/οὐκ ἤταβύοντο in 2:25) now know their own nakedness as a cause for fear and hiding from their creator (3:8, 10).

Adam's role as keeper of the command is further underscored by his portrayal as a priestly figure in Gen 2. As is widely recognized, Genesis 2 describes Eden as a sanctuary where

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One must also be wary of the somewhat artificial distinction between "prescriptive" and "descriptive" judgment, for God's judgment frequently involves handing people over to their own desires (cf. παρέδωκεν in Rom 1:24, 26, 28); e.g., the generation that fled Egypt rejected God's gift of the land, so God forbids them from entering it (Num 14); Israel exiled to the lands of foreign gods for persistently going after such gods (2 Kgs 17:11, 23). Other examples could be multiplied.

<sup>5</sup> Parker (2013, 733) is sensitive to the shift to the plural throughout the interchange between Eve and the serpent, rightly pointing out Adam's particular accountability for the command.

<sup>6</sup> Wenham (1987, 51) writes: "The hierarchy of authority established in scene 2 and reaffirmed in scene 5 [i.e., 3:9-13] is overturned. God-man-woman-animal in scene 2 becomes snake-woman-man-God in scene 4 [i.e., 3:6-7]. The order of creation is totally inverted."

<sup>7</sup> Parker (2013) rightly chastises translations that omit or reinterpret עִמָּה so as to diminish Adam's culpability.

God and humanity live in fellowship with one another and harmony with the created realm (Schachter 2013, 75; Wenham 1987, 65). The temple on Mt Zion served this theological function as the place of God's glory (presence).<sup>8</sup> There God met with his people to provide atonement for their sin; a purpose enacted most powerfully on the Day of Atonement when the High Priest entered the Holy of Holies before the Presence (Lev 16).

Indeed, the description of Eden in Genesis 2 shares features in common with the temple. For example, the river that flows out of Eden (2:10) and divides into four to nourish the earth finds a counterpart in the, "river that makes glad the city of God, the holy habitation of the Most High" (Ps 46:4 [MT: v. 5]). Moreover, the architectural design and furnishings of the tabernacle and temple include, among other things, a lampstand with seven budding branches symbolic of the Tree of Life that gave light to the sanctuary.<sup>9</sup> And before Adam and Eve are barred from Eden and the Tree of Life, in 3:21 God clothes them (לְבַשׁ) with animal skins to cover their nakedness/shame (עִירָם in 3:7, 10–11); a divine act that presupposes the sacrificial death of the animal. Correspondingly, God regularly provided atonement (כַּפֵּר = "to cover") through the sacrificial system in Leviticus. Cherubim guard the way to the Tree of Life, just as cherubim attend the ark of the covenant and adorn the sanctuary walls and the curtain entrance to the Most Holy Place (Gen 3:24; Exod 25:18-22; Exod 26:1, 31-33).

If Eden is a sanctuary, then Adam is its high priest. He is to "work (עָבַד) it and guard (שָׁמַר) it," which, as Lifsi Schachter observes, are the verbs "used to describe the work of the Levites in caring for the Tabernacle, suggesting a priest-like role for Adam (Num. 3:7–8)" (Schachter 2013, 75; cf. Wenham 1987, 67). In 2:16–17 Adam alone is charged with the command and responsibility for it. In addition to the estate of marriage then (cf. Gen 2:24), Genesis 2–3 orders the human community and Adam's priestly role within it as a *liturgical* community.

### The Wholeness of Scripture

In keeping with the theology of Gen 2-3, God establishes a male priesthood in Israel charged with teaching the people and administering the holy things (Lev 10:10–11). By so ordering the priesthood, God redresses the serpent's *disordering* of the human community, and restores the created order instantiated in Adam as the typological priest of Eden. Through their intercession and facilitation of the sacrificial system—liturgical acts that function both sacrificially *and* sacramentally—God cleanses and restores his people and blesses them (Lev 9:22-23; 16:30, 33-34; Num 6:22–24). The appointment of male priests is followed, in turn, by Christ's appointment of male apostles commissioned, among other things, with presiding at the Lord's Supper (Matt 26:20, 26–29; Luk 22:14–20) and baptizing and teaching Christ's commands (Matt 28:19-20).

Even though Eve took the active role in the precipitous events of Gen 3:1-7, the NT consistently joins Genesis 3 in laying the accountability squarely at Adam's feet. Romans 5:14 speaks directly about "the transgression (παράβασις) of Adam." So does Paul's Adamic Christology in 1 Cor 15:21–22, which again names Adam (Ἀδάμ) in obvious reference to the

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<sup>8</sup> See Levenson (1985) for a more extensive analysis of the temple.

<sup>9</sup> Schachter (2013) lists other common imagery between Eden and the Temple and cites numerous biblical texts, e.g., Ps 51:10; 92:13–14; Isa 51:3; Ezek 28:13; 31:8, and shows that "throughout the period of the Bible, Eden was commonly perceived as an archetype of the Temple."

events of Genesis 3. Never in question is the capacity for Adam—and by extension the New Adam, Christ—to represent the whole human community, just as the high priest represented all Israel—male and female—before God in the OT. But neither does Adam’s headship regarding Eve and Christ’s headship respecting the new humanity, the *Church*, fade from biblical view, as Christ the Bridegroom restores and purifies his bride and perfects the (new) covenant relationship with her (Eph 1:22; 4:15; 5:23; Col 1:18; 1 Cor 11:3; Rev 19:7; 21:1–3).

Where the NT does cite Eve’s role in the fall, it affirms the same male accountability for teaching the word as we find in Genesis 2–3. When giving instruction concerning the public teaching of God’s word in worship, 1 Tim 2:13 cites Adam’s creation before Eve, “for Adam was formed first, then Eve,” in clear allusion to Gen 2:7f. Then follows v. 14, where Paul reiterates the details of Gen 3:1–7: “and Adam was not deceived (οὐκ ἠπατήθη), but the woman, being deceived (ἐξαπατηθεῖσα), fell into transgression” (NKJV). Paul’s point here cannot be to exonerate Adam and demonize Eve as many interpreters are quick to infer,<sup>10</sup> but rather to report the basic facts of the Genesis 3 story: i.e., that Eve was the one approached by the serpent and deceived, not Adam. Moreover, the reference to Eve’s deception is in participle form—“being deceived” (ἐξαπατηθεῖσα)—with the real point still to come in the finite verb, “and was/became in a state of transgression” (ἐν παραβάσει γέγονεν (my translation); N.B. the pf tense indicating resultant state). Notably, Paul speaks in terms of “transgression” or “trespass;” that is, the over-stepping of boundaries (contrast, e.g., the NIV’s “became a sinner”).<sup>11</sup> Paul therefore does not make the unsustainable assertion that Eve was guilty and Adam innocent, but rather highlights the events of Genesis 3 as a breach of created order regarding responsibility for teaching of God’s word in the liturgical assembly. This is clear from v. 12, “I do not permit a woman to *teach* (διδάσκειν) or to exercise authority over a man,” where διδάσκειν is emphatically located at the beginning of the clause. Moreover, just as Genesis 2–3 are located in the liturgical context of the Edenic sanctuary, so 1 Tim 2:1–14 pertain to the public liturgical setting, as indicated by Paul’s urging “that supplications, prayers, intercessions, and thanksgivings be made for all people, etc.” (v. 1). When Paul recalls the events of Gen 2–3 in 1 Tim 2:1–14, then, he reports the serpent’s deception as a disordering of the liturgical community; a point readily seen in Genesis 2–3 (see above).

Genesis 2 also undergirds Paul’s instruction regarding women and public worship in 1 Corinthians 11–14. Like 1 Timothy 2, these chapters begin and end with Paul addressing the role of women in public worship, both times qualifying the manner in which they may contribute publicly in the congregation. As in 1 Tim 2:13, in 1 Cor 11:8–9 Paul appeals to the essential facts of the creation account, “For man was not made from woman, but woman from man, etc.,” then enjoins the women to “cover up” (κατακαλυπτέσθω) while prophesying; that is, they are to wear the recognized apparel of a married woman (Winter 2001, 127). Then at the end of these chapters in 14:34 Paul once again qualifies women’s prophetic activity in the church, this time in respect to how their words function toward other prophets. Paul calls on

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<sup>10</sup> E.g., Parker (2013, 732), who, without further analysis of 1 Tim 2:13–14 condemns it as a “misogynistic interpretation” of Gen 2–3. Parker also overlooks Adam’s responsibility for the fall elsewhere in the NT (see above) and seems predisposed to read 1 Tim 2 in light of a few early Christian and Jewish attempts to exonerate Adam that she cites.

<sup>11</sup> On the meaning of παράβασις see BDB, 758.

them to be silent in the weighing of others' prophetic speech—i.e., not to exercise public doctrinal oversight (cf. “judging doctrine” in CA 28),<sup>12</sup> thus affirming male accountability for the public teaching of God's word in the congregation. Paul would have the women instead direct their “interrogation” or “cross-examination” (Thiselton 2000, 1160) to their *own* men at home (1 Cor 14:35). Meanwhile, in the congregation, they are to subordinate themselves and their own prophetic offerings (hymns, interpreted tongues, etc.; cf. 14:26) to the doctrinal oversight of *other* prophets, for this is what true, Spirit-led prophets (both male and female) characteristically do: “the spirits of prophets subordinate themselves to prophets” (1 Cor 14:32). In 1 Cor 14:35, then, Paul does not so much offer a description of the problem at Corinth as his solution to it. There he redirects the women's problematic speech *from* the public sphere “in church”—where, in functional terms, they were weighing what other prophets said through public interrogation—to the private sphere “at home,” where they could address “their own husbands” without shame.

In the process Paul appeals to the law, “as the Law also says” (καθὼς καὶ ὁ νόμος λέγει). Paul has no need to specify the referent of ὁ νόμος here because he has already done that in 11:8–9 at the beginning this section of 1 Corinthians on women in public worship (contra. Fitzner 1968, 11-12). Both 1 Corinthians 11 and 14 thus qualify the kind and manner of prophetic speech that women may validly exercise in the public assembly. Both contexts appeal to created order. And both texts warn of objective, public shame before God that befalls those who act contrary to that order (καταισχύνει in 11:4–5 and αἰσχρὸν in 11:6 and 14:35). In doing so, 1 Corinthians 11–14 reflect another central concern of Genesis 2–3 identified above; namely, that Adam and Eve once knew no shame (וְלֹא יָתְבַשְׁשׁוּ/καὶ οὐκ ἤσχύνοντο in Gen 2:25) but afterwards knew themselves “naked” before God and afraid so that they hid (Gen 3:7; cf. Gen 3:10). Throughout 1 Corinthians 11–14 and especially 12–14,<sup>13</sup> therefore, Paul espouses the *Spirit's* ordering of the congregation in contradistinction to the Corinthians' own claims to spiritual gifts (esp. 12:1, 4–11)<sup>14</sup> in order that they might avoid such shame before God.<sup>15</sup> Just as in 1 Timothy 2, Paul premises his instruction on theological-creational realities, and not merely cultural ones.

## Conclusion

The serpent engendered mistrust of God's life-giving word through his distortion of the divine command. From the very first word the serpent misreported God's command, enticing Eve to usurp Adam's responsibility and Adam to abdicate it, thus living up to his description as “cunning” or “crafty” (עָרוּם in 3:1 [HALOT, 883; BDB, 791]). Nevertheless, from the very beginning God set out to restore his disordered creation, as throughout its pages the bible bears witness to Christ, the New Adam and New Great High Priest. In doing so the bible affirms God's original order in the realms of the family and the church as a liturgical community,

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<sup>12</sup> See discussion in Thiselton 2000, 1140.

<sup>13</sup> On 1 Corinthians 12–14 as a rhetorical unit, see Mitchell 1991, 266.

<sup>14</sup> Unlike Gal 3:28, Paul makes no mention of “male or female” when speaking about the unity of the body in 12:12–13 (“whether Jew or Greek, slave or free,” [εἴτε...εἴτε...etc.]). After all, he is mounting a larger argument that culminates with 14:34–40, which presupposes differentiation between male and female prophets.

<sup>15</sup> For a more detailed discussion of 1 Cor 14, see Hensley 2012.

affirming male accountability for the public teaching of God's word and administration of the holy things.

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