

## **Before Sin**

Creation, Adam and Eve, and the Garden of Eden

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Once upon a time, there was a big man with a white beard who lived in the clouds. He made a world, and in the world he made a garden, and in the garden he took some mud and made a little clay doll, and then he breathed life into the little clay doll and it became a man. Out of the man, he made a woman, and he told them to go frolic and be happy in the garden, which was full of lions and peacocks and wonderful things. There was only one rule: they were not supposed to eat the apples that grew on a particular tree. But a snake came, and whispered lies to the woman, and she ate, and that is why the world is full of suffering and death.

This is the story of the Garden of Eden as popularly presented and generally understood. It seems at best a childish fairy tale. Other cultures have wild and wonderful myths:

- 50-headed monsters locked up in Tartarus who lurk there sending up their foul breath to blight fields and poison marshes (Greek)
- a god who is violently dismembered, his pieces scattered across the world and lovingly reassembled by his wife (Egyptian)
- a world in which mysterious energies flicker across the depths of primordial pits, bringing together molecules into a miraculously perfect strand of DNA which slowly, over millions of years, transforms from bacteria to fish and from fish to sea monster and from sea monster to dragon, until at last, through a series of great cataclysms, man arrives on the world stage (the relatively ho-hum mythology of scientism)

In comparison, the biblical creation story seems a bit insipid. Catholics can stumble when asked to explain it. The right approach is to say that the Genesis account presents a microcosm of the entire story of humankind! In just over 2,000 words, it covers the Creation of the cosmos, the beginning of man, the enmity between God and Satan, the first sin, the consequences of evil, and the promise of salvation. We just need to plumb those depths.

### ***Imago Dei***

When God reaches down and creates a body for man, he is not fashioning a clay doll he will magically bring to life. Instead, he is taking the material elements of Creation—everything he had made in the previous five days— and making a body. Consequently, St. Thomas Aquinas asserts that “man is called ‘a little world’ because all creatures of the world are in a way to be found in him” (*Summa Theologiae* I:1:91).

Pope John Paul II further noted that “it is possible that the human body, following the order impressed by the Creator on the energies of life, could have been gradually prepared in the forms of antecedent living beings” (General Audience, April 16, 1986).

The evolutionary hypothesis presents one reasonable vision of the way the human body, as a microcosm of the Creation, might have been formed “of dust from the ground” (Gn 2:7).

When God was finished with the work of creating a body for the first man, he “breathed into his nostrils the breath of life” (Gn 2:7). In that moment, mankind acquired what makes us specifically human: a rational, spiritual soul. Just as the Holy Spirit brooded over the waters of the deep in order to bring forth material creation, he broods now over the body of man and brings forth a soul “in the image and likeness of God.” That means he is capable of reason, of appreciating beauty, of communicating through language, of participation in the work of cultivating and caring for the earth, and of free will.

It is this last gift which, more than anything else, sets man apart as the crown of material Creation, for while everything gives glory to God, man is able to love God deliberately, to engage in a love that possesses spiritual and moral dimensions.

This love is an essential part of the “image and likeness of God,” for it reveals the nature of God not merely as a unity, but as a Trinity, united by love. For this reason, it is “not good that man should be alone,” and God creates woman out of the side of man. Here, again, the biblical symbolism points towards a profound spiritual truth: the union between the man and woman is not merely something added on; it is present from the moment there are two distinct, human individuals. Adam looks at Eve and immediately sees in her what he has not seen in any of the animals: “This at last is bone of my bones and flesh of my flesh” (Gn 2:23). In this moment Adam understands not only Eve, but also himself: He sees that humanity is composed not of isolated individuals, but of a communion of persons.

It is clear from the Genesis account that Adam has some sense of this vocation even before Eve is made, that there is a longing present in him from the beginning which he cannot quite account for or explain. Prior to creation of another human being, he is somehow incomplete; for the first time, something in Creation is “not good.” The fact that he uses the words “at last” when he sees Eve tells us that this is the fulfillment of something that he has deeply desired. Eve is not merely his helper in the work of cultivating the garden, she is his helper in the work of becoming fully human. She is the “mother of all living,” (Gn 3:20) through whom the entire human race will come into existence.

### **Preternatural Gifts**

The biblical image of man’s origin contradicts the scientific mythos, which sees life, and therefore man, as constantly evolving from less perfect to more perfect states. Most children today are raised with a comic-book social Darwinism: Prehistoric life was nasty, brutish, and short; Neanderthals ran around dressed in ragged skins beating each other over the heads with bones and dragging women off into caves by the hair. Slowly, over tens of thousands of years, these inferior ancestors evolve until finally modern man emerges from the primordial darkness of violence and superstition, and the way to moral betterment is wholesale commitment to “progress.”

Christian tradition teaches the opposite: that humankind was originally created in a state of innocence and justice, in full possession of the dignity proper to our species, and was provided with preternatural gifts that elevated and perfected human nature. Adam was Superman, not

Tarzan. Human beings in the garden were not subject to the frailties and failings of our present life. They possessed the preternatural gifts of:

- impassibility (freedom from pain)
- immortality (freedom from death)
- integrity (freedom from concupiscence, or disordered desires)
- infused knowledge (freedom from ignorance in matters essential for happiness)

They were not inclined to do evil; their understanding and reason were not darkened by pride or lust; they had a perfect knowledge of the moral law; they did not experience any opposition between the spirit and the body; and all of the parts of the soul existed in a state of order and harmony in relation to one another. The material world was a paradise that supported human life; work was a source of pleasure and accomplishment; and all of the human faculties were able to function and flourish to their fullest potential.

From an anthropological point of view, the difference between these two positions is critical. If the social-Darwinism account is true, then immorality is a product of our immaturity as a species, an atavistic remnant of our bestial ancestry. Salvation, according to this hypothesis, is just a matter of time: Humanity will grow steadily better under the guidance of natural selection, and the only way to accelerate the process is through the deliberate eugenic manipulation of the genome. If, on the other hand, man began life in a state of grace and fell to his present stature, then salvation becomes a work of restoration.

Moral experience supports the Christian worldview. Everyone who has ever tried the moral life is aware that there is a deep tension within the human person, that the interior tendency towards evil must be combated if we are to live well, but that in spite of these inclinations we are not simply bits of fleshy flotsam borne along on the genetic tides. We are capable of choosing to live morally, of slowly putting ourselves back together, of placing reason on the throne of the soul, and of subjugating the appetites and the passions to her reign. We know that as we approach a state of rational freedom, the interior disorder begins to dissipate; virtue ceases to feel onerous or tedious, and the demands of concupiscence become less clamorous. Yet experience also confirms that we are not capable, by means of will and reason alone, to attain complete happiness. The flesh, however well subjugated, continues to make war on the spirit.

It is impossible to regain in this life what Adam lost in the fall. Neither a heroic effort of the will nor the constant reception of sacramental grace will eliminate pain, suffering, and death from human life. Christ, preparing to go to his death on the cross, makes it clear that the full restoration of man lies in heaven, that his kingdom is not of this world.

Yet the Holy Spirit bestows gifts which are, in many cases, a partial renewal of our original powers. The gift of tongues as described in Acts hearkens back to the original language Adam used to name the animals, which was universally comprehensible. The gift of understanding allows insight and wisdom which goes beyond the merely natural faculties of the intellect, just as the gift of infused knowledge did in Eden. Some of the saints were given extraordinary gifts of

fortitude that allowed them joyfully to bear pains that mere nature could not have endured. The Gospel tells us that after the Crucifixion, many were raised from the dead (cf. Mt 27:52-53), and the early martyrologies are full of accounts in which mortality is briefly suspended so the watching crowds could see that the God of the Galileans is capable of literally overcoming death. Eden is lost, but we are occasionally given some reminder of our former glory, along with the promise of what we will be when we are fully restored, perfected, and divinized in the beatific vision.

### **The Serpent and the Beast**

The Garden of Eden is not simply a small patch of ground near the headwaters of the Euphrates: It is all of Creation in microcosm. It is cosmic in scale. Everything is present in the beginning.

The full grandeur of Creation is not fully revealed until the end, until the “new heaven and the new earth” which Genesis anticipates and foreshadows. In Revelation, many of the themes and ideas in the Genesis account are revisited, but on a more mythological scale. Take, for example, the serpent. In images of the Genesis story, he is often depicted as a large snake, the size of a boa constrictor, or even a little innocent-looking grass snake sitting prettily on the branch of a tree. It seems unlikely that Eve could have been deceived into thinking that she was speaking with a harmless creature.

But if Mary is the second Eve, Eve is also the first Mary, so the same serpent who would make war on Christ and the Church was there in the beginning to make war on the woman and on her children. What Eve saw was the tempter, at once terrifying and seductive, a being sufficiently awe-inspiring that it seemed to speak with the authority to challenge God. The book of Revelation describes this creature as, “the great dragon . . . that ancient serpent, who is called the devil and Satan, the deceiver of the whole world” (12:9).

When Eve assents to be deceived by this serpent, she brings down on the world the series of curses that are consummated in Revelation. War, famine, pestilence, death, the disruption of the natural order, and the collapse of the world are not just harbingers of the end times: They are also the immediate consequences of the first sin. Death entered the world, not only for individuals but for all of humankind. Once sin has wreaked havoc on the battlefields of history, the world will die. Only through the creation of a new heaven and a new earth will it be possible to eradicate the effects of Adam’s fall.

### **The Two Trees**

The recreation of the world is a long way off when Adam and Eve trudge sadly out of the Garden, but already, in the final lines of Genesis 3, salvation is being prepared. There are two trees growing in Eden: the tree of the knowledge of good and evil and the tree of life. Adam and Eve eat from the first, but are prevented from eating from the second.

The tree of the knowledge of good and evil is one of the most mysterious symbols in the Eden narrative. We are told that “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” (Gn 3:6). It is important to note here that the tree really is genuinely good. Eve had

a perfectly ordered and rational human soul which found evil totally repugnant and unappealing. The temptation was to seek an objective good for disordered reasons, which is what happened. The temptation changes the way Eve perceived the forbidden fruit: She no longer sees its goodness in an ordered and disinterested way, but in a way that foreshadows the threefold concupiscence: The fruit is desirable to the flesh, it holds a sort of worldly glamour, and it appeals to pride.

It is interesting to note that there is no tree of death or tree of evil within the garden, only the tree of the possibility of evil. When Adam and Eve eat they interiorize that potential and make it real. This creates a new relationship between man and Creation. Suddenly, all of the things that were “good” in the beginning have potential for evil. That makes the image of a tree particularly apt because of the countless branches of knowledge which in our fallen condition represent a genuine danger:

- Spiritual knowledge may now be used for sorcery.
- Scientific knowledge may be used to exploit and destroy.
- Moral knowledge may be used to censure and condemn.
- Aesthetic knowledge may be used to make evil look attractive.

Every field of human endeavor is poisoned because humanity now knows not only how to use knowledge for the greater glory of God, but also how to use it in disordered and damaging ways.

The second tree is the antidote to this problem, but it is also dangerous. When God banishes Adam and Eve from the garden and the tree of life, bodily immortality is no longer possible. It was an act of mercy that he did so. Those who choose to love and serve God could hardly find endless life in a valley of sorrows desirable; those who reject God must not be allowed to grow in their evil indefinitely or to continually inflict harm on others without ever being subjected to justice. God posts at Eden’s gates “the cherubim, and a flaming sword which turned every way” (Gn 3:24). Eden is permanently closed to man. At the same time, however, the tree of life is being prepared and the fruit of salvation is ripening in its branches, for its hour has not yet come.

It is not by accident that the tree of life appears constantly in world mythology. The tree spreads out her branches across the galaxies, and stars spin like apples from her boughs. All life, all Creation, springs from the root of this tree, and its sap is the water of life. The tree is an image of the entire created order, a single, unified organism in which all things are reconciled and made one.

It is, of course, the cross, and its fruit is Christ crucified. We eat of its fruit each time we participate in the mystery of the Eucharist. It is the pillar on which the world is made, the source of all life, ordained from the beginning, the sacrifice which God had prepared to redeem and renew his Creation.

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## **Questions...**

- 1. In what way does the Genesis account presents a microcosm of the entire story of humankind?**
- 2. What makes us specifically human? Why?**
- 3. What gift sets man apart as the crown of material Creation?**
- 4. In what way does Eve 'complete' Adam as an image of the Trinitarian God?**
- 5. When it comes to human 'progress' social Darwinism and Christianity are saying the opposite. Explain what this means.**
- 6. What were the four 'preternatural gifts' of our 1<sup>st</sup> parents?**
- 7. In what way does moral experience support the Christian understanding of human development?**
- 8. In what way does the holy Spirit restore what was lost?**