

Session 13: The Primeval History of Genesis 1 - 11

C. The story of the Garden of Eden

In the previous session we noted that the story of creation in Genesis 2:4-25 is only the first half of the story of the first man and woman and the Garden of Eden. Genesis 3 is its continuation and, like Genesis 2, it explores basic features of human life and experience in the form of a story.

Activity 13.1

Read Genesis 3

List the patterns you find in this story that interpret basic features of human life

Here are some of the patterns you might have noticed:

- sin is pictured as a disobedience to a command
- the description of temptation: the woman is attracted by an apparent good
- the motive in the temptation: to become wise, to know good and evil, to become like God
- the result of disobedience: shame and the fear of God
- enmity between the woman and the serpent as a result of the temptation
- child-bearing becomes marred by pain
- the disruption of relationships between the sexes
- the disruption of the relationship with nature: the first couple are no longer able to eat the fruit of the garden; fulfilling work (the tending of the garden) becomes frustrating toil
- the certainty of death: a return to the dust from which they came
- banishment from the Garden
- clothes made by God to cover the shame of Adam and Eve

There is much to ponder in these features of the story, but we must remember that treating it in this way is rather like dissecting an animal in a laboratory: by the time of the dissection, the animal is dead. In a similar way, if we simply turn the story into systematic theology, we kill it. One of the essential features of the story is that it has life: constantly suggesting and evoking new responses.

Among the traditions of the exodus told and retold at the shrines of Israel was the tradition of Israel's rebellion in the wilderness. The key passages are found in Exodus 32, 33 and 34:

Exodus 32:7-10

The Lord said to Moses, 'Go down at once! Your people, whom you brought up out of the land of Egypt, have acted perversely; they have been quick to turn aside from the way that I commanded them; they have cast for themselves an image of a calf, and have worshipped it and sacrificed to it, and said, "These are your gods, O Israel, who brought you up out of the land of Egypt!"' The Lord said to Moses, 'I have seen this people, how stiff-necked they are. Now let me alone, so that my wrath may burn hot against them and I may consume them; and of you I will make a great nation.'

Exodus 33:1-3

The Lord said to Moses, 'Go, leave this place, you and the people whom you have brought up out of the land of Egypt, and go to the land of which I swore to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, saying, "To your descendants I will give it." I will send an angel before you, and I will drive out the Canaanites, the Amorites, the Hittites, the Perizzites, the Hivites, and the Jebusites.

Go up to a land flowing with milk and honey; but I will not go up among you, or I would consume you on the way, for you are a stiff-necked people.'

These traditions show that the result of Israel's sinfulness in the desert was that they were no longer to be in direct fellowship with Yahweh and further, that the penalty for sin is death.

There is a clear parallel between Israel's experience in the wilderness and that of Adam and Eve in the Garden. Both Israel's rebellion and Adam's and Eve's disobedience breaks fellowship with Yahweh. Adam and Eve no longer inhabit a Garden where God walks at the time of the evening breeze. And just as in the wilderness, the penalty for sin is death.

The story of the Garden places Israel's experience in a larger context: it shows that these features of their experience are a general law: sin leads to division from God and to death. It also examines some other features of the common experience of humankind. For example, it gives an answer to the question of Ecclesiastes as to why, for so many people, work is 'nothing but toil and a chasing after wind'. It links the great mystery of shame between the sexes to the loss of relationship with God. Psychologically, shame is the result of the failure to establish a secure boundary between oneself and others, and thus a failure to develop whole personhood. This is seen as a consequence of being cut off from the divine source of personhood.

But finally, the editors also knew that God was merciful:

Exodus 34:1-10

The Lord said to Moses, 'Cut two tablets of stone like the former ones, and I will write on the tablets the words that were on the former tablets, which you broke. Be ready in the morning, and come up in the morning to Mount Sinai and present yourself there to me, on the top of the mountain. No one shall come up with you, and do not let anyone be seen throughout all the mountain; and do not let flocks or herds graze in front of that mountain.' So Moses cut two tablets of stone like the former ones; and he rose early in the morning and went up on Mount Sinai, as the Lord had commanded him, and took in his hand the two tablets of stone.

The Lord descended in the cloud and stood with him there, and proclaimed the name, 'The

Lord.' The Lord passed before him, and proclaimed,

'The Lord, the Lord, a God merciful and gracious,

slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness,

keeping steadfast love for the thousandth generation,

forgiving iniquity and transgression and sin, yet by no means clearing the guilty,

but visiting the iniquity of the parents upon the children and the children's children,

to the third and the fourth generation.'

And Moses quickly bowed his head towards the earth, and worshipped. He said, 'If now I have found favour in your sight, O Lord, I pray, let the Lord go with us. Although this is a stiff-necked people, pardon our iniquity and our sin, and take us for your inheritance.'

The story of the first sin also ends on a note of mercy: God himself makes Adam and Eve clothes of skins.

This opening story sets up a pattern for the rest of these opening chapters of Genesis, which we will explore in the next section.