

## Chapter 4

# *Figures in the Garden: A New Reading of Genesis*

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*And the end of all our exploring  
Will be to arrive where we started  
And know the place for the first time.  
(T.S. Eliot, Little Gidding)*

### *The Seminal Myth*

One can also return to a familiar text and know it for the first time. The story of Adam and Eve, the serpent and the forbidden fruit is perhaps the best known of all the stories in the Bible, though not all who know it will be aware of its importance in western culture. But it is only after a very close reading and some acquaintance with the ancillary literature that one can make any claim to know it at all well. Not until returning to it after many years and reading it with the help of a Hebrew scholar did I feel I was even beginning to know it for the first time. In the Torah, the title of the book which we call Genesis is *Bereshith*, meaning *In the Beginning*, and much of what has made western culture what it is has its beginning in this book, and especially in its earliest chapters. Our ambiguous attitude to the earth, first seen as good, then cursed; man's dominion over beasts and birds; the subordination of women: all these can be traced to it. Furthermore there is in it an unquestioning attitude to authority and an acceptance of the predominance of power in the relations of the protagonists that have had continuing effects in western society. But Genesis can be read somewhat differently if Buddhist ideas are brought to bear upon it.

Eve, almost as much as the serpent, has traditionally been seen as the villain of the piece, the one who really 'brought death into the world and all our woe'. Only for her prompting, Adam would not have fallen, and God would not have had to become man and die a terrible death to redeem the human race, which, though not yet begotten, had mysteriously fallen with Adam and incurred the danger of eternal damnation.

Eve is a light, pretty name. Its Hebrew original, however, is a heavier, even a more serious-sounding one: *Khawwah*, a name with a meaning – *life*. Adam was the earth-man, shaped from the soil, *adamah*, but Eve was life. He was body, she was spirit, the vital member of the couple; which is presumably why the serpent, most intelligent of animals, approached her and not Adam.

In Christian thinking, however, Eve has always represented sexuality rather than life, and certainly not spirit. Until recently sexuality meant little other than sexual sin. It was not something biological and morally neutral but the action of ‘thought, word or deed’ done under the prompting of the devil. It was in fact believed to be an instrument of the devil to lead souls to perdition. Accordingly it was only legitimate when exercised within the bounds of marriage, which was not just a contract but a sacrament. In other words, the union of man and woman needed to be sanctified by divine grace because that which was permitted to be done within it was inherently sinful, and had been since the Fall.

Every so often one hears that once-familiar religious ideas are no longer understood, or even recognized, by many people today; among them, apparently, is the Fall. If so, it is an extraordinary thing, since it is an idea that dominated the western imagination for the best part of two millenia. Now it too is fallen.

### ***The Two Creation Stories***

Two creation stories are found in the early chapters of the Book of Genesis. In the first the creator is called Elohim, and in the second, Yahweh. Elohim is usually translated as ‘God’ and Yahweh as ‘the Lord’, and when joined as Yahweh Elohim they become ‘the Lord God’. Elohim is a form of the basic Semitic word for God. It is a plural, which at first sight is strange for the title of the One God. The usual explanation describes it as ‘the plural of majesty’ – the ‘royal we’ in the third person. Some authorities have seen it as a residue of an earlier polytheism. Some Christians have believed it was an indication of the Trinity, and there were Gnostics who numbered the Elohim as seven, Yahweh being but one of these.

The first of the two stories tells how Elohim created the heavens and the earth, the waters and the light. Then the light was divided from darkness, giving day and night, and a firmament was made and dry land appeared bearing grass and trees. Then Elohim called the sun, moon and stars into being, and he created fish, birds and the animals. All this was done in five days, and declared to be good by the Creator. On the sixth day Elohim said, ‘Let us make man in our image, after our likeness’. He made the two sexes and told them to be

fruitful and multiply, and fill the earth, and subdue it and have dominion over all other living creatures.

By now it was the seventh day, and he rested, and blessed his day of rest.

Thus ends the Elohist or, as it is usually called, the Priestly Narrative, an impersonal record but one full of grandeur. The second story introduces Yahweh, the Lord, and is at once more intimate and more dramatic.

We read that as yet there was no rain, only a mist rising from the earth, and there was no one to till the ground. Then Yahweh formed man, *Adam*, from the dust of the ground, the *adamah*, and breathed life into him and he became a living soul. This – *nephesh khayyah* – is the same expression used of the other creatures in the first narrative. Then Yahweh planted a garden in Eden and put the man there to till and keep it. Among its pleasant and fruit-bearing trees were two special ones: the tree of life and the tree of knowledge of good and evil. The fruit of the latter he was forbidden to eat; Yahweh said that if he were to do so he would die that very day. As yet the man has not spoken. He is a silent slave, apparently made only for work. Then his obedience is tested by means of the tree of knowledge; its fruit is there as a temptation, with death as the penalty for yielding. The slave is to be kept uneasy. He is not told about the tree of life.

Abruptly now the tone changes. Yahweh says, ‘It is not good that the man should be alone’, and decides to make a helpmate for him. Whereupon another act of creation takes place in Eden, as ‘the Lord formed every beast of the field and every fowl of the air’ which are called ‘living souls’ as before. They are brought to Adam for naming, which is the ancient token of dominion. ‘And Adam gave names to all cattle and to the fowl of the air, and to every beast of the field; but for Adam there was not found an helpmate suitable for him.’ Thereupon, without any consultation, Adam was put into a deep sleep, and one of his ribs was removed and made into a woman, who was brought to him just as the animals were before. And Adam names her also, using a little etymological conceit: the word he knows for man is *ish*, therefore she will be called *ishshah*, woman, being bone of his bones and flesh of his flesh and taken out of man.

The chapter ends with the statement that the man and the woman were naked and not ashamed. Nothing of the sort is said in the Priestly Narrative, which, though first in chapter order, is believed to be the later composition. There are other differences, the most obvious being that in the Priestly Narrative man and woman, created in the divine likeness, appear at the end of Elohim’s labors, whereas in the other story Adam is made first and alone, the animals appearing afterward, and the woman after them. The method of creation differs too, as Elohim creates by word, whereas Yahweh is said to form

Adam from the dust, a far more primitive procedure. Yahweh in fact would seem to be an altogether less grand figure than Elohim, who, however, is pleased to bless his creatures, human or otherwise, which Yahweh never does. On the other hand, his method of conferring lordship over the animals would seem to be less harsh than Elohim's injunction to subdue the earth and have dominion over them. But Elohim deals more equally with the sexes, which he creates together, male and female, neither derived from the other; whereas in the Yahwistic story Adam is not only created before the woman, but in effect contains her.

### ***Enter the Serpent***

The third chapter is the most dramatic part of the story and historically the most important, since from it, via St Paul, arises much of what we know as western culture, thought and religion.

Just as we have one particular man and woman, so now one particular animal is introduced – the serpent, ‘most subtil’ of them all. He approaches the woman, who, though without power over beasts, has the ability to converse with them. It is well to remember that the serpent is presented here as a talking animal and is not said to be the devil, as Christian tradition has it, nor possessed by the devil, in its ‘mazy folds’, as Milton says in *Paradise Lost*.

The serpent asks her, ‘Is it true that God has said “Ye shall not eat of every tree in the garden”?’ She answers that they may eat of all but one, nor even touch it lest they die. This presumably is how Adam has conveyed Yahweh's injunction to her, for of course she was not created when it was uttered. Yahweh had simply said, ‘not to eat’. Mistrustful Adam added, ‘not to touch’, purely for her benefit, it would seem, and she trusted him.

The serpent retorts, ‘Surely not. What it means is that if ye eat of the tree of knowledge ye shall become godlike, knowing good and evil.’

His words have the effect of causing the woman to see the tree as it were for the first time: it is good for food, pleasant to the eye and desirable for wisdom. She takes some of the fruit and eats and gives to Adam and he eats too. ‘And the eyes of them both were opened’ – though not before Adam has eaten. The first result of the experience is that they know they are naked. Previously they had not apparently given this a thought; now they are ashamed, and sew figleaves together to cover their sexual parts; and when they hear Yahweh moving in the garden they hide among the trees.

Yahweh calls out to Adam, asking ‘Where are you?’

And Adam answers, 'I heard you and was afraid, being naked, and I hid myself.'

'Who told you that you were naked?' retorts Yahweh. 'Have you eaten of the forbidden tree?'

Adam does not reply directly. 'The woman you put here gave me some of the fruit and I ate.'

Then Yahweh speaks to the woman for the first time: 'What is this you have done?'

She answers: 'The serpent tempted me and I ate.'

The serpent has been present during these exchanges. He is not invited to speak. Straightaway Yahweh curses him 'above all cattle, and above every beast of the field' and condemns him to go upon his belly and to eat dust all his days, and says that he will put enmity between him and the woman and between their descendants thereafter.

Then Yahweh turns to the woman again, and wills sorrow upon her, and especially the pains of childbirth, and commands that her sexuality be limited to her man, who shall rule over her. But because Adam listened to her and ate the forbidden fruit, the ground, the *adamah*, is henceforth accursed, and will produce thorns and thistles, and hard work will be required to get food from it, right up to the day of his death. But he will not die that very day as threatened at the time of his creation.

It is at this point that the woman receives her new name from Adam. Naming in fact is Adam's forte. Yahweh makes, Adam names. He calls her *Khawwah*, life, and the narrator explains: 'because she was the mother of all living'. She was not the mother of anyone yet, but Yahweh had said she would have progeny and so she would be the mother of the human race: reason enough to call her by that name.

Then Yahweh makes them coats of skins and clothes them. We are not told how he procured the skins or why the figleaves would not do.

And he says 'Behold the man is become as one of us, to know good and evil.' He refers only to Adam who, he fears, may 'put forth his hand, and take also of the tree of life, and eat, and live for ever.' This tree had not been forbidden, so that the eating of it would not have compounded the disobedience, but the mere possibility is enough to bring about the expulsion: 'Therefore', says the Authorized Version, 'the Lord God sent him forth from the garden of Eden, to till the ground from whence he was taken.' In this part of the story Eve is not mentioned at all; it is as if her fate is meant to be understood as subsumed in Adam's. Be that as it may, they did not die on the day of their disobedience; to that extent the serpent was right. Their death-sentence has been commuted, as it were, to hard labor, in forms particular to each.

They are next found living outside the garden, wherein Yahweh has set a whirling sword of fire to protect the tree of life. They produce children, beginning with Cain and Abel. Their third child, Seth, is named by Eve. This is the last we read of her. We are told that Adam lived nine hundred and thirty years, and some of his progeny even longer. How long Eve lived we are not told.