

THE LITERAL INTERPRETATION OF GENESIS 3

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For centuries most of Christendom believed that a historical Adam and Eve sinned in a real garden by means of the deception of a real snake. According to a recent survey, however, almost three-fourths of the members of America's protestant churches do not believe that Adam and Eve were historical persons. The early chapters of the Bible form the foundation upon which the rest of Scripture is built, and any question about the historicity of early Genesis, whether in the name of scientific information or Biblical knowledge, is a serious matter.

The majority of Christian theologians now reject the literal Fall, and conservative theologians also are doubting and denying that Genesis 3 has to be taken as literal history. Why do theologians feel the necessity of reexamining the early narratives of Genesis? What effects do their conclusions have upon their whole Biblical theology? Does Biblical exegesis determine the historical character of Genesis 3? How historical does Genesis 3 have to be theologically? Is there another method of interpretation which explains scientific information and Biblical knowledge better? These questions suggest the magnitude of the problems associated with the examination of the literal interpretation of Genesis 3.

To examine the literal interpretation is to examine the method which looks for the ordinary meaning of a passage or phrase of Scripture and accepts that as the sacred Author's meaning unless certain objective principles lead one to ascertain a figurative meaning. The great modern interpreters who have given a literal interpretation of Genesis 3 are Martin Luther, John Calvin, Carl Keil, Edward J. Young, and H. C. Leupold. These interpreters do not always exactly agree (Keil is most literal), but there is astounding agreement on even the details when one considers that the authors span a period of nearly four hundred years.

THE TEXT

What evidence is there in the text itself in favor of or opposed to literal interpretation? To the dismay of the destructive critics there are no major textual problems with this ancient passage, and neither is there any inherent critical problem. Dividing this chapter on the basis of textual reasoning is being abandoned. It stands as a well-defined and well-preserved unit with 2:4ff.

Not being able to challenge what the text says, liberal theologians, as well as some conservative ones, suggest that the story does not *mean* what it says, but is only a mythic or symbolic story. The basic characteristics, the contents, and the quality of Genesis 3, however, differ greatly from those of myth. Myth cannot be validated as the *genre* of this early narrative. Although there are figurative elements in Genesis 3, there is not sufficient evidence to show the *genre* to be that of a symbolic story. The mythic view interprets the story as a psychological explanation of the common human situation. The symbolic view agrees with the mythic that Genesis 3 gives us no description of the earliest humans, but does teach the reality of a historical fall. What really happened no one knows, but something definitely happened. The mythic and symbolic views agree on one point at least: what is written in Genesis 3 does not give us a description of what happened.

To the contrary, Genesis 3 and its immediate context have the characteristics of historical narrative. The historical data of Genesis 1-11 are astounding. Walter C. Kaiser, Jr., writes, "There are 64 geographical terms, 88 personal names, 48 generic names and at least 21 identifiable cultural items ... in these opening chapters." (*New Perspectives on the Old Testament*, ed. J. Barton Payne, p. 59) The writer of early Genesis appears to be narrating the story of how everything was in the beginning. He traces in story form the development of the first human societies, and thus provides the historical background of the patriarchs. Arthur C. Danto explains that "historical writings consist chiefly of historical sentences, and are further distinguished by the fact that a considerable number of the historical sentences which compose them employ, as grammatical subjects, proper names ... or definite descriptions of individual human beings who actually existed ... There are in addition, what I shall term *social individuals*, individuals which we may provisionally characterize as containing individual human beings amongst their parts. Examples of social individuals might be social classes, national groups, religious organizations, large-scale movements, and so on" (*Analytical Philosophy of History*, p. 258). Each of these characteristics is present in the early narratives of Genesis.

The *toledot* formula ("these are the generations of") appears eleven times in Genesis, dividing the book into ten sections. This formula is the key to the unity and development of this Book of Beginnings. The formulas mark the beginnings of new ancestral lines, lines which ultimately reveal the Messianic genealogy. That Genesis 3 falls into the pattern of the *toledot* formulas is a strong argument for its historicity. There is little doubt about the historicity of

the Patriarchal period and later. Neither should there be any doubt about Genesis 3, because Moses included it in the chronological framework upon which he builds.

GENESIS 3 AND OLD TESTAMENT CROSS-REFERENCES

What is the relationship of Genesis 3 to other Old Testament references? There are over two dozen references outside Genesis which have relationship to the Fall narrative. The witness of the Old Testament to Genesis 3 includes not only definite references to the details of the Garden narrative (Job 34:15; Isa. 65:25; Ezek. 28) but also an emphasis upon what happened there, the transgression of the man Adam (Job 31:33; Ezek. 28; Hos. 6:7). The prophetic writings often appeal to the literalness and certainty of early Genesis events to insure belief in the literalness and certainty of present and future events (Isa. 24:5; 54:9). Beyond this, these references cannot be viewed simply as repetitions of a symbolical or mythical story, but are appealed to and are used in the same manner as other literal historical occurrences. And there is evidence that what happened in the Garden is the first link.

The frequency of references to the Fall narrative in the Old Testament is very favorable when compared to that of other events and persons. The Flood is mentioned outside Genesis 6-9 only in Isaiah 54:9. The tower of Genesis 11 is without reference in the rest of the Old Testament. The name of Moses appears in the prophets in only five passages. Elijah is mentioned only in Malachi 4:5.

GENESIS 3 AND THE NEW TESTAMENT

Conservative scholars consider the confirmation of the New Testament to be the strongest evidence for the literal interpretation of Genesis 3. The testimony of the Son of God, "Adam in reverse," to the historicity of the Fall narrative is recorded in John 8:44 where Jesus is speaking in reference to a real historical spiritual condition. These Pharisees were actually children of the Devil. They were so because of an act which took place in the ancient Garden. The Master Teacher here uses two real events of the Garden, the lie and God's sentence of death, as points in His judgment of the Pharisees. In the context (8:56) Jesus uses the events of Abraham's life just as he does the events of the life of Adam, and He give no hint that Genesis 3 should be interpreted any other way than literally.

The Lord used the veracity of early events to establish proper doctrine. In Matthew 19:5 and Mark 10:7-8, He bases His attitude about the question of divorce upon the original intention of the Creator. Jesus, like the prophets, also used the actuality of early Genesis events to warn of actual future events (Matt. 24:37). Jesus treated the early narratives as history, not because He was a child of His time, but because that is the way the Old Testament interpreted them. He was more a student of the Old Testament than one of contemporary theology.

The Apostle Paul was saturated with the content of the Old Testament, especially early Genesis. He bases his doctrine of womanhood upon the Creation and Fall narratives of Moses. In the first place God created the woman from the man and for the man (I Cor. 11:8-9). Second, woman herself added to her subjection by misusing her position and thus being deceived by Satan (I Tim. 2:11-15). Paul's doctrine of womanhood necessitates that God created an actual man and woman at the beginning and that the woman was deceived and fell into transgression.

Alexander Whyte writes, "Adam and Jesus Christ, to Paul's heaven-soaring eye, stand out before God with all other men 'hanging at their girdles'" (*Bible Characters*, p. 19). In Romans 5:1-11 Paul teaches that salvation for sinners is accomplished through the work of Jesus Christ, "through whom we have now received the reconciliation" (5:11b). A question that naturally comes to mind is, "How can it be that one Man's work can do so much?" Paul answers in verse 13, "Therefore, just as through one man sin entered into the world, and death through sin, and so death spread to all men, because all sinned..." Paul does not here finish the comparison. It is obvious, however, that he is saying that just as through one man (Adam) sin entered the world, so also through one Man (Christ) the many receive the reconciliation. It is not until verse 18 that Paul finishes his comparison. Verses 13-17 are parenthetical and are designed to enforce the comparison.

In most modern commentaries the favorite explanation for Paul's use of the Fall of Adam is that Paul recognizes that Adam is a picture of every man. The important matter is not that the first man let sin in but that each of us does the same thing that "Adam" did. No one has applied the Adamic symbol more literally to each man than does Reinhold Niebuhr (see *The Nature and Destiny of Man*). This spokesman for the existential new orthodoxy takes the symbols of the Bible too seriously, so seriously, in fact, that there is no room for anything but symbolism. Only symbolism, in his system, can teach the relation between the finite and infinite. To Niebuhr the Garden constitutes a literal picture of everyone at any given historical moment of his life. Man has therefore original righteousness. Man has the freedom to choose the good. He is not dead in trespasses and sin. Since man is not by nature a sinner nor is he in a state of sin, he has no need of a blood atonement. Niebuhr has no need or room in his theology for the blood-stained

cross of Jesus nor for the bodily resurrection of the Son of the Virgin. Existential man needs only the heart impression that the infinite One has broken through to the finite by the symbol of the Cross. Niebuhr, as any theologian who denies the Fall, makes a complete break with the Biblical doctrine of evil. It is clear, then, that such a theologian is more concerned about preserving his philosophic presuppositions than about preserving the integrity of Jesus and the Bible.

Assuming that Paul is writing infallible Scripture, the literal interpreter finds three points in Paul's argument of Romans 5:12-21 which demand a literal Fall. First, he teaches a causal relationship between Adam's sin and man's *sin*. The emphasis throughout this paragraph is that "one" has done something which affects "the many" or "all." In verse 12 the point is that all die because *all* sinned. In verses 13-14 the point is that all die because *one* sinned. Paul is not contradicting himself, but, to the contrary, is demonstrating the solidarity of the race and Adam. Somehow when Adam sinned, all sinned. Paul does not explain all the details, but he makes it very clear that there is a causal relationship between Adam's sin and the sin of the race.

Second, Paul teaches a causal relationship between Adam's sin and man's *death*. He says in verse 12 that sin entered into the race through Adam and that death came in by that sin. In verse 14 he says that death reigned from Adam until Moses, even over those who had not sinned against Law. They died, in other words, because of the sin of the one man in the Garden. In verse 15 he states that through the one offense the many died (aorist). In verse 16 he writes that the judgment (of all) unto condemnation is a result of one (offense). In verse 17 he writes that by the one offense death reigned (upon all). And likewise in verse 18, condemnation rests upon all men because of the offense. The emphasis in these verses is not that the first man was a sinner and thus all who come after are sinners and therefore die, but that there was one offense by the one man Adam which caused all to be under the reign of death. The sin of the Garden, according to Paul, is an adequate explanation for the phenomenon of death, and is in fact the only explanation in some cases.

Paul's third point which demands a literal Adam is the close relationship between Adam and Jesus Christ: Adam is "the figure [type] of Him [Christ] that was to come" (5:14c). That the type requires the historicity of the person, event, or institution, is agreed by all men who regard the Bible as an objective revelation of God. For the Apostle Paul, then, the first man Adam who transgressed in the Garden of Genesis 3 was a historical person who corresponded in some way to the Second Man, Jesus Christ. For Paul, Adam was a historical person "who was first created" and who was not deceived (I Tim. 2:14), for whom the woman was created (I Cor. 11:9), and in whom all sinned (Rom. 5:12), as well as a type of Jesus Christ.

It is fitting that the last Book of the Bible should bring together the beginning and the ending. The Revelation of Jesus Christ to John the Apostle declares that the prophecy of the ancient Garden shall surely come to pass. In Revelation 12:9 and 20:2 John identifies the "dragon" as "the serpent of old who is called the Devil and Satan" The deceiver and slanderer of Genesis 3 is the same wicked personality who is the enemy of God and His people throughout the Bible. The deceiver in the Garden was just as real as the one who is deceiving men today and who will continue to deceive until his time of doom.

The final doom of the dragon is a major theme of the Apocalypse. He shall be "thrown into the lake of fire and brimstone" and "be tormented day and night for ever and ever" (20:10). This is the completion of the gracious curse that God spoke in the Garden of Genesis 3. John recognized his foe to be the ancient serpent, but he counted him a defeated foe on the basis of the historical curse of Genesis 3. In the midst of describing the final battle, he recalls the beginning of the battle in the Garden of old. The beloved Apostle goes on to reveal the Paradise of God in the vocabulary of the lost paradise of Genesis 3.

GENESIS 3 AND BIBLICAL THEOLOGY

To deny the literal Fall is to destroy Biblical theology at its heart. Christian theology interprets man in the creation-fall-redemption scheme. To deny the Fall is to cause creation and fallenness to coincide, to remove the need of the vicarious atonement, to abort the "mother prophecy" of all Biblical redemptive eschatology, and to render facetious the Biblical doctrine of the restitution of all things.

To question the historicity of the early genealogical characters is to question that of all the characters in the genealogies of Scripture. The great events of Creation and Fall are connected to the Great Deluge by the genealogy of chapter 5 of Genesis. The genealogy of Genesis 11 spans the time from the Deluge to the calling out of the Father of the Faithful. The Chronicler traces the chronology of David's theocratic kingdom from the beginning of mankind. The Evangelists trace the genealogy of Jesus Christ from Adam (Lk. 3:38). Abraham (Matt. 1:1), and David (Matt.

1:1), the three giants of Old Testament redemptive history. The fact that Adam is the fountainhead of three major Biblical genealogies assumes that he is as historical as any others in the list, including the Last Adam, Christ.

Up to this point I have ignored the Biblical doctrine of inspiration. Many of the arguments used against the literal interpretation of Genesis 3 are immediately invalid for one who believes in verbal inspiration. When the Scriptural doctrine of verbal inspiration is understood, any attack upon the events of Genesis 3 is an attack upon the God-breathed character of the Bible. In a sense, then, the defense of the literal interpretation of Genesis 3 can rest in the Biblical doctrine of inspiration. The infallible testimony of Jesus Christ and His Apostles is that there was a Fall. And not only was there a Fall, but there was the literal Fall of Genesis 3 narrative.

GENESIS 3 AND THE BIBLE-SCIENCE ISSUE

The conclusions of the examination of the Fall narrative in the light of Biblical studies demonstrate the validity of the literal interpretation of Genesis 3. Both the Old and New Testament demand that the Garden narrative is to be accepted as true historical writing. The Biblical doctrine of Biblical witness to the literal interpretation. And yet, many who profess faith in the Lord Jesus Christ choose to reject the literal interpretation of Genesis 3. If there is no Biblical evidence to deny the literal interpretation, what reason is given by professing Christians for espousing an alternate interpretation? By their own admission, such Christians claim that modern scientific discoveries, especially in physical anthropology, prohibit the literal interpretation of Genesis 3. Harminus Kuitert, student of and successor to G. C. Berkouwer writes, "The best attempts in the world will not bring the first chapters of Genesis into harmony with the current scientific understanding of the history of the world; is it not better to accept the Bible for what it intends to teach us, and assume that it wants us to understand that it is not giving us a literal picture of how things came about in the ancient past?" (*Do You Understand What You Read?*, p. 46). Jan Lever, a Christian biologist, asks, "How can a non-Christian put any trust in the Christian faith if Christians deny the clear and plain findings of the natural sciences?" (*Where Are We Headed?*, p. 18).

Biblical exegesis, however, is determinative for the Christian, not modern science. When the Bible speaks clearly, as it does in Genesis 3, this is absolute knowledge, and all so-called scientific information must be interpreted in the light of that infallible revelation. If scientific facts are limited to the well-defined limits of the scientific method, few problems develop. Problems do occur, however, when scholars (1) overstate the Biblical knowledge, (2) change their view of the Bible doctrine of inspiration, (3) overstate the scientific information, or (4) disparage scientific information. The greatest of these is the problem of scientific overstatement, especially in the area of the fossil record. The fossil evidence is not able to demonstrate what it is often assumed it can. Because of the propagandist pressures from the weight of scientific authorities, many conservative Bible scholars have concluded that a literal Genesis 3 is no longer tenable. Such reasoning is neither good methodology nor good science.

Conclusion

The literal interpretation of Genesis 3 is as true today as it ever was. The truth of this ancient narrative needs to be preached to the modern world, for without the Fall the great problem of man is an enigma. And even if Genesis 3 were not in the Bible, most of the details and facts could be reconstructed from the many cross-references:

Now the Serpent, he that is called the Devil and Satan (Rev. 12:9; 20:2), was crafty (II Cor. 11:3). He deceived Eve (II Cor. 11:3), and both she and her husband Adam, the son of God and the father of Seth (Lk. 3:38), transgressed (I Tim. 2:14; Rom. 5) in the garden of God (Isa. 51:3; Ezek. 28:13) where there were trees (Ezek. 31:8-9). The Serpent tempted them by lying (John 8:44) and causing them to think that they could be like God (Ezek. 28:9). Because man broke his covenant with God (Hos. 6:7), he tried to hide his iniquity (Job 31:33), the first sin of the world (Rom. 5:12). But it could not be hidden, and as a result man would eventually return to the dust (Job 34:15; Ps. 104:29-30) and die (I Cor. 15:22; Rom. 5). The Serpent, because of his actions, would eat dust (Isa. 65:25) and finally be crushed (Rom. 16:20), though he would wage a fierce battle against the woman's seed (Rev. 12:17). And so, God drove man out of the Garden (Ezek. 28:16), the location of the tree of life (Rev. 22:1-2, 14).

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