



## Meditation— Genesis 3.<sup>1-5</sup>

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<sup>1</sup>Now, the snake was more ingeniously devious than any other land animal that YHWH <sup>2</sup>’ēlōhîm had made. So, he said to the woman, “It really is the case that <sup>3</sup>’ēlōhîm said, ‘You are not to eat from every garden tree!’”

<sup>2</sup>The woman answered the snake, “We may eat fruit of all the garden trees. <sup>3</sup>However, concerning the fruit of the tree that is in the middle of the garden, <sup>4</sup>’ēlōhîm has said, ‘You are not to eat it, or even touch it, lest you die.’”

<sup>4</sup>The snake insinuated to the woman, “It isn’t that you will die. <sup>5</sup>It’s because <sup>6</sup>’ēlōhîm knows that when you have eaten from it your eyes will be opened, and you will be like <sup>7</sup>’ēlōhîm, understanding what is good and what is bad” (author’s translation).

The snake, we are informed, is enormously “subtle,” according to the KJV, or “ingeniously devious” according to the author’s translation. This notice is not for nothing, as my kids say. It is important to the story. It is important as one considers the snake’s very first words, traditionally understood as a question but one that I understand as a statement. Though these are the first words that the text reports as passing between the woman and the snake, the verse’s initial *ap* suggests that they represent a continuation of a conversation that has already been taking place. The previous conversation might be that which passed between the man and woman and God, or that which has been taking place between the woman and the snake. Either way, the snake’s trickiness is seen in the ambiguity of his statement.

“It really is the case that <sup>3</sup>’ēlōhîm said, ‘You are not to eat from every garden tree!’”

What, exactly, is it that the snake is saying? Is he simply reaffirming the assertion that God has indeed spoken? Period. Or is he reaffirming that God did indeed say that not every tree’s fruit was to be eaten? The ambiguity of the snake’s gambit seems purposeful. It is designed to draw the woman into further conversation. His ambiguity will require the woman to continue her engagement with the snake. And continue she does.

“We may eat fruit of all the garden trees. <sup>3</sup>However, concerning the fruit of the tree that is in the middle of the garden, <sup>4</sup>’ēlōhîm has said, ‘You are not to eat it, or even touch it, lest you die.’”

The woman’s reply is very revealing. In some ways, it may reveal more about her than it does about God, or the garden, or the trees, or any consequences of eating from the forbidden tree. The snake will take advantage of what he learns.

First, the woman places the tree “in the middle of the garden.” However, in reporting on the existence of the tree, the text had nowhere mentioned such a central placement. We might conclude that the author/editors left out this detail earlier, leaving it to the woman to reveal it in this conversation. On the other hand, we might just as legitimately conclude that the centrality of the tree is in the woman’s mind. The woman has, perhaps, been circling the tree, observing the tree, thinking about the tree, obsessing on the

tree. The woman has, perhaps, granted the tree a psychological centrality that has nothing to do with its actual location in the garden or with God's intentions.

Second, the woman has expanded God's earlier prohibition. In pointing out the tree, God warned the man and the woman, "thou shalt not eat." Now, again, perhaps the woman's additional "or even touch it" represents part of God's original prohibition which the author/ editors decided to leave to the woman to reveal. On the other hand, perhaps the addition is purely the woman's invention, akin to the Jewish practice of "building a wall around Torah." Walls are meant to protect, to keep dangers out. However, it seems built into human psychology that as soon as a wall is built to protect, it becomes an object that calls out to be scaled.

So, if we accept that both of the woman's additions to previously provided information were her own, we see a woman who has been thinking a good deal about that thing that is forbidden to her. We observe, then, a woman who is typically human, possessing the same psychology and behavior as nearly every other human being. First, like most of us, she wants what she is denied. The forbidden thing becomes an obsession. It becomes a central feature of her thoughts. She comes back to it over and over and over again. Second, sensing the danger of her obsession, she seeks to control her response by amplifying, magnifying, exaggerating the danger in hopes of strengthening her defenses against her desire. The evilly intelligent snake will not miss either of the woman's self-revelations and will use them to his advantage.

This story, then, is not simply a story about some singular individual in the distance past. It is a story about all of us. The woman is us—male and female alike. Therefore, as we continue to watch the back and forth between "the woman" and "the snake," and observe how "the snake" approaches "the woman's" thoughts and feelings, we are really being taught something about the approach the snake takes toward all of us.

In the King James Translation, the snake seems to suggest that God is lying about the danger of death that eating the fruit of the tree represents. In this reading, the snake claims, "You will not really die if you eat the fruit." My translation suggests something different. It suggests that the snake is insinuating that God is something far worse than a liar. "God doesn't care about you, but selfishly wants to keep the fruit from you, keeping it all for himself."

The snake's insinuation is still that God is of bad character. But, rather than simply being a liar, or even selfish, God is actually an adversary. "You can't trust him," the snake hisses. "God is not on your side." "God feels no fidelity toward you." Once the snake has whispered this ultimate lie into our ears, and then gotten us to consider it, give it airtime in our thoughts, the danger of God losing our hearts and minds grows until we act contrary to all that he has indicated as best for us.

Thus, this short story, so often considered unique and solitary, is anything but. It is commonplace. It is utterly human. It happens every day. We obsess on potential spiritual dangers, believing that keeping a wary eye on them will increase our chances of resisting them, only to discover over the long haul that all this obsessing and amping up of defenses often makes it more, not less likely that the forbidden thing will be partaken of. We discover that in putting potential spiritual dangers on a pedestal and placing them in a spotlight we have only succeeded in creating what amounts to an idolatrous God. We are not admonished to "come unto sin," after all, but to "come unto Christ."

We also learn that we are encouraged to distrust God in a million ways. We can easily think of him as an enemy. This is particularly true when, as we will see as this story continues, we partake of the forbidden fruit. At this point, already suspicious of God's commitment to us, we imagine that we have lost God as a loyal and committed partner. Our hiding from God then grows more pervasive and characteristic. It is impossible to calculate the number of ways in which we underestimate God's fidelity; his unflagging

commitment to us.

Even so, come, Lord Jesus!

*(edition: april 21, 2024)*