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On Reading the Story of Adam and Eve
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Someone asked the other day how we should read Genesis 2-3, the story of Adam and Eve. Behind his question lay troubled concern over the apparent conflict between science and Scripture. "If we take the biblical account seriously," he concluded, "then we have to reject evolutionary theory altogether and align ourselves with those 'creationists' who believe the Genesis account is to be taken literally, as an actual biological description of the way human life came to be."

There are two closely intertwined issues here: the *meaning* of the Genesis account, and God's role in the process of creation. To address either one, it is necessary first of all to untangle and separate them. Here we will try to speak to the first question; then in a future column we will turn briefly to the debate over evolution and creationism.

Before we can consider the way we should read the story of Adam and Eve, we need to return to a point we have made before in this space. In today's culture, we tend to confuse truth with fact. If a particular event could, at least in principle, have been tape-recorded or photographed, then we consider it to be true. This, though, is a very limited understanding of "truth." It would exclude from the realm of truth such realities as love and spiritual longing, since these cannot be empirically verified. It would exclude all that occurs on the macro cosmic scale, where the laws of Euclidian geometry no longer apply (curved space, black holes); as it would much that occurs in the nanosphere, where conventional notions of time, space and material reality no longer hold (the uncertainty principle of quantum mechanics, antimatter). It would also exclude faith. We can bear witness to our belief and to its content, but we cannot *prove* that we actually believe or that the content of our belief is real or true. Truth transcends fact in many ways. This is particularly evident in biblical narratives such as Jesus' (non-historical) parables and in the story of Adam and Eve.

The primary questions in dealing with the story recounted in Genesis 2-3 are these: what was the intention of the biblical writer (considered traditionally to be Moses) in composing the story, and what was God's purpose in inspiring that writer to formulate the story as he did?

Did the biblical writer himself consider the story of Adam and Eve to be "factual"? He certainly considered it to be "true," insofar as it speaks eloquently about God's creative activity in bringing humankind into existence, man's rebellion against God's will, and the suffering of human persons in their estrangement from God, their life "outside of Paradise." Militating against a purely literal reading of the passage, however, are elements of the story such

as Adam molded by God's hands "of dust from the ground," the image of God as a gardener who "plants a garden in Eden," the formation of woman from man's rib, the "sound of the Lord God walking in the garden," the clothing of Adam and Eve with "garments of skin," and the simultaneous existence of other people "in the land of Nod, east of Eden." This anthropomorphic image of God, together with logical inconsistencies in the narrative, require interpretation, as the Fathers of the Church well knew. As the Fathers also made clear, the entire narrative is to be understood in the technical sense as historical mythology: not a "fable," a made-up folk-tale, but a narrative element of Israel's sacred history that speaks of the ineffable interaction between God and His human creatures, a relationship that can best be described by symbolic language. (Consider, for example, the Hebrew terms *'adam*, *'adama*, which signify "man" / "earth"; and *'eden*, which means "bliss," "delight," a virtual synonym of "Paradise," as in Isa 51:3; Ezek 28:13; 31:9, 15-18, where the underlying mythological element is quite evident.)

We cannot know the mind of the biblical author, of course. But it seems likely that he developed the story of Adam and Eve (on the basis of ancient oral tradition) as a kind of "etiological parable": a story that explains, via mythological imagery, the activity of God from the creation of the world to specific realities and experiences in our daily life. His aim was to answer questions such as these: How did man and woman come to be? Why is there human sin and why is there death? Why do women suffer pain in childbirth, and why do men have to labor by the sweat of their brow in order to provide life's essentials?

To answer questions of this kind, the author of Genesis 2-3 allowed himself to be inspired and guided by the Holy Spirit, to create the profound and beautiful story of Adam and Eve. To interpret that story correctly, we need to read it allegorically, symbolically. We need to look beyond any particular historical event (Paradise, after all, is trans-historical, beyond time and space, as witnessed by Jesus' word to the "Good Thief"), in order to perceive in the midst of early human history the presence and activity of God, who is the Creator and Sustainer of all that exists.

This suggests the motive behind the inspirational work of the Spirit in guiding composition of the biblical narrative. By means of the story of Adam and Eve, God reveals Himself as Creator, Judge and Redeemer, who has supreme authority over life and death. His purpose is not thwarted by human sin or demonic influence, a point made clear not only by events in the garden, but also by His protection of Cain. Preserved by a divine mark, this fratricidal son of Adam becomes a prophetic image of the people of Israel, also sinful, also rebellious, yet also loved and preserved by the covenantal Lord against all who would destroy them.

The story of Adam and Eve is in fact the story of each one of us. Because of

our own rebellion, we have been expelled from Paradise, and a flaming sword now bars us from the life of beauty, peace and joy for which God fashioned us. In our garments of skin, we wander the earth, longing to rediscover and reenter the Garden in which and for which we were created.

The true end and fulfillment of the Genesis story is articulated most eloquently by the paschal icon of Christ's descent into Sheol. While His body reposes in another garden, the Son of God, the Second Adam, penetrates the realm of the dead, to liberate us from the power of death that holds us in bondage and exile. There He grasps the hands of Adam and Eve, and with them He embraces each of us, to raise us with Himself and restore us to full communion with the God of Life and Love. The final meaning of this story, then, is summed up in the simple yet profound words of St Ephrem the Syrian: "Adam's Lord came out to seek him; / He entered Sheol and found him there, / then led and brought him out / to set him once more in Paradise"

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1. Hymns on Paradise 8:10 (tr. S. Brock; SVS Press, 1990, p. 135).