
Richard HENDERSON-SMITH (GB)
28/07/2012

Beyond Eden

(Genesis 3: 16-24)

This familiar story lies deep in the heart of our shared European identity and culture. Here is an explanation of the dawn of humanity's moral sense and attempts to answer the 'Why' questions. Why do women experience so much more pain in childbirth than animals? Why must we work so hard to live, and what might be life's purpose? Why do we face so many choices, why do we have to accept responsibility for our actions and, above all, why do we find it so difficult to make the right choices?

Disobedience takes place, and Brueggeman suggests that this is the story of the struggle God has to respond to the facts of human life. I want to concentrate on the very moment of expulsion from paradise when technology and ethics become key to humanity's survival; '...God said, "See, the man has become like one of us, knowing good and evil"...God sent him forth from the garden of Eden, to *till* the ground from which he was taken.' (Gen 3: 22a, 23).

But first, if we were to read this short story in its entirety we would find in the previous chapter, a lightness, joy and communion with the soil of the garden where food is ready to be plucked at will. Here is the first application of a tool, humanity is to *till* the garden, lightly hoeing the soil, happily nurturing its plenty (Gen 2: 15). Technology is gentle in Eden, harmonious with the soil, caressing it in worship of its maker, full of joy and creativity (1: 28-29). Everything is gift and work is not exhausting as we know it to be (2: 9). Here is a place where God walked with his creatures in the cool of the evening (3: 8). Hunger and death are impossible because of abundance and harmony with God and nature. In Eden there is time, endless time, and freedom to obey and to work freely.

By eating the rosy perfection of the forbidden fruit humanity faces that instant of expulsion because, like God, now we have the knowledge of good and evil and threaten to take of the tree of eternal life also (3: 22). From that moment humankind must use its ingenuity, its science and technology now inescapably coupled with moral choices, to mitigate the pain, danger and darkness which surround us beyond Eden. Having eaten the forbidden fruit we have the dilemma of using our tools for good or evil. There is no way back, that moral struggle is as inevitable and necessary as our striving to feed ourselves. The use of our technologies must be tempered by judgement about appropriateness and fairness. Having the freedom to choose, but without God's perfection, we can no longer entirely trust our judgement as to what is right and what is not. So our essential sinfulness is exposed.

God addresses the three protagonists in this drama and already the harmony and cooperation of paradise is broken (3: 10-15). They defend themselves with 'I' statements; self-centredness has already asserted itself (3: 12-13). Our economy with its routine and exertion is already out of balance in this compulsive competition with neighbours. We are aware that things are not as they should be, we are never quite in control and a sense of futility follows foolish choices. In this lies the curse of Adam. Therefore humankind must *not* have access to that other tree, the Tree of Life.

With humanity's disobedience the early and tentative growth of plants after the first rain is replaced by rampant and persistent eruption of weeds always threatening food supplies (2: 5; 3: 18). Gentle gardening is replaced by strife against the ground from which we came (2: 15; 3: 23). Following the cataclysmic expulsion from paradise there is to be toil and frustration amongst the thorns and thistles rising up regardless of our efforts. Now pain mars the joy of childbirth and child-rearing. Survival is by unremitting struggle and wearisome routine, as we perpetually contend with the earth using our technology. But ultimate defeat seems inevitable; we are swallowed by the ground. The punishment of toil and pain is finite and the sentence of life ends, death after such effort and sorrow, is a release; it is a gift which returns humanity to its starting point in dust. The refusal to permit human immortality through the tree of life is a gracious act of God allowing us, eventually, to leave the frustration and suffering. Our misery is brought to the embrace of the ground from which humankind was made (3: 23).

So a barrier separates humankind from God. We have moved from a state of harmony with each other, the earth, animals, nature and God to a state of anxiety and misunderstanding, from childlike naïveté to a state of having to make calculations of potential consequences of actions, whether they are to be good or ill. There are no longer the certainties of childhood security. Cut off from innocence we are banished to use the God-given gifts of intelligence and technology within the freedom and responsibility of choosing how best to use them.

Notice that the technology of paradise is retained as a gift to equip humankind for life outside where nourishment is no longer freely available or easily taken (2: 15; 3: 23). In Eden humanity ate natural fruit by invitation now they must eat bread by strain, sweat and the application of technology (3: 19). Humanity's needs must be earned as we attempt to replicate the order, balance and plenty of the Garden (2: 9, 16). Formed from the ground we must now do battle with it (3: 17-18). A life of toil and scarcity, frustration and anguish replaces the gardener's life of ease and plenty (3: 16-19). Production only comes by pain and hunger, immediate death is inevitable if work is much delayed. Beyond Eden work becomes a necessity and, with fallen eyes, we view it as tedious and unfulfilling. Now there must be efficiency, property, reserves; there has been a move from the realm of freedom to the realm of necessity (Ellul). The eternity and enjoyment of the perfect life in God's immediate presence and the simple freedom to love him has changed to a perpetual choice between endless possibilities which can only be ended by death. Compatibility, intimacy and integration with God and creation have degenerated into ambiguity, alienation and conflict. Nonetheless damaged as those relationships are they are not quite eradicated.

According to Bonhoeffer, Genesis 3 says - 'Now live in this destroyed world, you cannot escape it, live in it between curse and *promise*.' We are forced, paradoxically by the very freedom of will with which we are divinely endowed, to bring moral choices to bear on the application of the technology and techniques we develop for that grievous struggle (3: 16-19). From the Biblical perspective technology is necessary, right and good. But the use of knowledge, science, and exploration is to be controlled by judgements about consequences. Right and goodness are to be sought, evil avoided. Disobedience to this moral imperative inevitably brings further pain and toil. Henceforth human existence cannot be divorced from the destiny of the earth. The use we make of technology is the

means by which God devises solutions to problems, ecological, medical and others. Technical progress is not a mere possibility but a necessity in the world described by the Bible but it should be tested for its moral and social effects and abandoned or modified if it fails these tests. Even the judgement that God makes on humanity cannot break the special relationship he has with it, he stays his hand, mitigating the penalty with the intention of redeeming humankind (Genesis 12: 2). Human life is allowed to continue under constraints but remains under his care with dignity (9: 15).

Nevertheless the very ground is cursed by humankind, nature itself is tainted by our failures to do good. Our inescapable stewardship of the earth is now so costly that there is a passionate nostalgia for primeval unity. But having chosen autonomy and knowledge they are irreversible, even so we are not abandoned without mercy. The Creator cares and tends to our needs; he is concerned for humankind's safety even at the moment of judgement. At that point of banishment we are delicately and tenderly guarded by his garments from shame and the assault of the elements (3: 21). So God's clothing, the products of nature, is a tender gift for our comfort; he remains engaged with humanity as his children (3: 21). Whether within or outside the Garden humankind lives on God's terms, but facing the consequences of our actions with a measure of maturity, for we feel we are adults now. With our expulsion God takes a risk, giving us the world with which to experiment and expecting us to act with responsibility. We may say that banishment from paradise brings us eventually to civilisation, modesty and wisdom with some understanding of what is good and evil in the choices we make and their effects on others. For example, we are exploring the fundamental particles of matter at huge cost, not far from here, with the Giant Hadron Collider, whilst at the same time failing to provide the basic needs of some 2 billion, more than a quarter, of the world's population. We disobeyed and continue to disobey so our frustrating attempts to build another Eden prove futile.

The reductionism of the scientific evolutionary story only aims to answer 'How we came about' and 'how can we function'. Science tells us that our brains and society have evolved through the use of tools as extensions of our limbs to solve problems. Such technology is essential to our nature. Language and cooperation follow bringing with them a moral sense. With the appearance of the technology with which to cultivate and settle in communities comes a measure of predictability and prosperity with the harvesting of grain (choosing to save some for later planting) and then its milling and baking. The fruits of the field rather than the pure fruits of nature are to be both the bread we eat with tears and the bread of charity. We are to use our wits, techniques and machines to try to control that which sustains us. But this account is not sufficient; we have a need to understand *why* we are as we are. We are dissatisfied and require a paradigm to explain the difficulties we face and provide a direction of travel. To produce a balance with our environment proves difficult; we yearn for a method of stewardship and a way to impose good over evil. So metaphors develop in our scriptures and the people who share them acquire community and direction. The Genesis myth of the curse gives an explanation as to why we struggle, why pain must accompany our existence and why our lives are extinguished by death but it does *not* give us a way through them.

For Christians the promise is understood in the gift of the broken body and blood of the Redeemer. It is that pure fruit of Eden restored to us through another tree and made available as Living Bread. St Paul says '...just as by the one man's disobedience the many were made sinners, so by the one man's obedience the many will be made righteous' (Romans 5: 19). The fractured relationship is restored by the Creator's identification with humanity and his self sacrifice is the ultimate act of love which deals evil and death a fatal blow and re-establishes that harmony which was lost. A new Kingdom is established within and amongst us although the once perfect communion with God is not yet *fully* restored. Its goal, a city, is not *yet* achieved. The nature of life and death remains but its moral dilemmas are radically illuminated and there is a new power to settle them. Thus new

freedom is presented as a way back to paradise, beginning here and now as life with the risen Christ. We may choose its restoration but even this is not to be against our will.

The exile from Eden occurred because humankind put its own desires ahead of God's priorities, imagining the universe belonged to us and wanting to run it our way. Even after banishment humanity remained in the image of God, with some of his creativity and imagination and the capacity to do his will, by doing good, but all too often still failing to do it. Accordingly the story of estrangement is incessantly repeated by our pride and tendency to take the easy option with imagined moral self-sufficiency. But Jesus provides the means, within our continuous toil, to make the right choice between good and evil, to cooperate and build with others for the benefit of all by the power of his forgiveness, generous love and peace.

There is a lovely symmetry between this passage of Genesis and the final Revelation of the Christian scriptures which describes, not a pristine garden, but a city, a garden city. The gates are always open and inviting (Revelation 21: 25). The Tree of Life is no longer locked within Paradise but available, what was forbidden and remained untouchable is generously offered. Indeed there is no longer one Tree of Life but two, standing on each side of a river causing a perpetual harvest of fruit and healing leaves. Here, at last, tillage and technology is no longer necessary and communion is complete with the generous God of love who is both the beginning of all things and the end of all.

The first passage, at the beginning of the Christian scriptures, prepares us to contend with the messy and difficult real world with which we have no choice but to engage and the second, at their end, gives that struggle meaning and purpose.

Bibliography:

- Bonhoeffer, D. 'Creation and Fall', SCM, London. 1959
- Brueggeman, W. 'Genesis', John Knox, Atlanta. 1982
- Ellul, J. *Technique and the Opening Chapters of Genesis*, in Mitcham, C & Grote, C (eds.) 'Theology and Technology', University Press of America, London. 1984