Evangelical Review of Theology

EDITOR: DAVID PARKER

Volume 28 · Number 1 · January 2004

Articles and book reviews reflecting global evangelical theology for the purpose of discerning the obedience of faith

Published by

PATERNOSTER PERIODICALS

for
WORLD EVANGELICAL
ALLIANCE
Theological Commission

ERT (2004) 28:1, 80-85

Lessons from Paradise on Work, Marriage, and Freedom
A Study of Genesis 2:4-3:24

Paul F. Scotchmer

KEYWORDS: *Paradise, worship, creation, sex, sin, autonomy, redemption, food*

THIS extraordinary tale, the first-ever Bible story, holds profound insights about life's most basic realities. The author directs particular attention to the meaning of work and marriage, the limits of human freedom, and the origins of sin, pain, suffering, death, and alienation. A single thread binds these topics: the gap between life as we know it and life as it is meant to be.

The story is composed of seven scenes,[1] best visualized as taking place in a round garden with three concentric terraces. From north to south, a line is drawn through the garden. Scenes one and seven take place in the outermost circle, scenes two and six in the next circle toward the centre, scenes three and five in the next circle, and the climactic fourth scene in the innermost circle.

The story begins on the western side of the garden with the creation of the first man and woman. The story concludes on the eastern side, where the man and woman are escorted, like a couple of ill-mannered party guests, from the garden. Between these two points lies a tale of seduction, betrayal, and remorse.

The drama comes to a crushing climax in Genesis 3:6 with three simple words: 'and he ate'. No words ever recorded could hold greater meaning for the human race, except for the exclamation at the other end of salvation history: 'He has risen!' (Mark 16:6; cf Rom. 5:12-19).

Scene 1: The first circle (west side). Gen. 2:5-17. As the story

1 This outline is based upon the structural analysis of J. T. Walsh, 'Gen 2:4b-3:24: A Synchronic Approach,' *Journal of Biblical Literature* 96 (1977): 161-77, with refinements by P. Auffret. Gordon J. Wenham follows the same outline in *Genesis 1-15* (Waco: Word Books, 1987), a book that has been especially helpful in my own efforts to gather information and insights for this paper.

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opens, Adam (literally, Man) is moulded like a piece of pottery from dust and given life from the breath of God. He finds himself in a place that earlier translators, borrowing from the Persian word for 'royal garden', called 'Paradise'. Within the garden, the man and woman are God's representatives on earth. In fact, they are rulers in God's own image over all creation (cf. 1:27-28) — an affirmation of great significance for the meaning of human work.

The Garden of Eden is more than a royal garden. It is the archetype of the tabernacle introduced by Moses, at God's direction, at Mount Sinai. Like the tabernacle, it is bedecked by gold and precious stones (2:12); it is 'served' (the same word as 'to till') by God's priestly representatives on earth; it is designed as a special meeting place for God and his people.

Yahweh-Elohim, the term for God in this scene, is far more personal than *Elohim*, the term used for God in Genesis 1. Adam is no longer simply a creation of the Creator-God; he stands in relation to the 'Lord God.' Although *Elohim* and *Yahweh-Elohim* are the same God, they are experienced in vastly different ways by the human person. This distinction becomes crucial in scene 3.

The 'tilling' or 'service' performed by Adam in the garden is good and pleasant. No hardship, pain, or struggle is associated with work at this time. And yet it is still work; in fact, it is the very picture of work intended by God from the beginning of time — an act of service happily performed for the benefit of humankind and the pleasure of God. In a later age, the apostle Paul would re-affirm the essential dignity of work as an act of worship. He urged his fellow believers at Rome, where physical work was relegated to slaves, 'to offer your bodies as living sacrifices, holy and pleasing to God — this is your spiritual act of worship' (Rom. 12:1). In the Garden of Eden, all work was performed as it was meant to be, as an act of worship.

According to the biblical story, man was made for work. The same was true in other Near Eastern accounts of human origins — but with a huge difference. In the biblical account, man was not brought into the world as a slave for the gods, to serve their physical needs and to relieve them of the drudgery of human labour. On the contrary, according to Genesis man was brought into the world to enjoy and manage a place of great beauty, order, and countless delights. In the Garden of Eden, God not only supplied the physical needs of man but offered surprising and unimaginable pleasures. The plants of the garden were fragrant and pleasing to the human eye. The land was replete with aromatic resins, glistening gold, and gemstones. The soil was fertile and naturally irrigated by a network of rivers and streams. It was into this idyllic world that God placed the only creature capable of communing with God.

Only one activity within the garden was proscribed: eating from 'the tree of the knowledge of good and evil'. Vividly and concretely, the author of Genesis makes a point that contemporary writers (under the influence of Hellenistic thought) would be more inclined to articulate abstractly. Through the symbolism of the tree, the author teaches that the human person is free in all respects but one: deter-

mining what is right and what is wrong solely on the basis of human insight. According to the Scriptures, when human beings assert themselves as autonomous moral agents, they choose the way of death (2:17). In the words of the Psalmist, they are 'like the chaff that the wind blows away' (Psalm 1).

Scene 2: The second circle (west side). Gen. 2:18-25. The garden was lovely, and all was well, with a single exception: Adam was lonely. He was with God. He enjoyed his work. He was surrounded by beauty and objects of pleasure. But he was alone.

The creation of Eve reads like a child's tale. One by one, and with picturesque simplicity, God introduces the new animals of this new world: 'He brought them to the man to see what he would name them' (2:19). They were doubtless all very charming in their own ways, but Adam was still alone: 'no suitable helper was found' (2:20). The reader can almost hear Adam's response as each new living creation is modelled on the runway: 'Yes, very nice … amusing … delightful … impressive…. I will call it such and such.' But then, to himself: 'That's not it.'

What Adam needed was a real companion, a fellow human being and 'helpmeet' (KJV), someone to complement his strengths and help complete his life. So God 'built' him a woman. To create this new being, the story says that God used Adam's own rib, a piece of anatomy of great strength and nearest the heart of man.[2]

Did God literally use a 'rib' to make the first woman? R. K. Harrison regards this translation of the Hebrew word (which has many meanings) as a misrepresentation. The real intention of the passage, according to Harrison, is to indicate (albeit graphically) the organic and spiritual bond between the man and woman, as compared to other species of life.

In any case, when Adam saw the woman, he was inspired to issue his first recorded words (2:23), an extemporaneous poem:

> This one! At last! Bone of my bones
> and flesh of my flesh!
> This one shall be called woman,
> for from man was she taken, this one!

Adam had found, to be sure, 'Heav'n's last best gift, my ever new delight' (Milton).

The man and woman were naked, but they were not ashamed. The point is not, as some suppose, that they were ignorant of their sexuality. Of this notion the Puritan Milton spoke derisively, noting that 'hypocrites austerely talk of purity and place and innocense (*sic*), defaming as impure what God declares to be pure.' Rather, the first couple had a pure view of sexuality. And their melding as 'one flesh' — a term that refers to the entire marital bond — was even stronger than the blood ties with parents (2:24).

The original readers of Genesis, let us recall, lived in a patriarchal society. In that culture, forsaking one's father or mother was no light affair. In the most literal sense, it meant abandoning one's siblings, clan, tribe, and nation; breaking from the customs, mores, rituals, moral standards, and religious foundations of the community; losing one's household goods,

2 R. K. Harrison, *Introduction to the Old Testament* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1969), pp. 555-556.

gods, and property.

Does the Book of Genesis require all of this for the sake of marriage? Not at all. No more than Jesus' recitation of Micah ('a man against his father, a daughter against her mother') was a call to violence (cf. Mt. 10:34-39). The point is simply this: parents, and all they represent in a patriarchal society, are to be valued less than one's bride or groom. Such is the strength of the tribute that Genesis pays to the marital bond in the Garden of Eden.

For the modern man and woman, the value of the marriage bond must be measured in a different coin. The competing force in today's world is not the patriarchal family, but Self. The marital bond is now in tension with 'individual liberty', 'personal freedom', and 'rights' of every description. Marriage in the modern age calls for sacrifice of a different sort: sacrifice of self-interest on the altar of intimacy, mutual trust, and fidelity. Marriage today calls for the constant giving of Self to the Other, and to the new life that proceeds from physical intimacy with the Other. It calls for limits on time spent elsewhere — in play or in work, especially work.

Have those doughty Puritans, who knew so well the biblical meaning of work and calling, overly influenced us, perhaps? As capitalism began to flourish in 17th-century British society, the Puritans led the charge. Taking their Bible seriously, they honoured the divine mandate to fill and subdue the earth. But work, like anything else, can be over-emphasized. Withal Milton, through the voice of Adam, reminds his brethren that friendship and affection — especially between husband and wife — are even more to be valued than work:

> [N]ot so strictly hath our Lord imposed
> Labour, as to debar us when we need
> Refreshment, whether food, or talk between,
> Food of the mind, or this sweet intercourse
> Of looks and smiles, for smiles from reason flow,
> To brute denied, and are of love the food,
> Love not the lowest end of human life.
> For not to irksome toil, but to delight to reason joined.

So far, the story has been positive. But as the players — the man, the woman, and a newcomer on the scene — move toward the centre, the tension builds. Abruptly, the serpent is introduced, and in terms that put the reader on notice of problems ahead (3:1). In no time, the creature without ribs, beneath the man, approached the creature built from a rib, beside the man.

Scene 3: The third circle (west side). Gen. 3:1-5. The conversation was subtle and urbane. For the woman, it was intoxicating. Like a couple of sophisticates hobnobbing at a party, the woman and the serpent refer to God as *Elohim* (the Creator-God), rather than *Yahweh-Elohim* (the Covenant-God). In doing so, they intentionally objectify the Almighty, depicting their maker as someone remote and official, rather than close and personal. God is no longer Thou, but It. He is now the object of a new discipline, founded by the woman and the serpent: theology, the study of God.

The woman, for her part, rationalized her imminent actions by exagger-

ating God's requirements. Falsely, she said that God had forbidden the couple to touch the fruit; in fact, he had only forbidden the couple to eat the fruit. The serpent, for his part, underplayed God's penalties. He assured the woman that she would become enlightened and more like God by eating the fruit. He told her that she would not die — contrary to what God had stated.

In one sense, Satan was right. For as the story goes on, we learn that Adam and Eve did not keel over and die after eating the fruit. Adam lived for a grand total of 930 years (Gen. 5:5). But the devil was dealing with death (his specialty) in simplistic terms. He failed to mention the eventuality of physical death and the immediate reality of spiritual death. Falsely, he assured Eve that she had much to gain and nothing to lose by her act of disobedience.

Scene 4: The inner circle. Gen. 3:6-8. When the woman saw that the tree of knowledge was good to eat, she lusted for its fruit, especially for the insights it would yield. So she took the fruit, and ate. She also gave to her husband. *And he ate.*

Suddenly, things began to change before their eyes. The serpent was right: their eyes were opened. But the new insights were not pleasant. 'Soon found their eyes how opened, and their minds how darkened,' wrote the blind poet in *Paradise Lost*. And in that Faustian bargain 'innocence, that as a veil had shadowed them from knowing ill, was gone….'

Before each other, the man and woman were uncomfortable in their physical nakedness. Before God, they were uncomfortable in their spiritual nakedness. Frantically, they tried to cover themselves with fig leaves and to hide themselves from God.

Scenes 5: The third circle (east side). Gen. 3:9-13. Gently, God called out to the man: 'Where are you?' Awkwardly, the man explained: 'I was afraid because I was naked.' Rhetorically, God asked how he knew he was naked: 'Have you eaten from the tree…?' Patiently, God listened as Adam shifted the blame to the woman — and to God himself: 'The woman you put here with me….' God continued to listen as the woman shifted the blame to the serpent: 'The serpent deceived me.' But toward the serpent, God showed no patience. The Liar was refused a chance to speak.

Scene 6: The second circle (east side). Gen. 3:14-21. After hearing the couple's sorry excuses, God systematically worked his way back up the line, meting out punishments along the way: first to the serpent, then to the woman, and finally to the man. No one was innocent, and no one was spared.

Of all the animals that God had made, the serpent would occupy the lowest place on earth. Henceforth, it would slither on the ground, eating the dust beneath man's feet. Trust between the woman and the serpent was replaced by perpetual enmity, through the seed of both; the serpent would strike at man's foot and man's foot would crush the serpent's head.

These words represent far more than an etiology of human alienation involving man and the wild. God's curse was upon the embodiment of evil. It presaged a long struggle between the human creation and the forces of death. Just as the man and woman represented God's own image in its earthly expression, the dust-eating serpent

represented the face of evil. But the human creation, with God at his side, would have the upper hand in this protracted struggle. Ultimately, the man and woman would triumph, with God's help (cf. Rom. 16:20). And unlike the serpent and the ground, the man and woman would never be cursed. Rather, they would be blessed, again and again, despite their many shortcomings.

The woman's penalty was twofold: pain in childbirth and an inordinate desire for her husband. Implicit in this passage is the idea that childbearing, like work ('tilling'), is a basic aspect of human nature. But never again would either be experienced in quite the way they were intended at Creation. The pain of childbirth would be extreme, and yet attraction to the man would remain strong. The passage seems to suggest a compulsive quality to a woman's attraction to a man. The attraction is normal; the compulsion is not. Like the pain of childbirth, the tendency for women to 'love too much' is part of the female experience in a fallen world. The intent of God is otherwise, for God is good.

The man's penalty was directed toward his work as the supplier of food. 'In pain' — the same word used in reference to childbirth — 'you will eat.' Although work itself is part of the order of creation, the hardship, struggle, and drudgery so often associated with work are not. Man was meant to rule over nature. But east of the garden, 'thorns and thistles' are as certain as death itself, staples of life until man's return to the dust, from whence he came. But again, the point of the biblical story is not that the hardships associated with work should be accepted (leastwise perpetuated) without attempts to alleviate them. For even in a fallen world, work is for man, not man for work.

Scene 7: The first circle (east side). Gen. 3:22-24. In the final scene, as in the first, God dominated the action. Having partaken from the tree of knowledge of good and evil, the man and woman were no longer to have access to the tree of life. For this reason, God drove the couple from the garden, relying upon fierce cherubim and a flaming sword to prevent their return (and access to the tree of life).

But that was then. With the appearance of 'a new Adam,' Scripture presents a more hopeful view of life: 'To him who overcomes, I will give the right to eat from the tree of life, which is in the paradise of God' (Rev. 2:7). So said the 'the First and the Last'. Dressed in a robe, with hair as white as wool, eyes blazing like fire, and a double-edged sword in his mouth, he spoke in a vision to the apostle of love. To those (who overcome) within the seven churches, and to all those that emerge as believers as a result of their witness, he promised the right to eat from the tree of life. He also promised that the world as a whole would be touched by the grace of God, for 'the leaves of the tree are for the healing of nations' (Rev. 22:2).

So let us not despair. The human assignment is not to renounce the world in order to avoid suffering, but to accept suffering, as needed, in order to redeem the world. To overcome is to restore the image of God to its fullest potential, using freedom wisely. To overcome is to restore every facet of God's world to its intended state, free of every form of alienation, not least in the arenas of work and marriage. For God blesses still. Amen.

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Books Reviewed

Book Reviews

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Beyond Fragmentation: Integrating Mission and Theological Education

Bernard Ott.

Regnum Studies in Mission.
Oxford, UK: Regnum Books International, 2001.
ISBN: 1-870345-14-2.
Paper xvii + 316 pp + 66 pp appendices.

Reviewed by Robert Ferris, Columbia International University, Columbia SC, USA.

In *Beyond Fragmentation*, Bernard Ott sets out 'to synthesise the global and ecumenical paradigm shifts in mission theology, as well as theological education and apply these to evangelical theological colleges and seminaries in Germany and German-speaking Switzerland' (p. 7). As Academic Dean of Theologisches Seminar Bienenberg, one of thirty-six evangelical Bible schools in Germany and Switzerland which make up the Konferenz bibeltreuer Ausbildungsstätten (KBA), he is well positioned to do so.

Technical flaws in publication of the book's extensive index (16 double-column pages) are regrettable. Page numbers provided in the index are off by up to six after the first fifty pages. This is a pity, since accurate referencing would make the book more usable. Furthermore, the survey reported in Ott's research was done in 1994-95, despite the book's 2001 publication date.

Ott finds the roots of the KBA schools 'in the context of pietism, neo-pietism, and evangelicalism, or those strands of Christianity in which the Bible, personal spirituality and missionary zeal were kept alive' (291). In recent decades, however, the schools have also been shaped by contact with North American missionar-