

CREATION, SIN, WISDOM:
INTERPRETING GENESIS 1- 3 IN ITS ANCIENT NEAR
EASTERN CONTEXT

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***Abstract:** The paper studies Gen 2-3 as one large narrative unit consisting of the second creation narrative (Gen 2:4b-25) and the account of the fall (Gen 3) to answer two questions: Who are human beings? Why is evil present in the world? An attentive reading of Gen 2-3 in the light of the Exodus event reveals that a human being is a free and responsible creature of God, who does not know how to deal with his/her freedom and responsibility. Though humans refused God's offer of salvation and crossed the limits of their createdness, and consequently were punished, they have also experienced the forgiveness of God. Therefore, while Gen 2 represents God's creative action and his plan for humankind, Gen 3 epitomises human failure to welcome God's gift, which God punishes, offering at the same time his mercy and forgiveness.*

Key Words: Ancient Near East; Creation, Freedom, Genesis, Interpretation, Sin, Wisdom.

Introduction

The second creation narrative (Gen 2:4b-25 — henceforth, for simplicity, Gen 2), and the account of the fall (Gen 3) form one large literary unity at the heart of which we find a very specific problem: Who is a human being? Who are we? Why is evil present in the world? Gen 2—3 aims to answer these questions. First, it reminds us that a human being is a creature of God, called to live in communion with him and with the non-human creation. Communion is represented in the story by the gift of the garden of Eden (2:4b-17), where a human being also experiences communion with the opposite sex (2:18-25). The human being is a free and responsible creature, who nevertheless, as Gen. 3 shows us, does not know how to deal with his/her freedom and responsibility.

The narrator answers the questions from which this well-known narrative originates by drawing first on Israel's experience of the Exodus from Egypt. In the Exodus, the Lord intervenes on Israel's behalf to

deliver the chosen people from Pharaoh's oppression (Exod. 1-15). Having arrived at Mount Sinai (Exod. 19-24), the people of Israel establish a covenant relationship with God (cf. Exod. 24:1-11), committing themselves to be faithful to the 'ten words' and to the Law that God has given them (cf. Exod. 20:1-17). But soon after, as was the case in the wilderness journey (Exod. 16—18), Israel abandons the Lord to build a 'golden calf' (Exod. 32); consequently, the people experience at the same time, God's chastisement and forgiveness (Exod. 33—34) and later finds His presence within the sanctuary (Exod. 35—40).

Gen. 2—3 explains why these patterns that Israel discovers in its history, namely, the gift of God, the consequent sin of those who reject that gift, punishment and forgiveness have always been present in human history. Indeed, since the origins of the world, God has offered humans salvation; he created and placed them in an ideal situation (the Garden of Eden; cf. Gen. 2); but they have refused God's gifts, crossed the limit of their createdness and thus experienced punishment, the loss of life; but at the same time, they have also experienced the forgiveness of Lord. In this way, Gen 2:4b-25 represents the positive part of the story, God's creative action and his plan on behalf of humankind - Eden; Gen. 3 epitomises the negative part, that is, human failure to respond and, consequently, God's action that punishes and at the same time offers his mercy. At the very moment when humans experience the reality of their sinfulness, God demonstrates his love and grace.

To read these two chapters together is, therefore, not to seek 'historical' justifications for the evil present in the world in 'something' that 'someone' would have committed at the origins of humanity. Instead, understanding Gen. 2—3 as a unified text means learning to understand who humans really are and thus *who we are*, to read our history in the light of God's plan, to discover the true root of our sin, to welcome the hope that comes to us from God's mercy, to understand above all that the Lord created us as free and responsible beings and asks us to carry out his plan for the world.

Freedom and responsibility are the cornerstones of the vision of man in Gen. 2—3 read in the light of covenant theology, that is, the covenant between God and Israel that appears behind the story of the Garden of Eden. We note at this point how man's freedom is nevertheless

linked in these two chapters to a reality present in the garden, to the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, to which is added the tree of life, in the middle of the garden (2:9). “Knowing good and evil,” the tree of life, the theme of “cunning” (3:1) — these are all images and themes well known to Israel's wisdom literature. For example, in Sir. 17:6 God provides humans with the “science of good and evil,” and in Prov. 3:18, wisdom is likened precisely to a “tree of life.”

The problems posed by the serpent, life, and wisdom and, by extension, the problem of evil, are the same as those posed by Israel's wisdom. We can recall in this context that the preeminent characteristic of Israelite wisdom is that it is the ‘art of living,’ a critical experience of reality. At the same time, the sages understand all human wisdom finds its limitation in God (cf. Prov. 16:1; 21:30) and that true wisdom consists ultimately in denying themselves (cf. Prov. 26:12). In this way, by exploring wisdom, humans find in it both their own richness and limit; they understand reality and their own life and, at the same time, grasp what limit it, which is then God himself.

There are, therefore, two kinds of wisdom: that of those who claim to be wise (cf. Prov. 26:12 again) and that of those who humbly stand before God (cf. Prov. 16:19; 18:12). Wisdom is thus a positive quality, a source of life, but it can turn into its opposite, into a source of death. The account of Gen. 2—3 should then be read within this typical perspective of the wisdom of Israel, a profound sapiential reflection on human life.

A first consequence of this sapiential dimension of Gen. 2—3 is the method followed by the narrator in these two chapters. The starting point is not an idea, a dogma, or an ‘original’ fact, but is rather the concrete experience of human reality read in the light of faith. This is what the narrator of Gen. 2—3 does; he does not intend to reveal to us the ‘prehistory’ of humankind, but to offer a narrative that, as it goes back to the origins, has in mind the present; it is, therefore, a typically inductive, sapiential process. This is why the narrator employs the covenant scheme mentioned at the beginning; in fact, his starting point is a reflection on Israel's situation in the present history; from there, the narrator moves back to the past of all humanity.

A second consequence of this approach is evident in the way the text deals with the question of the value of created realities: man is placed

in the garden of Eden to “cultivate it and keep it” (2:15), but in Gen. 3:17-19 the work turns into a painful toil. Man and woman are called to become “one flesh,” but soon the couple's union breaks, and the woman becomes an object crushed by the male's power while motherhood itself becomes a source of pain (Gen. 3:16). Finally, the life for which humans are destined (remember that in Gen 2 there is no prohibition concerning eating the tree of life!) becomes death. Yet the text of Gen. 3:19 is not itself a condemnation of death, but a recognition of human createdness. Death, like any other created reality, is ambiguous. This perception of the ambiguity of creation is precisely an attitude typical of the wise of Israel. Indeed, it is characteristic of wisdom to be able to recognize the relative value of creaturely realities; they are fundamentally good, but easily experienced as negative.¹

The Myth of Adapa: To Embrace Wisdom and to Lose Life

The myth of *Adapa* is an Akkadian poem that originated in the Mesopotamian environment.² Adapa is the protégé of the god *Ea*, a man to whom the deity has granted extraordinary virtues but not eternal life. Adapa is presented as the quintessential wise man, and he does not err in the face of the trial that awaits him. Brought before the gods, he is confronted with the bread and water of life offered to him by the god *Anu*. *Adapa*, following the advice of *Ea*, his patron god, who describes this food to him as a food of death, does not eat or drink of it, but in return for this refusal, while he gains wisdom, he loses immortality altogether.

The message from the *Adapa* myth is thus clear: humans must choose either wisdom or immortality. Adapa appears aware of his limitations and, in the end, accepts his mortality recognizing that death is indeed an essential element of life. Understood in this sense, the myth of Adapa represents not so much loss of immortality as newfound humanity; unlike the human characters of Gen. 3, Adapa does not

¹ On this topic, see Mark Smith, *The Genesis of Good and Evil: The Fall(out) and original Sin in the Bible* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2019).

² M. Cimosà, *L'ambiente storico-culturale delle Scritture ebraiche* (Bologna: EDB, 2000), 32; M.D. Coogan, *Reader of Ancient Near Eastern Texts: Sources for the Study of the Old Testament* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012); C.B. Hays, *Hidden Riches: A Sourcebook for the Comparative Study of the Hebrew Bible and Ancient Near East* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 2014).

succumb to the temptation to ‘be like God.’ The Mesopotamian sage thus knows very well that the attainment of divine qualities is impossible to humans: such a fact is decided by the ‘gods’ and it must be accepted. What is of great interest to us is the fact that *Adapa* loses the gift of immortality precisely by acquiring superior wisdom, and thus at the moment, he obeys *Ea's* command. In the account of Gen. 3, on the contrary, humans lose their lives because of their desire for higher wisdom and their disobedience to God. The mortal condition, for *Adapa*, is part of human life; the gods are at odds with each other (*Ea* vs. *Anu*), and true wisdom lies in accepting one's mortal condition with resignation and courage.

The myth of *Adapa*, with its close connection between wisdom and life, indirectly confirms the sapiential character of Gen. 2—3 and, at the same time, highlights its different setting. The outcome of the *Adapa* myth is ultimately tragic: man can only accept his situation of suffering, although he has obeyed the deity. In Gen. 2—3, on the contrary, human unhappiness is only related to their decisions; obedience to God is instead a guarantee of life; humans are unable, without God, to attain true wisdom.

The Polemic against a Royal Wisdom

Let us delve further into the sapiential dimension that characterises Gen. 2—3. One possible key related to the meaning of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil is the presence of a polemic against royal wisdom. In 2Sam. 14:17-20 the woman of Tekoa was sent by Joab to David so that he would grant the return home of Absalom who was banished after murdering his brother Amnon. Twice, she speaks of King David as an “angel of God” who possesses the wisdom to “know good and evil.” The king, therefore, has wisdom that consists precisely in being able to discern good and evil. For example, in 1 Kings 3:28, Solomon was able to render justice because he was imbued wisdom.

But this wisdom, the positive prerogative of kings, can all too easily turn into the king's claim to “put himself” in the place of God. Such is the case with the king of Tyre, who with all his pretended wisdom believed himself to be a god (Ezek. 28:2-4, 6, 13). Verse 13 describes the king of Tyre as if he were the first man created in Eden, who appropriated wisdom that was not his own; but the result is wholly

negative: “your wisdom had become corrupted” (Ezek. 28:17). A similar polemic against the wisdom of kings and the powerful is found in Bar. 3:16-21.

The polemic against a certain kind of court wisdom, which arrogates to itself the same rights as God, continues through the pages of Isaiah directed against the leaders of Israel: “The wisdom of his wise men shall perish, and the intelligence of his clever men shall be eclipsed” (Isa. 29:19). Jeremiah echoes it, thus, “Let not the wise man boast of his wisdom, let not the strong man boast of his strength, let not the rich man boast of his wealth” (Jer. 9:22; cf. also 8:8-9).

Now, in Gen. 3, the serpent suggests to human beings the possibility of acquiring wisdom that would make them “like God” (Gen. 3:5; cf. also v. 22). The moment they believe to have attained such wisdom, they suddenly discover that they have been excluded from the tree of life. In the light of the prophetic polemic, it is thus possible to see in Gen. 3 an indictment of the kind of ‘wisdom’ prevalent in the courts that claimed to combine wisdom and power and claimed the right to represent God on earth. Such wisdom cannot exist except as a gift from God and here lies the sense of the limit. God places on the claim of human wisdom, the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. Not even the greatest of kings, deprived of the wisdom that comes from God, can avoid finding himself ‘naked,’ with all his pretended wisdom, as happens to the man and woman in the Garden of Eden.

But this is not enough: Gen. 2—3 has a scope that transcends the concrete problems posed by the court wisdom of the time and proposes a reflection that concerns all humanity. In the light of Israel’s wisdom, we must therefore further explore the significance of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil and the prohibition related to it (Gen. 2:17).

To Know Good and Evil, to Know Wisdom

Knowing good and evil is not a matter of moral decision; rather, it is a matter of wisdom. In what sense? In the light of Israel’s wisdom, Gen. 2—3 can be read as the condemnation of the human claim to appropriate wisdom wholly independent of God. The human characters of Gen. 3 do indeed find some kind of wisdom, but the serpent, defined in 3:1 as “cunning” of all animals (in Hebrew *'arûm*), reveals

to the man and woman how they are in fact “naked” (*’arûmîm*; cf. Gen. 3:7).

The limitation imposed on man in 2:17 is thus a veritable proposition of wisdom. One is, therefore, wise only if one can accept his/her condition as a creature, that is, if he/she recognizes that God alone is responsible for the “knowledge of good and evil.” Listening to the serpent is, to some extent, a form of wisdom; however, it is a wisdom that in the moment “opens man's eyes” (Gen. 3:5), excludes him from the tree of life. But the underlying goal of biblical wisdom is precisely to find life (cf. Prov. 8:35: “he who finds me, finds life...”); to reject wisdom is, therefore, to encounter death.

The tree of life nevertheless exists, even if its access is ultimately foreclosed to humanity lest man become like God by living forever (cf. Gen. 3:22-24); yet this loss is not final. Indeed, Israel's wisdom, the “tree of life” (cf. again the text of Prov. 3:18) is proposed as the way back to being able to eat of this tree. From this point of view, Gen. 2—3 is like a paradigm and a model for every man who seeks wisdom and, with it, can find life again.

Thus, the wisdom dimension of Gen. 2—3 appears particularly important since the sages are concerned with the daily history of humanity, with the concrete existence of the individual. In contrast, Gen. 2—3 wants to present the beginning of the salvation history of all humanity (see again the use of the covenant pattern within Gen. 2—3), but it does so from a sapiential perspective. This means that attention to history is married with attention to man's ‘everydayness’ and, at the same time, to his desire to obtain a wisdom that enables him to be able to live. The moment man accepts his own limitation as a creature, contrary to the Mesopotamian *Adapa*, he discovers true wisdom and, with it, the tree of life.

The Creation of Humans in Mesopotamian Myths

Who is man? How did he appear on earth? What is the meaning of his life? In the Ancient Near East, an attempt was made to answer these fundamental questions through the language of myth. A general analysis of the myths relating to the creation of humans in the Mesopotamian setting will help us to better understand the meaning of the pages of Genesis that intend to answer these same questions and that also

attempt to do so through language borrowed from the myths of the time. We thus enter a world far removed in time, but always fascinating, for such are the questions, always relevant, that these myths so seemingly foreign to our reality intend to answer.

We will concern ourselves first with how the Mesopotamian myths describe why human beings were created; secondly, we will deal with the manner of their creation and, finally, with their destiny. Hopefully, this will throw some light on the narrative of Gen. 1—3.³

Humans Created to Serve the Gods

Among the many examples that the Mesopotamian world offers us, we choose the Akkadian poem of *Atrahasis*, whose first tablet contains a description of the creation of man. It consists of three tablets totalling 1245 lines, dedicated to the king of Babylon *Ammisaduqa* (1646-1626 BCE); *Atrahasis*, the ‘super-intelligent,’ is the name of the poem's hero, who corresponds to the biblical Noah.

The poem opens by recalling the time when “the gods were like man” and were, therefore, obliged to work. Because of this, the so-called *Igigi*, the lesser gods, are put to work; they eventually, exasperated, rebel and engage in a bitter struggle for freedom. The struggle is resolved when the god *Enki-Ea* proposes that the goddess of birth give birth to humans so that they can work for all the gods: “You are the womb, the creator of mankind: create the first man so that he may carry the basket” (vv. 194-195). The blood of a rebel god mixed with clay is to be used to create man (vv. 204-209); by nature, therefore, man turns out to be composed of material, earthly elements (clay) and

³ For an in-depth analysis, cf. B. T. Arnold and B. A. Strawn, eds., *The World around the Old Testament: The People and Places of the Ancient Near East* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2016); M.D. Coogan, *Reader of Ancient Near Eastern Texts: Sources for the Study of the Old Testament* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012); C.B. Hays, *Hidden Riches: A Sourcebook for the Comparative Study of the Hebrew Bible and Ancient Near East* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 2014); A.R. George et al., *The Babylonian Gilgamesh Epic. Introduction, Critical Edition and Cuneiform Texts*, 2 Vol. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003); Ph. Talon, ed., *The Standard Babylonian Creation Myth: Enuma Elish. Introduction, Cuneiform Text, Transliteration, and Sign List with a Translation and Glossary in French* by Philippe Talon (State Archives of Assyria Cuneiform texts 4; Helsinki: The Neo-Assyrian Text Corpus Project, 2006); D.M. Carr, *The Formation of Genesis 1–11: Biblical and Other Precursors* (Oxford – New York: Oxford University Press, 2020); Samuel G.F. Brandon, *Creation legends of the Ancient Near East* (London: Hodden & Stoughton, 1963).

divine (the blood of a slain god). The goddess of births, *Nintu*, can thus address the other gods by stating: “I have imposed your travail on man; you cried out for humanity; I have removed the yoke; I have restored freedom” (vv. 240-242).

Humans, too, would soon rebel against the hard labour imposed on them by the gods and, therefore, they would punish them. Thus, here comes the universal flood.

The tradition of humans being created to serve the gods and work for them is common in the Mesopotamian world and is also found in other poems. A Mesopotamian text known as “incantation for the establishment of a god's house” states that “to make the gods dwell in the dwelling that gratifies the heart he (i.e., Marduk, the god of Babylon) formed mankind.” In other words, to make the gods happy, to provide them with a temple and food, to provide them with offerings, there is a need for humans to work for them. Therefore, the freedom of the gods coincides with human enslavement; they are created so that finally the gods can rest: “that the travail of the gods would become the travail of humankind,” as another text of the time states.

How are Humans Created?

The manner of man's creation differs within the various creation myths. In the poem of *Atrahasis* we have already seen how man is created by kneading the blood of a rebel god with clay. In other texts, however, only the blood of a god appears, or only the clay. The latter mode is the case with the creation of *Enkidu*, the warrior, who will be the companion of the most famous Mesopotamian hero *Gilgamesh*. In contrast, the blood of the rebel god without the clay appears in the Akkadian poem called *Enuma Elish*. Here *Marduk* states, at the moment he decides to create *lullu*, man:

I want to coagulate blood ...

I want to erect *lullu* and for his name to be 'man.'

I want to form *lullu*-man, let them be charged with the work of the gods and to them give rest... (Table VI, 5-8).

Also present in Mesopotamian myths is a tradition that man comes from the earth, sprouting like a plant. In the so-called “hoe poem,” a

very ancient text dating perhaps to the 20th century BCE, men “cleave the earth” by coming out of it just as if they were sprouts. This is a typically Sumerian tradition that perhaps has at its basis the idea of the sexual union of two gods.

Human Destiny

What was the status of ‘primitive’ man? Another very ancient text, the ‘Dispute between the Sheep and the Wheat,’ from a Sumerian setting, reminds us that “humans of that time did not know how to eat bread, they did not know how to cover themselves with clothes; they went with bare limbs, they ate grass with their mouths like the small cattle...”; that is, they were like animals. It would be the gods who would make them civilized by teaching them husbandry. But more interesting is to reflect on man’s destiny according to the Mesopotamian myths: How did the man of ancient Mesopotamia conceive of himself and thus what vision did he have of all humanity and the meaning of life? The basic idea is found expressed again in the poem of *Gilgamesh* where the hero who is desperately seeking life is answered by the goddess *Siduri* thus:

Gilgamesh, where are you going?
You will not find the life you seek:
When the gods formed mankind,
death they attributed to humanity,
life they held in their hands.⁴

That is, humans are born to die, and life is a privilege only of the gods. This is an idea found in several Mesopotamian myths. What, then, is left for him/her? Only to follow the advice that the goddess *Siduri* offers to *Gilgamesh*: *carpe diem!* Enjoy those few moments of pleasure that are granted to you before death comes:

You, *Ghilgamesh*, satiate your stomach,
day and night continually experience a pleasure.
Celebrate every day;
wear sumptuous garments;
wash yourself, take a bath.
Enjoy the little one who grasps your hand.

⁴ *Gilgamesh*, Tav. X, col. III.

Your wife feels pleasure from you.
This is the task of humanity!

Genesis and Creation Myths

From this quick survey of texts, it is clear that the Genesis accounts, both Gen. 1 and Gen. 2—3, describe the creation of humans by making use of images common to the cultural and religious milieu of the time. For example, the man created from the dust of the ground in Gen. 2:6-7 recalls the creation of man from clay in Mesopotamian myths. But the very comparison with these myths reveals profound differences in the Genesis texts, even in the use of a common language.

Biblical man is certainly created out of the dust of the ground (not, however, out of clay, which is a typical material of the Mesopotamian plains). But the dust is not mixed with the blood of some god, least of all a rebellious god; it is animated by the “breath of life” that comes from the Lord (Gen. 2:7). Man is, in some sense, a mixture of the earthly and the divine, but it is precisely that breath of life coming from the Lord that makes him capable of standing before God as a free and responsible being, the “image and likeness” of God, in the language of Gen. 1:26. The personal, direct relationship that is immediately established between the Creator and the creature is perhaps the aspect on which we can grasp the difference between the biblical account and the Mesopotamian creation myths.

Humans are thus created free, not as slaves to deities, not destined for painful labour that is only for the benefit of the gods who created them. The garden of Eden is a gift that the Lord God gives to man after creating him (Gen. 2:8), and work (Gen. 2:15) is therefore not a condemnation but a true calling. In Gen. 2:16-17, before forbidding humans to eat of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, the Lord God allow them to eat of all the other trees in the garden (thus including the tree of life). God puts them into a great space of freedom. Therefore, before prohibition, there is permission; before law, there is freedom. Humankind, therefore, is not condemned to slavery from his creation. If humans will be punished by God, as we see in the flood narrative (cf. Genesis 6-9), this happens not because of a ‘caprice’ of the deity, but because of the choice of humans who claimed to put themselves in God’s place.

The differences between the Genesis narrative and the Mesopotamian myths touch on yet two other details of the text. In Gen 4:17-20 we find the beginning of human civilization; the various activities of man (farming, metallurgy...) are not the result of divine initiatives as in the myths of the Ancient Near East, but a discovery made by the first humans. In fact, they had within themselves the ability to learn what was needed for their own life.

A final observation: in no Mesopotamian myth is the creation of woman recounted; the existence of the sexes is a fact that is not reflected upon and is taken almost for granted. In the poem of *Gilgamesh*, the first man, *Enkidu*, is almost an animal. It would be by seeing a courtesan, a prostitute, that sexuality will awaken him and he will become fully a man:

...when he makes the herd drink at the trough,
she shall take off her garments and show her graces;
as soon as he sees her, he will approach her;
stranger will then become to him the herd.....

It has sometimes been thought that the biblical account of the creation of woman (Gen. 2:18-25), with its strange story of the rib and the one woman created after the man, was not just one of the signs of the cultural inferiority of women in Israel. In fact, the Genesis text, contrary to the Mesopotamian myths, offers woman a space that is truly out of the ordinary and considers the human couple not as a given, but as the fruit of a precise plan of God; sexuality, in this way, is not a way of becoming men, but is another of the gifts offered by the Creator to his creature to be lived with joy in being “one flesh” (Gen. 2:24).

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