

## THE TREE OF KNOWLEDGE

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Traditionally, the story that opens chapter three of Genesis is called *The Fall*. David Daube, who was the greatest authority on ancient law in his generation, and a biblical scholar of exceptional brilliance, said that it should be called *The Rise*. I shall explain why shortly, but first let me remind you of the orthodox interpretation of the story.

In the Christian tradition, both the name *The Fall* and the interpretation of the story associated with it were made canonical by Augustine's commentary in *The City of God*, which he wrote in the first decades of the fifth century AD, about fourteen hundred years after Genesis was written down. Augustine's interpretation, although not the name of the story, derives essentially from Paul (*Romans*, 5.12–21). It is as follows.

Before they ate the knowledge-giving fruit, Adam and Eve were, we are told in the last verse of chapter two, 'naked and not ashamed'. (According to Augustine, their nakedness was not shameful because 'not yet did lust move those members [i.e. their genitals] without the will's consent'. (*City of God*, 14.17))

The devil, a fallen angel, envious of man's innocent and unfallen state, chose the serpent to 'insinuate his persuasive guile into the mind of man' because 'being slippery, and moving in tortuous windings, it was suitable for his purpose'. (14.11) The serpent, Augustine says, 'first tried his deceit upon the woman, making his assault upon the weaker part of that human alliance', (14.11) and judging that the man might be more susceptible to persuasion by the woman than by himself.

God had told Adam he would die if he ate the fruit, but Eve was persuaded by the serpent that the threat was

empty, and that if she ate the fruit she would herself become like a god. Adam was not persuaded, but he yielded to Eve, 'the husband to the wife, the one human being to the only other human being.' (14.11) So Eve was deceived, whereas Adam, Augustine says, 'sinned with his eyes open.' 'Although they were not both deceived by credulity, yet both were entangled in the snares of the devil and taken by sin.' (14.11)

What sin did Adam and Eve commit? It was the sin of pride. 'The evil act had never been done' Augustine says, 'had not an evil will preceded it. And what is the origin of our evil will but pride? And what is pride but the craving for undue exaltation.' (14.13) The immediate result of their sin was that their eyes were opened, they saw that they were naked, they were ashamed, and they covered the shameful parts of their bodies with fig-leaves.

Augustine acknowledges that it may not be immediately obvious to everyone who hears the story that Adam and Eve committed an act of 'great wickedness' (14.12). But he insists that we should not think that the sin was a small and light one, because it was committed about food. On the contrary, 'obedience is the mother and guardian of all the virtues', and preferring to fulfil one's own will, instead of the Creator's, 'is destruction'. (14.12)

Adam and Eve, Augustine says, 'despised the authority of God'; and God's punishment was that man would henceforth live 'in a hard and miserable bondage [since he had chosen obedience to his own will rather than to God's], doomed in spite of himself to die in body as he had willingly become dead in spirit, condemned even to eternal death (had not the grace of God delivered him) because he had forsaken eternal life.' (14.15)

This is how Augustine summarizes his interpretation of the story: '[Adam and Eve] committed so great a sin, that by it human nature was altered for the worse, and was transmitted also to their posterity, liable to sin and subject to death.' (14.1) This is the orthodox interpretation of the story in the Christian tradition, and the canonical interpretation in

the Roman Catholic church. The interpretation in the Jewish tradition has been similar since the rabbinical period – in other words, for the last two thousand years.

Now here is David Daube's comment on the story. It comes from the book, originally a lecture series, *Civil Disobedience in Antiquity* – Adam and Eve being, as he puts it, 'probably [among] the earliest heroes of civil disobedience' (60), the earliest ancestors of Mahatma Ghandi and Martin Luther King, not just genetically but ideologically as well.

In the Greek myth, as Zeus, the highest of the gods, is intent on withholding from man the basic material for civilization, namely fire, Prometheus, a being half-way between the Olympian rulers and the earth-dwellers, steals the forbidden object from heaven and brings it to man. Zeus cannot undo what has been done; he can only inflict dire punishment on the two conspirators, Prometheus and man. The myth reflects an archaic phase in theology when man looks on the gods as opposed to him. Nor can one be surprised that there should have been such a phase seeing that, before the advent of even primitive technology, it must have been very natural for man to feel himself in the midst of a largely inimical set-up. Any gains were to be attained in defiance of the dominant forces around him.

In the Bible, one of the chapters representing this stage is the so-called story of the Fall. It ought to be entitled the story of the Rise. It is only if we read it through late Jewish rabbinical and Christian spectacles that it is about a fall. It is indeed astonishing that the true meaning should have been successfully suppressed so long ... Stripped of subsequent interpretation, the narrative reports that Adam and Eve were in a garden, living crudely and mindlessly like the animals surrounding them. 'They were naked and not ashamed' – this, from the wisdom narrator's

point of view, was not a blissful Rousseauesque state but a horrible primitivity. However, there was a tree in the garden with knowledge-giving fruit. Only God forbade the couple to eat of it, and he made sure his prohibition would be heeded by threatening them with immediate death if they disobeyed: 'On the day that you eat thereof, you shall assuredly die.' A being half-way between God and man, the serpent, informs them that this threat is empty: the fruit is not death-bringing, not fatal, on the contrary it will open their eyes and make them discerning. So they do eat of it, and indeed God turns out to have been lying. They do not die, and their eyes are opened exactly as the serpent, the Prometheus of the Biblical story, told them. They become discriminating between good and evil, aware of their nakedness – capable of shame. Just like Zeus, God inflicts fearful retribution on the rebellious serpent and couple, but like Zeus, he must put up with the start of human civilization. (*Civil Disobedience in Antiquity*, 60–61)

Perhaps Daube's suggestion that the story should be called *The Rise* is an exaggeration. The Hebrew word for fall (*nepilah*) does not occur in the story itself, or in any of the references to it in the Hebrew scriptures. And the story does not seem to describe a change for the worse in human nature. But it does describe a change for the worse in the circumstances in which human beings live, and it explains the most difficult and painful aspects of human life, as well as the origin of civilization. Nevertheless, Daube's interpretation of the story is essentially correct.

First, as Daube says, nakedness was certainly considered shameful by the author of the story, and the community in which it was originally told and written down. It is extraordinary that commentators continue to miss this point. For example, the *Cambridge New Bible Commentary* on Genesis, published in 2008, says: 'Genesis 2 ends in a brief notation about the innocence of the first human

couple. Although they were “naked” there was no shame in it.’ (*Genesis: New Cambridge Bible Commentary*, 61.) But this is not what the verse says. It says, ‘And they were both naked, the man and his wife, and not ashamed’, which is of course quite different.

Second, there is no mention in the story of the devil. Satan appears in Jewish writings in the post-exilic period, about four centuries after Genesis was composed; and there, in the *Book of Job* for example, he is clearly subordinate to God and unable to act without his permission. Satan emerges as an independent personality, and as the personification of evil, in the first century AD, and the earliest extant statement in Jewish writings that he was responsible for the Fall is by Rabbi Eliezer, at the end of the first or the beginning of the second century.

Third, as for the serpent himself, Augustine seems to have believed that what mattered about him is that he is slippery and moves in tortuous windings. In the text he is described as ‘*arum*’, which means, crafty, shrewd or cunning. This does not imply ‘*wicked*’ or ‘*evil*’, any more than the Greek word *polymetis*, also meaning crafty, which Homer uses as Odysseus’s epithet. What is clear is that the serpent knows that the humans will not die upon eating the forbidden fruit, but will become ‘like Gods, knowing good and evil’ (3.5), as God himself acknowledges they have done: “Behold, the man is become as one of us, to know good and evil”.’ (3.22)

Fourth, the orthodox interpretation of the story ignores God’s lie. God says to Adam: ‘of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, thou shalt not eat of it: for in the day that thou eatest thereof thou shalt surely die.’ (2.17) The serpent says: ‘Ye shall not surely die.’ (3.4) And this is true. Ever since Paul, the orthodox interpretation has finessed this point by reading ‘die’ as ‘become mortal’ or ‘become susceptible to eternal death’. But this is unconvincing. ‘Die’ is not used to mean these things anywhere else in the Hebrew scriptures. And besides, the creation story does not imply that Adam and Eve were immortal until God punished them for eating the fruit. On the contrary, God expels

Adam from the Garden of Eden to ensure that he will not *become* immortal, by eating from the tree of life. (3.22–3)

Fifth, it cannot have been wicked or sinful on the part of Adam and Eve to eat the fruit of the tree of knowledge, because when they ate the fruit they did not yet know the difference between good and evil. It is true that they knew they were disobeying God. The story implies that this is something one can know without yet understanding evil, wickedness or sin. And no doubt this is correct. But disobedience in a state of moral innocence or ignorance, even deliberate disobedience – for example, by young children – is not evil, wicked or sinful, regardless of whom one disobeys.

Sixth, knowledge in general, and knowledge of good and evil in particular, are good for human beings. This has always been acknowledged as the greatest obstacle to regarding God's commandment not to eat the fruit as just. This point is too obvious to need detailed exposition, and besides it is set out in John Milton's poem *Paradise Lost* in compelling terms, when the serpent advocates disobedience to Eve with consummate forensic skill. (*Paradise Lost*, book 9, lines 678ff.)

For all of these reasons, Daube's interpretation of the story must be essentially correct. It is not a story of human sin and just punishment by a just God; it is a story of a deceitful god who is jealous of human progress and visits the most terrible retribution on the man and woman who take the first perilous and defiant step towards civilized human life.

Daube comments that although the story pits man against God, it is presumably modelled to some extent on precedents involving struggles of man against man, and indicates an acquaintance with 'a milieu where a potentate can only with difficulty be got to concede a minimum of independent life to his subjects'. He adds: 'There may be a reminiscence, too, of a helpful role of persons who, while connected with the ruler, side with the oppressed – and pay the price.' (62)

This is plausible, but of course it is speculative. What is certain is that the story is the earliest affirmation in our

culture of the value of knowledge for human beings, and its indispensable place in human life. I am not saying that this is all the story is about; but it appears to be its main significance, what it was principally meant to teach.

Six centuries after *Genesis* was written down, Plato presented a puzzle about the value of knowledge in his dialogue *Meno*:

*Socrates*: If a man knew the way to Larissa, or any other place you please, and walked there and led others, would he not be a good guide?

*Meno*: Certainly.

*Socrates*: And a person who had the right opinion as to which was the way, but had never been there and did not really know, might also be a good guide, might he not?

*Meno*: Certainly.

*Socrates*: And presumably as long as he has the right opinion, he will be just as good a guide as the one who knows – if he believes the truth instead of knowing it.

*Meno*: Just as good.

*Socrates*: Hence true opinion is as good a guide to acting the right way as knowledge is ... (*Meno*, 97a–c)

This is the puzzle. Knowing is not the same as happening to having the right opinion. For example, no one can know now which team will win the next World Cup. But all over the world there are people who fervently believe that their team is going to win, and some of them will turn out to be right. That is what Plato meant by having the right opinion. But once we have drawn the distinction between really knowing and merely having the right opinion, it becomes much harder to explain why we prize knowledge as highly as we do. Knowledge and right opinion seem to be equally valuable as guides to action, because the one who knows the truth and the one who merely has the right opinion will offer the same advice. So why does it matter what we know?

Plato was not a sceptic about the value of knowledge. He did not doubt that it is the guide we really need, when we are deciding what to think or what to do. But he saw that once knowing is distinguished from merely having right opinion, it becomes difficult to say why. In the *Meno*, he offers a solution to this puzzle, and philosophers still disagree about whether it works. But that's another story.

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In one of Blake's watercolour illustrations to *Paradise Lost*, Satan points out Adam and Eve to the Serpent, coiled around his body, and instructs him in his fateful task. William Blake, *Satan Watching the Caresses of Adam and Eve* (Illustration to *Paradise Lost*), 1808. Pen and watercolor on paper. Museum of Fine Arts, Boston.

### References

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