One of the most careful biblical scholars Mormonism has produced takes a microscopic look at the Garden of Eden story and concludes that it is not interested in how death and sexuality came into the world but in how humans came to be distinct from animals and, intellectually, more like the gods.

SEX AND DEATH IN THE GARDEN OF EDEN

By David P. Wright

It is a striking fact that, other than telling the tale in Genesis 2–3, the Hebrew Bible itself does not pay much attention to the Garden of Eden story. Only in later (post–Hebrew-biblical) Jewish and Christian traditions do we find exploration of its meaning. This interpretive activity includes Mormon scriptural explanations and retellings of the story in the Book of Mormon, the Book of Moses, the Book of Abraham, and the Doctrine and Covenants. Despite the variety of directions in which the Jewish, Christian, and Mormon interpretive works go, they all address questions generated by the story found in the Hebrew Bible or its translations. This is the most original form of the story available. It is therefore necessary to carefully examine it by itself, to see what questions it raises, and to search its context for answers.

One of the questions that arises from the story—and one that readers in the religious traditions mentioned above found important—is whether the man and woman are liable to death and are sexually functional and potentially reproductive in the garden before eating the fruit. The answer to this question is crucial since it bears on the theological essence of the story. For if the man and woman are mortal and are sexually functional or reproductive only after transgression, then eating the fruit marks a descent in the state of the human condition, a “fall” as it has been termed. But if the couple is liable to death and is sexually functional before eating the fruit, then their physical status does not significantly change—they suffer an “environmental” change by being expelled from the garden and the direct presence of Yahweh, and they now have to deal with thorns and thistles, but the only physical change is the pain of childbirth for the woman. Indeed, the intellectual faculty they acquire—knowledge comparable to that of the gods—mitigates the punishments they receive. In this second case, it may be better to think of the story as one of ascent rather than descent: the humans distinguish themselves from the animal world and draw nigh to godhood.

To be sure, it is not easy to determine from the text whether, before eating the fruit, the couple is sexually capable and active and whether death is possible in the garden. The story gives clues in both directions, and some scholars who have read the story critically have concluded that the pair is not sexually active and that death is avoidable before ingesting the fruit. After having agreed with this position and having advocated it in public scholarly debate, I now believe the stronger argument is that the man and woman are sexually active and are susceptible to death before eating of the fruit. Since the issues of sexuality and death are intertwined with one another, the argument below will move back and forth between them as logic requires.

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A PIECE of evidence that could support the idea that sexuality does not begin until the pair eat the fruit is that the woman is named hawwa (Eve)—which is intended to mean something like “Life” in the present context as the gloss em kol-hay “mother of all that lives” indicates—only at the end of the story (Gen. 3:20) but not at 2:23 where, just after being created, she is called simply isha “woman.” Why would the name that reflects sexual fecundity be reserved for after the consumption of the fruit if the woman is sexually capable at the beginning of her creation? The solution is found in how the death penalty of 2:17 is played out—or not played out.

As several scholars have noted, the penalty in Genesis 2:17 is formulated in a way so as to suggest that its execution would be swift. This implication is potent enough to make one think that Yahweh decides not to carry out the penalty but simply let the couple die a natural and eventual death. Support for this judgment is found in the lack of any death penalty in the explicit punishments of 3:14–19. The passing reference to returning to the ground in 3:19 hardly qualifies as a statement of punishment.

If Yahweh does not execute the penalty of 2:17, how does the threat function in the context? Is it not then superfluous? No. The story can be understood as displaying a tension between the deity’s need to sustain creation and his need to vent his punishing anger. If he were to execute the penalty, creation would effectively come to naught. Humans, the center of the deity’s creation, would vanish from the scene. As opposed to the Flood where a favored individual is able to continue the race (Gen. 6:8, 9; 7:1), or rebellions in the wilderness where Moses’ posterity might replace the Israelites (Exod. 32:9–10; Num. 14:11–25; Deut. 9:13–14; cf. Ezek. 20:13–17), here at the beginning of creation, there is no one else to carry on the line. Hence, Yahweh relents and institutes alternative punishments (Gen. 3:14–19) that allow humanity to continue.

Naming the woman “Eve the mother of all that lives” late in the story is to be explained in connection with Yahweh’s repentance. Despite the fact that punishment has been exacted, the man here celebrates the chance and blessing of continued existence by naming his wife Eve. Hence, it is not that sexual activity begins here; it is rather that the pair’s lives have been spared, and they are allowed to raise up posterity. Eve thus becomes “the mother of all that lives.” This interpretation, by the way, suggests that though the man and woman are sexually capable from the beginning, they have not yet had children, otherwise their children, like those of Noah or Moses, might have continued the human line.

The above explanation shows that the death penalty in Genesis 2:17 cannot be used to argue that the man and woman are immortal or can otherwise avoid death. It might be thought this verse means that the man and woman will live indefinitely until they eat the fruit of the Tree of Knowledge. But the threat of death can be explained otherwise, as just shown. Thus this, the main proof for the pair’s immortality, dissolves.
THE EFFECT OF THE TREES
What divine prerogatives are conferred?

That the man and woman are sexually able and active from the beginning helps explain more clearly the effect of the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil. It has always been difficult to see how eating the fruit, if it involves sexual activation, can lead to “becoming like the gods” (Gen. 3:5, 22), who are presumably nonsexual or not distinctively sexual over against animal creation. But if the fruit does not initiate sexual ability and activity, this difficulty does not arise. The man and woman acquire only god-like intelligence, rationality, and discernment (Gen. 3:5, 22).12

The challenge to a divine prerogative through eating the fruit of the Tree of Knowledge, when pruned of its sexual connotations, stands in neat parallelism to another arboreal challenge to the divine: eating of the Tree of Life. If the couple eats the fruit of the knowledge tree, they gain divine knowledge; if

GENESIS 2
The New Jewish Publication Society (JPS) Translation

2 The heaven and the earth were finished, and all their array. On the seventh day God finished the work that He had been doing, and He ceased on the seventh day from all the work that He had done. And God blessed the seventh day and declared it holy, because on it God ceased from all the work of creation that He had done. Such is the story of heaven and earth when they were created.

When the LORD God made earth and heaven—when no shrub of the field was yet on earth and no grasses of the field had yet sprouted, because the LORD God had not sent rain upon the earth and there was no man to till the soil, but a flow would well up from the ground and water the whole surface of the earth—the LORD God formed man from the dust of the earth. He blew into his nostrils the breath of life, and man became a living being.

The LORD God planted a garden in Eden, in the east, and placed there the man whom He had formed. And from the ground the LORD God caused to grow every tree that was pleasing to the sight and good for food, with the tree of knowledge of good and bad.

A river issues from Eden to water the garden, and it then divides and becomes four branches. The name of the first is Pishon, the one that winds through the whole land of Havilah, where the gold is. The gold of that land is good; bdellium is there, and lapis lazuli. The name of the second river is Gihon, the one that winds through the whole land of Cush. The name of the third river is Tigris, the one that flows east of Asshur. And the fourth river is the Euphrates.

The LORD God took the man and placed him in the garden of Eden, to till it and tend it. And the LORD God commanded the man, saying, "Of every tree of the garden you are free to eat; but as for the tree of knowledge of good and bad, you must not eat of it; for as soon as you eat of it, you shall die."

The LORD God said, "It is not good for man to be alone; I will make a fitting helper for him." And the LORD God formed out of the earth all the wild beasts and all the birds of the sky, and brought them to the man to see what he would call them; and whatever the man called each living creature, that would be its name. And the man gave names to all the cattle and to the birds of the sky and to all the wild beasts; but for Adam no fitting helper was found.

So the LORD God cast a deep sleep upon the man; and, while he slept, He took one of his ribs and closed up the flesh at that spot. And the LORD God fashioned the rib that He had taken from the man into a woman; and He brought her to the man. Then the man said,

"This one at last
Is bone of my bones
And flesh of my flesh.
This one shall be called Woman,
For from man was she taken."

Hence a man leaves his father and mother and clings to his wife, so that they become one flesh.
they eat of the life tree, they gain divine life. As the latter offers only a single capacity, i.e., eternal life, it makes sense that the former offers only a single capacity, i.e., discernment. The lack of a prohibition about eating the Tree of Life has been used to argue that the couple can eat of this tree before eating of the Tree of Knowledge in order to stave off death. Thus they are effectively immortal, it is said, until they eat of the explicitly banned fruit. This assumption is questionable. The story reflects Yahweh's jealousy about the unique attributes of divine beings. The people are not to acquire divine knowledge, and when they do, he expressly forbids consuming fruit from the Tree of Life. He does not want people to be like the gods. Yahweh displays a similar spirit in the Tower of Babel tale (Gen. 11:1-9), a story from the same tradition as the garden story. From this evidence, it seems more likely that the couple is expected not to eat of the Tree of Life as well. Perhaps this prohibition is not stated earlier on because the story is an imperfect elaboration of a simpler story that originally had only the Tree of Knowledge in its narrative. Or perhaps the story intends us to understand that the couple does not know the significance of the Tree of Life until they eat of the Tree of Knowledge. Note in Genesis 3:22 how the acquisition of knowledge is made the basis for preventing the couple from eating of the Tree of Life.

In any case, though the story lacks an explicit prohibition about eating from the Tree of Life, the man and woman appear to have avoided it. The wording of Genesis 3:22 (note particularly the adverb gam, "also") indicates that by this time, the couple has not eaten of this tree. And there is certainly no requirement that they eat of it. Thus, even if they can eat of this tree, they do not and thus do not have an immortal status in the garden. By all appearances, they can die there naturally.

**NAKEDNESS AND SEXUAL METAPHOR**

The literalness of eating the fruit.

Two related bits of data that initially appear to prove that the man and woman are not sexually active in the garden are (1) that immediately after they eat, they recognize their nakedness (Gen. 3:7) and (2) that immediately after the man confesses his nakedness, Yahweh asks if he has eaten of the Tree of Knowledge (Gen. 3:8-11). Eating the fruit seems causally connected with sexual cognition. Why does Yahweh react in this way if the eating has nothing to do with sex? The solution lies in understanding the larger etiological orientation of the story. One of the story's goals is to explain the difference between humans and animals, specifically in regard to humans' superior intelligence. How did humans come to be so notably set apart from the rest of the animals? This happened, as discussed above, by their ingesting food that gave them intellectual abilities akin to those of the gods. Gaining this power of discernment, according to the story, led immediately to the establishment of the chief visible difference between humans and animals: clothing. Thus, the focus on nakedness does not reflect a concern about sexuality, but rather why humans, as opposed to animals, wear clothes. Note that the story mentions making clothes not just once but twice (Gen. 3:21). The statement that before eating the fruit, the man and woman were naked and not embarrassed (2:25) stresses the affinity and proximity of humans to the animals at that point in the story. Sometimes it is argued that eating the fruit of the Tree of Knowledge is to be understood metaphorically, a structural metaphor, to use Lakoff's and Johnson's terminology, where "Sex is Eating." This metaphor is alive not only in modern poetry and colloquial speech but also in ancient Near Eastern and biblical texts. For example, in Proverbs, an adulteress "eats and wipes off her mouth, and then says, "I have done nothing wrong" (Prov. 30:20). More positively in Song of Songs, the woman's "shoots[?] are a paradise of pomegranates, with choice fruit," and she invites her beloved to "come to his [my?] garden and eat its choice fruit" (Song. 4:13, 16). The woman's "valley[pudenda] is like a round bowl which does not lack mixed wine" and her "belly is a heap of wheat, surrounded with lilies" (7:2).

Despite the broad attestation of this metaphor, it is doubtful that the fruit eating in our story stands for sexual activity. First, the eating and the fruit in the story are conceived of as real, not simply as metaphors. The tree is planted (Gen. 2:9), and it exists among other trees (2:16-17; 3:1-5). Second, eating is something that the man and certainly the woman do independently of each other (cf. 3:6). Third, eating the fruit of the Tree of Knowledge is not the only instance of fruit eating in the story; the people may eat all the trees in the garden save one (2:16-17; 3:2-3), and if they only had the chance, they might partake of the
The two of them were naked, the man and his wife, yet they felt no shame. Now the serpent was the shrewdest of all the wild beasts that the LORD God had made. He said to the woman, "Did God really say: You shall not eat of any tree of the garden?" The woman replied to the serpent, "We may eat of the fruit of the other trees of the garden. It is only about fruit of the tree in the middle of the garden that God said: 'You shall not eat of it or touch it, lest you die.'"

And the serpent said to the woman, "You are not going to die, but God knows that as soon as you eat of it your eyes will be opened and you will be like divine beings who know good and bad." When the woman saw that the tree was good for eating and a delight to the eyes, and that the tree was desirable as a source of wisdom, she took of its fruit and ate. She also gave some to her husband, and he ate. Then the eyes of both of them were opened and they perceived that they were naked; and they sewed together fig leaves and made themselves loincloths.

They heard the sound of the LORD God moving about in the garden at the breezy time of day; and the man and his wife hid from the LORD God among the trees of the garden. The LORD God called out to the man and said to him, "Where are you?" He replied, "I heard the sound of You in the garden, and I was afraid because I was naked, so I hid." Then He asked, "Who told you that you were naked? Did you eat of the tree from which I had forbidden you to eat?" The man said, "The woman You put at my side—she gave me of the tree, and I ate." And the LORD God said to the woman, "What is this you have done?" The woman replied, "The serpent duped me, and I ate." Then the LORD God said to the serpent,

"Because you did this, More cursed shall you be Than all cattle And all the wild beasts: On your belly shall you crawl And dirt shall you eat All the days of your life. I will put enmity Between you and the woman, And between your offspring and hers; They shall strike at your head, And you shall strike at their heel."

And to the woman He said, "I will make most severe Your pangs in childbearing; In pain shall you bear children, Yet your urge shall be for your husband, And he shall rule over you."

To Adam He said, "Because you did as your wife said and ate of the tree about which I commanded you, 'You shall not eat of it,' Cursed be the ground because of you; By toil shall you eat of it All the days of your life: Thorns and thistles shall it sprout for you. But your food shall be the grasses of the field; By the sweat of your brow Shall you get bread to eat, Until you return to the ground— For from it you were taken. For dust you are, And to dust you shall return."

The man named his wife Eve, because she was the mother of all the living. And the LORD God made garments of skins for Adam and his wife, and clothed them.

And the LORD God said, "Now that the man has become like one of us, knowing good and bad, what if he should stretch out his hand and take also from the tree of life and eat, and live forever?" So the LORD God banished him from the garden of Eden, to till the soil from which he was taken. He drove the man out, and stationed east of the garden of Eden the cherubim and the fiery ever-turning sword, to guard the way to the tree of life.
Tree of Life. Just as these other cases are not sexual metaphors, so eating from the Tree of Knowledge is not a metaphor.

Against the notion that eating the fruit is a metaphor for sexual intercourse also stands the consideration that if the first instance of sexual intercourse was sinful, then all ensuing instances should be equally sinful. This view, however, cannot be sustained on the broad evidence from the Hebrew Bible.

**THE EPIC OF GILGAMESH**

_Similarities and differences with the Genesis story._

One last piece of evidence that might demonstrate that sexual activity begins with eating the fruit is in the Mesopotamian Gilgamesh epic. The possible parallels between this story and the garden story are numerous: Enkidu, the companion of Gilgamesh, is created out of clay by deity (I ii 34); he has association with the animals until a woman (Shamhat, the harlot) appears on the scene (I ii 36-iv 5); she engages him in sex (I iv 6-21; Old Babylonian version II ii 6-8); this sets him apart from the animals (I iv 22-28); as a result of his sexual activity, he becomes “very wise” (I iv 29); he also has “become like a god” (I iv 34; cf. Old Babylonian version II ii 11); Enkidu is clothed (Old Babylonian version II ii 27-28); the woman gives him food to eat (Old Babylonian version II iii 6-16); finally, much of the rest of the Gilgamesh story deals with the question of human immortality and even sees immortality as available to Gilgamesh through ingestion of a certain plant, a chance, however, that is foiled by a snake (XI 287-288). These possible common motifs indicate that the stories are somehow related, and this similarity provides grounds for assuming that sexuality and acquisition of knowledge are connected in Genesis 2-3.

While the two stories likely share some common traditional blood (a direct dependence on the Gilgamesh story is unlikely, however), the development of the biblical story is complex as tradition-historical analysis has shown. In Genesis 2-3, multiple traditions have been conflated and creatively revised to yield a rather unique product. It is not impossible that, in the course of this development, sexuality and knowledge, perhaps once causally tied together as in the Gilgamesh story, were disconnected and given different places and functions in the story. Enlightenment became associated with eating the fruit of a tree, something not found in the Gilgamesh story.

**THE STORY'S THEOLOGY AND ANTHROPOLOGY**

_Below the gods; above the animals._

All the foregoing considerations lead decisively to the conclusion that the man and woman are sexually active in the garden, and that theoretically, they can die there of natural or accidental causes. Thus, the story is not interested in telling how death and sexuality came into the world. These are given, as they appear to be for the animals. The story’s interest rather is to tell how humans came to be distinct from animals and more like the gods in intellect. Something of a hymnic counterpart of this is found in Psalm 8:6-9:

> You (God) have made him (i.e., humans) a little less than divine beings (‘elohim),
>
> you have made him to rule over your creation;
> you have placed everything under his feet,
> all sheep and cattle,
> as well as the wild beasts,
> the birds of the sky and fish of the sea,
> that cross the paths of the sea.

The difference between this psalm and the Genesis story is that, in the former, God is the one who gives humans their near-divine position. In Genesis 2–3, the humans seize it for themselves. Human initiative, with a little help from a cunning animal—not divine blessing—is responsible for the power of intellectual and moral discrimination.

NOTES

1. Outside of Genesis 2-3, the Hebrew Bible does not make clear, developed reference to the tradition. Job 31:33 has Job rhetorically demonstrating that he had been candid about his failings: “Did I hide my sins like Adam!” But this is not developed. The closest and longest parallel is in Ezekiel 28:11–19, but this is concerned with a single individual, a male, perhaps a royal figure, who is already wise before rebellion, and who lives, along with a cherub (for the reading of v. 14, see W. Zimmerli, _Ezechel 2. Teillband_ [Neukirchener Verlag, 1969], 675), “in Eden, the garden of God,” alternatively called “the holy mountain of God.” After some sin, the man is struck down from the mountain. As can be seen, this tradition is unique and does not necessarily reflect or depend upon the story in Genesis 2–3. It seems to be a parallel story of rebellion against deity much like the so-called “Lucifer” myth in Isaiah 14:12–20. There are a few passages that mention “God’s Yahweh’s garden” or Eden (Gen. 13:10; Isa. 51:3; Ezek. 28:13; 31:8–9; 16, 18; 36:35; Joel 2:3). But these are few and do not refer to a story of transgression as in Genesis 2–3. It is only in later (post-biblical) Jewish and Christian traditions that we find extensive attention given to the Garden of Eden story and the meaning of some of its arcane features explored.

2. E.g., _Apocalypse of Moses_ 7–9 (and passim); _Life of Adam and Eve_ 1, 32–36 (and passim); _Apocalypse of Adam_ 1; _Jubilees_ 3; _Ezra_ 3:4–7; _1 Cor._ 15:21–22, 45–49; _Rom._ 5:12–21. To this should be added many of the commentaries on the story throughout Jewish and Christian tradition to the present.


4. Joseph Smith’s exegesis, for example, is based on the King James version of the Bible (see note 3).

DAYS UNFOLD

From this toy-sized pond on Plumb Road
A blue Gill struggles at my feet,
the line spittle-like trails its lip to grass.
I don’t pay attention to the familiar flop
and wheeze, instead I watch my neighbor
take his grandchildren for rides
in an old Ford tractor. He circles, does figure eights;
three small heads bob behind him.
I want to wave, maybe stick my thumb out for a ride,
then, in the bump through high grass
and whir of mosquitoes, ask him
to drive past my driveway and his, past
Grambling, keep going to where we see
only corn-fields and crows
and the slow hills of Ohio.
His wife comes to their porch, waves to them—
the afternoon sun strikes her dress, her smile
of hip, causing me to shudder with a warmth
close to embarrassment. He heads for home.
The Gill already collects the first flies. I study
the random breach of water and air when the fish jump.

After losing at love again, my father
flaked the empty barn with buckshot
where now daylight composes a litany
of shadows on the walls. The barn’s skeleton
folds a little more each season, just like the memory
of my father curling into floor dust, the puff of dirt
will get restless. Maybe after a breakfast
of hot cakes and honey they’ll run outside
where now daylight composes a litany
of shadows on the walls. The barn’s skeleton
folds a little more each season, just like the memory
of my father curling into floor dust, the puff of dirt

One could expand the parallels to include the flood story in Gilgamesh XI
and Genesis 6-8 which includes a flood story from the same tradition as Genesis
2:4-5:24.

Another supposed evidence of sexual activity is the term eden which means
“pleasure,” perhaps including the notion of sexual pleasure (cf. eden in
Gen. 1:26). See G. Anderson, “Celibacy or Consummation in the Garden?
Reflections on Early Jewish and Christian Interpretations of the Garden of Eden,”
Harvard Theological Review 82 (1989): 137-138 for evidence). This is not decisive
since the garden seems to have its designation from what humans might do there,
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