

THE ORIGINAL CHOICE: THE PROHIBITION OF THE TREE OF THE KNOWLEDGE OF GOOD AND EVIL

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***Abstract:** This paper addresses the significance of the prohibition in Genesis 2 regarding the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. Multiple explanations for the nature of the tree are offered as well as possible reasons for its exclusion from sanctioned activities in the garden of Eden. The role of the prohibition in the Creator/creature relationship is also explored, and some thoughts are offered on the repercussions of the choice made to partake of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. It becomes apparent that what is at stake in this story of beginnings is not the destiny of humanity, but the reliability and faithfulness of the Creator.*

Augustine was one of the first theologians to use the narrative in Genesis chapter three to defend the concept of original sin and to explain the entrance of evil into our world.¹ Since that time, the implications of Adam and Eve's actions have become a mainstay of theology and folklore alike. However, before any act that could be labelled as *sin* occurred in this story, the element of a definite and significant choice had to be present. In order to more clearly define what that choice was, it is important to explore the main object of temptation: the tree of the knowledge of good and evil.

It should be noted that a detailed analysis of the origins of the biblical text in question is beyond the scope of this study; I will be dealing with the first few chapters of Genesis in the form in which we find them today within their canonical context. Furthermore, the questions being

addressed here are theological ones and not ones relating to textual criticism. With that in mind, the story of beginnings² will be explored primarily as it relates to the dual description of the tree in question. In addition, an explanation will be offered regarding the nature of and reason for the prohibition as well as the underlying significance of this prohibition for the relationship between the Creator and his creation. Finally, the repercussions of the choice will be outlined and a few thoughts provided on the implications this original choice has for the concept of sin. It is my conclusion that what is at stake in this story is not the destiny of humanity, but the reliability and faithfulness of the Creator.

² Scholars today generally agree that there are two creation stories present in Genesis: the first is found in Genesis 1-2:4a and the second one in 2:4b-25. This distinction, while important, is not vital to this study and therefore will not be addressed in any depth.

¹ See Augustine's *The City of God*, Book XV, Chapter 1.

The Context of the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil

And the Lord God planted a garden in Eden, in the east; and there he put the man whom he had formed. Out of the ground the Lord God made to grow every tree that is pleasant to the sight and good for food, the tree of life also in the midst of the garden, and the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. ... The Lord God took the man and put him in the garden of Eden to till it and keep it. And the Lord God commanded the man, "You may freely eat of every tree of the garden; but of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil you shall not eat, for in the day that you eat of it you shall die (NRSV Genesis 2:8-9, 15-17).

The stage set in the second chapter of Genesis is a world created by God into which he inserts a creature formed from dust. This man is then placed in a garden called Eden where he is given vocation and freedom to eat freely from any tree except one. The consequence of defying this directive is dire: death. In order to ascertain why this particular tree was associated with such severe a punishment, it is necessary to examine the nature of this tree and what it represents.

The tree is placed within the context of a garden named Eden, which means "delight," a place associated with fertility and beauty.³ Other references to Eden point to the garden as a place where God dwells, referring to it as the "garden of God."⁴ The symbol of a sacred tree or plant is a familiar one in Biblical and comparative Ancient Near Eastern literature. The epic story of Gilgamesh, of Mesopotamian origin, tells of a plant by which the hero regains his "life's breath," but it is stolen from him by a serpent. Other stories also refer to the "plant of life" and the "food of life."⁵ The common

thread behind these texts is the concept of a tree with power to confer supernatural qualities, often immortality, when it is ingested.⁶ What is unique about these two named trees in Eden in contrast to the life-generating plants in other comparative literature is their naturalization, that is, they do not possess any inherently magical properties. As Sarna puts it, "their mysterious powers do not exist apart from the will of God."⁷ The garden then, is the realm of God where everything comes from him, is related to him, and is sustained by him. This point is imperative to an informed understanding of the tree in question.

The Meaning behind the Knowledge of Good and Evil

The Hebrew word translated "knowledge" here carries with it a sense of life experience and relationship rather than merely intellectual understanding.⁸ E. A. Speiser sees it as referring to both the mode by which knowledge is acquired as well as the resulting awareness.⁹ Partaking of the tree that symbolises this knowledge, then, would result in relational, experiential, and intellectual change.

There are several different interpretations of the phrase "the knowledge of good and evil" which can be grouped into four common schools of thought.¹⁰

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Nahum M. Sarna, *Understanding Genesis* (New York: MacGraw-Hill, 1966), 25.

⁸ Richard J. Clifford, "Genesis," *The New Jerome Biblical Commentary*, eds. Raymond E. Brown, Joseph A. Fitzmyer, Roland E. Murphy (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice Hall, 1990), 12.

⁹ E. A. Speiser, "Genesis", vol. 1, *The Anchor Yale Bible* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1964), 26.

¹⁰ These four schools of thought are a distillation of selected ideas found in Wallace; Gordon J. Wenham, Genesis 1-15, vol. 1, *Word Biblical Commentary* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson Publishers, 1987); Jeffery Howard Tigay and Bernard J. Bamberger, "Paradise," vol. 15, *Encyclopaedia Judaica*, eds. Michael Berenbaum and Fred Skolnik, 2d ed. (Detroit: Macmillan Reference USA, 2007); and my own observations on the text.

³ R.N. Whybray, "Genesis," *The Oxford Bible Commentary*, eds. John Barton and John Muddiman (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), 44.

⁴ Genesis 3:8, Ezekiel 28:13, Ezekiel 31:9.

⁵ Howard N. Wallace, "Tree of Knowledge and Tree of Life," vol. 6, *The Anchor Bible Dictionary*, ed. David Noel Freedman (New York: Doubleday, 1992), 658.

1. **Moral Discernment.** The parameters of good and evil are seen to represent moral choice. Speiser translates this knowledge as the ability to distinguish between the two.¹¹ The insight to be acquired by eating of the tree is an enlightenment which enables a person to make the correct decision when faced with both good and evil options. Some have called this legal responsibility.¹² While a cursory reading of this phrase does seem to imply a certain moral factor, the resulting dilemma of being faced with a moral choice (whether to adhere to or disregard the prohibition) before being equipped to discern between right and wrong is troublesome. This dilemma throws doubt upon the creator's forethought, responsibility, and just intention toward his creation. "Critics of this view note that the very prohibition presumes that man knows the rightness of obedience and the wrongness of disobedience, and ask how the biblical God can be conceived as wishing to withhold moral discernment from man."¹³ One cannot study the narrative without noting that a certain morality is implied to be already present in mankind by the nature of the responsibility and vocation given to him and by the permission and prohibition placed before him. Therefore, the only possible reading of this phrase as meaning moral discernment would be in the sense of expanding humanity's pre-existing basic moral knowledge through actual experience. However, the problem with this interpretation of knowledge as broader experience is that after Adam and Eve eat of the fruit, moral and legal responsibility are two qualities notably absent. They are quick to shift blame and they attempt to avoid the creator of the prohibition or law.

2. **Sexual Knowledge.** This interpretation of "the knowledge of good and evil" is linked with other references regarding the verb "to know" which refer to sexual

intimacy.¹⁴ As well, there are instances in which a similar phrase designates the young who are said not to possess this knowledge yet (Deut. 1:39) and the old who have lost it (2 Sam. 19:35).¹⁵ The sexual implications of the knowledge of good and evil within the context of the Genesis narrative are taken from observing that immediately after eating of the fruit of this tree, the man and woman become aware of their nakedness. In addition, the first act mentioned after their dismissal from the garden is sexual intimacy (Genesis 4:1).¹⁶

However, several details in the story reveal the sexual emphasis of this particular knowledge to be a weak interpretation. First, man was given the prohibition before the creation of the woman. Secondly, the sexuality of the humans seemed to be established before the serpent appeared (Genesis 2:23-25).¹⁷ Thirdly, it would be incongruous for God to deny sexual awareness and thereby procreation to mankind, especially considering the command to multiply given in Genesis 1:28. While it may be argued that the mandate to procreate belongs to a different creation account, the implications should not be entirely dismissed. In light of these indications, any inference that sexual knowledge was wrong for mankind or reserved only for God seems inconceivable.¹⁸ The interpretation of the knowledge of good and evil as implying sexual contact, though having little textual support, might be somewhat tenable if seen as part of a larger prohibition which was temporary - a delay until mankind reached some level of maturity. This is the main argument put forth in the next viewpoint.

3. **Maturity and Wisdom.** Some scholars believe Adam and Eve to have been like children in this story, innocent and

¹⁴ Genesis 4:1, 17, 25 to name but a few.

¹⁵ Tigay and Bamberger, 624.

¹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷ Wallace, 657.

¹⁸ Wallace, 657; Tigay and Bamberger, 624.

¹¹ Speiser, 12.

¹² Wallace, 659.

¹³ Tigay and Bamberger, 624.

unlearned.¹⁹ George Buchanan argues that as a result of eating from the forbidden tree, Adam and Eve had to shoulder the responsibilities and concerns common to adults.²⁰ However, it is not quite certain why God would forbid his children to obtain wisdom, for there is no mention of the prohibition being lifted at some point in the future when they were better equipped to receive this knowledge, and if this was to be the case, it certainly would have been vital to the story. In addition, wisdom is consistently touted as desirable and useful for life in other biblical texts, notably Proverbs, and described as an attribute to be highly sought after, not something to be delayed.²¹

Another aspect of the maturity interpretation is to see the knowledge of good and evil as referring to additional, though inappropriate, faculties for humans. The most compelling of the suggested unbecoming abilities is self-determination.²² However, the theory offered by Wenham that the gaining of knowledge or wisdom would lead to human autonomy which would run counter to the purpose of God has little support from other biblical texts referring to wisdom. As mentioned earlier, it would isolate this story from the continuity of scripture.²³ A resulting self-determination does offer some explanation for the reference that partaking of the fruit of this tree would render mankind similar to God in some aspect (Genesis 3:22). The obvious question then is whether any of these qualities were apparent in human beings after their choice to eat from the tree. There is little evidence to support any gain in wisdom for Adam and Eve, unless one can count the presence of guilt, shame, and fear as elements of that virtue or as

steps towards maturity. It should also be noted that self-determination was undeniably present not only in the aftermath of the choice to eat the fruit, but in the events leading up to it. This renders it somewhat ambiguous as a definitive effect that came into play exclusively after the choice was made.

4. Universal Knowledge. The term "good and evil" can also be read as a merism, which is a figure of speech that names both extremes in order to indicate the inclusion of the full spectrum of the subject.²⁴ Therefore, this knowledge would encompass a certain totality of what is to be known. An example of this exact phrase and its subsequent explanation can be found in 2 Samuel 14:17-20 where David is referred to as "discerning good and evil" and a few sentences later cited as one who knows "all things that are on the earth." This knowledge might be said to refer to special wisdom that belonged to God's realm alone, the acquisition of which was beyond mankind's comprehension. The importance of avoiding this "divine knowledge" is more understandable in light of the greater purpose of preserving the relationship between creator and creation by protecting the limited and perhaps fragile human creatures from a weighty burden too great for them to bear responsibly. Again, it is unclear whether mankind's spectrum of knowledge was increased to a great extent with the breaking of the prohibition. Certainly, there was a new awareness of their nakedness and vulnerability as well as their changed situation in relation to their creator, but the humans also seemed more confused and uncertain than before the incident with the tree.

Each of the interpretations mentioned above breaks down at some point when inserted into the story and extrapolated in light of the surrounding events. It is interesting to note that the writer of Genesis never offers a clear description or

¹⁹ Speiser, 25.

²⁰ George Wesley Buchanan, "The Old Testament Meaning of the Knowledge of Good and Evil," *Journal of Biblical Literature* 75, no. 2 (June 1956): 119.

²¹ Wenham, 63.

²² Wallace, 657.

²³ Wenham, 87.

²⁴ Wallace, 657; Clifford, 12.

explanation of this tree. It is mentioned only twice in the story, with the first appearance somewhat awkwardly inserted in the text which has led some scholars to suggest that it might be a later addition.²⁵ If that were the case, it would only serve to further obscure the nature of the tree. In the end, it is most likely a moot point, because either the writer assumes that the reference is common enough to be self-explanatory, or the story itself is seen to carry adequate explanation for what the author is trying to convey. Because the purpose of the prohibition cannot be found, at least with sufficient clarity, within the name given to the forbidden tree, the answer must be found elsewhere within the story.

The Tree of Life

It is not possible to fully grasp the meaning of the prohibition of the tree of knowledge of good and evil without mentioning its apparent counterpart, the tree of life, and what it represents. It should be noted that in the Old Testament the word "life" is used to refer to a wide range of meanings, including "immortality" and "good health."²⁶ The tree of life also appears in Revelation, whereas the tree of the knowledge of good and evil is absent, which leads one to conclude that the first had enduring qualities while the second carried with it a limited and temporal purpose.²⁷ The lasting nature of the tree of life seems to be directly related to the eternal presence of God. In fact, in some texts it is synonymous with being in the presence of God (Rev. 2:7, 22:14, 19).²⁸ This tree is also a source of healing in Revelation 22:2, pointing to the notion of good health mentioned previously. In Genesis, both named trees are referred to as being situated in the middle of the garden of Eden which could denote a somewhat competitive aspect, a vying for centrality

in the story. However, there is insufficient evidence within the text itself to pit one tree equally against the other or to conclusively make the first choice one between either life or knowledge.

It appears that the pair did not eat from the tree of life even though it was available to them. The question as to why they did not partake of a tree with such special status and obvious benefits is unclear. John Skinner suggests that the tree of life, situated in the middle of the garden, was perhaps another forbidden tree or even *the* forbidden tree itself, since no identifier other than location is given to the prohibited tree in Genesis 3:22.²⁹ However, R.N. Whybray denies this idea that the two trees were one and the same, synonymous in a way, and defends the more widely accepted position of two distinct trees.³⁰ Traditionally, the rabbis explained this conundrum of the shared location of the two middle trees by placing the tree of life at the very centre, but inferring that the tree of knowledge was placed around it as a sort of hedge. Therefore, any access to true life must be through true knowledge.³¹ While interesting, this concept fails to explain why any prohibition would have been made on these trees since both are seen to lead mankind closer to the purpose of God in this scenario.

Knowledge, then, cannot be said to be in direct conflict with life in this story, but neither can it be said to lead to life. It does seem clear from the text that the tree of the knowledge of good and evil was a lesser tree than the tree of life, having limited effect and power, occupying no lasting place in the purpose of God.

The Nature of the Prohibition

When God speaks the prohibition to Adam, he does not expand on it in any

²⁵ Wenham, 62.

²⁶ Wallace, 658.

²⁷ 1 Corinthians 13:8.

²⁸ See also Walter Brueggemann, *Genesis* (Atlanta: John Knox Press, 1982), 45.

²⁹ John Skinner, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on Genesis*, 2d ed. (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1930), 88.

³⁰ Whybray, 44.

³¹ Julian Morgenstern, *The Book of Genesis: A Jewish Interpretation* (New York: Schocken Books, 1965), 57.

way, aside from citing the result of partaking of the tree, which is death. It is the crafty serpent, questionable as a reliable source, who expounds on the nature of the forbidden tree, refutes the claim that they will die and instead, insists that they will become like God, knowing good and evil (Genesis 3:4-5). The serpent implies that the prohibition was put in place not for their own protection, but in God's self-interest and for his security. The fact that they did not die immediately after ingesting the fruit can be taken to be a confirmation of at least part of the serpent's statement.

Scholars have sought to explain this apparent non-fulfillment or at the very least, delayed implementation of God's words to Adam. Wenham makes a valid point regarding the narrative of the first few chapters of Genesis: "...at best, all language about God is analogical. Words used to describe him and his acts must inevitably be human words, but they do not have quite the same meaning when applied to him as when they refer to men."³² While the fact that the humans did not die on the day that they ate of the fruit seems to contradict God's earlier warning, one must look at the overall use of the word, "day," in the creation narratives. In Genesis 1:5 God separates the darkness from the light, and the first day is declared, even though the sun has not yet been created. Clearly, the use of the term, "day," in this story is far from straightforward. Therefore, one must be careful not to impose an implicit timeframe in one instance (Genesis 2:15) that one is not willing to consider regarding other occurrences of the word in a similar context (Genesis 1).

The term "you shall die" can also be read not as referring to physical death, but "to be cut off, excluded from community with God."³³ Ezekiel 18 is an example of this reading, being a chapter on the implications of righteous living (they shall

live) as opposed to turning away from righteousness (they shall die).

It should be observed that there is no strong indication that God did not follow through regarding the announced consequence for eating from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. Death took up root and grew ever more prevalent in the story of humanity, as is evidenced by the murderous story of Cain and Abel that follows in Genesis 4:1-16 and subsequent disturbing narratives. Moreover, Moberly believes that what is at risk in the prohibition is not merely physical life for the first man and woman, but something much more profound: God's trustworthiness.³⁴ The choice made by Adam and Eve to test the bounds of the prohibition indicate that they were indeed questioning the veracity of their creator's words, and they would not be the last humans to do so. The implication of this, a fearless creator putting his reliability and credibility on the line to be affirmed by his creation, is that human beings find themselves in a constant position of choice. The narratives found in the remainder of the Old Testament would seem to expand and verify this.

The Reason for the Prohibition

In order to explore the reason why the creator might give his favoured creatures a prohibition, putting not only mankind but conceivably his own reputation at risk, one must revisit the story within its larger setting. Hermann Gunkel observes that unlike later narratives, the early chapters of Genesis depict a God who is decidedly intimate and recognisably present with mankind.

In the latter [legends of the patriarchs] the divinity appears always enveloped in mystery, unrecognised or speaking out of Heaven or perhaps only in a dream. In the earlier legends, on the contrary, God walks intimately among men and no one marvels at it: in the legend of Paradise

³² Wenham, 40.

³³ See Clifford, 12.

³⁴ Moberly, 31.

men dwell in God's house; it is assumed that he is in the habit of visiting them every evening...Furthermore, in the legends of the patriarchs the real actors are always men; if the divinity appears, it is regarded as an exception. But in the primitive legends the divinity is the leading actor...³⁵

Taking the point of view that God, the creator, is the primary actor in the story shifts the focus away from mankind and his fate. Genesis three is not then, as James Barr proposes, an account of how the opportunity for mankind's immortality was squandered.³⁶ In fact, immortality is not mentioned until the end of the third chapter (3:22). The story does not begin with human beings - it begins with God. Once this paradigm is established, the details of the narrative take on a slightly different perspective.

As articulated earlier, Eden is the place where the creator is present by his works, words, and proximity, though he is not defined by its locale nor restricted to its elements. Within this context, the purpose of the garden is not primarily as a habitation for creation, but as an expression of the creator; it is a point of contact between the two. The perspective of God as the main character changes the question regarding the purpose of the prohibition. It is no longer, "Why was mankind refused access to a certain tree and its implied knowledge?" but "How does this prohibition further the purpose of the intimately relational creator whom we see present in the early chapters of Genesis?"

Placing the focus of the story on the fall of humanity and the entrance of evil and death into the world causes one to miss the larger picture being painted by the writer, and fails to take into consideration the introductory chapters which set the

tone for what follows. Brueggemann warns against this tendency to misinterpret the first chapters of Genesis: "Like the people in this narrative, our concern is not finally the danger of sex, the origin of evil, the appearance of death, or the power of the fall. It is, rather, the summons of this calling God for us to be his creatures, to live in his world on his terms."³⁷ These chapters cannot be read through the simple formulaic lens of sin and punishment. God's purposes are much grander than justice; his design is on creating life.

The prohibition given by a relational God would then be to guard and protect the best interests of the communion that God initiated between himself and humanity. The only bad choice would be one which would cause a rift in this relationship. A careful reading finds that the knowledge of good and evil is not portrayed as an evil and alluring object in this scenario; only the suggestions of the crafty serpent allude to such a concept. In other biblical passages, knowledge and wisdom are clearly desirable traits. Proverbs 1:7 says that "The fear of the Lord is the beginning of knowledge; fools despise wisdom and instruction." Not only is there is a correlation between gaining knowledge and revering God, but the method and order of acquiring knowledge are deemed important. As one can see from the Genesis narrative, when knowledge is sought to be procured outside of the parameters set up by the creator, there are drastic consequences. The prohibition therefore, could be interpreted to be more about the means of gaining knowledge than about acquiring the knowledge itself.

The Effects of Defying the Prohibition

It has been established that the prohibition was given to protect and promote trusting interaction between the creator and the creature. According to Wenham, the eating of the fruit of the forbidden tree

³⁵ Hermann Gunkel, *The Legends of Genesis: The Biblical Saga and History* (New York: Schocken Books, 1966), 13-14.

³⁶ James Barr, "Is God a Liar? (Genesis 2-3) - and Related Matters," *Journal of Theological Studies* 57 (2006): 4.

³⁷ Brueggemann, 44.

would lead to "human autonomy and an independence of the creator incompatible with the trustful relationship between man and his maker which the story presupposes."³⁸ This is, in fact, exactly what transpires. Mankind was driven from the garden of God and became an outsider to the close fellowship that was present before. The humans were deceived into believing that their action was a search for further knowledge. Ultimately, their decision was not one for greater knowledge, but to acquire knowledge apart from its source. According to Proverbs, the path to knowledge starts with reverential respect and acknowledgement of one's dependence on God; it does not start by eating the fruit of a tree.

Perhaps one of the most devastating effects of this choice to become autonomous was that the source of life was cut off. What had earlier been readily available to humans, not as fruit from a tree, but as sustainability from the one who breathed life into them, now became a temptation as well, and they were banned from it.³⁹ It can be speculated that Adam and Eve did not eat of the tree of life earlier because the fruit of the tree paled in comparison to their every day encounter with "the real thing," the author of life. If there was no desire to eat from the tree of life because they had life, then the only way they could be tempted by the tree of knowledge was to believe that they lacked something, and that their creator was not dealing fairly with them nor providing adequately for their needs. The secondary tree was never about gaining forbidden knowledge; it was placed there as a symbol of trust. Once that trust was eroded, aided by the clever innuendos of the serpent, the result was inevitable.

The Concept of Sin

The three most common Hebrew words for sin in the scriptures incorporate the

ideas of failure, breach, and crookedness.⁴⁰ Thus, sin in its most basic definition denotes a break in a relationship or covenant, a failure of mutual obligations in the realm of relations. Though the word *sin* does not occur until Genesis 4:7, the break in the relationship is evident much earlier in the story. Was mankind totally responsible for this schism, or can any blame be placed on the clever serpent?⁴¹ Tigay and Bamberger see the source of evil as neither divine nor demonic, but having roots in the actions and attitudes of the creatures of God.⁴² This is an uncomfortable conclusion to draw, for it lays the responsibility for the choice and its subsequent repercussions squarely on humanity's shoulders. Every time human beings place blame on the serpent for how this story turned out, they are replaying the immediate fallout of the first decision to break faith: a desire to escape responsibility. The shameful attempt of the humans to assuage their guilt by hiding from the truth did nothing to repair the broken relationship. It happened then, and it continues to happen today.⁴³ The persistent search for an explanation as to why evil is present in the world invariably leads to theories that include every other factor than our own lack of trust. It is another sign of how deeply human fidelity has been wounded.

However, the issue of blame is only a symptom of the real tragedy: the disruption of the first community which saw the divine being, humanity, and the earthly elements all in harmony with each other. Clothing became an attempt to deal with the shame and the uncomfortable exposure that had never been present within the covenant of God. Both Lipinski and Armstrong believe that sin, the breaking of the covenantal

⁴⁰ Edward Lipinski and Louis Jacobs, "Sin," vol. 18, *Encyclopaedia Judaica*, eds. Michael Berenbaum and Fred Skolnik, 2d. ed. (Detroit: Macmillan Reference USA, 2007), 621-622.

⁴¹ Karen Armstrong sees little difference between the two scenarios. See *In the Beginning: A New Interpretation of Genesis* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1996), 28.

⁴² Tigay and Bamberger, 626.

⁴³ Whybray, 43.

³⁸ Wenham, 87.

³⁹ Clifford, 12.

relationship, is the catalytic component that dissolves community and positions itself as the enemy of completeness, honesty, and honour.⁴⁴ The banning of the man and the woman from the garden of God was a solidification and confirmation of their breach of trust with the Creator. It was not the cruel and disproportionate backlash that it appeared to be. It was God's concrete recognition that they had excluded him from their community, not by desiring knowledge, but by directing their wills towards a purpose in direct opposition to a trusting, communal attitude.⁴⁵

The uniqueness of this story among other legends of origin is that the God represented here is one God, a single deity as opposed to the multiple gods of other traditions.⁴⁶ This is the story of one creator and his creation. The monotheism which stands out in stark contrast to other myths of origin testifies to the central importance of an exclusive and intimate component in the creator/creature interaction. The distinguishing characteristic which makes this unique partnership possible is the peculiar identity of the creature who carries the breath and likeness of the creator. "The most striking statement of the primeval story, over and above God being the creator, preserver and sustainer of creation, is that God created human beings in his image. The sentence means that God created humanity to be his counterpart so that something can happen between God and the individual."⁴⁷

What began as a world of integrated relations meant to establish wholeness in place of chaos soon tumbled into disarray when the first cracks of distrust crept into the community. Where this inclination towards destroying unity came from is not the important question, at least according

to the story of beginnings that we find in Genesis. The emphasis is always on the Creator, inviting his creation to live in harmony with his mandate in order to benefit from his goodness.

The original choice, then, was not a decision to gain moral discernment, sexual knowledge, a broader range of experience and maturity, nor to acquire some degree of omniscience and so become more like God. Neither was it strictly a choice to obey or disobey an arbitrary directive given by the creator. The prohibition was put in place to protect the community created by God wherein all things come from him, exist in him, and are sustained by him. This intimate community was built on trust, and in order for it to remain authentic, the choice was given to human beings either to continue as willing participants in trusting communion with their creator or to venture out on their own. Unfortunately, God's confidence in humanity as a faithful partner proved to be greater than mankind's confidence in the creator and ultimately, in themselves. Fortunately, this is only the story of beginnings and not the end. What follows in the biblical narrative and beyond is the continued account of God presenting humanity with opportunity after opportunity to re-establish community so that he can show himself to be trustworthy.

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⁴⁴ Lipinski 622; Armstrong, 30.

⁴⁵ Miroslav Volf, *Exclusion and Embrace: A Theological Exploration of Identity, Otherness, and Reconciliation* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1996), 96.

⁴⁶ Whybray, 40.

⁴⁷ Westermann, 111.

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