

# Shame in Eden

## The Garden of Eden

*Now the serpent was more subtil than any beast of the field which the Lord God had made. And he said unto the woman, "Yea, hath God said, "Ye shall not eat of every tree of the garden"?" And the woman said unto the serpent, "We may eat of the fruit of the trees of the garden; but of the fruit of the tree which is in the midst of the garden, God hath said, "Ye shall not eat of it, neither shall ye touch it, lest ye die."'" And the serpent said unto the woman, "Ye shall not surely die, for God doth know that in the day ye eat thereof, then your eyes shall be opened, and ye shall be as gods, knowing good and evil." And when the woman saw that the tree was good for food, and that it was pleasant to the eyes, and a tree to be desired to make one wise, she took of the fruit thereof, and did eat, and gave also unto her husband with her; and he did eat. And the eyes of them both were opened, and they knew that they were naked; and they sewed fig leaves together, and made themselves aprons.*

*And they heard the voice of the Lord God walking in the garden in the cool of the day; and Adam and his wife hid themselves from the presence of the Lord God amongst the trees of the garden. And the Lord God called unto Adam, and said unto him, "Where art thou?" And he said, "I heard thy voice in the garden, and I was afraid, because I was naked; and I hid myself." And he said, "Who told thee that thou wast naked? Hast thou eaten of the tree, whereof I commanded thee that thou shouldest not eat?" And the man said, "The woman whom thou gavest to be with me, she gave me of the tree, and I did eat." And the Lord God said unto the woman, "What is this that thou hast done?" And the woman said, "Thy serpent beguiled me, and I did eat". And the Lord God said unto the serpent, "Because thou hast done this, thou art cursed above all cattle, and above every beast of the field; upon thy belly shalt thou go, and dust shalt thou eat all the days of thy life. And I will put enmity between thee and the woman, and between thy seed and her seed; it shall bruise thy head, and thou shalt bruise his heel." Unto the woman he said, "I will greatly multiply thy sorrow and thy conception; in sorrow thou shalt bring forth children; and thy desire shall be to thy husband, and he shall rule over thee." And unto Adam he said, "Because thou hast hearkened unto the voice of thy wife, and hast eaten of the tree, of which I commanded thee, saying, "Thou shalt not eat of it": cursed is the ground for thy sake; in sorrow shalt thou eat of it all the days of thy life; thorns also and thistles shall it bring forth to thee; and thou shalt eat the herb of the field; in the sweat of thy face shalt thou eat bread, till thou return unto the ground; for out of it wast thou taken; for dust thou art, and unto dust shalt thou return." And Adam called his wife's name Eve; because she was the mother of all living. Unto Adam also and to his wife did the Lord God make coats of skins, and clothed them.*

*And the Lord God said, "Behold, the man is become as one of us, to know good and evil; and now, lest he put forth his hand, and take also of the tree of life, and eat, and live for ever." Therefore the Lord God sent him forth from the garden of Eden, to till the ground from whence he was taken. So he drove out the man; and he placed at the east of the garden of Eden Cherubims, and a flaming sword which turned every way, to keep the way of the tree of life. The First Book of Moses, called Genesis. Ch. 3, vs. 1-24. Pocket Canon. Canongate, 1998.*

**Commentary on the above:** The God of these excerpts is undeniably the old testament God, the father who wields an inflexible authority, who is judgmental and disapproving, and who administers his rules with unswerving certainty and a degree of cruelty, or at least unconcern for the effects on his children. We must reasonably wonder, if this God is omniscient, knowing everything, and he created both Adam and Eve, why, knowing that they would fail his test, he demanded that they not eat of the tree. Then there is the matter of an apparently deliberate deception - eating the fruit does not kill them, even though God has threatened them with death. The only way out of this, which preserves God as something of a reasonable figure, is to understand God's words as metaphorical - the loss of innocence is akin to death. The last paragraph of this story is also interesting - it would appear that God's wrath, and what we might reasonably think to be his overreaction to Adam and Eve's sin, is based on a wish to keep them dependant and subject to his authority. When they develop minds and desires of their own, when they become self-conscious, God is unable to tolerate

this. His wrath is kindled because Adam and Eve have become like himself, and his reaction is to persecute, shame and humiliate. This is the parent who shames and humiliates when his children demonstrate independence and therefore are not under the control of the parent. God banishes his children because they will not be controlled, and capriciously withholds the gift of living forever in an act that smacks of spite. It is also clear that, now that Adam and Eve have achieved self-consciousness, they are now vulnerable to shame.

The Book of Job also presents God as a capricious, harsh authority in relation to whom it is difficult not to be found wanting. God, in this story, is shown as a figure who offers little protection, empathy, or care, towards his unfortunate child, Job, who is exposed to hardship and disease because of a bet God has taken up with Satan - in order, apparently, to reinforce God's narcissism. This, again, is the shaming parent, who fails to recognise Job's positive qualities and achievements, and whose relationship towards Job is one of satisfying his own needs, then denying the consequences and the motivations for his actions. Job, however, refuses to be shamed (to accept the blame for his misfortunes), despite the attempts of multiple figures to shame him. He has the strength of character to hold a mirror to God's failings, and he will not let God deny or avoid the reality of his actions.

Of course, at another level, both stories are attempts to say something about, and to make sense of, the reality of human suffering, the inherent painfulness and unfairness of life. They are attempts to explain, and therefore to contain, the problem of evil and suffering in the world, the factor of human powerlessness in the face of disease and other disaster - and these tragedies may have seemed less controllable to our ancestors than they do to us today even if our current perspective is more delusional than the beliefs of the past.



In this image the first man and woman, Adam and Eve, are shamefully expelled from the Garden of Eden by an avenging angel, presumably acting on God's behest. The garden in the background is lush, productive and sun-lit in contrast to the twisted darkness of the foreground, symbolic of their sinfulness as a consequence of eating the fruit of knowledge. They hide their shameful nakedness with ill-fashioned clothes. The angel is a stern superego figure, sword unsheathed, bathed in light, the image of perfection, power, and superiority, perhaps. Eve covers her eyes and bows her head, a posture that can be assumed to indicate shame. They are banished from connection, growth, and nurturance, and instead sent into a realm of disappointment, lack and deprivation.



This image shows the Creation of Adam (Michelangelo: Sistine Chapel Ceiling). The hand of God reaches down from Heaven to touch the mortal, and therefore bestows some of his Godliness, or at least approval, on his creation. Adam seems to bask in this approval of his creation in the picture, and we might

think that there is a parallel with the "maternal reverie" that all babies need in order to form a healthy sense of themselves as a wholesome self.



This image shows Eve offering Adam the tempting fruit of knowledge in the Garden of Eden as animals and the peccant serpent observe. Adam and Eve knew the difference between good and evil after tasting the fruit. They became ashamed of their nakedness and they were therefore no longer

innocent in the eyes of God. In the relationship with their parent (creator), they discovered the relationship of transgression, akin to the baby's fall from grace at the discovery of the word "no", and the realization that the world is not altogether under one's own control, will and bidding.