

“A Different Perspective on a Familiar Story”

Genesis 2:15–17; 3:1–7; Matthew 4:1–11

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Most stories can be viewed in more than one way, especially the best stories. In Jewish tradition, there is always more than one perspective on any story or teaching. While there are certain truths we claim, the same can be said of many Christian stories. Jesus’ parables, for example, often contain many layers of meaning. Even in Muslim faith, there are different views, though this may seem not to be the case.

While on sabbatical in 2008, I attended the Christian-Muslim Institutes at Georgetown University in Washington, D.C. which was co-sponsored by Hartford Seminary. It is a fascinating program that brings Muslim and Christian clergy together to learn about each other’s tradition not only through books and lectures, but also through people who embody the other faith. The Christian clergy came from all over the country while the Muslim clergy came from all over the world.

In our discussions, a Christian would often ask the Muslims what they believed about a certain matter. Inevitably, an older Imam would answer any question first, saying something like, “Our faith teaches us that...” or “The position of Islam is...” There was always one answer.

But at this point, the younger Imams and scholars would shift a bit and eye one another until one of them would speak, humbly saying, “With all due respect to my elder brother, while it is true that many Muslims have always taught... some of us have come to believe...” Then, he/she would express a different view. The ritual was fascinating, but the takeaway was clear. Even in Islam there are different perspectives. Most stories can be viewed in more than one way.

This is certainly the case with the familiar story we have read from Genesis about Adam and Eve being tempted in the Garden. At the most basic level, there are different perspectives on what kind of story this is. Many throughout history, and some to this day, read this as a historic narrative of

the first human beings. But for some time, most scholars have viewed the first eleven chapters of Genesis as mythic narrative, archetypal stories that tell us who human beings are, why we are in this world, and how we relate to each other. The stories herein are true in the most important sense, but not in a literal, historical sense.

There are many reasons to embrace this latter perspective. On a practical level, if there is only one family that has two boys, and one kills the other, as we know, who do the boys marry and thus how are there other human beings after them? On a linguistic level, the word *Adam* means “mankind.” There is a different Hebrew word for man. The name itself screams, “Archetype!” And there are other reasons, and no cause for feeling like a heretic because there is no mandate to believe something about a story that it doesn’t claim for itself. The author never says this is history. I am not saying you have to believe this. I’m simply suggesting that there are different ways to read the story.

But in addition to the basic structural question, there are different ways to interpret the story. One longstanding view, maintained by many to this day, quite amazingly, is to blame the woman, Eve, for what happens, that is, giving in to the serpent’s temptation and disobeying God. This perspective concludes that women are more vulnerable and thus responsible for sin — temptresses even — since Eve convinces Adam to eat fruit from the forbidden Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil.

Before some of you are tempted to throw fruit at me, let me quickly say what I think of this way of reading the story. The only reason the woman tries the fruit first is because the man is nowhere to be found when an important decision has to be made! There is indeed nothing new under the sun. A lack of responsibility goes all the way back to the very beginning. Whatever the woman does, the man does. Both are culpable and both experience consequences for their actions. I am not saying you have to reject this view, but I certainly do.

But having named these levels of understanding and some different views, I want to examine in more detail another dimension to this story and a very different perspective from the most traditional one. The church has viewed this story as a narrative of the fall. Unlike Jesus in our reading from

Matthew 4, who responds to temptation with faithfulness, Adam and Eve give in and disobey God. They eat from the tree God has told them not to and they are cast out of Paradise. In his book *How Good Do We Have to Be?* Rabbi Harold Kushner suggests a very different perspective.

While acknowledging the traditional view, along with its varied consequences, not just for the church and synagogue but Western society, Kushner wonders if we might view this story not as account of people being punished for making one mistake because they are not perfect, but as an image of human beings evolving, moving from a relatively uncomplicated life to an immensely complicated world of being human and knowing that there is more to life than eating and mating, that there are such things as Good and Evil.

In other words, they are moving from a life of ease and little purpose to an existence that involves moral complexity and decision-making. They will make mistakes, Kushner says, not because they are weak or bad but because the choices they confront will be difficult. From this perspective, this is a narrative not of a fall but of growth.

It is, as I say, a very different perspective, and I am not saying I embrace it completely. Disobedience or disloyalty to God is a central theme of this narrative. But it seems to me that there is value in this perspective, in seeing something more than punishment happening to the first humans, in seeing this story as a narrative about growth.

Old Testament scholar Justin Michael Reed reads the story alongside African-American author Nora Neal Hurston's novel *Their Eyes Were Watching God* and with the insight of feminist biblical scholars who emphasize maturity as the theme of Genesis 2 and 3. "Even if acquired through disobedience," Reed asserts, "This exciting and dangerous maturity is necessary for human thriving (workingpreacher.org)." We don't have to dismiss the traditional view to value this perspective.

It implies that being morally engaged is a part of what it means to be human. I realize this may lead us to conclude that some people we know are not human. But being morally engaged doesn't mean we always make the best choices. Jesus may face every temptation faithfully. He may be tested in all ways but not sin. We make mistakes, as Kushner says, because our choices are difficult, at least some of the time. Other times we just make mistakes. But we are morally responsible and accountable, capable of

engaging important decisions. That is a good thing, a gift, not a form of punishment.

We don't know it all, which is what the tree of good and evil symbolizes, trying to be like God, but we are aware of the ethical framework of life, and we are able to negotiate a world with moral complexity. A simplistic reading of Genesis 2 and 3 might lead us to conclude that all decisions are right and wrong. Jesus gets it right in Matthew 4 and is rewarded. Adam and Eve get it wrong and are punished. The Apostle Paul, in our reading from Romans 5, seems to draw this conclusion. But most of our decisions are not this simple. Most are between not good and evil but competing goods or evils.

Consider financial decisions we make. There are selfish options, but many of our choices are about balancing good priorities – daily needs, children's education, support of the church, other good causes we care about in the world. Consider the healthcare decisions we face. There is not always a clear right choice medically, ethically, or spiritually. Some say we should leave things in God's hands, but does this mean we seek no medical help, or is God involved in medical care? Yet are there not times when one more procedure doesn't make sense?

Consider our decisions about vocation. Does God call us to one task for all of life? If God does, we better have good discernment. But many people, like Moses, play different roles in different parts of life. God provides many gifts to us all. As a friend once said, most of us have face cards in more than one suit. Even our decisions as a church are often complex, like the building decisions we are contemplating.

It is helpful to have an affirmation of the complexity of life because it is in the context of such complexity that we are called to be faithful. The question is — how do we do that? What guidance do we have as we navigate a world of so much change and complexity?

As with most things, we can learn from Jesus' example. Each temptation he faces is paradigmatic of challenges he will face throughout his life. In essence, they all concern his identity and calling. What kind of Messiah will he be? One who caters to the whims of people, one who is willing to put on a show to get a crowd, one who is willing to make a deal

with the powers of this world to achieve a goal? No, Jesus knows who he is and what the tempter has to offer does not square with understanding. He will achieve his goals through sacrificial love. To do otherwise would be to lose himself.

Jesus also knows scripture inside and out, and this too is worth our consideration, but the tempter knows scripture too. Head knowledge is not enough. Understanding is essential. And the main thing that enables Jesus to remain faithful is that he understands who he is and what he is called to do. Being clear about our identity and calling is immensely helpful as we face complex moral realities. It doesn't give an immediate answer to every question or decision, but it does ground us. And it all begins with the basic affirmation that we are beloved children of God, created in the very image of our Creator, given a purpose for good.

The different perspective on the Genesis story we have considered strengthens this affirmation. Traditional views of the fall have led to the foundational assumption that human beings are weak or evil by nature. An undergraduate professor of mine summed this up by saying that if Descartes' view of humankind was, "I think; therefore, I am," Augustine's view, representing Christian thought, was, "I sin; therefore, I am." It is not far off-base. A standard assumption of the church has been that sin defines us and is the one thing that separates us from God.

To be clear, all have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God, but this doesn't mean we are defined by our worst tendencies. We are beloved children of God. And while sin does distance us from God, each other, and our own best selves, there are other things that do this — like our creatureliness, our culture, the pace of life — and in Christ, God provides a way to address every kind of distance. Herein lies is an added benefit of reading this story in a different way. We recover some of the innate goodness in humankind when we choose to focus not solely on who we are at our worst, but who we are at our best, those called, in the context of grace, to grow up into Christ in every way.