THE CRY OF EDEN

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It is believed that, the narrative of the Garden of Eden was composed approximately three thousand years ago, part of what Old Testament scholars call “the primeval history” of Genesis, which begins with the story of the six days of the creation of the world and ends with the story of the Tower of Babel. Relatively soon after this story was composed, it was written down and became part of the Five Books of Moses, which were already crystallized and largely canonized by the seventh century BC. While we are not sure when these texts began to be recited or read aloud in synagogues and places of assembly, still it appears that they took on a kind of authority relatively early in their life-cycle and that people who heard this story even at the end of the first millennium BC thought of it less and less as a story and more and more as a statement of doctrine. We might say that these parts of the Bible progressed early in their life-cycle from religious literature to sacred text.

1 This primeval history may be distinguished from the patriarchal history which begins with God’s call to Abram in chapter 12 and ends with the fulfillment of His promise to give the Land of Canaan to Abraham’s descendants, in the Book of Joshua. Modern Bible scholars commonly refer to the Hexateuch, the Five Books of Moses plus the Book of Joshua, as one literary unit woven together from the primeval history and the patriarchal history, along with various priestly texts which concern themselves with temple practice, sacrifices, purity ordinances, and social and political governance—and the work of the so-called “Deuteronomist,” who repackaged much of the earlier material. See S. R. Driver, An Introduction to the Literature of the Old Testament (New York, 1897; repr. New York, 1956); Gerhard von Rad, Genesis: A Commentary (Philadelphia, 1972); and Claus Westermann, Genesis 1–11: A Continental Commentary, trans. John J. Scullion, 1 (Minneapolis, 1994). Also the FOTL Project at Claremont (George W. Coats, Genesis, with an Introduction to Narrative Literature, The Forms of the Old Testament Literature, 1 [Grand Rapids, Mich., 1983]).

2 See the account in 2 Kings 22–23, the story of Josiah and the discovery of the “Book of the Law.”

3 See Rolf Knierim, The Task of Old Testament Theology (Grand Rapids, Michigan, 1995), pp. 57 ff., discussing “The Interpretation of the Old Testament”: “…biblical texts are…theological texts” (p. 67). I am “dancing over” the rich methodological complexities which he discusses there because I have a different purpose.
In spite of its antiquity, the story of the Garden of Eden is scarcely mentioned in the Prophets and other writings. When Isaiah and Jeremiah were lamenting Israel’s forsaking of God’s covenant—an idea that was firmly grounded in the Pentateuch—they did not mention Adam’s sin; this aspect failed to become part of their theological armory. Centuries later, in rabbinic times, only a few of the many themes which the story weaves together seem to have caught the Jewish imagination: the theme of man being created in God’s image, which is the most important and is related to the theme of man’s place in the divine hierarchy, and issues of the relationship between man and woman as well as that between man and the rest of the environment. It is of interest that, apparently, it was not until the Christian era that disobedience, original sin, and the fall from grace became central to the interpretation of the Garden of Eden story.

The present study offers an explication of this narrative. Rather than look forward from the story through the succeeding three thousand years of commentaries and interpretations, we will approach this narrative as a response to what came before it.

Firstly, it should be stated that religious narratives have a life-cycle. As the ancient epic says, “For how long do we build a house? For how long do we seal a document?” Stories which were compelling to our ancestors often lose their power to move us. The tensions and deep conflicts which they addressed, the resolutions they offered, sooner or later may lose their currency. This no doubt is why no one retells today the Sumerian story of Inanna, the Babylonian Ishtar, who chose the shepherd Dumuzi as her husband in preference to the farmer. At the time this story was first told, perhaps as long ago as about 3500 BC, there must have been conflict in the community about whether to live

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1 Isaiah 51, “He will make her wilderness like Eden…,” and several references in Ezekiel—not to Adam’s sin but to the contrast between Eden and a wilderness. The fact that the theme of disobedience is not mentioned later, except in Ezekiel 28 relating to the King of Tyre, is also remarked by James Barr, *The Garden of Eden and the Hope of Immortality* (Minneapolis, 1993), as well as other commentators.

2 There is of course discussion among the rabbis of Adam’s transgression, and of the disobedience of Eve and the Serpent. But it is not the principal theme in Jewish discourse.


4 See translation in Diane Wolkstein and Samuel Noah Kramer, *Inanna, Queen of Heaven and Earth* (New York, 1983). The source text for this particular work is just one of many ancient texts in which the same stories are told.