YOU SHALL SURELY NOT DIE

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In Christian theology, and even more so in popular opinion, the interpretation of the events narrated in Gen chs. 2-3 is usually based on Paul's understanding and use of the narrative in his letters. Sin came into the world through one man, the first man created by God. Only another man, Jesus Christ, could change this situation through his death on the cross and bring man back into fellowship with God, Rom 5:12-21, I Cor 15:21f.

In his view of sin as a corruption of man's ideal life with God, Paul is in harmony with a general way of thinking in the Old Testament. As a well educated rabbi he had learnt interpretation from his youth on, and it was part of his whole view of life. It is more astonishing that the O.T. writers and editors did not use the ancient narrative when they spoke about sin, in, for example, Ps 51:2-7, 69:6.\(^1\) The origin of sin was not a question that interested them. Sin was always there and had to be defeated, Rom 5:13, but the question of how it originated was not relevant.\(^2\) Paul obviously went further in his conclusions than the O.T. writers and editors did. He has drawn out one special aspect of the narrative in Gen 2-3 which he discusses and underlines as the most important trait, especially seen in its relation to the life and death of Christ.

In all its simplicity the brief narrative includes also other aspects of real importance. If one starts with its genre it is clearly an etiological myth. The author wants to explain why man must toil with an unwilling soil to earn his living. That was obviously not the original God's intention when he created man. He was intended to live in a garden whose fruits and vegetables would give him the necessary


nourishment. His wife was intended to live a free life in God's garden, without fear and anxiety, without toil and tears. But because she broke the rules and disobeyed the orders of God everything went wrong. Therefore she is destined to be attracted to her husband so that she bears him children in toil and pain.

The third party in the event, the snake, was feared because of its secret life on and in the ground, and the danger it represents for men and women. Why was it so secret in its ways, why so dangerous? What had it done, since it was obviously damned by God?

The etiological intention of the author (or maybe better: the narrator) is so obvious that one cannot omit the question: is it his chief intention? Paul gives a firm answer: his intention is to depict how sin came into man's life through his disobedience to God's will, Rom 5:12ff.

The two chapters containing the narrative of God's garden are actually so packed with important traits pertaining to man's life and situation in the world that it may be characterized as impossible to decide which of them the narrator wanted to emphasize. The narrative runs so smoothly and one trait segues into another so easily that no one seems to be emphasized more than the other. Two aspects have been touched upon above: the idea of original sin, strongly underlined by Paul, and the etiological aspect, which is clearly present.

The point of departure, however, for both these aspects lies in the words of YHWH Elohim in 2:11f.: "'You may eat freely from all trees in the garden, but you must not eat from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. On the day you eat from that you shall surely die'". These words start the action in the narrative, leading to enormous consequences.

All these consequences have been discussed and described for centuries, and probably always will be discussed. In the words of YHWH Elohim only one consequence is mentioned: You shall surely die. The idea of death is here brought into the world of man, without any definition of what it means. To the narrator the fact of death was well known—a threatening fact. That this fact might be unknown to the first man did not enter his mind.

In Gen 3 the snake immediately takes up the question of a possible death, also he as if this were a well known phenomenon. To him death seems to be the central point, and he uses God's own words, with a slight, but decisive change: You shall surely not die, Gen 3:4. After having decided this matter so authoritatively, the snake turns