

Evil in Genesis 1

So, one of the things I've tried to claim in describing Genesis 1 is that in this story evil is represented not as a physical reality. It's not built into the structure of the world. When God rests he's looking at the whole thing, [and] it's very good. And yet we know that evil is a condition of human existence. It's a reality of life, so how do we account for it? And the Garden of Eden story, I think, seeks to answer that question and to assert that evil stems from human behavior. God created a good world, but humans in the exercise of their moral autonomy have the power to corrupt the good. So, the Garden of Eden story communicates what Kaufman would identify as a basic idea of the monotheistic worldview: that evil isn't a metaphysical reality; it's a moral reality. Evil lacks inevitability; it lies within the realm of human responsibility and control.

Now Nahum Sarna, the scholar whose work I referred to earlier, points out that the motif of a tree of life or a plant of life or a plant of eternal youth is a motif that we find in other Ancient Near Eastern literatures. The quest for such a plant, or the quest for immortality that the plant promises, were primary themes in the Mesopotamian Epic of Gilgamesh. But by contrast, Sarna says, we haven't as yet uncovered a parallel in Ancient Near Eastern literature to the biblical tree of the knowledge of good and evil. It's not the tree of knowledge, it's the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. What is the significance of the fact that the Bible mentions both of these trees? It mentions a tree of life and the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, and then goes on to just focus on the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. It virtually ignores the tree of life until we get to the end of the story. Sarna argues that the subordinate role of the tree of life signals the biblical writer's dissociation from a preoccupation with immortality. The biblical writer insists that the central concern of life is not mortality but morality. And the drama of human life should revolve not around the search for eternal life but around the moral conflict and tension between a good god's design for creation and the free will of human beings that can corrupt that good design.

The serpent tells Eve that if she eats the fruit of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, she will become like God. It's one of the things about God: he knows good and evil and has chosen the good. The biblical writer asserts of this God that he is absolutely good. The humans will become like gods, knowing good and evil, not because of some magical property in this fruit but because of the action of disobedience itself. By choosing to eat of the fruit in defiance of God—this is the one thing God says, "Don't do this! You can have everything else in this garden," presumably, even, you can eat of the tree of life, right? It doesn't say you can't eat of that. Who's to say they couldn't eat of that and just live forever? Don't eat of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil.

Student: Why does God say you can't eat of this tree ...

Professor Christine Hayes: Read the story closely; see if you can figure out what's going on here. Why does God do this? Isn't this, in a way, putting an obstacle in front of someone almost ensuring they're going to trip over it? That's been an argument that some commentators have made. Others see it differently.

It's true that by eating of the fruit in defiance of God, human beings learn that they are free moral agents. They find that out. They're able to choose their actions in conformity with God's will or in defiance of God's will. So paradoxically, they learn that they have moral autonomy. Remember, they were made in the image of God and they learn that they have moral autonomy by making the defiant choice, the choice for disobedience. The argument could be made that until they once disobeyed, how would they ever know that? And then you might raise all sorts of questions about, well, was this part of God's plan that they ought to know this and should know this, so that their choice for good actually becomes meaningful. Is it meaningful to choose to do the good when you have no choice to do otherwise or aren't aware that you have a choice to do otherwise? So, there's a wonderful thirteenth-century commentator that says that God needed creatures who could choose to obey him, and therefore it was important for Adam and Eve to

do what they did and to learn that they had the choice not to obey God so that their choice [to obey] God would become endowed with meaning. That's one line of interpretation that's gone through many theological systems for hundreds of years.

So the very action that brought them a god-like awareness of their moral autonomy was an action that was taken in opposition to God. So we see then that having knowledge of good and evil is no guarantee that one will choose or incline towards the good. That's what the serpent omitted in his speech. He said if you eat of that fruit, of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, you'll become like God. It's true in one sense but it's false in another. He implies that it's the power of moral choice alone that is godlike. But the biblical writer will claim in many places that true godliness isn't simply power, the power to do what one wishes. True godliness means imitation of God, the exercise of one's power in a manner that is godlike, good, life-affirming, and so on. So, it's the biblical writer's contention that the god of Israel is not only all-powerful but is essentially and necessarily good. Those two elements cannot become disjoined, they must always be conjoined in the biblical writer's view. And finally, humans will learn that the concomitant of their freedom is responsibility. Their first act of defiance is punished harshly. So they learn in this story that the moral choices and actions of humans have consequences that have to be borne by the perpetrator.

So, just to sum up, Sarna sees in the Garden of Eden story a message that's in line with Kaufman's thesis about the monotheistic world view. He says this story conveys the idea that, "...evil is a product of human behavior, not a principal inherent in the cosmos. Man's disobedience is the cause of the human predicament. Human freedom can be at one and the same time an omen of disaster and a challenge and opportunity" [Sarna 1966, 27-28].