
The Earth and the Earthling: Thoughts on Gen 2–3

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The connection between humankind and the earth is a central theme of Native American mythologies and cultures. The biblical narratives share this interest in emphasizing the connection between humankind and the soil, more specifically, the hope for an ideal state of the relationship between humans and the earth as their habitat. The Jahwist's narrative of the earth and of the earthling's fall in Gen 2–3 reflects on this ideal state of humankind as a time in a well-kept garden, in retrospect, from the vantage point of a paradise lost. Already at its outset, this story offers an inspiring vantage point that may be seen in relation to Native American traditions and their understanding of humankind. The Jahwist refers to the first human as a being made out of clay. It conceives of the ideal-typical humankind semantically and ontologically as an "earthling," using the Hebrew term *'adam*, a cognate of "earth" (*'adamah*). While grammatically masculine, this being is at the outset not gendered and receives a full gender-identity as male only after the fall in the curse 3:17–19. Translations often render the word as "the man." A more literal translation that I use here is "the earthling." This first being's very essence consists of earth/clay. Further along this line of thought, the narrative conceives of "the earthling's" primary relationship to the creator as the relationship of a clay figure to an artisanal potter. The potter first forms "the earthling," then, in a dynamic act, enlivens them by blowing breath into the nostrils.

This narrative framework has multifold implications for biblical, as well as for Christian anthropology. The following selective reflections first focus on Yahweh's compassion for the humans in the garden and after the fall (I); second, on the fragile nature of the state of affairs of the humans' state in the garden (II); and, finally, on the description of the world order after the fall (III). Before unfolding these three aspects, a brief analysis of the outline of the narrative of the fall in Gen 2–3 is in order. It consists of five parts¹ with a number of sub-scenes in the first part.

1. I owe this outline and a number of the considerations in this article to the insightful study by Friedhelm Hartenstein, "Und sie erkannten, dass sie nackt waren..." (Gen 3,7): Beobachtungen zur Anthropologie der Paradieserzählung, *Ev Theol* 65 (2005), 277–293.

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| I | The first humans in the garden | 2:4b–24 |
| | The creation of the humans from clay | 4b–8 |
| | The four streams | 10–14 |
| | The conditions of life in the garden | 15–17 |
| | The creation of the animals and the partner | 18–24 |
| II | The woman, the snake, the transgression | 2:25–3:7 |
| III | The humans encounter God after the fall | 3:8–13 |
| IV | Yahweh's three curses: snake, woman, man | 3:14–20 |
| V | The expulsion from the garden | 3:21–24 |

I Yahweh's compassion for the humans in the garden

Through a variety of images and elements of its storyline, Gen 2–3 express Yahweh's tender care for the humans through two artisanal activities, the act of a potter and the act of a gardener. The plot refers to Yahweh's intimate formation of "the earthling" from clay as a tangible, creative and thoughtful process: "Then Yahweh God formed the man of dust from the ground" (2:7), quickly adding the potter's devotion to "the earthling" through the intimate animation of the clay figure by ways of blowing the breath into its nostrils

so that “the earthling” would receive the spirit of life. Yahweh’s care for “the earthling” is particularly tangible in this portrait of thoroughgoing, resourceful accommodation, when, in the role of a gardener, Yahweh releases him and his “helper” (2:18, 20) or “the woman”² into a luscious garden as their habitat.³ Tokens of Yahweh’s care for “the earthling” and the woman are evident even after the trust between them is broken, and Yahweh expels the couple from the garden. Yahweh the gardener still exercises extended resourceful care for the harsh conditions of life that “the earthling” and the woman face in their life outside the garden. In preparation for this environment, Yahweh makes “garments of skins for the man and for his wife, and clothed them” (Gen 3:21).

II A cross-fade from the fragile ideal state of affairs in the garden to life after the fall, outside

Many narrative techniques enforce the story arc leading from part II to part V. Paul Ricoeur described one of these techniques by an analogy to the cinematic device of the cross-fade in a movie. In the course of a continuous process, the movie editor lets a picture or sound appear or be heard gradually as another disappears or becomes silent. One image dissolves, giving way to another frame that fills the screen. The author(s) of Gen 2–3 apply this technique of the cross-fade through their artful connection between reference points from the exposition of “the earthling” in the garden to its counterpart in the terminal stage of the curses (Gen 3:14–20) and the expulsion of “the earthling and the woman” (3:21–24). Gen 2:4b–24 opens with an exposition that describes the state of affairs in the natural idyll of the garden. To mention only a few hallmarks of the intimacy and of the harmony of the social world in the garden at its outset: Gen 2:15–17, 18–24 describe a peaceful state between animals and humans, the experience of an immediacy of interaction in a social space exempt from hierarchical order that, consequently, allows for a healthy pleasure-filled life of the earthling. The story presupposes an open-ended life in harmony with the habitat and in the absence of burdensome acts of reproduction with its nature-induced pain and health risk. Step by step the plotline of Gen 2–3 dissolves this ideal-typical state of affairs of “the earthling” and the woman in the garden, converting it into the state of affairs after the fall. At the end of this conversion, three curses against the

2. The narrative refers to the second human as both “the help/er” and “the woman”; the latter is a word play on the male form “man” in 2:22–23 and 3:6 “her man”; otherwise the first creature is called “the earthling.” The act of creating the woman in 2:21–22 requires separate attention which is beyond the scope of these brief remarks. Note that the function of passing on life comes first into view in the curse 3:16 and in the etiology in 3:20, when the earthling gives her the name *hawwah* “Eva,” “living one” “Eva,” probably with the association of “life-giving one.”

3. I mostly use the literal translation “the earthling and the woman” to designate the two humans before the fall. The designations in Gen 2–3 vary to some extent; Gen 3:6 refers to them as “the woman” and “her man”; 3:20 mentions “the earthling” and “Eva.”

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main protagonists, the snake, the woman, and the man, stipulate the new human condition, including the couple’s expulsion from the garden. Parts II–V describe the intermediate phases of the cross-fade, leading from an original state of the humans in the garden to its transformation and ultimately to the couple’s expulsion from the garden: The woman interacts with the snake, acting as a successful trickster (II; 2:25–3:7); “the earthling” and the woman must face the rift between them and Yahweh (III; 3:8–13).

The story summarizes the new state of affairs in a verdict-like, three-pronged curse (IV; 3:14–20). Finally, the narrative thread wraps up the consequence of the earthlings’ expulsion from the garden (V; 3:21–24). By means of the technique of the gradual cross-fade and the transformation from one state to the current state of affairs after the fall, the narrative highlights its ending, with the expulsion of the protagonists as the result that ultimately points to the fragility of the ideal state of affairs that the exposition described.

III The three-pronged curse of the humans functions as descriptor of the current world order

Gen 3:14–20 is a three-pronged curse against the serpent, the woman, and the earthling. The curse is a stipulation of the gardener of Gen 2–3 capturing the reality of the world order after the fall. A major formal category of the curse is the establishment of the social hierarchy in the world outside of the garden. The narrative captures the essence of the human condition prior to the fall as marked through genuinely benevolent interactions between all protagonists in a plain leveled field. Prior to the fall, “the earthling,” the woman, and the animals in the garden share a community of which the gardener was an integral part. Until the woman and “the earthling” had transgressed the gardener’s rules the communication between them had taken place in a non-hierarchical sphere that allowed for Yahweh, the gardener, to visit the humans in the cool of the day (3:8) and to interact with them on par.

During the course of the narrative this equal exchange and the communication between “the earthling,” the woman, and Yahweh gradually dissolves. What emerges in the cross-fade out of the plain leveled field are the contours of a highly regulated complex social hierarchy in which every interaction takes place between distinctly ranked constituents. Consequently, the curses separately address the serpent, the woman, and “the earthling.” This distinct way of addressing each constituent mirrors the fundamental social

framework for any human interaction after the fall. The threefold curse in detail demonstrates the clear distinction between the three fault lines that now separate the protagonists in what was formerly plain leveled field. The hitherto intimate community between three different spheres of the social reality now gives way to an intrinsically hierarchically shaped social landscape. As pointed out earlier, a clear-cut gender distinction emerges as an aspect of social reality under the curse. Only after the fall, the curse assigns “the woman” a status in the hierarchic structure subordinate to the earthling/man’s status. Only now the woman is designated to pass on life through giving birth, an act that the curse associates foremost with pain. The narrative describes the development into this new social hierarchy with the use of many subtle techniques. For instance, it uses the nakedness as the literary device to drive home how clothes are markers of social hierarchy. Immediately after the fall the story describes as a result that “both their eyes were opened” and that now “they saw that they were naked” (3:7). Aware of the need of hierarchical structures, the first change after the fall in **“the earthling’s” and the woman’s behavior** is to provisionally create a first marker of social hierarchy in the garden: “They crimped fig leaves. And they made themselves loincloths.” These makeshift garments demonstrate the first attempt of coping with and of realizing the hierarchically structured social sphere. The conclusion of the narrative mirrors this shift into the more fully socially stratified sphere when, after the fall, the animals, the woman, and “the earthling” find themselves divided into the three distinctly established groups of a social hierarchy. As a consequence, the gardener’s curses address them separately, now distinguishing between the **woman and “the earthling”** with their species-specific and gender-specific frames of reference. The curses hit the protagonists in accordance with the order of the newly established hierarchy, beginning with the serpent as the lowest in social status, to the woman, and ending with the now fully male-gendered “earthling.”

Yahweh’s first curse directed against the serpent initially designates the ground as its habitat. It then continues with a public declaration that marks the end of the peaceful interactions between the serpent and the woman’s offspring. The impending fight will be a struggle for life and death: The woman’s descendants “will strike your head, and you will strike his heel” (Gen 3:15b). This first curse directed to the serpent marks the beginning of an era of ongoing malevolence between the animals and the humans. It explicitly states the brokenness and the from now on fraudulent nature of their relationship. In the curse the serpent serves as the paradigm of the animal world at large that points to the hostile relationship between the humans and the serpent. As inhabitants of the garden, the animals, “the earthling” and the woman could peacefully co-exist under the gardener’s rule. After the fall, when leaving the garden, “the earthling” and the woman will encounter malevolent animals and their fight against them will be part of their existence.

Another feature in addition to the enmity between the humans and the animals is the gender-specific nature of the second curse

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that addresses the woman (Gen 3:16). In the garden it was not necessary for the humans to pass on life through such a painful process. Yet in the broken world after the fall, things have become ambivalent. While the woman receives the privilege of her capability to pass on human life, the narrative frames the process of giving birth that is painful and life threatening as a consequence of the fall. With its reference to birth pain and to fatality, the curse reflects the fact that childbirth presented a significant health risk for women in antiquity.

Most far reaching and most consequential for all human life after the fall are the stipulations of the third curse in Gen 3:17–19. It puts forward the arduous nature of human toil and the adverse conditions for “the earthling” laboring in an agrarian world, facing thistles and thorns, and thus this curse paints a stark contrast to **“the earthling’s”** previous conditions in the luscious garden. Notably, human mortality, the return to dust, is the result of trespassing the gardener’s rules.

IV Outlook

The story of the two humans in the garden in Gen 2–3 is an essential part of the Jahwist’s anthropology. It creatively describes Yahweh’s compassion for the humans in the garden and after the fall, capturing the fragility of the state of affairs of **“the earthling” and the woman** in the garden. Its portrayal of the world’s order after the fall puts forward the origin of the earthling from clay, the role of Yahweh as a potter and as a gardener, as well as Yahweh’s intention for the humans to live together in harmony with all of creation, thus painting a vivid and impressive picture of the human condition. With this, Gen 2–3 offers an expressive example for the Jahwist’s perception of the intimate relation between human life and the earth. It was at the heart of the teaching and of the theology of Gordon Straw to focus on the multiple reference points between biblical narratives such as Gen 2–3 and Native American mythology. These thoughts are dedicated to his memory.