

# Murder in the Garden? The Envy of the Gods in Genesis 2 and 3

*Paul Duff*

George Washington University

*Joseph Hallman*

University of St. Thomas

**A**ccording to Walter Brueggemann, "No text in Genesis (or likely in the entire Bible) has been more used, interpreted and misunderstood" than the story of Adam and Eve in the garden. "This applies to careless, popular theology as well as to the doctrine of the church"(41). Augustine attempted to explain the first few chapters of Genesis on no fewer than five different occasions throughout his career. Based on his reading of Paul, Augustine and Western Christianity after him believed that the entire human race inherited the disobedience of Adam and Eve.

The story in Genesis 2-3 represents the beginning of the J narrative, the so-called Yahwist account of the creation which originated in the early years of the Israelite monarchy.<sup>8</sup> Commentators have long acknowledged a variety of elements in the Yahwist creation account which complicate its interpretation and defy any satisfactory explanation. Among the more puzzling elements in the story are, first, the implication in Gen. 3:22 of a plurality of divine beings, a fact which seems to contradict the rest of the narrative and which also flies in the face of Israelite monotheism. Second, according to Gen. 2:17, God threatens Adam with the punishment of

---

<sup>8</sup> The Yahwist document, originally independent, was later combined with three other strands of ancient material to form the Pentateuch. For a recent study of the "Documentary Hypothesis," see Richard Friedman.

immediate death for transgressing the deity's prohibition (cf. 3:3, 3:4). God does not carry out the threatened punishment, however, nor does the text offer the reader an explanation for the deity's commutation of the sentence (Westermann 224-5). Third, the origin and nature of the serpent in the story is unclear. Where did he come from? The identification of this figure with Satan in the later tradition has no support in the text (Westermann 237-9). Finally, the prohibition not to eat of the single tree in the garden appears to be arbitrary. Hence the crime of Adam and Eve is obviously contrived. Despite the fact that the original sentence of death for their disobedience was not carried out, the curses invoked on Adam and Eve seem hardly warranted by the offense. Consequently, some sections of the text depict the deity as a petty tyrant, certainly a very different picture than that given by other scriptures of the Jewish and Christian traditions.

We believe these difficulties can be overcome by approaching Genesis 2-3 from a Girardian perspective.<sup>9</sup> We propose that this story has evolved<sup>10</sup> in order to hide its original meaning. As a result—following Girard's understanding of the function and evolution of mythology—we will endeavor to "deconstruct" Genesis 2-3 in order to trace the evolution of this myth from its origin in a primal crime. This will enable us to explain the inconsistencies in the text as it stands and to appreciate the final revisions made by the biblical author(s). We will begin with a brief discussion of Girard's understanding of myth. Then we will turn to the problems of the Genesis text.

### **Girard on myth**

According to Girard, myth is, quite simply, a narrative about a primal murder, rewritten from the vantage point of the killers (1977a, 64-7, 91-5; 1986, 24-44). As such, mythology covers up the role of the victimage mechanism as the basis of culture. Myths which disguise or cover up such a crime can take many forms. For instance, the foundational murder of an

---

<sup>9</sup> In his recent book on Paul, Robert Hamerton-Kelly presents a Girardian interpretation of this passage which is completely different from ours (92-7). Since Hamerton-Kelly appears to read the myth at face value without a sense of development, he, like most interpreters, ends with somewhat tortuous conclusions.

<sup>10</sup> It is virtually certain that the account found in Gen. 2 and 3 did not come into being as a free composition of the Yahwist. But, as Claus Westermann has pointed out in his history of the exegesis of this passage (186-91), despite the fact that most see it as a product of a long prehistory, there is no consensus concerning the passage's evolution to its present form.

**innocent victim can be staged as a struggle among gods which results in the sacrifice of one of the deities for the greater good of all. By highlighting the "necessity" of the victim's death, a myth of the North American Ojibwa culture covers up the primal murder. As Levi-Strauss explains the myth,**

the five "original" clans are descended from six anthropomorphic supernatural beings who emerged from the ocean to mingle with human beings. One of them had his eyes covered and dared not look at the Indians, though he showed the greatest anxiety to do so. At last he could no longer restrain his curiosity, and on one occasion he partially lifted his veil, and his eye fell on the form of a human being, who instantly fell dead "as if struck by one of the thunderers." Though the intentions of this dread being were friendly to men, yet the glance of his eye was too strong, and it inflicted certain death. His fellows therefore caused him to return to the bosom of the great water. The five others remained among the Indians, and "became a blessing to them." From among them originate the five great clans or totems, (quoted in Girard 1987a, 105-6; cf. Girard 1987b, 95-6).

The text presents a being who possesses what some cultures call the "evil eye." The myth barely covers up the fact that his peers murdered this individual during a social crisis, for it states that his companions "[caused] him to return to the bosom of the great water." In plain language, his companions drowned him. The myth justifies the killing, however, by insisting that the victim presented a grave threat to the community.

Not all myths reveal the primal crime so readily. Myths tend to evolve so that they not only distort the primal crime but also cover up all traces of violence. In the above story, the myth is in its very early stage. The collective violence is quite visible. Presumably, the passage of time would see the further development of this myth, a development that would eventually abolish all traces of the primal crime's violence.

Girard cites an Aztec myth about the creation of the sun as an example of a myth in a later stage of development. In this case, the violence is less obvious than in the Ojibwa myth.

They say that before there was day in the world, the gods came together in that place which is called Teotihuacan. They said to one another: "O gods, who will have the burden of lighting the world?" Then to these words answered Tecuciztecatl, and he

said: "I shall take the burden of lighting the world." Then once more the gods spoke, and they said: "Who will be another?" Then they looked at one another, and deliberated on who the other should be. And none of them dared offer himself for that office. All were afraid and declined. One of the gods [named Nanauatzin] . . . who was covered with pustules, did not speak but listened to what the other gods were saying. And the others spoke to him and said to him: "You be the one who is to give light, little pustule-covered one," And right willingly he obeyed. . . . And midnight having come, all the gods placed themselves about the hearth, called *Teotexcalli*\_\_\_\_And then the gods spoke and said to Tecuciztecatl: "How now Tecuciztecatl! Go into the fire!" . . . But feeling the great heat he held back and dared not cast himself into it. Four times he tried but never let himself go. Since he had tried four times, the gods then spoke to Nanauatzin, and said to him: "How now Nanauatzin! You try!" And when the gods had addressed him, he exerted himself and with closed eyes undertook the ordeal and cast himself into the flames. (1986, 57-8)

Nanauatzin, of course, becomes the sun. The myth of Teotihuacan transforms the collective murder into self-sacrifice. The deity Nanauatzin—originally a scapegoat<sup>11</sup> of the society (i.e. the other "gods") of which he was a member—is portrayed in the evolved myth as a generous individual whose self-immolation resulted in the creation of the sun. In the later story the collective violence of the "gods" against the scapegoat has been transformed into the individual, self-directed violence of Nanauatzin (1986, 57-65).

Finally, a Scandinavian myth about Baldr takes the cover-up even further. According to this myth, the god Baldr has dreams in which he is warned of his death. In order to protect him, his mother Frigg extracts an oath from all creatures, animate and inanimate, to do Baldr no harm. Following this universal pledge, "Baldr enjoys an extraordinary game with [his companions] the Ases in the public square. They hurl things at him and strike him with their swords but nothing wounds him" (Dumézil 224, quoted in Girard 1986, 66). The trickster god Loki (in disguise) asks Frigg

---

<sup>11</sup> The description of Nanauatzin as the "pustule-covered one" identifies him as having physical characteristics which set him apart from others. As such, he is a typical scapegoat (see Girard 1977, 64-7 and 91-5; 1986, 17-21).

if there was any exception to the universal oath. He discovers that the mistletoe was not required to take the oath because of its youth. Consequently, Loki takes a shoot of mistletoe and gives it to Baldr's blind brother Hoehr. He then guides Hoehr's hand to Baldr who is killed by the blow. According to Girard, this story does not represent the original version of the myth about Baldr. Girard argues that:

It must stem from older versions in which Baldr is the victim of the most banal and classic of all collective murders. It must be the work of people who cannot tolerate the traditional representation of the murder because it makes all the gods, the victim aside, into criminals. (1986, 68)

Hence, the Scandinavian myth evolves to cover up the collective nature of the murder which is depicted as the work of a single god. In addition, the myth characterizes the actual violent act as unintentional. The trickster god Loki—who has manipulated Baldr's blind brother Hoehr into dealing the death blow to Baldr—orchestrates the violence. Here we see a myth which has evolved in such a way as to effect the total elimination of collective violence.

In the above three myths, a clear strategy for the domestication of myths is evident. In the Ojibwa myth, the collective violence is visible (although it is justified). The Aztec myth transforms the collective violence into individual (in this case, self-directed) violence. And finally, the Scandinavian myth transforms the collective violence into individual violence and depicts the individual violence as unintentional.

In our opinion, in the myth behind Genesis 2 and 3, Adam stands as a scapegoat figure. And like the above cited myths, this myth evolved in order to conceal, as fully as possible, the violent elements of the primal crime.

The present study attempts to explore the contours of the myth behind Genesis 2 and 3, a myth which had its origin in a primal murder. It also briefly suggests how the myth behind the Adam and Eve story might have evolved before its use by the Yahwist in Genesis 2 and 3. Finally, the study asks if the Adam and Eve narrative as presented in the Bible is indeed a "revelatory" text, that is, one which contributes to the demystification of the victimage mechanism.

**An alternative Eden story: Ezekiel 28:12-19**

Although several biblical texts hint at elements of an earlier "creation" narrative which was the source for the Yahwist in Genesis 2-3 (e.g., Job 15:7-8; Isa. 14:12-15), there is no question that the tradition found in Ezek. 28:12-19 is somehow related to the Adam and Eve narrative of Genesis 2 and 3. However, the Ezekiel narrative does not appear to depend directly on the Genesis account or vice-versa. Instead, it is more likely that Ezek. 28:12-19 and Genesis 2 and 3 are dependant upon a common tradition. Hence, if we examine the Ezekiel text and then compare the Genesis narrative to it, we should be able to discern something of the myth in its original form.

Chapter 28 of Ezekiel, as it stands in the Bible, is a polemic against the prince of Tyre. In the midst of the chapter (12-19), we are treated to what seems to be a lament over that prince. However, a quick reading suffices to show that the primal man is the original subject of the Ezekiel lament, for the subject of the lament occupies Eden, as verse 13 attests.

- 12 Son of man, raise a lamentation over the king of Tyre,  
and say to him, Thus says the Lord YHWH:  
You were the signet of perfection, full of wisdom  
and perfect in beauty.
- 13 You were in Eden, the garden of God;  
every precious stone was your covering,  
carnelian, topaz, and jasper,  
chrysolite, beryl, and onyx,  
sapphire, carbuncle, and emerald;  
and wrought in gold were your settings and  
your engravings.
- On the day that you were created they were prepared.
- 14 With an anointed guardian cherub I placed you;  
you were on the holy mountain of God;  
In the midst of the stones of fire you walked.
- 15 You were blameless in your ways from the day you  
were created, till iniquity was found in you.
- 16 In the abundance of your trade you were filled with  
violence, and you sinned;  
so I cast you as a profane thing from the mountain of God,  
and the guardian cherub drove you out from the midst of the  
stones of fire.
- 17 Your heart was proud because of your beauty;  
you corrupted your wisdom for the sake of your splendor.

- I cast you to the ground; I exposed you before kings, to  
feast their eyes on you.
- 18 By the multitude of your iniquities, in the unrighteousness  
of your trade you  
profaned your sanctuaries;  
So I brought forth fire from the midst of you; it consumed  
you,  
and I turned you to ashes (אפר) upon the earth in the sight  
of all who saw  
you.
- 19 All who know you among the peoples are appalled at you;  
you have come to a dreadful end and shall be no more for  
ever. (RSV)

Although the protagonist appears in "Eden, the Garden of God" in verse 13, he is, in verses 14 and 16, on "the holy mountain of God."<sup>12</sup> Hence, it is reasonable to infer that, according to the Ezekiel text, Eden itself sits on the "mountain of God." The placement of Eden on a mountain is peculiar, for the mountain represents the abode of the divine in the ancient Near East (Clifford 173; cf. Yaron 38-9; Zimmerli 93). What is the primal man doing in the abode of God? The text explains that on this mountain, this individual "walked among the stones of fire (אבני אש)" (18:14). It is quite likely that these "stones of fire" represent heavenly beings (Clifford 173; Zimmerli 93).<sup>13</sup> Although later readers might be surprised to encounter such polytheism in the Bible, a multiplicity of divine beings is not particularly unusual in the earlier strata of the Hebrew Scriptures. Consequently, "the holy mountain of God" in the original myth is not simply the home of the primal man but is, in reality, the abode of the assembly of the gods. In fact, according to a passage in Job, the primal man

---

<sup>12</sup> Both Walther Zimmerli (93) and Walter Eichrodt (393) downplay this seeming disparity between the Genesis and Ezekiel accounts. They maintain that the mountain in Genesis can be inferred from the geography of the garden as described in Gen. 2:10-14.

<sup>13</sup> The context of the passage suggests that the "stones of fire" are heavenly creatures who dwell with the magnificently-clad creature. However, the orthography has led some to suggest that the "stones of fire" (אבני אש) is a corruption of "sons of fire" (בני אש) or "sons of God" (בני אל). For the various options, see Zimmerli (93). G. A. Cooke (318) suggests that 1 Enoch 18:6-16 is a later variant of the same myth. In that text the stones imprison celestial beings, stars, "which have transgressed the commandments of God" because they were not punctual.

is one such heavenly being, participating in the divine council (cf. Job 15:7-8).

The mention of the cherubim in the same verse as the mountain of God also affirms the place of the assembly of the gods, for the cherubim were frequently associated with the heavenly court. Umberto Cassuto has suggested that the Ezekiel poem originally referred to an epic about one of the cherubim:

In a remote period of antiquity there was an Israelite saga that related how the cherub—or one of the cherubs—who dwelt in the garden of Eden, upon the mountain of God, which was as high as the heavens, sinned against God, and as a punishment for his transgression he was driven out from the garden of Eden and cast down to earth. (81)

If we return to the Ezekiel text we can see that the situation of this individual dwelling among the gods lasted until “iniquity was found in [him]” (28:15). After that he was destroyed by fire. Some have suggested that the destructive fire which consumed the original human originated in the thunderbolt of the storm god YHWH (Cassuto 70-80).<sup>14</sup> Leslie Allen, however, in a recent commentary, makes a more interesting suggestion by proposing that the fire came from the stones of fire (i.e. the other gods) surrounding the primal individual. As Allen suggests, the stones here “appear to put their fire to new use” (95). This novel interpretation is supported by the text’s curious expression concerning the origin of the fire. The deity states: “I brought forth fire *from your midst* (מִתּוֹכְךָ); it consumed you” (28:18; emphasis added).<sup>15</sup> Hence, the myth seems to have originally suggested that the responsibility for the destruction of the victim was collective. Not surprisingly, however, the revised version of the myth found in Ezekiel attributes the death to YHWH. And, as we will see, the Ezekiel text ultimately attributes the blame for the victim’s death to the victim himself.

Initially, the Ezekiel text informs the reader that the first man was endowed with perfection (28:12b). Verse 15a interprets this as moral

---

<sup>14</sup> For the thunderbolt as a weapon of the ancient Near East storm god, including Marduk and YHWH, see Patrick Miller 27, 122, 239 n. 72.

<sup>15</sup> Although the word מִתּוֹכְךָ in the text contains the second person singular object suffix (ך-), this could easily be explained as a gloss on the original.



perfection. In short, the primal man was without guilt. However, even though verse 15a describes this individual as "blameless," nevertheless, verse 15b suddenly states that "iniquity was found in him." But we are told nothing about this iniquity.<sup>16</sup> In the following verse (16), however, the individual is described as "filled with violence."<sup>17</sup> Finally, Ezek. 28:17 accuses him of "pride and corruption." The text goes to great lengths to convince the reader of the guilt of the first man. Crime upon crime is heaped onto him. He is proud, corrupt, violent, and iniquitous. But the passage, it seems to us, "protests too much." Is it trying to cover something up?

As we have seen in the myths about Nanauatzin and Baldr, one of the ways that mythology veils the victimage mechanism is by eliminating—at least partially—violence from the text. Another way is to justify it, as in the Ojibwa myth. The Ezekiel text does not shy away from revealing the violent fate of the first man. The text tells us that he was reduced to ashes (28.18-19).<sup>18</sup> It even suggests, as mentioned above, that the death of the victim was the result of collective violence. However, the Ezekiel text justifies the violence perpetrated against this individual by pointing out over and over again that this individual deserved his fate.

If we briefly summarize our findings from the examination of the early tradition found in Ezek. 28:12-19, we observe a number of elements which suggest that the victimage mechanism lies behind this text. First and foremost, the text implies polytheism. The stones of fire represent gods. Hence, it is not a story of God and humanity but rather it seems to be a story about violence among the gods. As such, it can be compared to the stories of the Ojibwa, Scandinavian, and Aztec gods cited above. The Ezekiel text also implies the murder of one of the characters of the narrative, a character who was "turned to ashes upon the earth in the sight of all who saw [him]" (28:18). That character met his fate at the hands of the group. Can we find the same elements in the other Eden narrative of the Bible, the Adam and Eve story of Genesis 2 and 3?

---

<sup>16</sup> In fact, the term עולה (as well as its lengthened form צולתה) is found nowhere else in Ezekiel.

<sup>17</sup> It is possible to assume, with Zimmerli, that this statement represents a late stage of the redaction and is an attempt to conform the myth to the circumstances of the king of Tyre.

<sup>18</sup> Even here there is some ambiguity, for 28:16 suggests that the individual is expelled from the mountain of God, not killed.

We will turn now to an examination of certain details of the Adam and Eve narrative which indicate an original polytheistic context of the myth lying behind this text. Next, we will discuss the fate of Adam, the victim. Finally, we will turn to the “envy of the gods,” highlighted in Gen. 3:23-24. The discussion will lay the groundwork for our outline of the structure of the original myth and our suggestions as to the stages of its evolution.

### God or gods? The original polytheistic context of Genesis 2 and 3

If we look closely at the Adam and Eve story of Genesis 2 and 3 we can see—even more clearly than in the Ezekiel passage—remnants of polytheism. Probably the most obvious remnant occurs in Gen. 3:22, a verse which portrays Yahweh speaking in the plural, presumably to other divine beings: “Behold the man has become like one of *us* . . .” (emphasis added). Gen. 3:5 also implies a multiplicity of divine beings, even though the standard English versions obscure that fact. The text states:

The serpent said to the woman, “You will not die but Elohim (אלהים) knows that on the day you eat from [the fruit of the tree] your eyes will be opened and you will live like gods (אלהים—“God” or “gods”)<sup>19</sup> knowing (ידעי) good from evil.” (3:4b, 3:5; RSV, emended)

The plural form ידעי (“knowing”) in the last line suggests that the word אלהים be understood in the plural (“gods”) rather than the singular (“God”) (Sarna 25).<sup>20</sup> The odd occurrence of the plural in verse 5 as well as its appearance in 3:22 suggest that the myth lying behind Genesis 2 and 3 involved a number of divine beings.

One other oddity that suggests that the original myth was polytheistic concerns the appellation of the deity in this passage. Throughout this

---

<sup>19</sup> The different translations have to do with the fact that the term אלהים can be taken as a proper noun (singular) or a common noun (plural). Elohim is a plural form. It is probably related to the Hebrew singular noun אלה which means “god” (See Brown; Driver; Briggs 43; Ringgren 272-3). The singular form can be found in the Hebrew Bible in a number of places, for instance Deut. 32:17; 2 Chron. 32:15, and 2 Kings 17:31. So, Elohim can be used as a singular designation of the specific Israelite deity (i.e. YHWH) or it can refer to a plural number of deities as Ps. 82:1 shows.

<sup>20</sup> There is an ambiguity in the Hebrew text here. It could also be translated, “You will be knowers of good and evil just as God is.” However, given the word order of the Hebrew text, the translation which compares Adam and Eve to the one God אלהים is less likely.

section the text consistently refers to God as “YHWH Elohim (אלהים יהוה)”<sup>21</sup> (literally “YHWH God” or “YHWH, the gods,” translated by the RSV as “the LORD God”). This is a strange appellation for the deity, as virtually all commentators have pointed out. The Hebrew Scriptures usually designate the deity either by the name “YHWH” or by the noun “Elohim.” In fact, “YHWH Elohim” occurs in the Pentateuch in only one other instance (Exod. 9:30).

Many scholars have tried to explain the consistent occurrence of “YHWH Elohim” in Genesis 2 and 3 by suggesting that “YHWH” was original to this account (as is characteristic of the J source). “Elohim,” so the argument goes, was added by a later redactor to assure the identity of YHWH in chapters 2 and 3 with “Elohim,” the common appellation of the deity in the P account of chapter 1 (e.g. von Rad 75; Delitzsch 112; Driver 36-7). However, this suggestion is hardly convincing for it is difficult to believe that anyone would feel compelled to amend “YHWH” with “Elohim” so that readers would not be confused. A Jewish reader would readily identify YHWH in chapters 2 and 3 with Elohim in Chapter 1.

Concerning the odd designation of the deity in this narrative, Nahum Sarna comments that “admittedly . . . the remarkable concentration of the combination of these divine names in this narrative and their virtual absence hereafter have not been satisfactorily explained” (17). Nevertheless, if we postulate a polytheistic context for the original story behind the Yahwist account (cf. Gen. 3:22), the problem is easily solved.

Since 3:5 and 3:22 strongly suggest a polytheistic context for the original myth, is it not reasonable to assume that the original characters were the “Elohim” (see Procksch 19), that is, “the gods?” According to this scenario, a later hand added “YHWH” in order to purge the original story of its polytheism. In short, although the plural form אלהים is usually understood in the singular in Israelite religion (i.e. “God”), it seems that the plural “gods” better fits the context of the original story behind the Yahwist account, especially in light of the first person plural references in 3:5 and 3:22.

If we assume that the original story behind Genesis 2 and 3 was set in a polytheistic context, we must now ask: are there indications that Genesis 2-3 has a similar scapegoating story behind it such as the one implied behind Ezekiel 28? In order to answer this question, two more elements in

---

<sup>21</sup> The exception is Gen. 3:1-5 where only Elohim appears.

the Genesis text need to be explained. The first is the threatened punishment leveled at Adam by the deity. The second is the envy of the gods.

### **The original fate of Adam: exile or death?**

In the Genesis narrative, Adam is exiled from Eden as punishment for his transgression. However, the Ezekiel passage suggests a story of collective murder. Is there anything in the text of Genesis which might suggest that death was the fate of the primal man in the original myth? In fact, the text contains two striking oddities which point in that direction.

One impressive bit of evidence for the death of Adam concerns YHWH's threat in 2:16-17:

And YHWH Elohim commanded the man, saying, "You may freely eat of every tree of the garden; but of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil you may not eat, for in the day that you eat of it you shall die." (RSV, emended)

This threat is twice reiterated in the Genesis narrative (Gen. 3:3, 4). The thrice-mentioned death threat is troubling because the eventual punishment is not death but expulsion. Attempts to explain away this textual inconsistency by suggesting that the threat refers to Adam's loss of immortality are misguided, for the text presumes just the opposite.<sup>22</sup> We solve the problem, however, if we postulate that the death threat is a remnant of the original myth, where a death actually occurs.

The next piece of evidence features a surprising link between the Ezekiel passage and the Genesis text. Umberto Cassuto has noted the interesting linguistic connection between the "ashes" (אפר) in Ezek. 28:18 ("and I turned you to ashes upon the earth") and the "dust" (עפר) in Gen. 3:19 ("you are dust, and to dust you shall return"). In each instance, ash/dust is connected with the ultimate fate of the doomed individual. On the surface, each text seems to be punning upon the other. However, since it is hard to imagine any direct textual dependence of Genesis on Ezekiel or vice-versa, it is more likely that each text points to a common story in which the word אפר ("ashes") occurred. But what indications are there that

---

<sup>22</sup> As Westermann points out, the meanings "you will become mortal" or "you will die sometime later" are hardly possible (225). Gen. 3:22 indicates that the expulsion of Adam and Eve is intended to prevent their gaining immortality (Sarna 18, 21). Hence, the whole story presumed their mortality, not their immortality as is often assumed.

the underlying myth contained the word אפר (“ashes”) rather than עפר (“dust”)?

In the Genesis account, עפר (“dust”) seems secondary for a number of reasons (cf. Gunkel 6). First, in 2:7, it interferes with the pun that demonstrates the chthonic origin and nature of humanity.<sup>23</sup> Second, עפר sits awkwardly in the verse.<sup>24</sup> Third, in the other parts of this creation narrative where God creates from the ground (בן-אדמה), there is no mention of dust (2:9; 2:19). Finally, the only other place that עפר is used in connection with a human being<sup>25</sup> is in 3:19 where God tells Adam, “You are dust and to dust you shall return.” However, this description of humanity is unnecessary (and hence probably secondary), for the phrase immediately preceding has already expressed the same idea. Here, as at the beginning of the narrative, the phrase puns on אדם (“human”) and אדמה (“ground”): “[YHWH Elohim said to Adam] . . . By the sweat of your face you will eat bread *until you return to the ground because you were taken from it*” (emphasis added).

On the other hand, אפר (“ashes”) fits quite well into the narrative of Ezekiel 28. For instance, the text of Ezek. 28:18 states: “I brought forth fire . . . and it consumed you.” Hence, the phrase “I turned you into ashes (אפר) upon the earth” follows naturally from this statement, especially in light of the “stones of fire” that have appeared earlier in the text (28:14, 16).

In sum, there are several strong arguments for the death of the victim in the original myth. First, the Ezekiel text reflects such a scenario. Second, throughout the Genesis narrative of Eden runs the threat of death, a threat which, despite the transgression, is never carried out. Finally, the link between אפר (“ashes”) in the Ezekiel narrative and עפר (“dust”) in the Genesis story suggests that one of these words derived from the original myth. The awkwardness with which the word עפר (“dust”) fits the Genesis narrative versus the easy fit of אפר (“ashes”) with the Ezekiel narrative indicates that the latter is most likely the original. This, in turn, recom-

<sup>23</sup> This pun can be roughly translated into English: “YHWH Elohim formed the earthling (האדם) [of dust] from the earth (בן-האדמה).”

<sup>24</sup> This is especially so since the preposition מן follows עפר. Hence, עפר must be understood in apposition to the direct object האדם. Consequently, the best English rendering of the phrase would be something like: “YHWH Elohim formed the earthling (who was made from dust) from the earth.” So עפר functions as the accusative of material (Cassuto 106). But it is nevertheless redundant and cumbersome.

<sup>25</sup> The word עפר also appears in 3:14 where the serpent is condemned to eat dust.

mends that the earliest myth, like the Ezekiel passage, featured the death of the individual.

We will now address the reason for the death of the individual: envy, or in Girardian terms, mimesis. The Genesis story and the Ezekiel text point to the envy and rivalry of the gods as the cause of the protagonist's punishment.

### **The envy of the gods in Genesis, chapters 2 and 3**

It is evident that envy or mimesis lay at the heart of the original myth underlying Gen. 2-3 and Ezek. 28:12-19. We still see this envy in the biblical texts, although faintly. The clearest example is in Gen. 3:22 and 24.<sup>26</sup>

22 Then YHWH Elohim said, "Behold, the man has become like *us* (כְּאֵדָם מִמֶּנּוּ), knowing good and evil: and now, lest he put forth his hand and take also of the tree of life, and eat, and live forever."

24 He drove out the man; and at the east of the garden of Eden he placed the cherubim, and a flaming sword which turned every way, to guard the way to the tree of life. (RSV, emended; emphasis added)

According to this passage—the same passage that contains evidence of the plurality of divine beings—Adam's punishment resulted not directly from his transgression but rather because he had roused the envy of the gods. The gods are here concerned that Adam might totally eliminate all distinction between humankind and themselves. It is no accident that such elimination of distinctions in a society leaves that group open to the destructive power of mimesis. And the destructive power of mimesis can most effectively be neutralized by focusing it on a single individual.

The collective nature of the action against Adam, clearly specified in Gen. 3:22, recalls the fact that the individual in the Ezekiel narrative suffered his demise at the hands of the other gods (i.e. "the stones of fire") in the divine council. Although we do not specifically see envy in the Ezekiel account, we are confronted with hints of rivalry (in the form of

---

<sup>26</sup> It is almost universally agreed that verse 23 is out of place. Verse 24 provides the conclusion to 22, while verse 23 is intrusive. See, for example, Westermann 271; von Rad 94.

hubris) in verse 17. According to that verse, the gods (i.e., "stones of fire") destroy the primal man because: "[His] heart was proud because of [his] beauty; / [He] corrupted wisdom for the sake of [his] splendor."

The "gods" behind the Genesis and Ezekiel accounts—that is, the community of human beings from whom the tellers of the myth descended—successfully directed their rivalrous violence away from themselves. They accomplished this by focusing their violence on a scapegoat whom the Genesis text calls Adam. Adam, originally a member of the circle of the "gods," was most likely murdered as a result of the mimetic rivalry of the others.

### **The evolution of Genesis 2 and 3**

The Genesis narrative—like the text of Ezek. 28—suggests that at some time in the distant past, a community convulsed by a great social crisis suddenly and unanimously focused its violence on a single, convenient victim. This action provided an outlet for the diffused aggression and, as a result, effected the "creation" of that society. Although we cannot track the evolution of the Adam and Eve narrative with any great precision, we can make some comments about the development of the story from its origin in the primal crime to its final form in Genesis 2 and 3. The development of the story was aided by five significant narrative additions, each of which helped to cover up the collective violence of the primal murder

First and foremost, the earliest form of the myth justified the punishment received by the primal man. The fact that the Adam and Eve story as well as the Ezekiel variant (cf. also Isa. 14 and many Canaanite parallels) attribute the cause of the primal man's demise to pride (cf. Jensen) shows that this justification for the punishment was clearly an early, if not the very earliest element of the mythic narrative.

Second, at some point in its history, the myth introduced the prohibition to steer clear of the tree. The addition of this prohibition also aids the justification of Adam's punishment. The trivial nature of this command, however, stands out from the Adam and Eve narrative as something quite remarkable. Although the Adam and Eve story portrays the victim as guilty and deserving punishment, the reader of the biblical text wonders if the punishment really fits the crime. The addition of the tree prohibition may also have come early in the evolution of the myth (i.e., before the Yahwist version).

Third, the collective nature of the crime was eliminated in the course of the myth's development. The gods became the God named "YHWH Elohim." This change must have taken place early in the myth's evolution for in both the Ezekiel text and the Genesis account, YHWH and the inhabitant(s) of Eden are the primary characters of the narrative and all hints of collective murder are suppressed. In the Genesis and Ezekiel accounts, the other deities are not absolved of responsibility as in the earlier version(s) of the myth. They simply cease to exist. Only their telltale shadows remain (e.g. Gen. 3:5; 3:22; etc.).

Fourth, the punishment for the transgression became exile instead of death during the course of the myth's history. This move alone virtually eliminated any hint of violence from the picture. This change probably occurred at a relatively early time since even the Ezekiel text implies the change of punishment from death to exile (cf. Ezek. 28:16).

The fifth addition to the story is the inclusion of a quasi-dualism. In the final version of the story the serpent (possibly one of the original gods) has become the tempter. This addition accomplishes two things. First, it puts the serpent and the deity in an adversarial relationship, making Adam and Eve mere pawns in the struggle between these two beings.<sup>27</sup> Second, it removes virtually all responsibility for Adam's fate from YHWH Elohim (i.e., the former gods). The role of the serpent in the Genesis account resembles the role of Loki in the Scandinavian myth about Baldr's death. Although we cannot determine with any precision when this change took place, it is fair to say that it was probably relatively late in the evolution of the myth, since the Ezekiel account gives no hint of a tempter in its text.

Finally, a much later hand—possibly even the Yahwist—added the woman to the story.<sup>28</sup> When Eve enters the story, the disobedience is attributed to her. This erases the last of the original elements of the crime. The original perpetrators (the "gods") have been concealed, the original crisis (envy) is virtually invisible, the primal crime (murder) has been covered up, and the original victim all but disappears, becoming merely a pale imitator of his spouse's disobedience: "She took of its fruit and ate; and she also gave some to her husband, and he ate" (Gen. 3:6b).

---

<sup>27</sup> Since the serpent takes the role of the adversary in this text, the later tradition (quite logically) identified the serpent with Satan, the ultimate adversary of God.

<sup>28</sup> Westermann (230) points out that the tradition about the creation of the woman, although in itself very old, has been inserted into the narrative. Its secondary character is also demonstrated by the fact that the woman's creation is not found in the Ezekiel tradition.



It is interesting to note that the writer who added the woman to the story did not do so with perfect consistency. *She* is not explicitly expelled from the garden. Only the man is: "Therefore YHWH Elohim sent *him* forth from the garden of Eden to work the ground from which he had been taken. He drove out the *man* ... (Gen. 3:23-24; emphasis added).

### **Is Genesis 2 and 3 revealing or concealing?**

One of Girard's main contentions is that some texts of the Bible are revelatory, thus making it possible to see how religions traditionally have justified and camouflaged the sacrifice of innocent victims. Is this myth as we now have it at least partially revelatory or does it further conceal the original violent event? Because of the modifications and additions to the original myth do we see the sacrificial mechanism at work or is it hidden even further from view?

Suffice it to suggest that the monotheism of the Israelite tradition led to many of the changes that we have attempted to outline, changes which came from the belief in a single caring deity who walked with Adam in the garden, who provided a mate for him, and who, in spite of their disobedience, fashioned clothing for Adam and Eve when they recognized their nakedness (3:20-21). The author was probably not even aware of what the myth that he or she was using had covered up. Hence, there was no conscious or even unconscious intention to conceal or reveal. Nevertheless, in the hands of the Yahwist, we can see how the influence of the distinctive religious faith of ancient monotheistic Israel had already begun its critique of polytheism and the mythology of guilty victims.

### WORKS CITED

- Allen, Leslie C. 1990. "Ezekiel 20-48." *Word29*. Dallas: Word.
- Brown, Francis; Driver, S. A.; and Briggs, C. A. 1975. *Hebrew and English Lexicon of the Old Testament*. Oxford: Clarendon.
- Brueggemann, Walter. 1982. *Genesis*. Interpretation. Atlanta: John Knox.
- Cassuto, Umberto. 1961. *A Commentary on the Book of Genesis 1*. Jerusalem: Magnes.
- Clifford, Richard J. 1972. *The Cosmic Mountain in Canaan and the Old Testament*. Harvard Semitic Monographs 4. Cambridge: Harvard University Press.
- Cooke, G. A. 1936. *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Book of Ezekiel*. International Critical Commentary. Edinburgh: Clark.

- Delitzsch, Franz. 1889. *A New Commentary on Genesis 1*. New York: Scribner & Welford.
- Driver, S. R. 1904. *The Book of Genesis*. New York: Gorham; London: Methuen.
- Dumézil, Georges. 1968. *Myth et épopée*. Paris: Bibliothèque des sciences humains.
- Eichrodt, Walter. 1970. *Ezekiel*. London: SCM.
- Friedman, Richard Elliott. 1987. *Who Wrote the Bible?* San Francisco: Harper & Row.
- Girard, René. 1977. *Violence and the Sacred*. Translated by Patrick Gregory. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press.
- . 1986. *The Scapegoat*. Translated by Yvonne Freccero. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press.
- . 1987b. "Generative Scapegoating." In *Violent Origins*, edited by R. G. Hamerton-Kelly, 73-105. Stanford: Stanford University Press.
- Girard, René, Jean-Michel Oughourlian and Guy Lefort. 1987a. *Things Hidden Since the Foundation of the World*. Translated by Stephen Bann and Michael Metteer. Stanford: Stanford University Press.
- Gunkel, Hermann. 1964. *Genesis*. Göttinger Handkommentar zum Alten Testament. Göttingen; Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht.
- Hamerton-Kelly, Robert G. 1992. *Sacred Violence: Paul's Hermeneutic of the Cross*. Minneapolis: Fortress Press.
- Jensen, Hans J. L. 1991. "The Fall of the King." *Scandinavian Journal of the Old Testament* 1: 121-147.
- Lévi-Strauss, Claude. 1964. *Totemism*. London: Merlin.
- Miller, Patrick D. 1973. *The Divine Warrior in Early Israel*. Harvard Semitic Monographs 3. Cambridge: Harvard University Press.
- Procksch, Otto. 1924. *Die Genesis übersetzt und erklärt*. Kommentar zum Alten Testament 1. Leipzig: Deichertsche.
- Ringgren, Helmer. 1974. "אלהים." *Theological Dictionary of the Old Testament* 1: 267-84.
- Sarna, Nahum. 1989. *Genesis*. Jewish Publication Society Torah Commentary. Philadelphia: JPS.
- von Rad, Gerhard. 1961. *Genesis*. Philadelphia: Westminster.
- Westermann, Claus. 1984. *Genesis 1-11*. Minneapolis: Augsburg.
- Yaron, Kalmon. 1964. "The Dirge over the King of Tyre." *Annual of the Swedish Theological Institute* 3: 28-57.
- Zimmerli, Walther. 1983. *Ezekiel 2*. Hermeneia. Philadelphia: Fortress.