

CHAPTER 3

☞ ^{1a}*Now the serpent was more clever than any beast of the field that YHVH, God, had made.*

Nothing is mentioned about what motives the serpent may have had for beginning the following dialogue. He was, however, the cleverest of the beasts and the only one, so far, capable of speech. God, after realizing that Adam was not self-sufficient, formed the animals as if in expectation that one of them might do as Adam's helper. Perhaps the serpent, thinking himself the most likely candidate, intended Eve's downfall to show Adam how foolish he had been in not having chosen the serpent when the animals were brought before him (Gen. 2:19–20).

☞ ^{1b}*And he said to the woman, "Did God actually say, "Do not eat of any tree in the garden?"*

Many questions will be asked in the book of Genesis. This questioning process was begun by the serpent. In general the questions in Genesis are not simple ones asked by someone ignorant of the answers. In the next chapter God, in imitation of the serpent, as it were, will pick up the habit of asking poignant questions when he calls out. "Where are you?" to the man and the woman who are hiding in the garden (Gen. 3:9). Next he will ask Cain, "Where is Abel your brother?" (Gen. 4:9). The three men who visit Abraham will ask him, "Where is Sarah your wife?" (Gen. 18:9), because they know that she is hiding behind the tent and will hear them. Isaac's simple question, "Where is the lamb?" (Gen. 22:7), is anything but simple to the reader. Perhaps the only other character in the book of Genesis capable of asking a purely naive question is Abimelech; see Chapter 20.

☞ ²*The woman said to the serpent, "We may eat of the fruit of the trees in the garden. ³But God said, 'Do not eat of the fruit of the tree that is in the middle of the garden, neither will you touch it, lest* you die.'"*

* Unfortunately there is no better equivalent than "lest" in modern English. The Hebrew carries the sense: "otherwise it may happen that ... and that would be a bad thing."

Since God's command had been given to Adam before Eve was made, she could only know about it through Adam. Her answer to the serpent revealed that she had misunderstood the command in several significant ways. First of all, she referred to the tree of knowledge as the tree which was in the middle of the garden, but in fact that was the tree of life. Secondly, there was no command about touching the tree, but only eating of it. Furthermore, God said, "You will surely die," not "lest you die." The oral tradition from Adam to the woman has become somewhat confused. It is strange that a book which relies so heavily on the validity of oral traditions should begin with such doubts about the validity of oral traditions as such. Perhaps the point is that the essential character of the original command is still present even in the garbled tradition which the woman had. She was still aware of the fact that she was not to eat the fruit of the tree which was standing before her.

☞ ⁴*But the serpent said to the woman, "You will not surely die."*

The serpent quoted God's words more accurately than did the woman; and in fact the serpent's words in Hebrew could have been taken to mean "[Did God] not [say] you will surely die?" This may be part of the serpent's attempt to demonstrate his own greater worthiness and at the same time to eliminate Eve.

☞ ⁵*"For God knows that when you eat of it your eyes will be opened, and you will be like God, knowing good and bad."*

The English word "evil" will not do as an adequate translation at this point. *Evil* implies a radical distinction between the failings of people and the failings of other beings. We do not ordinarily speak of an evil animal, nor do we say that a chair is evil because one of its legs is short. Neither the Hebrew language nor the text of the Hebrew Bible seems to justify such a radical distinction. To be sure, the Hebrew word usually has reference to people, as does the English word "evil"; but by no means does it refer primarily to human *activities*. More often than not it refers to the way in which things, animate, inanimate, or human—things such as beasts or pestilence, boils or poison, or people—affect people. Its meaning is closer to words like *disagreeable*, *malignant*, or, as here, just plain *bad*. Nevertheless, human intentions sometimes prove to be so thoroughly malevolent, or events so profoundly injurious that a word like "bad" is simply inadequate to describe them; in such cases "evil" is the right choice and I use it accordingly.

The phrase “good and bad” occurs several times throughout Tanakh, and an examination of those usages may be helpful in understanding the nature of the tree. It is used three times in the book of Genesis itself. In Genesis 24:50 and again in Genesis 31:24 Laban is warned by God to say nothing concerning Jacob, either good or bad. In Genesis 31:29, this is taken by Laban as being equivalent to *doing no harm* to him.

In the fourteenth chapter of II Samuel, Joab, realizing that King David’s decision to exile his own son, Absalom, would send David into despair and injure the political unity of the country, dispatches a woman from Tekoah to regale David with the trumped-up story that one of her sons has killed the other, and that she is in distress because the people of her city wish to sentence her only remaining son to death. The king commands that the son be protected. When the woman then reveals to David that it is he who has wrongly punished his own son, she refers to the knowledge appropriate to a king as “knowing [hearing] good and bad” (II Sam. 14:17). That definition of the phrase, “knowing good and bad,” will be made even more explicit in a conversation between God and King Solomon. At the beginning of his reign, Solomon will be offered any gift that he might desire. Instead of choosing riches or fame Solomon will request “an understanding heart, that I may judge your people, that I may discern between good and bad” (I Kings 3:9). Presumably it is by virtue of this wisdom that Solomon will make his famous decision concerning the two prostitutes and the disputed baby (I Kings 3:16).

In the beginning of the book of Deuteronomy, small children, too young to have formed any opinions during the period of slavery in Egypt, will be described as “not knowing good and bad” (Deut. 1:39). But at the end of that book these same children, now grown to adulthood, will be asked to choose between good and bad (Deut. 30:15). In all these cases, the knowledge of good and bad seems to be knowledge appropriate to political life. It has to do with many things: sometimes, as in the case of Laban, it implies simple power; at other times it concerns free choice as opposed to prejudices inherited from others—the choice Israel will be able to make only after it has been separated from the Egyptians for forty years. Finally, it is the knowledge appropriate to a king.

In verse 9 of the second chapter two strange trees, the tree of knowledge and the tree of life, were briefly mentioned; but the subject was dropped, and our attention turned to other matters. Immediately prior to God’s announcement of his decision to provide Adam with a helper, he