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Genesis Three in the Light of Key Hermeneutical Considerations

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INTRODUCTION

Though the Greek word ἑρμηνεύειν has three main shadings (to state, to expound, and to translate), the basic idea underlying all three meanings is "to mediate *understanding.*"

It is only in comparatively recent times, namely, in the Post-Reformation era, that the term hermeneutics has been used with the sense of a "theory concerning the exposition of texts," that is, rules of interpretation; nevertheless, even then it has always been understood that hermeneutics is more of an art than an exact science that sets up exact rules of interpretation which will of themselves yield guaranteed results.

Rather than to begin with a theoretical discussion of hermeneutical principles, we shall put Genesis 3 at the center of our consideration and view it and its concrete content in the light of three key hermeneutical considerations. We shall emphasize the areas of history, literary analysis, and theology as they play into its interpretation. Though these aspects must be discussed serially, in actual practice they must be used simultaneously, working like three gears moving together.

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THE GRAMMATICAL-HISTORICAL APPROACH

To understand a specific text we must first of all, *listen* to it; it must be and remain the subject and we the object; we must read and reread and listen; we must let it strike us; our occupational hazard is to speak before we have really listened. As we do this we will gradually perceive its unity and fix its limits (in the case of our chapter, Genesis 3, we must also consider Chapter 2, since the two chapters are a unit). We must also note the structure of the text. This gets the printed text into a form that enables us to see its basic structure. Then we must try to ascertain its literary type or genre. Many people have only one scale of judgment when they approach a text, the modern concept of historicity, and ask only the historical question "What really happened?" as if this were all that mattered. To be sure, it is important in its place, also for understanding a text, but sound hermeneutics teaches us that the decisive question is rather "What did the person (who was himself frequently a spokesman for God) speaking in the text want to say with his words to the hearers at that time?" As we pursue such study, attempts to identify the social milieu of the text make us ask, "For what purpose was the document written?" or, before it was even written down, "For

what purpose was the tradition preserved?" By such research we may be able to identify its setting in the life of the community out of which it came. We must also carefully interpret words and phrases, ascertaining by dictionary and concordance their normal use. The question of authorship, if the author is unknown, may be broached, though that question is not always decisive for understanding a text. We may ask: "Who spoke the text? Who then wrote it down? Who revised it, if there is any indication of that? Who transmitted it?" Another key question in understanding any text is: "How does it fit into the context, the immediate context and the more remote context?" Also, in the case of understanding an Old Testament text it is basic that its relation to the New Testament as part of the history of salvation and ultimately its relation to Christ must be considered. At the end of such investigations we ought to be able to tell what is the meaning of the text; we may not have been able to come to definite answers for all of our questions, but such research will certainly contribute to our understanding of the text. The proverbial grandmother reading it understands it intuitively, and yet the most learned exegete never masters it completely.

What has been briefly outlined is the grammatical-historical method of getting at the meaning of a text. We feel that there is an intended meaning, a literal sense, and we rightly search for it. Until we find it, the text puzzles us. Of course, the interpreter needs and seeks the guidance of the Holy Spirit as he pursues these studies. If we follow the Reformation principles of *sola scriptura* (and its hermeneutical corollaries, *scriptura sui ipsius interpres* or *scriptura scripturam interpretatur* — then we must let the texts themselves speak of the saving Gospel; tradition (even our own particular brand of tradition) or dogmatic authority dare not determine the result of the exegete's study in advance. The denominational exegete wishes to work within the scope of that tradition or confessional standard. But these formulations must always be considered a subordinate norm. A traditionalistic theory about the "how" of inspiration dare not be invoked to impose mere traditionalistic viewpoints upon the text. If we take seriously the verbal inspiration of the Holy Scriptures, we will, on the one hand, by no means be satisfied with the utterly inadequate and misleading idea that the Holy Scriptures merely contain the Word of God; we will confess that even the individual *verba* are inspired. But on the other hand, precisely because the Word of God condescended to come down to our level in space and time and history, and, so to say, entered the flesh of human speech, there is warrant for a serious search for the intended meaning with all available historical and philological-hermeneutical means at our disposal. We dare not therefore play this by ear; we dare not just take a leap into the dark. We must earnestly search for the intended literal sense (which can be much different than a literalistic interpretation, especially one which reads unwarranted modern presuppositions into the text). Sometimes we may not want to be bothered with such reexamination and rethinking; and we may even sometimes be tempted to excuse our refusal to rethink and to make necessary distinctions, say, among the various literary types in the Scriptures by alleging that if

a person even so much as embarks on such a course he will come to no understanding, or, even worse, a false, rationalistic understanding. In dealing with literature and history-writing from the ancient world we may find that because of different conventions and because of the intervening distance we do not always "catch on." But just for that reason we must study the ancient world, its history, and its culture for it is the background of Israel. No one objects to Biblical studies in the area of geography; some might object to archaeological and historical research; still more to literary research. But, as we can see when we are confronted with the problem of understanding Genesis 3, we cannot avoid discussing such things.

I. Genesis Three in the Light of Its Historical Nature

History

We must ask, "What do we mean when we call this account of the Fall a historical account?" for it is evident that there are all sorts of history, historiography, and historical documents (e. g., mere archive annals are historical; so are sagas like the legends of King Arthur; so are genealogies). The danger here is, of course, that we impose modern definition on ancient works; therefore, to narrow our question even more (and be more in conformity with genuine hermeneutical approach), we put the question in a more specific form: "What do the Scriptures themselves tell us about Israel's view of the past?" Of all peoples of the ancient world, Israel seems to have preserved her traditions most carefully. History was significant to her, for she was not a polytheistic nation living in the never-ending cycle of the annual cosmic struggle between divine forces of nature for control of the universe. In polytheistic cultures such a struggle is presented as a conflict between the gods in a story that is legitimately called a myth; in such a struggle mankind is peripheral (in The Babylonian Genesis, to take a typical example, man was made to be the slave of the gods). But Israel lived in the sober light of real historical events and dealt with only one God, the Lord. Man was considered a creature, and in evil days the Israelite did not run away from a patron deity that had failed him to another seemingly superior deity; he still turned to the Lord, the only true God. Because Israel had such a sense of history, what it reported of the past was reported from that presupposition of her faith. To be sure, her sense of history may appear primitive to us modern people with our present highly developed sense of history. For example, Israel included in history-telling (this is our designation) things which modern, Greek-oriented, scientifically exact historians might easily dismiss, but it is nevertheless history. There are, therefore, many types of history in the Scriptures. (Cf. 2 Sam. 8 with 2 Sam. 9; 1 Kings 2 or Gen. 1—11 with Jer. 36—45)

Israel's Historiography

How did the Israelite historian go about his work? A Biblical author of the period of Israel's monarchy, for example, had available all sorts of material for his proposed history. Some events he had himself experienced, of others which were farther removed from him in time and space he learned from eyewitnesses or even third or fourth hand; still other events were remembered by the people from earlier times. Finally, he could consult written

documents which in turn represented everything from eyewitness accounts to popular anecdotes. Now it is true that a Biblical author by divine inspiration sees the past from a different point of view than a secular writer, namely, *sub specie aeternitatis,* but as far as his human knowledge of its details is concerned, it remains what it was before the charisma of divine inspiration was added. Inspiration guarantees that the author will report what God wants him to and that it will certainly not deceive, but inspiration does not have to imply that a Biblical author receives new information.

To make this general description of historiography in ancient Israel more relevant, we shall briefly trace Israel's historiography backward from the period of the monarchy, beginning at this period where it can be more easily controlled and then proceeding backward toward the beginning, which is our immediate concern, thus proceeding from what is historiographically more clear to that which is less clear. A good share of the material in the Second Book of Samuel, for example, consists of references of an exact character that come from almost contemporary accounts. The events recorded there had occurred in a well-ordered society; the royal court, as well as the temple, had their officials, their secretaries and archives (2 Sam. 8:15-18; 20:23-26). In such a society which existed only after David's unification of the nation and establishment of the Jerusalem capital, the activity of writing about the past was carried on, and undoubtedly much of Israel's history was recorded. We must now ask how writers of this time of the monarchy were informed about the events of the past. And we have every right to investigate this, for the Bible is not a block of divine information that fell ready-made from heaven, nor does it claim the pseudo-authority which the 19th-century authors of the Book of Mormon tried to give that patently unauthentic document. By contrast, the Bible reflects an authentically historical origin.

David and Solomon

We are best informed, of course, about David and Solomon. We have contemporary documents from their times. For example, in 2 Sam. 1 we have David's famous Lament for Jonathan and Saul, which few doubt comes from this period. Its superscription gives us most enlightening insight into the path — typical in many respects — that this famous elegy traveled before it got into its present spot in the Book of Samuel. (a) After David had first sung it orally on the original occasion of the tragic news of the battle of Mount Gilboa, it was (b) taught to the people of Judah and presumably repeatedly sung by them; (c) then it was written down in the "Book of Jasher," which was apparently an anthology of war poems that is no longer extant, but which is also quoted in Joshua 10:12 f.; then (d) finally, in this written form it was transferred by the author-compiler into its present location in what we call the Second Book of Samuel.

Similarly it is certain that in 2 Sam. 9 to 1 Kings 2 we have a consistent and compact document from a person so well-informed about the court struggle for succession to David's throne that even secular historians hail this as an authentic eyewitness account preceding Herodotus, the so-called Father of History, by at least 400 years. Nevertheless, even from this exceptionally well-documented period of his-

tory we do not always get to know everything that a modern historian might want to know; for example, we do not actually know how the young man David came into Saul's court, because the various Biblical accounts are not identical. In one case, Chapter 16, he comes because Saul's servants have found him to be most suitable to serve the melancholy king; in Chapter 18, however, he comes to the court as a result of his singular victory over Goliath. But it is normal even today that more than one version circulates about one specific event, for example, the different accounts concerning the beginning of the New Deal. If it turns out in such a case that we are dealing with a double tradition about one event, no doubt both rest on objective facts, even though the nature of the present information does not allow us to establish more about the exact historical events. The charisma of inspiration did not indicate to the Biblical author which of the traditions was the closer to what moderns might term the one historical reality; but, as has been said, this it not the prime hermeneutical question. The Biblical scholar has something more important to turn to even after he leaves such a historical question unsolved. Undoubtedly both accounts are legitimate simplifications of complex reality; therefore it seems unwise either to try to harmonize the present accounts in such a way as to suppress any part of either of them or to resort to the sort of literary surgery which earlier documentary-hypothesis theorists once practiced. We must take the accounts as they stand.

Samuel and Saul

In the stories about the introduction of the new institution of monarchy to replace Israel's old-fashioned 12-tribe confederacy at the time of Samuel, there is, as is well known, a certain ambivalence. Some of the accounts are told without one bit of criticism of the institution of monarchy (e. g., the charming story of how young Saul went to look for his father's lost she-asses and found a crown). But other stories show how Samuel and other contemporaries criticized as wicked the very idea of Israel having an earthly king alongside the Lord, the real King. Our curiosity for more exact details about what actually happened, a curiosity which was foreign to the Hebrews' tradition, remains unsatisfied, but to furnish exact details is, after all, not the purpose of the Holy Scriptures. It brings rather a message central to the history of salvation: the establishment of God's own kingship on earth, a kingship certainly not achieved by Saul, nor even by the man after the Lord's heart, David, but one finally manifested in our risen Lord Jesus. It is simply unfair to impugn the sort of historiography that tells of Samuel and Saul because it does not present all the facts which we moderns may well expect, we who live in an age when our sense of history has been sharpened by modern means of communication to such an extent that at 5:30 each evening we are eye- and ear-witnesses to key events in our times. The ancient world, however, did not have our sharpened sense of history. Only a person with a perverted sense of history would demand of ancient documents such modern characteristics. Even though we are closer to events, more than one version of a complex event may circulate (after all, historical events are really more complex than we popularly imagine).

Joshua and Judges

The stories about Joshua and the Judges lie farther back in Israel's historical memory. The events from that period are, therefore, understandably not related with the precision of the events of David's life nor with the precision which a modern reader expects. In fact, the average modern reader who approaches these books with little understanding of the ancient world and its customs will find himself in a strange, if not bewildering, world.

For example, details about the centuries-long process of Israel's settling down in the Holy Land are fragmentary. In the Song of Deborah (Judges 5) we have a seemingly contemporary account of the victory over the Canaanites; but the parallel report in Chapter 4 is shaped by the conventions which mark the reports of Israel's ancient holy wars. This does not mean that the latter, more stylized, report is less true, although its more fragmentary nature transmits to us less historical information about the details of this period than does the contemporary Song of Deborah. The sacred writer, however, has used his material well; it is a wonderful history of salvation which is able to speak its message across the centuries even to people who are unaware of the exact historical significance of many of the conventions which are employed. Our point is that the information available to us from the history writers of Israel's monarchy period about her past in the days of Joshua and the Judges is much more fragmentary than that available to us from their accounts of David.

The Exodus

Strangely enough, the records of the Exodus and wilderness wanderings give us a much clearer picture. These accounts were much better preserved, perhaps because they were told and retold so often before the dispersion of the tribes in Canaan; perhaps they were already liturgically fixed in the Passover and festival liturgies. Nevertheless, we should not imagine that even these accounts were ever meant to conform to modern canons of historiography.

The Patriarchs

Next, we come to the stories about the patriarchs. Granting that the oldest written documents from which the patriarchal stories have been constructed came from the time of Moses, it must still be remembered that between Abraham and Moses there are approximately 500 years during which time the stories were preserved largely through oral tradition. It is rather widely recognized today that under certain conditions oral tradition is quite precise, especially when it transmits important material. With regard to the transmission of the patriarchal stories, it should be noted that ideal circumstances for trustworthy transmission existed: a closed circle bound together by blood and religion (first a family, and then a slave people living in isolation for centuries with only the anchor of stories of the patriarchs and of the divine promise to unite them). In this case the most important details impressed themselves very deeply on Israel's memory. We may, in fact, be sure that any stories which might have been created in the period of the monarchy and then projected back on a supposed earlier time, as Wellhausen originally maintained, would look quite different from what we have. Israel took along from Egypt at the Exodus

a holy tradition of the past, a tradition formulated by Moses.

The patriarchal stories bear the marks of popular history remembered by the people over the centuries. Their inspiration in no sense affects this historic insight. In fact, inspiration, as part of God's gracious condescension to man, used the manifold forms in which past events were communicated in those days. Even when it is inspired by the Holy Ghost, such popular history does not suddenly become our type of scientific history. What is constant in this historical report is God's gracious revelation to man and man's corresponding response of faith in God, the one and only true God, the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, and the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ.

The Primeval History

Finally we come to the question, "What sort of 'sources' did Israel have available for its knowledge of the earliest primeval history?" If we are to get at the grammatical-historical nature and gain clarity on the intended sense of Genesis 3, we must patiently continue our tracing of Israel's historiography to the end. First, let us look at the matter of a possible source for Genesis 1—11 in a primeval tradition, one mediated through the great antediluvian and postdiluvian ancestors from primeval times, the so-called *traditio primitiva.* This traditional explanation is inadequate as an explanation of the source of Genesis 1—11. Adam and Eve, it would seem, not only transmitted their religious faith to their children but also told them what they had experienced in the way things happened. Hence, the existence of such a first-phase *traditio primitiva* ought not be denied. In the Biblical primeval history Israel hears from God something about God's special and gracious blessing upon man and even of His care for fallen man in primeval time. Israel also hears how the first sin worked itself out: namely, again and again there was great apostasy culminating in the dispersion of the nations. Mankind had alienated itself completely from God. Scripture does say that in a general way God revealed Himself to the people of primeval times (Rom. 1:19,20; Acts 14:17); but Scripture also teaches that God revealed Himself far more clearly to Israel! After mankind had corrupted itself, the true God spoke to the patriarchs of Israel.

The second phase of the history of revelation begins with Abraham's call and a new intervention of God, whereby He again undertakes the establishment of His rule among men. If, of all nations, Israel alone was loyal to the true religion, it was *not* because the true religion was transmitted uncorrupted through a chosen series of families and is thus supposed to have come to Israel *(traditio primitiva).* No, the Lord's special revelation to Israel is the exclusive cause and explanation of Israel's religion. This point is important for our understanding of the Biblical primeval history in general and of Genesis 3 in particular. The direct source of the Biblical primeval history is to be sought not in the *revelatio primitiva* but in the revelation which was given to Israel.

The theory concerning the transmission of the *revelatio primitiva* has been traditional among us. It seemed to offer the best defense of the accuracy of the accounts in Gen. 1—11. Other theories about their preservation seemed incompatible with orthodox faith and sound Biblical study. But these traditional views must be

reexamined for a number of reasons. We have, it seems to this writer, Biblical warrant for dropping them in Joshua 24:2, where Joshua at the Shechem covenant-renewal festival says to Israel, "Thus says the Lord, the God of Israel, 'Your fathers lived of old beyond the Euphrates, Terah, the father of Abraham and of Nahor; and *they served other gods.* Then I took your father Abraham from beyond the River.'" What Abraham received as tradition in the way of religions and what his ancestoral family continued to hold to in Haran was a form of paganism (a form of paganism, by the way, which is not entirely unknown to us, especially since the discovery of the contemporary Mari texts).

All of this brings us to the conclusion that we must therefore approach the primeval history and Genesis 3 with the understanding that we are here dealing with Israel's view of the most ancient past. Israel is, it would appear, the only correct point of departure for understanding these accounts. If we are therefore to get at the primeval facts, we must be anxious to determine: "What did *Israel* know of this?" Or, to divide this one question into two parts, we may ask: (1) "What could Israel know of the most ancient past in a purely natural manner, by traditional transmission?" and (2) "To what extent did Israel get knowledge of this in a supernatural manner?"

The "Source" of the Primeval History

Though there may be several possible ways of viewing God's role in the origin of the Genesis account, it still remains a question of basic importance to inquire concerning Israel's human role in the recording of this primitive history, even if we ask this only in order to determine the extent of the divine intervention.

We must, therefore, continue our line of inquiry to the very limit and ask also of this earliest period of history and the historiography dealing with it: "How great in this case is the temporal distance between the story and the events that are related in it?" and, "What are the possibilities of transmission?" The answers are: "The temporal distance is very great" and "For the reason given above we must disregard the possibility of any tradition (oral, sung, or written) so specific that it could be the explanation for the primeval history in its present concrete form."

The traditional assumption of 4,000 years from Adam to Christ has been virtually abandoned. A study of Genesis 5 and 11 shows that we are dealing here not with chronologies but with genealogies. The genealogies in the primitive history in Chapters 5 and 11, for example, serve as bridges between Israel's ancestors and the earlier ancestors of mankind. Recently discovered ancient-world king lists and genealogies have put us on the track of the specific literary type or genre of these Israelite systems.[1]

The historical probability (let alone possibility) of even a somewhat detailed and rather well-structured tradition from Adam to Abraham stands or falls with the traditional chronology. Thus people formerly argued: "When Adam died, Noah's father was 56 years old; he therefore had the best knowledge of these events of the primeval world and he impressed them on Noah. And Noah, in turn, was still able

[1] Umberto Cassuto, *A Commentary on the Book of Genesis* (Jerusalem: Hebrew University 1961), I, 249 ff.

to personally transmit them to Abraham, since Abraham was already 60 years old when Noah died." If this were true, one might say that the form and content of this account does go back to eyewitnesses whose witness has been transmitted to the Biblical account unchanged. But the premise is not true, and any interpretation which lays serious claim to getting at the intended grammatical-historical sense of the account will have to resort to other arguments.[2]

What then is the thread that connects Israel with the primeval events which lay beyond her empirical experience and knowledge at the outermost edge of the horizon of the beginnings? It would seem that Israel's accounts of such events must be judged in terms of the providential intervention of God. Israel's knowledge of the original events depended on revelation. But even here we would bypass God's way of acting if we interpreted the first chapters of Genesis as if they fell from heaven as they are. Hence revelation in this connection must mean something more like this: that Israel came to its knowledge of these primeval events by means of, on the one hand, inspired reflection upon the tremendous historical experience which she had had with the Lord in history, and, on the other hand, by a centuries-long practical and meditative wrestling with the great problems of life, especially with the problem of evil (for, as we shall see, this is the central concern in Genesis 3).

Protology and Eschatology

People in the ancient Near East were also curious and anxious to know such things, not only as far as the distant future but also the distant past was concerned.[3] In its own way the ancient Near East had profane knowledge of this. It had explanations for phenomena and there was a profane knowledge which was founded on events which actually happened and on actual phenomena that had occurred. Israel did not first have to invent its own "science" of astronomy, of metallurgy, etc.; it had inherited the "science" of its time, especially that which originated in the most advanced culture, Mesopotamia.

When He began His revelation to Israel, God, so to say, found Israel's head already full of ideas and concepts. God, who revealed the essential facts of salvation from the past to Israel, found already present very definite human ideas about the past. What otherwise happens in the Holy Scriptures seems to have happened also here. The peculiar construction which Israel had of primeval times, and sometimes we can even establish the provenience of the building materials which Israel had gathered, became the vehicle, the needed points of crystallization, for the essential facts of salvation which God wanted to share with Israel. Israel's divinely illuminated ideas about the great religious problems and Israel's repertoire of profane knowledge became a living

[2] Henricus Renckens, *Urgeschichte und Heilsgeschichte,* translated from the Dutch by Hugo Zulauf, 2d ed. (Mainz: Matthias-Grünewald, 1961), p. 36: "There may be better proofs [of the reliability of Gen. 1—3], but this proof proves nothing." This volume has been translated into English by Charles Napier: *Israel's Concept of the Beginning* (New York: Herder and Herder, 1964).

[3] A comparison of the form and method of Old Testament eschatology with its protology reveals striking similarities in historical understanding and literary form.

unity, one single account. God, it would seem, grafted His revelation on the already existing human knowledge of Israel.

II. Genesis Three in the Light of Its Literary Nature

It is evident that our approach to Genesis 3 via the historical route has not really completed our investigation, though it should have clarified some of our views concerning the nature of the historical material with which we are dealing. Before turning to the key question of the ultimate meaning of Genesis 3 in the light of its theological nature, we must take a look at Genesis 3 from the angle of its literary nature.

Unity and Unevennesses in Genesis 2 and 3

Chapter 3, together with Chapter 2, is part of one unitary pericope. The narrative that begins at Gen. 2:4 ought not be considered a second account of creation, as is so often done. It is rather another step in the primeval history, since this account concerns itself not with the question of why the world exists, but why the world and man exist as they are: sinful and in rebellion against their Creator. The fact that the rather unique title "The Lord God" occurs only here in the Book of Genesis serves to signal the reader that this section should be set off from its own immediate context. Despite the basic unity of Genesis 2 and 3 as a literary composition, it is not as polished as Chapter 1. Certain unevennesses appear within the story, and for centuries commentators have had to deal with them in one way or another. They are perhaps not more than what McKenzie nicely calls "faintly discordant themes."[4] For example, sometimes one gets the impression that the Garden of Eden is a sort of oasis, while at other times it seems to be the source of great rivers. In 3:18 man is to eat of the grass of the field, whereas in 3:19 he is to eat bread in the sweat of his brow. Those who overemphasize such unevennesses have gone so far as to posit a mixing of pastoral and agricultural backgrounds. Perhaps more to the point is the observation that according to 3:23 f. man's punishment is that he is driven from the garden back to the *adhamâh* from which he had been taken by God and put into the garden. Therefore he must cultivate the *adhamâh* outside of Paradise. This *adhamâh* never was part of Paradise, it seems, and therefore it will be difficult to cultivate. But we read in 3:17-19 that the *adhamâh* is cursed and thereafter brings forth thorns and thistles. If the entire *adhamâh* had been paradisal before the fall, the special description of the garden would be really superfluous. It should be added that once you try to perform surgery and remove any mildly discordant parts and themes, you run into more trouble and find yourself tampering with an essential part of the story. The feeling of unevenness such as we perhaps do not expect in polished literary composition persists, however, and it is not improbable that our account had predecessors and is itself the crowning synthesis of a long tradition.

Certain obscurities will always remain in the history of the transmission of this chapter. The person who merely stares at such unevennesses and obscurities till they

[4] John L. McKenzie, "The Literary Characteristics of Genesis 2—3," *Myths and Realities* (Milwaukee: Bruce Publishing Co., 1963) p. 157.

blind him finally loses sight of what is entirely clear to the proverbial grandmother. The main defect in the preoccupation with doublets is that it always points to accounts which are otherwise unknown and hypothetical while it tends to abandon the account that lies before us and whose meaning we wish to understand. If not every detail of this account shows a willingness to become transparent to our view even after we bring all available insights to bear on it, we must remember that the writer is perhaps working with ancient narrative material which long since may well have taken on certain definite form, so that he feels himself bound to certain expressions and conceptions which he seeks to work into his new synthesis. Many details may therefore be older than the synthesis which we now have in the present account.

The probable circumstance that not every part of Genesis 3 was born at the same time could well be the explanation why no one has thus far succeeded in giving a completely definitive exegesis of Genesis 2 and 3. But such an explanation cannot be forced. Too often people fall prey to the temptation of getting rid of the "disturbing elements" by correcting the text or by some other such expedient. Thereby they can obtain a logically coherent whole, but they soon find themselves tampering with essential parts of the narrative. And in the end no one will deny that the full Biblical text is our concern, rather than the "best" modern revision or abridgment.

If we knew the exact course of our text's prehistory, that might well help us explain satisfactorily some of the external details; but it is doubtful whether we would thereby become the wiser as far as the real intent of the account is concerned, because the present account is a most original piece of literature. It is dominated by one spirit. Our main emphasis will therefore have to be directed to the completed building, not to the stones out of which it has been built.

The Nature of Ancient Books, Authorship, and Literary Activity

Before we move into a discussion of "parallels" and other literary matters, it will be helpful to remind ourselves of the quite different nature of books, authorship, and literary activity in the ancient world, including Israel. Many a book of the Old Testament reached its present canonical form after having traveled a rather complicated literary path. Few books of the Old Testament were written by one writer at one time, chapter after chapter, and then somewhat definitively published at a definite place at a definite time in the way modern books are written and published. Luther put us on the right track in this matter with his statement concerning the origin of the Biblical books of the prophets, when he said, "No prophet's sermons were written down completely at once; rather their disciples and hearers wrote down at one time this saying and then later still another; and thus they were brought together. Thus did the Bible come into being."[5] Note that Luther employs

[5] "Nullius prophetae sermones integre sunt scripti, szondern haben zu zeiten ein spruch gefast und darnach aber einen und alszo zusamen getragen. Und alszo ist die bibel erhalten worden." *D. Martin Luthers Werke* (Hereafter cited as WA), *Tischreden,* 2 (Weimar: Hermann Böhlaus Nachfolger, 1913), 605, No. 2704. See also 1, 209, No. 475.

the concepts of "oral tradition," "collecting existing materials," and "a growing book." Hence misunderstanding prompted by well-meaning harmonization is as radical as that caused by the literary surgery of radical practitioners of the documentary hypothesis. The truth of the matter lies elsewhere, in a position in between and on a different level.

The documentary theory in its classic Wellhausenian form held that the present Biblical text arose from an interweaving of two or more older documents (the so-called J E D P documents) which were themselves combinations of older writings. It is generally conceded in contemporary Old Testament scholarship that in setting up and applying this theory people were entirely too doctrinaire and theoretical. However, many pertinent literary facts were brought to light in the debate. In such discussion the literary types or genres of the Biblical books were more carefully distinguished and better understood in the context of their historical place in Israel's history. Similarly, Biblical scholars have learned that not only the Bible as a whole shows traces of growth through many generations and centuries, but that individual books themselves also grew over a period of time. They were shaped by the history of Israel out of which they came. When this fact of literary history became known and accepted, the search for sources *(Quellenscheidung)* became the rage, but often the mistake was to believe that such a "book" could be separated into literary documents or sources which the holy writer was supposed to have used, and that, by sorting these out, one might be able more or less to reconstruct the source. What presumably had been actually a living process was at first imagined to be a mechanical bit of editing, often of the gross scissors and paste type that is used in preparing newspaper copy.

While this view has been largely rejected, it is not impossible that the final editors of Biblical books did some routine editing.[6]

It is also altogether possible that the final collector of our Book of Genesis, or maybe even someone before him, put together the present primeval history (Genesis 1—11) by collecting existing accounts. The pericope we are dealing with, Genesis 2 and 3, may have been such a finished unit which once existed outside the great connected units of the Book of Genesis. If this pericope did once exist by itself, the nature of its independent existence is, of course, not now clear. It is possible that the archetype of Genesis 1 once existed as a great liturgical hymn of creation before it got into its present prose form and position. As far as Genesis 2 and 3 are concerned, the most we can say about its literary genre is that it is a didactic story.

While rejecting the classic documentary-hypothesis contention that the unevenness in Genesis 2 and 3 arose from an artificial combination of older independent accounts, we may still hold that in it a number of lines of tradition have been combined. It seems entirely possible that the holy writer had available for the embellishment of his account older existing presentations.[7] Some of these older materials he may well have simply appropri-

[6] Cf. the appendix to the Books of Samuel, 2 Sam. 21—24, and the Elohist Psalter, Pss. 42 to 82.

[7] Cassuto, I, 142.

ated; others inspired him to better original work. Others may have led him to make an entirely different presentation, perhaps for polemical reasons, but in no case should this process of collecting and reworking be imagined to have occurred in the sense of the old documentary hypothesis.

How then are we to imagine or conceive of this process? In Israel specific convictions had developed on the basis of her own manifold historical experience with the Lord in her history. The inspired writer developed these convictions, incorporating with them his own mature and distinct conviction. (a) In his account, it would seem, he gives to the subject he is dealing with a highly original synthesis of the view which Israel had by virtue of its divinely given faith in the Lord. This is then the primary "source" from which our author draws. It is a living source, not a dead document. Beyond that, (b) there were certain ancient concepts and themes, many of which were common to the Near East and had been circulating in Israel for a long time. Israel's leaders and thinkers had gradually and with some difficulty baptized some of them into the use of its monotheistic faith; other ancient Near Eastern concepts and themes Israel rejected; others it modified; and still others it created itself. The writer of Genesis 2 and 3, obviously equipped with synthesizing and highly original didactic gifts, selected and combined this material into a compelling whole which was entirely subservient to his religious convictions, so that the resultant story was the clear expression and the dependable vehicle for the teaching and the facts which God wished to communicate through him.

If this is the prehistory of our account — and it is more probable than any other this essayist knows of — this is another reason why nothing can be abstracted from our pericope, and also why every attempt to reconstruct original literary documents out of which it is supposed to come must be judged as fruitless, as is also shown by the various different results to which such attempts have always led, even when scholars have been very careful and have proceeded with a clean methodology. The results are usually the same: several doublets are rightly or wrongly "established"; and on that basis two threads are extrapolated from the whole story, never, however, without the introduction of subjective elements (such as changing the reading of the text, conjectures, or suppression of some part of the text), so that the result is different in the case of each different practitioner of that art.

It seems to me that we shall do better if we realize that the internal unity and homogeneity of our account goes hand in hand with certain "unevennesses" in it as a literary composition. The documentary hypothesis looked only at the latter element, the unevennesses, whereas those who attribute everything in the account to the final holy writer explain only the former, the inner homogeneity of the account. But between these extremes there is an approach which does justice to both literary facts. It sees the prehistory of the account in a living process of growth in which the thoughts of the account as well as its means of expression slowly unfolded in such a way, however, that in form and content the most important work still remained to be done, and it was done by the holy writer!

Possible Building Materials "Parallels" for Genesis 2 and 3

Our account therefore does not seem to derive its form and content entirely from the final holy writer. To answer the next question, "Whence did he get his building material?" we do not refer to documents, but to a whole body of traditional narrative material. Such material is to a greater or lesser degree known to us in definite specimens or samples taken from certain tributary streams of the tradition both inside and outside of Israel. We do possess other accounts of these things or traces of other accounts in the so-called "parallels." It is improbable that they were used by the holy writer in the form in which we know them. But they do give us a historical and concrete picture of that treasury of concepts, themes, and motifs which formed the common seedbed for these other accounts as well as for elements in the account we have in Genesis 2 and 3. Alexander Heidel in *The Babylonian Genesis* asks, "Why could they [the Biblical writers] not have studied foreign literature and then have incorporated in their own writings some of the elements of this material that were true or were suited to illustrate truth?" Heidel concludes, "I personally fail to see why it should be incompatible with the doctrine of inspiration to assume that Genesis 1:1—2:3 might in a measure be dependent on Enuma Elish. But I reject the idea that the Biblical account gradually evolved out of the Babylonian." [8]

The role of the sacred writers' experiences and study is also discussed by Francis Pieper. "As the Holy Ghost employed the style which He found in the individual writers, thus He also utilized the historical knowledge which the writers already possessed either through their own experience, or through their own investigations, or through communications received from other persons." [9]

John Theodore Mueller comments: "Independent study and historical research were indeed carried on at times by the holy writers; for they themselves tell us that they were prompted to write not only new revelations, but also such things as they knew in consequence of their general study and their special experience, Gal. 1:17-24; Luke 1:1 ff. . . . words He Himself supplied, 2 Sam. 23:2 ff. Some of these truths were given the holy writers by direct revelation, 1 Cor. 14:37; 2:7-13; others were known to them by experience, Acts 17:28; Gal. 2:11-14; others, again, by direct investigation and special research, Luke 1:1 ff.[10]

In treating such so-called parallels we must distinguish between the thoughts, the convictions, the point, the truth that is taught, and the means of expression, the garments in which this content is clothed. Generations of scholars have compared and measured these parallels, and a striking result of such comparison of the Biblical Paradise account (Genesis 2—3) and "parallels" from the ancient Near East is the fact that the Biblical Paradise account, viewed in its essence, is absolutely unique and without parallel. We can therefore

[8] Alexander Heidel, *The Babylonian Genesis* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1942), pp. 115 ff.

[9] Franz Pieper, *Christliche Dogmatik* (Saint Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1924), I, 284 f.

[10] John Theodore Mueller, *Christian Dogmatics* (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1934), p. 110.

speak only of parallel elements. This position is in marked contrast to the views of an earlier generation of "parallelomaniacs."

Extrabiblical Comparative Material

First let us take a general look at the extrabiblical comparative material, that is, material which may have served as "source" material for the Biblical writer.

As far as content is concerned, we can find only vague points of agreement or similarities in the extrabiblical comparative materials which are rooted more in general human experience than in any particular form of dependence of one version on the other. In the Epic of Gilgamesh, for instance, the hero, Gilgamesh, tries to find immortal life. The Babylonian Noah, Ut-Napishtim, living with his wife in a kind of never-never land, had obtained immortality because he successfully passed through the flood. Gilgamesh almost obtained it when he got the miraculous plant from the bottom of the sea. But then the serpent ate the plant, immediately sloughed his skin, and obtained immortal life; and Gilgamesh returned to Uruk without it. Or, sometimes extrabiblical parallels tell us that once there was an ideal Utopian condition, which was lost by some intrigue or mistake. The Mesopotamians had the Myth of Adapa with that theme. Noah Kramer's book, *History Began at Sumer,* cites the myth of Enki and Ninhursag as a parallel account. McKenzie thinks that Gilgamesh's boon companion and rival, Enkidu, who first cavorts in a state of innocence with the wild animals until he is seduced by the temple-lass and loses the purity of his body, reflects such a parallel.

As far as the form or "clothing" of our account is concerned, the situation is quite different because, even though it is still true that we seldom do find exact parallels, yet we are moving both inside and outside the Bible in the same circle of symbols. Lagrange writes concerning the similarity in form and the divergence in content, "Though we never come upon a trace of what is the real meaning of the Genesis account [the loss of bliss by the sin of man], we are still moving in the world of the Semites, in the circle of the same symbols." [11]

We do not have to restrict ourselves to speaking only of "the same symbols," that is, certain expressions. Lagrange's assertion fits also the general way in which the story is told. This phenomenon is usually called "parallelism," and means that in a certain given social context people use certain more or less conventional expressions. The Oriental way of telling a story is highly imaginative; people are accustomed to that and understand the form. While our writer belongs to this social background, he also handles the narrative art with remarkable independence and originality, sometimes, it seems, even creating his own symbols. But even "when he is original," says Lagrange, "he is original within the frame of reference of the ancient Near East." His independence, the almost total absence of genuine parallels to his account, stems from the very unique content to which he was called to give fitting form.

If therefore we come across the motif of men being fashioned from clay elsewhere, or the tree of life, or a serpent playing an important role, or a cherub, then we may be rightly wary about the extent to which

[11] M. J. Lagrange, "L'innocence et le séché," *Revue Biblique,* VI (1897), 377, quoted in Renckens, p. 126.

such elements in the Genesis account are historical in the strictest sense of conveying the *ipsissima verba* and *ipsissima acta* of eyewitness reporting. In earlier times when the Bible was practically the only source of man's knowledge of the past, and people were forced to use Genesis as a source even for a sort of scientific information, many persons in the church, though by no means all, believed that this was exact history writing. Also, when in the 19th century the literature of the ancient Near East was discovered, in the surprise of the moment people actually believed in parallels and the direct literary dependence of one on the other in the strict sense. For the unbelieving rationalists of the day this was a proof that the primeval history was only mythology. Orthodox respondents preferred to see in the same alleged exact parallels a proof for the exactness of Genesis. An original tradition or revelation, they claimed, had been preserved in its purity in the Bible, but distorted elsewhere — both the material of the Bible and that existing elsewhere going back to the same objective and detailed facts. But such parallelomania and such oversimplified identifications were soon shown to be false by the evidence itself, for what was found of the Paradise account elsewhere amounted to only a number of insignificant elements. Nothing of Genesis' real content was found, and even the similar elements did not have the same significance as the Biblical ones.

To judge by the extrabiblical parallels, then, it is safe to say that in the ancient Near East there was nothing which could be designated as a genuine Paradise-Fall tradition. The existence of individual component parts of the account which offer purely external points of comparison does not say much more than that in one and the selfsame cultural milieu the same sort of expressions were being used.

Israel, however, had new ideas to express. And in order to express them, Israel had no other media at its disposal than the symbol language of the ancient Near East. Thus in Israel, traditions developed in which certain figures and motifs (which correspond closely to the ancient Near Eastern manner of expression) began to live their own specifically Israelite life. It is this Israelite material which our writer joined and fitted together to fashion a suitable vehicle for his message.

As far as the relation of the Biblical material to such extrabiblical parallels is concerned, we can therefore conclude that it is only a very distant one and consists only in external similarities. This is the conclusion to which one must necessarily come on the basis of the actual data. And it is interesting that Biblical scholarship in general has come to this conclusion. As a result now we have to give attention only to the comparative material to be found in the Bible itself.

Biblical Comparative Materials

No matter how our pericope (Genesis 2 and 3) may once have looked in its earliest stages, in its present form it is a synthesis in form and content of what had grown in Israel through the centuries. Hence parallel expression or accounts from Israel itself, if they can be established as such, would free the story and many difficult aspects of it from its present isolation, and perhaps give a clearer indication of its meaning. We may safely make three significant observations.

Observation 1

Genesis 2 and 3 reflect genuine Old Testament (Israelite) faith and teaching. We are dealing with a genuine Israelite, a typically Old Testament, pericope. In other words, that very factor which we found lacking in the extrabiblical comparative material is present to the highest degree when we compare our pericope with other Biblical material.

We see in our Paradise account the same sort of Israelite faith which the Old Testament prophets reformulated and deepened. If we leave the details out of consideration for the moment and look at the central spirit of the account, at the religious truth which it expresses, then we can almost hear a prophet speaking through it. To be sure, he is not using the conventional pattern of the prophetic utterance of doom or of a salvation oracle. The prophets employed all sorts of literary genres (folk songs; mock court scenes; funeral laments, etc.), to get their message across. Why should we exclude the possibility of a prophetic person's using the story form with the purpose of explaining Israel's present situation by reference to events of the past?

The sacred writer lets the events of the narrative speak for themselves. Many a detail of the account must, in fact, be seen as a reaction to specific ideas or practices which existed in or round about Israel of the sacred writer's day and which represented a danger for the purity of her faith. Without having an explicit sermonic or hortative form, the story does, in context, transmit an eloquent appeal to Israel, and it is the same appeal that the prophets were continually directing at Israel. This observation helps us free this account from its isolation, for, after all, we do know rather well what the prophets were fighting against.

Observation 2

Genesis 2 and 3 are, however, not referred to in the Old Testament. On the one hand, Genesis 2 and 3 brings an account which is so unique and distinctive that even if you heard it only once, you would later be able to recognize it out of the midst of 1,000 similar stories. But, on the other hand and surprisingly enough, this account is not referred to in the rest of the Old Testament! At least no single passage betrays any knowledge of this great story. The prophets never appeal to its significant incidents, even though the incidents of the Fall story would provide them with wonderful "sermon material." This is strange, for the prophets do know the past; they live out of Israel's past. They go back behind David to the Exodus stories, to Jacob and Abraham. And yet — they are silent about this primeval story.

Observation 3

In the light of these first two observations, our final observation now appears in an entirely new light. And that observation is that *the rest of the Old Testament does contain a number of external elements which also appear in Genesis 2 and 3,* even if they are not always understood in the same sense. We can enumerate some of them. The Old Testament "rings the changes" a number of times on man's composition from the dust of the earth and the breath of life. Perhaps not all of these parallels refer to Genesis 2:7 f. In fact, Genesis 2:7 f. may refer to a general ancient Near Eastern concept which was widespread also in Israel. We also

meet elsewhere in the Old Testament the term "tree of life," the name "Eden," the garden of Eden, the trees of Eden, the Garden of the Lord, the garden of Elohim. We meet cherubim elsewhere in the Old Testament. Moreover, we find specific details like paradisal fertility and limitless supplies of water; or, again, perfect peace between man and beasts and among the animals themselves. Finally, at one point, in Ezekiel's Taunt on the Fall of Tyre (Ez. 28:12-19; cf. Is. 14:12-15), we come to traces of an account which makes us think directly of Genesis 3, although it may be that at second look we will not be able to consider it a reference to this well-known account.

Conclusions

In Israel there was circulating beside the authentic, orthodox Israelite literature that was taken up into the Holy Scriptures of the Old Testament other narrative material. By means of allusions to this material in Biblical poetry we come into contact with the thought-world in which our Biblical accounts once got their form material.

Hence the comparative material from the Bible gives us some conception of the living background and milieu in which the Paradise account took its final form. The Biblical parallels do not give us reason to assume that Genesis 2 and 3 come directly from that background; rather, the opposite seems true. What many are inclined to call "reminiscences" of Genesis 2 and 3 are actually specimens of a thought-world which created the literary climate in which both Genesis 2 and 3 and also the rest of the Biblical material received the form which they now have.

We can therefore narrow our conclusions down still more with the aid of the three observations about the comparative materials. Just as Genesis 2 and 3 (according to observation 1) are completely homogeneous with the rest of the Old Testament, so the account is absolutely different in comparison with the pagan extrabiblical accounts. But, according to observation 2 the account itself goes unmentioned inside as well as outside the Old Testament. According to observation 3, Genesis 2 and 3 does employ external component elements or "building blocks," which fit the thought-world of the ancient Near East, as far as we know this world from Biblical as well as extrabiblical parallels. However, it is true that we feel ourselves much more at home with the Biblical elements. They bring us into contact with the Israelite milieu, in which the general ancient Near Eastern elements had received their specific Israelite coloring and therewith the form in which they were employed by the sacred writer of Genesis 2 and 3.

III. Genesis Three in the Light of Its Theological Nature

The Analogy of Faith

Genesis 3 has a theological nature which is inaccessible to merely historical and literary analysis. It is to this aspect of understanding Genesis 3 that we must now turn.

Luther says at the beginning of his Genesis lectures that anyone who wishes to understand Genesis 1 ought to come to this chapter with a good knowledge of the entire Scripture; and Luther begs his readers' indulgence with his own pioneering work since, as he puts it, the text contains "matters of the utmost importance and very difficult to understand." Luther even expresses the following opinion: "God has

reserved His exalted wisdom and the correct understanding of this chapter for Himself alone, although He has left with us the general knowledge that the world had a beginning and that it was created by God out of nothing. This general knowledge is clearly drawn from the text. As to particulars, however, there are differences of opinion about very many things, and countless questions are raised at one point or another."[12] No wonder he asks his readers' indulgence as he goes on with the serious and difficult task of understanding Genesis exclusively in its intended, literal, nonallegorical sense.

What Luther said about Genesis 1 also applies to Genesis 3, especially to the fact that its point is very clear even though people have taken unimportant features like the eating of the apple and made them central. To clear away misunderstanding here, hermeneutical principles are again called upon to perform their salutary function.

One of the most significant hermeneutical formulations that is distinctively and traditionally Lutheran is embodied in the expression "the analogy of faith." We are rightly urged in attempting to understand Scripture, especially when we run into difficulty, to follow the analogy of faith rather than ecclesiastical office or ecclesiastical tradition. This phrase, which gives one possible translation of part of Rom. 12:6, had become a hermeneutical catchword in pre-Reformation days, often, however, being legalistically associated with "officially approved doctrine as promulgated by ecclesiastical authority." It was, however, reinterpreted in a most distinctive manner by the Reformation, as is well known, to apply only to those passages of Scripture exhibiting both genuine clarity and treating fundamental doctrines, articles of faith.

The articles of faith are not so and so many independent truths to be assented to, but different aspects of one truth, and that one truth is Christ. "Take Christ from the Scriptures," Luther asks, "and what more will you find in them? You see, then, that the entire content of the Scriptures has now been brought to light, even though some passages which contain unknown words remain obscure."[13] This prime principle of Lutheran hermeneutics is laid down confessionally in the Apology when it is said of the article of justification, "This article is of the utmost importance, and also serves above all for the right understanding of the entire Holy Scripture, and alone points the way to the ineffable treasure and the true knowledge of Christ, as it also opens the door to the whole Bible."[14] The confessors contend "it is certain that any interpretation of the Scriptures which weakens or even removes this comfort and hope is contrary to the Holy Spirit's will and intent."[15]

Lutheranism has always regarded the analogy of faith as a basic, Scripturally valid principle of heremeneutics. By the term "faith" as used in this axiom Lutherans have always understood the fundamental articles of faith. These articles, set forth in Holy Scripture in passages that

[12] Martin Luther, "Lectures on Genesis, Chapters 1—5," *Luther's Works,* ed. Jaroslav Pelikan (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1958), I, 3.

[13] WA 18, 606.

[14] Apology of the Augsburg Confession, IV, 2.

[15] Formula of Concord, Solid Declaration, XI, 92.

manifestly treat of them in clear and plain words, confessed in the symbolical writings of the Lutheran Church, all constitute together one essential whole, the real meaning of which can be understood only in the light of the article of justification for Christ's sake through faith.

The Meaning of Genesis Three

Such are the traditional and, in part, official views of the Lutheran Church; they are hermeneutical principles with which we Lutherans operate. They are fundamental, for we are concerned about the primacy of the Gospel. It will, however, never be enough for us to say merely, "Find the history-of-salvation element in Genesis 3 and forget about the rest," important and crucial as finding the Gospel is. We shall have to find this in the sacred text itself. Therefore part of the unfinished task of this essay is to grapple with the main concepts of Genesis 3, especially as they relate to the central point of the so-called Paradise account, Genesis 2 and 3.

First, then, a brief look at the immediate context of Genesis 3, that is, Genesis 2. These two sections are not dealing with the same question at all. Genesis 2 and 3 does not address itself to the question of why things exist, but rather to the question of why they exist as they are, in a ruined condition. "How did this come to pass?" our writer asks; and then he gives the twofold answer in our pericope that (1) the original state of man, the one for which God created him, corresponds to the fact that the Lord is the source of all good and of all life, but that (2) by his disobedient friendship with the power of evil, that is to say, by his own sin, man fell from that original status of joy into the condition in which he now finds himself. But even man's present condition bears witness of God's goodness, for he is not without bright and hopeful prospects, as he would be on the basis of his guilt.

This is not theoretical speculation. Nor is it only information as to how all evil came into the world in the distant past. It is also information as to how evil is still in the world, Israel's world and ours. The answer of our pericope (Genesis 2 and 3) may be paraphrased something like this: "It is not the Lord who is the cause of all the misery and trouble in the world, but man is responsible." This is an important exegetical point, because when we come to discuss the nature of the expressions which describe the paradisal world in which man first lived we shall certainly have to decide the specific meaning of a number of items mentioned there and this general context dare not be excluded.

The Garden

We take up the item of the garden first. For our purposes it is important to keep in mind that the obvious point of this part of the account is the innocence of man: there is no sin. No matter how one decides the question of the reality of the garden and the trees, it is clear throughout the account that the paradisal conditions in the early world are a reflection and a concomitant of a spiritual condition in which man lives in peace and intimacy with God. He knows no fear in his relation to God. The harmony between man and animals, man's harmony with the entire created world, is a concomitant of the harmony existing between God and man. This is where the center of gravity in the story lies. At first there is harmony within

mankind itself. Even Adam and Eve wear no clothes and are not ashamed. The physical constitution of man in contrast to that of his surroundings is not pictured differently than it is according to our common experience now, except that man does not have to die. No matter whether the wondrous garden can be nailed down geographically or not, in this story it is a symbol by means of which the sacred writer wishes to say something different than what the mere letter of the geographical details might indicate. He is certainly not merely giving information about the physical makeup of the world once upon a time and the original locations of well-known rivers. By expressing what we might call in logic a value judgment about the difference between the state of sin and of innocence, he is laying the foundation for picturing in Chapter 3 the upset which sin caused, the utter reversal of the relation between God and man. It is the Fall which is the climax of this pericope.

This assertion is not made abstractly, but concretely, in a story which reports details, details which are evaluated with a value that is projected only symbolically on a measuring-stick of chronology and geography. Therefore it cannot be assumed that the sacred writer is necessarily trying to teach us about a portion of the history of our material world which once chronologically preceded the world of our empirical perception and which might therefore be added to this history as events are usually added end to end.[16] People who have attempted to approach this pericope to discover geographical or cultural information have missed the point. The sacred writer is getting at much more important things. He is appealing to the conscience of his readers. He is proclaiming the faith of Israel. He is expressing theological truth; or, to put it in Lutheran terms, he is preaching Law and Gospel. The account illustrates both what happened between man and God, and what as a result, still continues to happen.

A few words concerning the specifically scientific question, "Is the Garden of Eden a symbol[17] of an actual world which was materially different from our world?" Many who answer with a firm yes point to the undeniable fact that in Old Testament prophecies the material and the spiritual are often indissolubly combined. Such people conclude, "Yes, the garden was actually different from the material world that we know." Many answer, "No, the garden was not different from our world. The imagery is the Semitic, Oriental way of expressing things; it does not logically and clearly distinguish between the material and the spiritual." They add the warning, "To translate such Oriental language into Western logic of a scientific nature is misleading!" What shall we, guided by sound hermeneutical principles, say? Again it would appear that the exegete working as an exegete cannot say either yes or no on the basis of the text. A scientist reasoning purely as a scientist may answer, "No! We have no empirical evidence of such a perfect world or of such a period in the world's history!"

[16] The nature and the amount of precise historical information in this pericope is another question which we touched in discussing the historical nature of this section. We left open the possibility that the account transmits information from the earliest primeval times.

[17] It should be kept in mind that language which employs symbols may still be communicating historical facts.

Another scientist might, however, dispute that claim. And still others who read their Bibles literalistically may respond to such scientists, "Well, keep digging and researching and you'll find the scientific evidence to prove the Bible." But the sober exegete can only say, "The text does not speak to that question!" Hence we conclude, "That particular question must be left an open question. Our modern scientific-age questions and problems were far from the mind of the inspired writer of this account."

The Fall

Another individual item which is illuminated by the general context of the entire chapter is the Fall itself. Again the main question for us is not, "What did the first human do that was so wicked?" Rather, the hermeneutical question takes the form, "What concept did Israel have of this first sin?" or, better yet, "What is the concept which the writer wants to give us of this sin? Was it a so-called sin of the flesh or of the spirit? Or was it both?"

Many commentators argue that the transgression of Adam and Eve had to be some sort of fleshly sexual transgression. The last part of the pericope, 3:22, makes a sexual interpretation impossible. There the Lord says, "Behold, the man has become like one of us, knowing good and evil!" This cannot be understood as if sexual experience were the privilege of the *elohim,* the supernatural beings in the Lord's heavenly court. Moreover, the expression "to know good and evil" is equated in 3:6 with the phrase, "to make one wise." We cannot therefore interpret the Fall as a so-called "sin of the flesh."

It is true that the expression "to know good and evil" by itself can mean both "to know everything" (2 Sam. 14:17) and "to discern between good and evil" (1 Kings 3:9). The latter seems preferable here, since it is very doubtful whether the first people were striving for a sort of omniscience, whereas the very choice and discerning between good and evil suits the context very well, much better than mere inquisitiveness or curiosity to know all things.

In the ancient Near East the serpent is bound up with so many concepts that the context will have to be called on to decide which one applies in any one given case. Hence to interpret the serpent as a sexual symbol is only one of many possibilities. In the case of Genesis 3 the context which we have established as being "nonsexual" will have to decide. To be sure, there is a polemic in the words that describe the serpent as a creature "which the Lord God had made," an emphasis on the Lord's being the Creator and the serpent a creature. In Canaan the serpent was not a frightful beast, but, on the contrary, an animal that was considered as the bringer of life and fertility. As such, serpents were pictured as emblems of Canaanite fertility goddesses. It must therefore be conceded that the sexual interpretation does have a certain relevance here, but that is by no means the only characteristic a serpent had in the ancient Near East. In the ancient world's magic the serpent was usually the animal which knew secrets of divine wisdom. It seems more likely that our writer makes use of this well-known concept in his account; but he does this in order to break with such concepts. That is why he shows the serpent as an animal that brings

death and not life. So the polemic would seem to be not against sexual aberrations primarily, but against the general syncretism which threatened to amalgamate Israel's religion with polytheistic Baalism.

The Sentences of Judgment

The next item in the story that received illumination from the context is that of the sentences of judgment. The purpose of the account is, first of all, to teach Israel and us something about the unhappy present, since it is the unhappy present that was and is a problem even for believers. That is why the account of the primeval history had to push back behind such primeval apostasies as the nations' determination to make themselves a name at the Tower of Babel, the almost universal degeneracy before the Flood, and the growth of sin in Cain's line, to the historical fact of the original sin which ruined the saving purpose of God. In fact, the paradisal past is in our story the concrete representation of this saving purpose of God.

The references in these judgments to the condition which preceded the Fall do not enable any strictly historical reconstruction of that condition, since, as also was the case in our discussion of the details of the garden, such references to Paradise are intended primarily to give a value judgment about present reality. Ultimately the account wants to say: if the Lord had continued on His course, man and the world would now look thus and so; the fact that they are otherwise is not to be attributed to the Lord, but to sin, the sin of the beginning and the sin of today.

It is God's saving purpose which reveals to miserable and fallen man his real significance, opening up to him the grand perspective of his ultimate triumph over sin. Then the situation of Paradise will become reality, and more than that, what is mortal in man will be clothed with immortality. All things will be new; there will be a new heaven and earth. The New Testament then proclaims: "With the resurrection of our Lord Jesus Christ this new world has in fact already dawned!"

The prophets who stood in the midst of a sinful and unclean Israel had by faith the certainty of future Messianic salvation; they saw what the Lord Himself saw when He chose Israel. This same certainty is extended by the paradisal account to the universal level. The protology in which Israel's faith extends beyond the empirical realm of ordinarily experienced history to the farthest horizon of the beginnings at the one end corresponds to the eschatology in which Israel's faith extends to the farthest horizon at the other end.

This means that the Paradise pericope shows sinful and miserable man that there is hope. His present condition does not correspond to God's purpose and plan. That plan will be completed when the old world has passed away. For the Creator does not give up, but will effect, His plan of salvation despite all obstacles. With that we come to the great formulation of this faith in the Protevangelium, Gen. 3:15, a fitting item for our final consideration.

The Protevangelium

It is not our purpose to give an exegesis of this passage, nor to enter into many aspects of its interpretation, but merely to point out that a genuine salvation-perspective is really present.

If we look at this passage in the light of its immediate context (for the moment leaving out its more remote and decisive New Testament context), we note that in form it is one of the Lord's verdicts after the Fall, one of the announced judgments. Nevertheless, even though man's present condition does differ from his original situation, there still is hope. Judgment is not the last word. And so a salvation-perspective is not unexpected; after all, in the message of the prophets, doom and judgment were never the last word either.

Throughout the history of salvation God's plans are continually being ruined by human sin. Again and again, however, God redirects His saving purpose in keeping with the new situation that arises at each outbreak of sin and rebellion. This was the case each time Israel was on her way to a catastrophe because of her iniquity. Finally Israel lost her God-given privileges as a nation, but a believing remnant recovered them on a higher level, even though that remnant always felt the loss of the earlier privileges as a chastisement. Similarly man loses irretrievably the gracious gifts of Paradise. God does not abandon man to the Deceiver, but intervenes and takes man's side over against a common enemy. God acts like an angry father who rescues his son from a wicked bully whose company had been strictly forbidden. The full punishment is directed first at that wicked bully; there is not a word about the child's guilt at first. But as soon as the father has settled scores with that misleader, he takes up the problem of His son's sin. The judgments upon the man and woman, therefore, contain punishment, but the judgment spoken against the serpent is the moment for a more favorable perspective, for the First Gospel!

Even a brief look at the parallelism between the three judgments on the man, on the woman, and on the serpent shows that a view of Gen. 3:15 as an announcement of salvation is not obtained only by reading the New Testament into the Old Testament but is in the text itself. For just as the man is, so to say, the instrument by which the woman is punished, and the earth with its thorns and thistles is the means by which the man is punished, so the woman and her Offspring are the instruments by which the serpent is punished. This verse, therefore, from its very context, can be said to express more than just that there will be continual enmity and struggle between the woman and her Seed on one side and the serpent on the other; the conflict will end with the defeat of the serpent.

The fact that the serpent is a symbol for a deeper spiritual truth (no matter whether it was a real serpent, originally walking uprightly, or not) is a fact that is clear also in the Protevangelium. This shines through from behind the mask of the story. For while in 15a the woman stands over against the serpent ("between thee and the woman") and in 15b one seed stands over against the other seed ("between thy seed and her Seed"), in 15c the woman's Seed again stands over against the serpent (He will crush thy head and thou wilt snap at His heel"). Thereby three things are stated: (1) the enmity will culminate in a final battle, since the head of this one serpent can be crushed only once; (2) the paradisal serpent is the real protagonist in the conflict between the two seeds, and, therefore, is

thought of as a continual spiritual power which transcends the creature of Paradise; (3) the spiritual individual wearing the mask of the serpent will find himself facing an individual antagonist in the decisive final battle.

In the battle between man and the serpent which began with the first sin, the devil will one day suffer defeat and final judgment by the arrival of some descendant of the very woman whom he deceived. The woman will die, but as mother of all living she will take vengeance through her Descendant, through a Seed to whom all mankind owes its victory.

Israel's type of thinking has been neatly characterized by Wilhelm Vischer and others as *ganzheitliches Denken,* "thinking in totalities."[18] Israelite thinking does not separate, as we Westerners are prone to do, the individual from the group to which he belongs. That is especially the case with the Hebrew word for "descendants," "seed" (zera'), which sometimes refers to an individual (cf. Gen. 4:25) but which more usually is used in its connection with a collectivity and as a representative of it (cf. Gen. 22:18, 2 Sam. 7:12). Therefore it is not reading something into this text which is not there to see, especially in the light of the growing clarity of expectations of salvation, that the stress becomes more individual, so much so that the Septuagint translation, for instance, translates the pronoun referring to the Head-Crusher with the masculine form αὐτός, even though it refers to a neuter noun, σπέρμα. St. Paul's explanation of the singular in Gal. 3:16 is well known.

Therefore when the New Testament reveals that Christ Jesus is the victor over Satan, it has every right to establish a connection between this statement in Gen. 3:15 and the later fulfillment. Then the Protevangelium points in an indirect but literal sense to the victory which mankind wins through Christ over the devil. As St. Paul puts it in Rom. 16:20, it is the God of peace who through Christ tramples Satan under our feet. (Cf. Luke 10:17-20)

Revelation 12 parallels the Protevangel account. There we meet (a) the great dragon, that ancient serpent, who is called the devil and Satan, the deceiver of the whole world; (b) the woman; (c) her child, and (d) the rest of her offspring (v. 17). St. John employs the Biblical figures of the struggle promised in the primeval Promise for his presentation of the apocalyptic final struggle (protology again corresponds to eschatology). In Revalation, of course, literal and typological elements are interwoven; but, in any case, the intended correspondence between Genesis and Revelation, protology and eschatology, is clear.

The rest of the Old Testament Messianic hope forbids us to insist, on the basis of Gen. 3:15, that Adam and Eve knew that Jesus would one day die on the cross. We Christians, it is true, cannot but see the fulfillment; but sober exegesis of the Old Testament will limit itself to something less detailed but identical in essence. What is expressed in this text is Israel's believing view of human existence, an existence which is full of misery but not without

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[18] Wilhelm Vischer, *Das Christuszeugnis des Alten Testaments,* 7th ed. (Zurich—Zollikon: Evangelischer Verlag, 1946) I, 117. Eng. trans. A. B. Crabtree, *The Witness of the Old Testament to Christ* (London: Lutterworth Press, 1949). The translation of the passage quoted is that of this writer.

hope. This view grew out of Israel's history as a nation and out of its historically oriented and divinely revealed expectations of salvation. On that basis Israel was first enabled to apply that faith in a perspective that was universal, including all humanity.

That does not in any way mean that Gen. 3:15 loses its objective and historical content. We look upon the text as an authentic interpretation of the situation at the beginning. The first humans sinned, but God did not abandon them to their fate. He sought a new way to actualize what man had lost. God concerned Himself with man, and in man the need for the expectation and hope for salvation lived on. This universal human situation found its most meaningful expression in the Protevangelium.

The exegete may stop at this point. Systematic theology will connect these insights with the rest of the corpus of important doctrines. Edmund Schlink's comments are apropos in conclusion.

"The church's teaching concerning man's original condition is not a survival of myths concerning man's original condition from the religious world that surrounded Israel and early Christianity. Furthermore, this teaching is not only based on the Old and New Testament statements concerning Adam and his fall, but it results with inner necessity (like the doctrine of creation) from the recognition of the historical deed of salvation by which God revealed that all men are sinners but that He Himself is the gracious Lord. Just as in the case of the doctrine of creation, so also here the element of a temporal beginning cannot be eliminated from the teaching concerning man's original condition *(Urstand)*.

"Even as God, in His saving deed, revealed Himself as the loving Lord, even so His loving activity also stood at the beginning of human history. . . . God created man good. . . . By means of such teaching concerning man's original condition the Marcionite myth about an evil creator-god was rejected, as well as the Gnostic understanding of the body and of the visible world in general as being a banishment of the soul into a reality at odds with God.

"Even as God in His saving deed exposed all men as sinners and took away from them the possibility of excusing the dominion of sin in their lives, even so the only cause of this condition that can be recognized is a decision by man himself against God, in fact, a decision by which sin attained dominion over the entire race of mankind. . . . By means of its teaching concerning man's original condition *(Urstand)*, the church completely rejects any attempts at making sin something harmless and at basing the dominion of sin on anything besides the incomprehensible decision of the creature against his Creator.

"As is the case with God's deed of creation at the beginning, so man's original condition cannot be established in an empirical or scientific manner. No matter how far back we go into prehistory to ask biological and paleontological questions, we meet man in revolt *(Widerstand)* against his Creator and under the fate of death. If theology would like to exempt itself from that by transferring man's original state and his fall to man's preexistence, as Julius Mueller [d. 1878] once did, then this world would be no longer understood as the creation that was originally good. And if we were to understand man's orig-

inal condition and the Fall (as Emil Brunner does) as the fundamental condition *(Grundbefindlichkeit)* and as the decision of every individual person, it seems unavoidable that the fact that all men without exception are sinners would be deduced from the very fact of his being a creature, and God's Creator's love would at the same time be put into question. The teaching concerning man's original condition is a teaching of faith which cannot be empirically either proved or disproved. It is the necessary doctrinal exposition of our confession concerning the Creator and concerning sin. . . ." [19]

River Forest, Ill.

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[19] Edmund Schlink, "Urstand," *Die Religion in Geschichte und Gegenwart,* ed. Kurt Galling, 3d ed., VI (Tübingen: J. C. B. Mohr, 1962), 1212—1214.