

## The Paradise Narrative

The Paradise narrative – Genesis 2:4b – 3:24. - will be discussed with reference to the “*The Earthly Paradise*” by Jan Brueghel <sup>1</sup>, the 17<sup>th</sup> century Flemish painter<sup>2</sup>, and the corresponding commentary on the passage by the biblical scholars Charles Aalders<sup>3</sup> and Hermann Gunkel.<sup>4</sup>

Brueghel’s “*The Earthly Paradise*” depicts the penultimate moment before the Fall. In a bucolic, sylvan setting an inspiring vision of the ideal state of nature is presented, teeming with life in all its richness<sup>5</sup>. Animals and birds of every description are depicted living together in harmony; indeed, in close proximity to one another. In the middle of the painting is a large tree bearing abundant fruit. That this is intended to represent the Tree of Life is deduced only by the fact that there is another fruit-bearing tree, somewhat further back, at which Eve is portrayed in the act of picking the fruit to give to Adam. This second tree, then, is the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil; and if one looks closely, the serpent is coiled in the lower branches just above Eve’s hand.

Paradise is not presented here as a garden per se., but rather as a particularly pleasant forest glade on a height of land. In the middle distance one can see a river and forest stretching towards distant hills on the horizon. Everything is green and lush. However there is evidence that change, for the worse, is in the midst of occurring.

As the Bible tells us in Gen. 3:6, Eve ate of the fruit of the tree before Adam did. Although it is not clear whether she has already partaken, the act of commission has already begun for we can see the plucked fruit in her hand. The consequences of the Fall have already started, and are reflected in the detail of Brueghel’s work. In the lower left hand corner of the painting, a lion and a lioness

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<sup>1</sup> Jan Brueghel, *The Earthly Paradise*, depicted in Richard Cavendish, *Visions of Heaven and Hell*, (New York: Harmony Books, 1977), 38-39.

<sup>2</sup> Copy attached at Annex A

<sup>3</sup> G. Charles Aalders (William Heynan translator), *Genesis Volume I*, (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1981)

<sup>4</sup> Herman Gunkel (Mark E. Biddle translator), *Genesis*, (Macon: Mercer University Press, 1997)

<sup>5</sup> Cavendish, 37

are snarling at each other and look about to fight. In the center foreground, a dog with a fierce expression is about to pounce at a pair of swans, and in the Tree of Life itself, a cat is climbing the trunk, stalking a bird in the foliage above. Life in the state of nature is about to become, in Hobbesian terms, nasty, brutish and short.

The Fall, as we know, did not just affect man. The animals, were also affected adversely. Some became man's chattels and servants; others became his mortal enemies. The serpent was joined in this by the fierce wild beasts. Animals would be killed to provide his clothing, and eventually his food. That change of relationship is foreshadowed here.

In Gunkel's interpretation, Paradise is depicted as being in the mountains bordering Mesopotamia in the North, near the source of the Tigris and Euphrates Rivers. It is a wonderful garden – a gloriously irrigated land – in the midst of a horrible desert.<sup>6</sup>

Gunkel notes that the ancient Hebrews considered groves of trees, with powerful life force and mysterious rustling branches, to be God's sanctuaries. Indeed, their tradition was that man planted fruit trees in the field but God planted the Cedars of Lebanon.<sup>7</sup> The trees in this Garden, however, are childishy idyllic. They are impressive and bear tasty fruit.<sup>8</sup> The Tree of Life and the Tree of Knowledge are both in the Garden because they embody characteristically divine properties. Immortality is a divine prerogative, and knowledge renders one like God.<sup>9</sup>

God gave man tasks: to work and to guard the garden. The latter, Gunkel believes, indicates that Paradise is not an absolutely perfect place, but only a beautiful locale. Paradise, presumably, must be guarded against beings at enmity with God; which introduces the possibility of evil beings or demons in the creation.<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> Gunkel, 9

<sup>7</sup> *ibid*, 7

<sup>8</sup> *ibid*

<sup>9</sup> *ibid*, 8

<sup>10</sup> *ibid*, 10

Since man rejected the animals as companions, God created woman from man's flesh so that he would recognize her as being 'related', and accept her.<sup>11</sup> Together they are portrayed, before the Fall, in the primal state. They are child-like and unashamed in each other's presence. They do not know about good and evil, moral distinctions, or sexuality. They also do not use judgment or reason<sup>12</sup>

According to Gunkel, the Fall was not the result of an appalling crime; but rather a child's sin. The child pilfered a snack with no idea of the frightful consequences of the deed.<sup>13</sup> The woman, in her childishness thinks how beautiful the fruit is and how marvelous it must taste, and with harmless and childish desire commits the most consequential act of her life.<sup>14</sup> Adam quickly followed her lead and the formerly unknowing children instantly became adults.

The serpent that seduced Eve is not, Gunkel suggests, an evil being; but simply an animal<sup>15</sup>. Never-the-less for his part the serpent is cursed by God to be forever engaged in mortal combat with man. The woman's punishment corresponds to her sin. Her desire for her husband will lead to childbirth and pain; yet the desire will persist. The man's curse is not the work, for which purpose he was created, but that the work will be bitter ... a burden ... in an obstinate and unforgiving field<sup>16</sup>. Yet, Gunkel suggests that God's grace is still present in this. Like the loving father, his punishment was not as severe as threatened<sup>17</sup>.

In Aalders' opinion, the first chapter of Genesis dealt with creation. The subsequent chapters deal with the history of the created world, in which the first scene is Paradise and the events associated with it<sup>18</sup>. It is his opinion that everything from 2:4b forward is a historical message; but one that is not a mere human composition, but a revelation given by God<sup>19</sup>. In his view it follows from

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<sup>11</sup> Gunkel, 12

<sup>12</sup> *ibid*, 14

<sup>13</sup> *ibid* 32

<sup>14</sup> *ibid*, 17

<sup>15</sup> *ibid*, 20

<sup>16</sup> *ibid*, 21 - 22

<sup>17</sup> *ibid*, 32

<sup>18</sup> Aalders, 78.

<sup>19</sup> *ibid*, 81

the Creation narrative. Any differences are explained by its focus on the particular in the Paradise narrative<sup>20</sup>.

Aalders exegesis focuses primarily on the characters and their interrelationship. The physical description of paradise is little amplified beyond the biblical narrative.

Aalders thesis is that God determined to create a suitable 'helper' for man; who was becoming aware of his own uniqueness and a lack of social companionship that even the animals possessed among their own kind<sup>21</sup>. In fact, according to Aalders, he was exhibiting a deep longing for social companionship with a being his equal in every respect<sup>22</sup>. God satisfied it by forming woman as a life companion for man. Aalders notes that the writer of Genesis expresses the basic ordinance for the marriage bonds between man and woman in the words of 2:23-24, "The man said this is bone of my bones and flesh of my flesh ...For this reason a man will leave his father and mother and be united to his wife ..."<sup>23</sup>.

Aalders depiction of the Fall is that it was the work of the Devil, using the serpent for its own godless purposes<sup>24</sup>. He notes that Jesus himself implied as much in John 8:44 when he described the Devil as a murderer from the beginning ... a liar and the father of lies<sup>25</sup>. The woman is depicted as strongly desiring to attain the knowledge of good and evil – to be like God and stand equal with him, no longer subject to him<sup>26</sup>. But the man also ate, of his own free will.

Aalders describes Adam and Eve's punishment in much the same terms as Gunkel. A significant difference is that Aalders portrays a Hobson's choice for Man standing before the two Trees. He can have either eternal life (and remain blissfully unaware), or eat of the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil and suffer death as a consequence<sup>27</sup>. Aalders notes man was NOT prevented from

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<sup>20</sup> Aalders, 81

<sup>21</sup> *ibid*, 93 - 94

<sup>22</sup> *ibid*, 95

<sup>23</sup> *ibid*, 97

<sup>24</sup> *ibid*, 101

<sup>25</sup> *ibid*,

<sup>26</sup> *ibid*, 102

<sup>27</sup> *ibid*, 114

eating of the Tree of Life; however, eating from the one precluded eating from the other.

The three descriptions each present a somewhat different theological perspective. Of the three, I prefer the Brueghel. In the painting, the enormity of Mankind's loss is vividly depicted in a manner to which the average viewer can relate. Moreover, the potential for the themes presented by the two scholars is hinted at – and, indeed, foreshadowed - in the painting. To me it is the most devotional of the three depictions. Gunkel's exposition is more academic, and theological. Aalder's is more religious, and suited to teaching and sustaining the faithful.

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## BIBLIOGRAPHY

1. G. Charles Aalders (William Heynan translator), Genesis Volume I, (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1981)
2. Richard Cavendish, Visions of Heaven and Hell, (New York: Harmony Books, 1977)
3. Herman Gunkel (Mark E. Biddle translator), Genesis, (Macon: Mercer University Press, 1997)