

# REFLECTIONS ON THE FORBIDDEN TREE

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In Gen. 1:1–2:2, God creates over the course of six days "the heavens and the earth," a merism meaning all things,<sup>1</sup> and announces that the completed creation is very good. On the seventh day, he rests from (does not continue) his special work of creation, and for that reason, blesses and sanctifies the seventh day in 2:3.<sup>2</sup>

The first of the ten *tôlêdôt* sections in Genesis begins at 2:4. The word *tôlêdôt* often is translated as "generations," "histories," or simply "descendants." As a heading for the various sections of Genesis, it announces the historical development from the ancestor and means "this is what became of . . ." <sup>3</sup> So, in 1:1–2:2 the creation is brought into existence, and then in 2:4–4:26 we are told what became of that creation. In 2:5-25, Day 6 of chapter 1 is highlighted with additional details because Adam and Eve, their placement in the Garden, and God's command governing their lives in the Garden are central to what happened to the very good creation. In the remainder of the section (3:1–4:26), sin enters the world through mankind, the creation is cursed as a result (see, Rom. 8:18-25), and sin spreads and worsens.

Mankind, male and female, is created in the image, the likeness, of God that they may rule over (*rādâ*) all the earth on God's behalf, rule as his representatives (Gen. 1:26-27; Ps. 8:4-8). Since ruling involves making judgments, adjudicating between alternatives, for it to be done rightly and wisely requires an ability to discern between good and evil, right and wrong. That ability, in turn, requires some knowledge of what qualifies as good and evil. As David VanDrunen explains:

The use of the phrase "knowing good and evil" and related expressions elsewhere in the OT provides strong evidence for interpreting this idea in a royal-judicial sense in Genesis 2–3. The attribution of knowledge of good and evil to

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<sup>1</sup> That the phrase here functions as a merism is widely recognized. For example, the OT scholar John Sailhamer states in *Genesis Unbound* (Sisters, OR: Multnomah, 1996), 56:

By linking these two extremes into a single expression – "sky and land" or "heavens and earth" – the Hebrew language expresses the totality of all that exists. Unlike English, Hebrew doesn't have a single word to express the concept of "the universe"; it must do so by means of a merism. The expression "sky and land" thus stands for the "entirety of the universe." It includes not only the two extremes, heaven and earth, but also all that they contain – the sun, the moon, and the stars; every seen and unseen part of the universe; the seas, the dry land, and the plants and animals that inhabit them.

<sup>2</sup> Much later, at Mount Sinai, God blesses and sanctifies the "Sabbath day," the seventh day *as a commanded day of rest for man*, because he previously, at the time of creation, had rested on the seventh day (Gen. 2:3). In other words, the seventh day was blessed and sanctified on two occasions for two different but analogous reasons. It was blessed and sanctified at creation because it was the day on which God rested from his work of creation (Gen. 2:3), and it was blessed and sanctified at Sinai *as the Sabbath day* because it was the day on which the people of Israel, by God's command, rested from their labor (Ex. 20:11). The Sabbath commandment was based on God's deliverance of the Israelites from Egyptian slavery (Deut. 5:15) and served as a sign between God and Israel, a reminder of the covenant he made with them upon delivering them (Ex. 31:12-17; Ezek. 20:12-13).

<sup>3</sup> Allen P. Ross, *Creation & Blessing* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1988), 69-72.

the two great Israelite kings, David and Solomon, provides the clearest evidence that such knowledge is the particular province of monarchs as they render judgment. 2 Samuel 14 describes a ruse by Joab to restore Absalom to the presence of his father David. Joab sends a wise woman from Tekoa to present a concocted judicial appeal to the king. In the course of her conversation with David the woman states, "your servant thought, 'The word of my lord the king will set me at rest,' for my lord the king is like the angel of God to discern [know] good and evil" (14:17). Here the phrase refers to a king's judicial decision that grants relief to a person bereft of justice. The same is true in 1 Kings 3. Solomon initially asks for wisdom in order to *judge* [לשפט] God's people, "that I may discern between good and evil" (3:9). After his wise judicial ruling involving the two women claiming the same living child, the people "perceived that the wisdom of God was in him to do justice" (3:28). Thus the recognition that he does justice is evidence that God has answered Solomon's request for wisdom to *discern good and evil*. . . . In light of the immediate context – particularly God's exercise of judicial authority as a king seated in the midst of his heavenly court and the human commission to exercise dominion – it is compelling to understand the references to "knowing good and evil" in Genesis 2–3 in line with this common OT meaning of the phrase.<sup>4</sup>

God creates "the tree of the knowledge of good and evil" (Gen. 2:9, 17), which presumably is a tree whose fruit enhances one's knowledge of those things, one's moral perspicuity, and therefore is something that could enhance mankind's ability to rule rightly and wisely.<sup>5</sup> And yet, God states unequivocally that the fruit of this tree is not to be eaten (Gen. 2:17, 3:11, 17). He apparently wants the humans to rule with the sufficient but less complete knowledge of good and evil that they have by virtue of being created in his image.

Given that mankind is to rule over creation and that greater knowledge of what constitutes good and evil can be beneficial in that task, the command not to eat the fruit tests whether mankind will trust the judgment of God and obey his decrees even when they appear by human lights to be misguided. Will mankind second guess God and choose what it thinks is best in view of its assignment or accept its limitations as a mere creature and submit to God even when his purpose and rationale in forbidding the fruit are not known?

Though animated by Satan (Rev. 12:9, 20:2), the serpent was a beast over which mankind had divinely delegated authority (Gen. 1:26, 3:1). Satan, through the serpent, misrepresents what God had said, asking if he had prohibited them from eating from *any tree* in the Garden (Gen. 3:1), implying that it would be unreasonable or outrageous for him to do so. He then directly contradicts God's warning about the consequences of disobeying him. God said they "*shall* surely die" (Gen. 2:17), but Satan assures Eve they "*will not* surely die" (Gen. 3:4). Notice how he shifts the focus from the straightforward commandment – "you shall not eat" – to what the consequences will be if one eats the fruit. He is a master of misdirection.

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<sup>4</sup> David VanDrunen, *Divine Covenants and Moral Order: A Biblical Theology of Natural Law* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2014), 63-64.

<sup>5</sup> It is not revealed whether the fruit has this effect intrinsically, because God endowed the fruit with that property, or extrinsically, because God bound himself to produce the effect in conjunction with eating the fruit.

The serpent then entices Eve by misrepresenting what eating the forbidden fruit will provide her. He assures her that eating the fruit of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil will make her "*like God*, knowing good and evil" (Gen. 3:5), meaning that she would then know *all things*, as God knows all things. He cleverly pretends that "good and evil" in reference to the tree of the knowledge of good and evil is a merism, a phrase meaning *all knowledge*, good and evil and everything in between, and thus presents it as a tree of omniscience. But that is a lie. God did not say that one who ate of it would become like God in that he or she would know all things; he said only that it was the tree of the knowledge of good and evil and they were forbidden to eat from it. By tolerating the serpent's evil, by failing to rebuke or eject the serpent despite having authority over it, Adam allowed him to seduce Eve, and then him, to eat the forbidden fruit.

When God says in Gen. 3:22a, "Behold, the man has become like one of us in knowing good and evil," he is not saying that the serpent's word had come to pass, that by eating the fruit humanity had become omniscient like God. That is certainly false, as shown by Scripture, history, and universal experience. Rather, he is saying that in defying the express commandment not to eat of that tree mankind had *acted like God's equal* in terms of knowing good and evil, in terms of being capable of and entitled to judge whether the fruit of that particular tree should be available for their eating. They overrode God's judgment, claiming by their action to be his equal, to know as he knows, and therefore not to be subject to his will. It is the perennial and fundamental temptation of mankind, to usurp the prerogative of God.

Given humanity's prideful self-assertion against God, he says in Gen. 3:22b, "Now, lest he reach out his hand and take also of the tree of life and eat, and live forever--" Adam and Eve, and thus all mankind, are that very day made mortal as a result of their rebellion, as God had promised that they would surely die. They are expelled from the Garden and denied access to the tree of life, which represents God's supernatural provision of continuing life. ("Life" here connotes a desirable life, not merely eternal existence, because all will have that.) It is only those who by God's mercy share in the new heavens and new earth who will have access to the tree of life (Rev. 22:1-2, 14).