

Genesis 3 follows an attractive but somewhat static picture of the garden of Eden with what might be called the first story in the Bible. It tells of a deliberate temptation, and begins by introducing the tempter: *Now the serpent was more crafty than any of the wild animals the LORD God had made* (3:1). The word translated *crafty* has the sense of doing things well, but it can be used with a positive connotation, “prudent,” as in Proverbs, or with a negative one: *He [God] thwarts the plans of the crafty* (Job 5:12). Here the negative sense is clearly intended, since the serpent’s words lead to rebellion against God (though the victims may not have appreciated the import of what they did).

The story tells of sin entering the world (though not in those words), and yet has nothing to say about where sin came from. Dualism, which would portray God as in opposition to an entity of more or less equal rank and power, is one way to explain the existence of evil, but that is utterly foreign to the biblical understanding of God. The traditional understanding of Satan, as a created being in rebellion, avoids that error. The serpent plays an analogous role as rebel here: it is explicitly said that it is one of *the wild animals the LORD God had made*, and its words are clearly intended to thwart God’s plans. Note that the serpent is never said to be Satan in some guise, or even a tool of Satan, though both positions have been espoused by some commentators. It seems plausible that the omission is deliberate, to avoid the distraction of a secondary issue. The crux here is man’s fall, not the origin of sin.

The serpent speaks exclusively to Eve (who is not yet so named), and she is the only one who responds. Adam is not yet mentioned, but is clearly in view: all the occurrences of “you” are plural (in the Hebrew), as of course is “we” (3:2). No reason is given for choosing Eve as the one to speak to (which is to say, the one to tempt directly) – but one may presume that a *crafty* adversary would attack where there was the greatest probability of success. Perhaps, because she had heard the prohibition only second hand, God’s command was not as vivid for Eve as it was for Adam.

The text also does not comment on Eve’s apparently easy acceptance of a talking *wild animal*. We reject the explanation that this is a fable in which impossible things are allowed for the convenience of the narrative.¹ Possibly, Eve’s experience was limited, and she did not appreciate the strangeness. There is no indication of how much time had passed since the events of chapter 2; it could have been days or decades.

He said to the woman, “Did God really say, ‘You must not eat from any tree in the garden?’” As befits the most *crafty* of the wild animals, this short statement has several subtleties:

- “Say” is used rather than “command,” thus softening the strength of the prohibition.
- “*Did God really say*” is formally a question, but in function it is rather an expression of astonishment. It has the effect of suggesting that God’s prohibition is surprisingly restrictive.
- The extent of the prohibition is exaggerated: As stated, it would apply to all trees, not to the one specified tree. From what follows, it seems plausible that the intent of the misrepresentation is to draw Eve into replying, inviting her to clarify the true extent of God’s restriction.

The woman said to the serpent, “We may eat fruit from the trees in the garden (3:2). So far, so good – the invited correction is perfectly factual. However, it is often noted that Eve adds a prohibition to what is said in chapter 2, against touching the fruit: *But God did say, ‘You must not eat fruit from the tree that is in the middle of the garden, and you must not touch it, or you will die.’* (3:3). It is possible, though it seems unlikely, that this restriction had in fact been given earlier. It seems far more probable that this is an embellishment on Eve’s part, and many commentators criticize her for it. However, the text itself makes nothing of it, and it is hard to see that the subsequent dialog or consequent behavior would have been any different without it. It seems likely to me that the detail is included simply because it is true.²

“You will not certainly die,” the serpent said to the woman (3:4). The serpent repeats (and denies) the exact formulation from chapter 2. “*Certainly die*” translates the emphatic form that reads literally “dying you will die,” a relatively common construction in Hebrew. We will consider just what it means – what are the particulars of this death sentence – when we consider the rest of chapter 3, in the next class. For the moment, it suffices to note that the serpent accuses God of untruthfulness – and immediately gives a reason for believing this accusation.

¹ Additionally, there is nothing in the text to support the conjecture that in Eden at least some animals could talk.

² This would be a strong argument against the narrative being a fable. In a fable, the details are painstakingly crafted to further the moral. It is only in fairly recent “realistic” fiction that “irrelevant” details are included to achieve verisimilitude.

*For God knows that when you eat from it your eyes will be opened, and you will be like God,*³ *knowing good and evil (3:5).* This “reason” for God lying is truth so craftily stated that it implies a lie. Let us look at the components:

- When you eat the fruit, you will know good and evil. The tree was called *the tree of the knowledge of good and evil (2:17)*, certainly for this very reason. Thus, God and the serpent agree on this truth. Moreover, eating the fruit did indeed have that effect in one regard.⁴
- Knowing good and evil will make you be like God. If “be like” is understood only in the restricted sense of sharing the knowledge of good and evil, then this too is a true statement. On the other hand, the natural way of understanding the phrase implies a far greater likeness to God, possibly to the extent of equality – and of course that degree of equality is a lie.
- God, the statement implies, does not want to share this knowledge. This is not exactly a lie – God indeed does not want man to know good and evil, as he himself indicated by his prohibition – but the serpent implies an unworthy motive. Whatever God’s motive was, it was surely not selfishness, or a desire to preserve his supremacy or his unique status.
- Consequently, God has lied about dying from eating the fruit. This tacit implication is itself an outright lie. Moreover, it does not follow logically from any of the premises.

So far, we have not considered what *knowing good and evil* means – the meaning was not needed to follow the twists of the serpent’s argument. “Good and evil” is clearly a merism, which means that it includes everything between these extremes – but that is only the start of understanding. Walton⁵ looks at how “*knowledge of good and evil*” is used in the Old Testament, and concludes that it means the ability to make moral judgments (thus excluding young children).⁶ With this understanding, the prohibition is a requirement that man make no moral judgments himself, but instead defer to those of God. This explains why eating the fruit of this tree can be seen as rebellion: It indicates a desire to make moral judgments for oneself. (This view is reinforced by the Old Testament practice of making a tree a place of judgment.)⁷

The serpent’s argument sufficed to persuade Eve to violate the prohibition. She saw the virtues of the fruit; it was:

- good for food – it is not said how this was determined.
- pleasing to the eye – Eve could have, and likely did, notice this at some earlier time, but had not let it entice her into disobedience.
- desirable for gaining wisdom – more precisely, though Eve already knew (from the name) that eating the fruit would bestow *the knowledge of good and evil*, she had not previously considered that this knowledge would elevate her to God’s level. Presumably, this consideration, rather than the other virtues, is what convinced her to break God’s commandment.

Further, doubt had been cast on the death penalty – though not on the prohibition itself. *She took some and ate it (3:6).*

She also gave some to her husband, who was with her, and he ate it. It is only at this point that Adam enters that narrative. It seems to be implied that he was there all along, though not participating. In any case, Eve is not said to persuade Adam, nor is Adam said to argue against Eve; he simply eats the fruit alongside Eve. One might imagine that he, too, was persuaded by the serpent’s argument. Or, much more simply, he saw that Eve did not drop dead with the first bite, as might have been expected from the ban.

Then the eyes of both of them were opened, and they realized they were naked (3:7). We argue that the language here is elliptic, and what they realized was not the simple fact of being naked (which would have been manifest), but the significance of it. This fits well with our provisional understanding of what knowing good and evil means. They judged their nakedness to be inappropriate (that is, somewhere on the negative end of the scale from good to evil) and needing to be remedied. This they did, as best as they could with what was at hand: *They sewed fig leaves together and made coverings for themselves.*

It is commonly suggested that a realization of being naked implies that the knowledge of good and evil is, in some sense, a knowledge of sexuality. This is not explicitly contradicted by the text, but it is hard to see how such knowledge would make man like God; in particular, it fits poorly with 3:22.

³ This could also be translated as “divine beings,” here and in 3:22. This alternative translation resolves some technical difficulties, but raises others; there does not seem to be a good reason to translate the same word in the same sentence two different ways.

⁴ There is an alternative view, that knowledge of good and evil would grow precisely from obedience to the prohibition. This agrees well with chapter 2; I confess I don’t see how to reconcile it with chapter 3.

⁵ John H. Walton, *Genesis, The NIV Application Commentary*, 2001, pp 170-2.

⁶ In fairness, it must be noted that there is considerable disagreement over this.

⁷ I learned of this from a sermon on Jonah by Dr. Hugenberger.