

As It Is Written



As it is written here is the NRS translation of Genesis 2:17:

*but of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil you shall not eat,
for in the day that you eat of it you shall die."*

However, we all know that Adam and Eve do not die on the day they eat the fruit. How do we reconcile the plain meaning of the text with the rest of the biblical narrative in which Adam and Eve become mortal and die of old age? To address this question, we need to understand the cultural context of the ancient

audience of this story.

We begin by noting that it is not the so-called "forbidden fruit" that confers mortality upon Adam and Eve. Rather, they become mortal because once expelled, they no longer have access to the Tree of Life. Just to make this point, here is a paraphrase of 2:16-17 that incorporates God's reasoning in Gen 3:22:

... but of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil I will expel you from the Garden and, no longer having access to the Tree of Life, you will become mortal as when you were made.

Culturally, the motif of the immortality as a transient state occurs in many ANE (Ancient Near East) and Greek legends¹. In these narratives, a theme common to everyone is that some substance (plant, fruit, water, etc..) when ingested confers immortality. However, when access to the substance is denied mortality is regained. For example, in the Epic of Gilgamesh, the king of Uruk, Enkidu (Gilgamesh's best friend) dies which then motivates Gilgamesh to search for the secret of eternal life. In time, he discovers a plant that, when eaten, confers immortality. Later in the Epic, a serpent steals the plant and Gilgamesh, no longer having access to the plant's power's reverts to his original mortal existence.

The parallel to Genesis is striking. In Genesis, man is initially created mortal but becomes immortal after gaining access to the Tree of Life. Later, in order to prevent man from eating from the Tree of Life (Gen 3:22) he is expelled and, no longer having access to its fruit, man reverts to a mortal existence.

One interesting note: an ancient Jewish legend attributes the long lives of Adam and Eve (and their direct generations) to the gradual decline of the effect of the Tree of Life.

Now, go and study

¹ For a list of additional legends and myths about immortality, see Wikipedia's entry for Ponce De Leon's Fountain of Youth.