

As It Is Written



During the conversation between Eve and the Serpent in the Garden of Eden, Eve explains her understanding of God's warning that they are not to eat the fruit of the Tree of Knowledge. Eve "quoting" God says (Genesis 3:3).

'you should not eat from it nor touch it, lest you become mortal and subject to death.'

The underlined phrase, "nor touch it", does not occur in God's original warning to Adam. Here is what God actually said to Adam in the previous chapter (Genesis 2:17):

"you should not eat from the tree of the knowledge of good and bad, for when you do, you will surely become mortal and subject to death."

So, how did Eve come to understand that *touching* the Tree of Knowledge would also lead to mortality? Most, if not all, scholars agree that Eve must have learned of the warning from Adam because Eve had not yet been created when God issued His original warning! What's going on here?

There are two possible explanations:

1. When Adam told Eve about the Tree of Knowledge, he extended God's warning to include touching.
2. Eve made up the prohibition, perhaps as a strategy to overcome the serpent's challenge.

In either case, the original warning was incorrectly understood to include coming in contact with the Tree of Knowledge. Why is this important? We'll never really know, but one intriguing possibility exists. An ancient midrash¹ tells of the serpent pushing Eve into the tree. When Eve sees that nothing bad happens, she mistakenly comes to believe that God's warning was a simple exaggeration. Here is the midrash (Gen. Rabbah 19:3),

¹ A midrash is a story invented and used to fill in "gaps" found in the biblical narratives. The use of midrash is characteristic of Jewish exegesis and seeks to provide background which would explain the missing text.

The serpent saw that Eve added things, and pushed her against the tree then said to her: "See, you have died!" He then told her: "Just as you did not die by touching it, so, too, you shall not die by eating of it."

The lesson to be learned, according to the midrash is that disaster awaits those who extend or modify God's commands (see also, Deut 4:2, Prov 30:5-6).

Now, go and study