

The Knowledge of Good and Evil

This essay presents the argument that the reason behind the expulsion of Adam and Eve from the Garden of Eden is explained by an allegory in which “the knowledge of good and bad” (hadda’at tov vara) symbolizes sexual awareness. Represented this way, the expulsion was necessary because the existence of procreative immortal beings within the confines of the Garden of Eden would result in disastrous overpopulation.

Read this way, the second creation story advances, for the first time, the idea that the individual human person is responsible for his

Introduction

In Genesis 2:9 of the second creation story (Genesis 2:4b-3:24) we first encounter the enigmatic “*tree of the knowledge of good and bad*”^{1,2}

However, we do not learn of the significance of the Tree until verses 16 and 17, when God is quoted as saying,

“You are permitted to eat from any tree in the garden; however, should you eat from the tree of the knowledge of good and bad, you will surely become mortal and subject to death.”³

In this essay, we will focus on the meaning and significance of the Hebrew phrase,

הַדְּעַת טוֹב וְרָע (hadda’at tov vara)

Hadda’at tov vara is theologically significant because the meaning of the entire story rests squarely on a correct understanding of what the ancient Hebrews would have understood upon hearing this phrase, namely that Adam and Eve were expelled from Eden after having gained this knowledge. Moreover, Adam and Eve had been warned⁴ of the consequences of gaining

¹ Most older commercial Bibles translate the Hebrew as “good and evil”. However, a review of newer scholarship reveals that the word *bad* (in the sense of *unfit* or *unsuitable*) is a better reflection of its intended meaning. See, for example, (Sarna 1989) p. 19, or (Westermann 1984) p. 243

² The tree of knowledge of good and bad/evil is unique to the second creation story. As noted below, the tree of life occurs in a wide variety of ANE stories (including this one) (Sarna 1989) p. 18

³ Unless otherwise noted, all translations are my own.

⁴ ‘warned’ is a more logical translation than ‘ordered’. For a detailed explanation including references, see the

such knowledge (specifically that they would no longer have access to the tree of life⁵), yet they chose to eat from the tree of knowledge anyway. Evidently this knowledge, *hadda'at tov vara*, was such as to render their presence in Eden untenable. Our challenge, then, is to answer two questions – knowledge of what and why this knowledge resulted in their expulsion from Eden?

Hadda'at Tov Vara

To begin, note that *tov vara* is widely recognized as a merism, a combination of two contrasting words used to refer to the entirety of something⁶. If *tov vara* is a merism, to what, then, does it refer? On this question oceans of ink have been spilled. Fortunately, Professor Gordon J. Wenham⁷ has summarized the prevalent theories in his commentary on Genesis⁸. I'll summarize all six of them here:

Hadda'at tov vara is simply a description of the consequences of ignoring God's commandments. Man acquired the knowledge of evil by disobeying the command not to eat of the fruit. Had the primordial couple not disobeyed, they would have known only good. Under this theory, the tree plays its part in the opportunity it offers, rather than the qualities it possesses: like a door whose name announces only what lies beyond.

Hadda'at tov vara means moral discernment - knowing the difference between right and wrong. This interpretation has not been taken seriously

author's commentary for Genesis 2:16-17 at <http://learn-biblical-hebrew.com/hebrew-scripture/garden-of-eden-story/genesis-216-17/>

⁵ The Tree of Life is a very common motif in ANE creation stories. It is a metaphor representing the immortality gained by eating of its fruit (Friedman 2003) p. 17. Moreover, Sarna argues that since mankind was originally mortal (having been created from mortal, perishable earth) to be immortal required continual ingestion of its fruit (Sarna 1989) p. 18. To be denied access to the tree of life, therefore, was a sentence of death.

⁶ For example, when we mean to say that someone searched thoroughly, everywhere, we might say that someone searched high and low. The phrase "high and low" is a merism.

⁷ Gordon Wenham: https://www.wikiwand.com/en/Gordon_Wenham

⁸ (Wenham 1987) pp. 63-64

since the late 1800s because, given the narrator's assumptions, it is absurd to suppose man was not always expected to exercise moral discernment or that he acquired such capacity through eating the fruit.

Hadda'at tov vara means omniscience. The argument against this interpretation is the plain meaning of the text in which Eve who may have hoped to gain wisdom (3:6) along with Adam gained only shame and awareness of their nakedness.

Hadda'at tov vara means wisdom and is a variation of the omniscience theory. Its proponents argue that the couple's attempt to gain wisdom was an act tantamount to idolatry because by eating the fruit in opposition to God's warning they symbolically attempted to gain a self-sufficient wisdom untethered to that provided by God.

Hadda'at tov vara refers to moral autonomy⁹ and, in one form or another, has received substantial scholarly attention. In a nutshell, moral autonomy is the idea that the human person is free to choose between right and wrong without reference to God's revelation and that mankind acquired the freedom to act against God's will, by eating of the fruit of the tree of knowledge.

A major problem with the moral autonomy theory is the same as that described for moral discernment. The primordial couple could not have acquired moral autonomy by eating the fruit because they were already autonomous, that is, having been originally created with free will. Had this not been the case, the initial warning issued to Adam (2:9) would make no sense.

Hadda'at tov vara refers to sexual awareness. Support for this argument is

⁹ Proponents of this theory also advance the argument that the expulsion of the king of Tyre from the "Mountain of God" (Ezekiel 28:6) parallels that of the Eden expulsion. My analysis and response to this argument can be viewed in the Appendix.

compelling and is arguably the most widely accepted theory among scholars who regularly publish in peer reviewed journals. This is the interpretation I believe makes the most sense and its explanation consumes the rest of this essay.

Sexual Awareness

Elsewhere in the Bible, we learn that *hadda'at tov vara* is an awareness or knowledge that the very young and the very old do not possess (Deut 1:39 and 2 Sam 19:35[36])¹⁰. Asked rhetorically, what kind of awareness do humans in, say, their mid-twenties possess that a three year old child and a ninety year adult does not possess (or possess in a much diminished form)? One [obvious] answer is that *hadda'at tov vara* refers to the sexual awareness that emerges with puberty. After puberty the knowledge gained is simply the recognition of erotic desire where before there was none. With respect to the very young and very old, then, erotic desire, the natural expression and biology of a sexual being, is absent in the former and much diminished (if not gone) in the latter.

If this view is correct, then the overriding analogy in the second creation story is that Adam and Eve were created in an initial state of [sexual] innocence and prior to eating the fruit “*were both naked and not ashamed*” (2:25) - as is characteristic of prepubescent children. Following this analogy, one gains *hadda'at tov vara* when experiencing puberty - the onset of sexual awareness and the biological ability necessary to respond erotically to sexual stimuli and as a consequence, become procreative¹¹.

But, procreativity presents a problem within the closed confines of the

¹⁰ See the Appendix for a more detailed treatment of *tov vara* as sexual awareness.

¹¹ A more detailed analysis of *hadda'at tov vara* is provided in the appendix

Garden Eden¹². Were immortal beings allowed to reproduce in their likeness, disaster would surely ensue. In the absence of death, the Garden would be overrun. Hence, there arises the need to remove Adam and Eve from the garden thereby causing them to lose immortality. For example, consider verse 3:22 (I've paraphrased it for effect):

..., the man has become like one of us, able to create others like us; but now, he might stretch out his hand, and take moreover from the tree of life, and cause himself to eat and live forever

In other words, to remain immortal required the couple to eat the fruit of the Tree of Life periodically. Thus, immortality is no longer possible if access to this tree is deniedⁱ.

The consequence of sexual maturation, symbolized by acquiring *hadda'at tov vara*, is the ability to create other humans. As procreative beings, Adam and Eve are functionally like God able to create other humans (albeit biologically, not divinely). To this extent, they are like God. Unhappily, they must be expelled from Eden to avoid overpopulation. In this I follow Brettler's understanding¹³ in which *hadda'at tov vara* refers analogically to an awareness of erotic desire, i.e., one's sexual nature. Thus, Brettler writes,

The connection between procreative sexuality and mortality is compelling and was well understood even in antiquity – if people were to be both sexually procreative and immortal, disastrous overpopulation¹³ would result.

The great medieval scholar, Ibn Ezra¹⁴ also viewed sexual awareness to be the meaning of *hadda'at tov vara*. Of Ibn Ezra, Nahum Sarna¹⁵ writes,

"Ibn Ezra, followed by many scholars today, understood carnal knowledge to be intended meaning of the tree of knowledge of good and bad since the first human experience after

¹² The Hebrew word usually translated as 'garden' more literally means enclosure and is derived from a Hebrew word meaning "defend". In Hebrew, 'garden' connotes an enclosure that is largely impenetrable.

¹³ (Brettler 2005) pp 44-46

¹⁴ Ibn Ezra - https://www.wikiwand.com/en/Abraham_ibn_Ezra

¹⁵ Nahum Sarna: https://www.wikiwand.com/en/Nahum_M._Sarna

eating the forbidden fruit is the consciousness of nudity ...; moreover, immediately after the expulsion from Eden it is said, "Now the man knew his wife Eve."¹⁶.

Prof. Claus Westermann¹⁷, writing in his Genesis commentary cites a long list of scholars who support the interpretation that *hadda'at tov vara* refers to sexual awareness and the ability to procreate, including H. Gressmann, H. Schmidt, and H. Gunkel, among others¹⁸

It's fair to say that today many (if not most?) scholars today (working in this field) agree that the sexual awareness that accompanies the biological process of sexual maturation is the meaning of *hadda'at tov vara*. If one accepts this theory, then the point at which the primordial couple become aware of their sexuality is after eating the fruit of the Tree of Knowledge (Genesis 3:7). Having eaten, the two become sexually aware of the erotic nature of their relationship. To this end, note that the coverings they make for themselves only cover their genitals¹⁹. It is God who later provides conventional clothing to the couple immediately prior to their expulsion.

Conclusion and Theological Implications

Contained within the second creation story is the answer to a profoundly fundamental question: what is the nature of evil? The answer provided in the Garden story contradicts the pagan conception of evil. In pagan theologies, nature and its gods were ultimately responsible for evil. By contrast, in the Garden story evil is dissociated from the created order and is not inherent in nature. The author removes evil from the physical world and places it in the metaphysical, moral order. Evil is what men do, not what the

¹⁶ (Sarna 1989) p 19.

¹⁷ Claus Westermann: https://www.wikiwand.com/en/Claus_Westermann

¹⁸ (Westermann 1984) p 242-244

¹⁹ The Hebrew word for the coverings in this verse literally means 'belt', but is commonly translated in most commercial Bibles as loincloths.

gods or nature causes them to do.

The pagans of the surrounding cultures, upon hearing this story, would have been shocked and possibly angry. The Garden story, like the first creation story, demythologizes the pagan gods. Evil is not the result of capricious gods. The human is the moral agent and evil is the result of choice, not nature's dictates. In this, the Garden story stood as a radical polemic against the existing (and historical) pagan beliefs that evil was part of nature. Underlying all of Judeo-Christian moral theology is the notion, first expressed in both first and second creation stories, that nature is not a moral actor. Mankind has only itself to blame for evil in the world. In all of the Bible's narratives evil is always a consequence of human endeavor.

Appendix

Argument Against Scriptural Support for Moral Autonomy

Proponents of the moral autonomy theory argue that the expulsion of the king of Tyre²⁰ from the "Mountain of God" parallels the expulsion of Adam and Eve from Eden. This argument merits a closer examination. Here's the text in question. God, speaking through His prophet, Ezekiel says to the king of Tyre that ...

Because your heart is proud having said, "I am a god" and yet you are but a mortal and [are] no god though you compare your mind with the mind of a god.." (Ezekiel 28:2 RSV).

Ezekiel then continues, comparing this expulsion with that of Adam and Eve.

"You [the king] were in Eden, the garden of God ... You were blameless in your ways from the day that you were created, until iniquity was found in you ... so I cast you as a

²⁰ The king was probably Ethbaal who reigned in Tyre from about 591 BCE to 573 BCE and is thought to be the subject of Ezekiel's cherub in Eden (per Josephus). Google "Ithobaal III" for further information.

profane thing from the mountain of God, and the guardian cherub drove you out from among the stones of fire.” (Ezekiel 15-17, RSV

Proponents of this theory make too much of this comparison however. Note that Ezekiel only applies the comparison to the fact of the expulsion. In other words, the comparison goes no further than the fact that both the king and primordial couple were expelled from their respective homes. Furthermore, the comparison of the king with Adam is not clear. For example, Prof. Michael Heiser and others argue Ezekiel is referring to the serpent in Eden²¹, not the king as an analog to Adam.

No matter who/what is expelled, there is another dimension that the moral autonomy proponents overlook. In no way does the Ezekiel text lend support to the idea that the king actually acquired some God-like capability. His offense was one of hubris in that he thought of himself as divine; as a god if you will. Compare this with Genesis 3:22 when God announces that the couple are being expelled because they had become like gods.

“Behold, mankind has become like one of us knowing good and bad”

In other words, they were expelled not because of what they thought of themselves, but because the knowledge they acquired made them [pro]creative beings thus precluding their continued presence in Eden.

Hadda’at as Sexual Intercourse

(*hadda’at*) literally means “the *knowledge* of”. Its root, *yada*, in its various forms means knowledge, awareness, cognition. One of its more common usages in the Bible is that *yada* represents carnal knowledge acquired through sexual intercourse. This usage is attested in the well-known euphemism “Adam knew (*yada*) Eve his wife” and its parallels

²¹ (Heiser 2009)

(Genesis 4:1; Genesis 19:8; Numbers 31:17, 35; Judges 11:39 and 21:11; 1 Kings 1:4; 1 Samuel 1:19). As an aside, *yada* is also used to describe the knowledge of sexual perversions such as sodomy (Genesis 19:5; Judges 19:22) and rape (Judges 19:25)²².

Tov Vara as Sexual Awareness

Very young children are not capable of having erotic feelings (barring certain medical conditions) much less act on those feelings. The very old find themselves in a similar, but not exact, situation. While they intellectually know about and remember their sexuality, most elderly people lose the desire and/or ability to act on their erotic urges if, indeed, they even have any. Keep this in mind when reading 2 Samuel 19:35-36. Here we read of Barzillai who, when asked by king David to continue on to Jerusalem with him, declines somewhat facetiously, by virtue of his age - or more specifically, by virtue of his age-related infirmities,

But Barzillai said to the king, "How many years have I still to live, that I should go up with the king to Jerusalem? ³⁵ Today I am eighty years old; can I know tov vara? Can your servant taste what he eats or what he drinks? Can I still listen to the voice of singing men and singing women? Why then should your servant be an added burden to my lord the king?"

While there is no explicit reference to sexual ability, context surely permits it especially when taken in context with Deuteronomy 1:39 in which God has just told the first generation of Israelites that they would not be allowed to cross over into Canaan. But then God says,

As for your little ones, who you thought would become booty, your children, who today do not yet know tov vara, ...

In this verse, *tov vara* is not possessed by the children but evidently they are destined to acquire *hadda'at tov vara* later when they are older. A

²² Other examples in which a form of *Yada* is used in place of sexual intercourse (or, in some cases, rape) are, but not limited to, Genesis 4:17, 4:25, 9:24, 19:4-35, 24:26, 38:26, Numb 31:18, Judges 21:12, etc.)

final clue that *to'v vara* refers to sexual awareness is that it is by the process of consuming the *fruit* of the tree that they become aware of eroticism. In the ANE (and many other) cultures, fruit is associated with fertility and reproduction. In Genesis 1:28, mankind is commanded to be "fruitful" and multiply. Elsewhere the phrase "fruit of [the,her, their,your] womb" occurs over 20 times in the Bible. Here the word fruit is a metaphor for child[ren]. In this narrative, eating the fruit metaphorically confers the ability to be fruitful, i.e., procreate.

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ⁱ As indicated previously, the Tree of Life motif occurs in other ANE narratives, the most famous of which is the Gilgamesh epic in which a serpent steals "the plant of eternal life" from Gilgamesh who has just come into his possession. For additional details and a comparison to the Eden narrative, click here: https://www.wikiwand.com/en/Epic_of_Gilgamesh