

Was The Fruit Really Forbidden?

As it is written, the NRS translates Genesis 2:16-17 as follows:

*And the LORD God commanded the man, "You may **freely** eat of every tree of the garden; 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.**"*

This translation is curious for two reasons: first, God is correctly quoted as saying that every tree¹ in the garden is available for food. Second, this translation describes God as imposing a condition on an otherwise unconditional premise. Let me explain.

In this verse, “freely” is the key because it is translated from a Hebrew grammatical construct called an *emphatic infinitive* – a phrase in which a verb’s infinitive is placed immediately before the verb itself. For example, look again at verse 16 in which “freely eat” is translated literally and highlighted in red.

*“from every tree of the garden **to eat you may eat.**”*

This is a classical example of an emphatic infinitive and in this verse means that each and every tree in the garden is unconditionally available to Adam for food. In the next verse of the NRS translation, however, we are told that the Tree of Knowledge is off limits. In other words, Adam is given unconditional permission to eat the fruit of any and all trees of the garden and then immediately informed that he is not to eat the fruit of the Tree of Knowledge! This is a very curious way of expressing an exception.

Luckily, there is an alternate translation in which the Tree of Knowledge is not treated as an exception. Moreover, it more meaningfully

¹ Also can be translated as ‘each’ or ‘every’

reflects the use of the emphatic infinitive. We can accomplish this by changing the translation of one word, וַיִּצְוֶה (*vayetzav*) from “commanded” to “warned”. In addition to “commanded”, *vayetzav* can also mean “instructed” (e.g., 1 Samuel 17:20, 2 Samuel 21:14, Ruth 2:9), “commissioned” (Numbers 27:18, Deut 31:14), or “warned” (Genesis 26:11). The use of “warned” is particularly appropriate because the consequence of ignoring *vayetzav* means certain death. Here, we have another emphatic infinitive (again colored red). Leaving *vayetzav* untranslated for the moment,

*So Abimelech **vayetzav** all the people, saying, "Whoever touches this man or his wife **to death will be put to death.***

Likewise, in Genesis 2:16-17 the consequence of ignoring *vayetzav* is also certain death;

*And the LORD God **vayetzav** the man, "... should you eat of the tree of knowledge **to die you will die.***

Now, like 26:11, let's translate *vayetzav* as “warned”:

*And the LORD God **warned** the man, saying, "...should you eat from the tree of knowledge ... **to die you will die.**"*

By translating *vayetzav* as “warned” instead of “commanded”, the Bible conveys to English readers two important moral principles. First, the couple's choice to ignore God's warning was made of their own free will (note as a warning, the verse is devoid of divine coercion). Second, we learn that the exercise of free will has consequences. This stands in contrast to contemporary pagan religions in which a person's actions are attributable to the capriciousness of the gods. In these two verses, we learn of the moral virtue of accountability. As such excuses like “God made me do it” is not part of the Judeo-Christian moral tradition.

Now, go and study