

The Five Books of Moses

Translated, with notes and commentary, by Robert Alter

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CHAPTER 3

1 **N**ow the serpent was most cunning of all the beasts of the field that
 2 the LORD God had made. And he said to the woman, "Though
 3 God said, you shall not eat from any tree of the garden—" And
 4 the woman said to the serpent, "From the fruit of the garden's trees we
 5 may eat, but from the fruit of the tree in the midst of the garden God
 6 has said, 'You shall not eat from it and you shall not touch it, lest you
 die.'" And the serpent said to the woman, "You shall not be doomed to
 die. For God knows that on the day you eat of it your eyes will be
 opened and you will become as gods knowing good and evil." And the
 woman saw that the tree was good for eating and that it was lust to the
 eyes and the tree was lovely to look at, and she took of its fruit and ate,

1. *cunning*. In the kind of pun in which the ancient Hebrew writers delighted, 'arum, "cunning," plays against 'arumim, "naked," of the previous verse.

2. As E. A. Speiser has noted, the subordinate conjunction that introduces the serpent's first utterance does not have the sense of "truly" that most translators assign it, and is better construed as the beginning of a (false) statement that is cut off in midsentence by Eve's objection that the ban is not on *all* the trees of the Garden.

3. But, as many commentators have observed, Eve enlarges the divine prohibition in another direction, adding a ban on touching to the one on eating, and so perhaps setting herself up for transgression: having touched the fruit, and seeing no ill effect, she may proceed to eat.

6. *lust to the eyes*. There is a long tradition of rendering the first term here, *ta'avah*, according to English idiom and local biblical context, as "delight" or something similar. But *ta'avah* means "that which is intensely desired,"

and she also gave to her man, and he ate. And the eyes of the two were
 opened, and they knew they were naked, and they sewed fig leaves and
 made themselves loincloths.

And they heard the sound of the LORD God walking about in the gar-
 den in the evening breeze, and the human and his woman hid from the
 LORD God in the midst of the trees of the garden. And the LORD God
 called to the human and said to him, "Where are you?" And he said, "I
 heard Your sound in the garden and I was afraid, for I was naked, and
 I hid." And He said, "Who told you that you were naked? From the tree
 I commanded you not to eat have you eaten?" And the human said,
 "The woman whom you gave by me, she gave me from the tree, and I
 ate." And the LORD God said to the woman, "What is this you have
 done?" And the woman said, "The serpent beguiled me and I ate." And
 the LORD God said to the serpent, "Because you have done this,

"appetite," and sometimes specifically "lust." Eyes have just been mentioned in the serpent's promise that they will be wondrously opened; now they are linked to intense desire. In the event, they will be opened chiefly to see nakedness. *Ta'avah* is semantically bracketed with the next term attached to the tree, "lovely," *nehmad*, which literally means "that which is desired."

to look at. A venerable tradition renders this verb, *lehaskil*, as "to make one wise." But Amos Funkenstein has astutely observed to me that there is an internal parallelism in the verse, "lust to the eyes . . . lovely to look at." Though the usual sense of *lehaskil* in the *hiph'il* conjugation does involve the exercise of wisdom, Funkenstein's suggestion leans on the meaning of the same root in the *hitpa'el* conjugation in postbiblical Hebrew and Aramaic, "to look." And in fact, the Aramaic Targums of both Onkelos and Yonatan ben Uziel render this as *le'istakala beih*, "to look at." At least one other biblical occurrence is almost certainly in the sense of look, the beginning of Psalm 41: "Happy is he who *maskil* to the poor man"—surely, who looks at, has regard for, the poor man. A correlation between verbs of seeing and verbs of knowledge or understanding is common to many languages.

12. *gave by me, she gave me*. The repeated verb nicely catches the way the first man passes the buck, not only blaming the woman for giving him the fruit but virtually blaming God for giving him the woman. She in turn of course blames the serpent. God's curse, framed in verse, follows the reverse order, from serpent to woman to man.

Cursed be you
of all cattle and all beasts of the field.
On your belly shall you go
and dust shall you eat all the days of your life.
15 Enmity will I set between you and the woman,
between your seed and hers.
He will boot your head
and you will bite his heel.”

16 To the woman He said,

“I will terribly sharpen your birth pangs,
in pain shall you bear children.
And for your man shall be your longing,
and he shall rule over you.”

17 And to the human He said, “Because you listened to the voice of your wife and ate from the tree that I commanded you, ‘You shall not eat from it,’

15. *Enmity.* Although the serpent is by no means “satanic,” as in the lens of later Judeo-Christian traditions, the curse records a primal horror of humankind before this slithering, viscous-looking, and poisonous representative of the animal realm. It is the first moment in which a split between man and the rest of the animal kingdom is recorded. Behind it may stand, at a long distance of cultural mediation, Canaanite myths of a primordial sea serpent.

boot . . . bite. The Hebrew uses what appear to be homonyms, the first verb meaning “to trample,” the second, identical in form, probably referring to the hissing sound of the snake just before it bites.

17. *to the human.* The Masoretic Text vocalizes *le’adam* without the definite article, which would make it mean “to Adam.” But since Eve in the parallel curse is still called “the woman,” it seems better to assume the definite article here.

Cursed be the soil for your sake,
with pangs shall you eat from it all the days of your life.
Thorn and thistle shall it sprout for you 18
and you shall eat the plants of the field.
By the sweat of your brow shall you eat bread 19
till you return to the soil,
for from there were you taken,
for dust you are
and to dust shall you return.”

And the human called his woman’s name Eve, for she was the mother 20
of all that lives. And the LORD God made skin coats for the human and 21
his woman, and He clothed them. And the LORD God said, “Now that 22
the human has become like one of us, knowing good and evil, he may

with pangs shall you eat. The noun *itsavon* is the same used for the woman’s birth pangs, confirming the lot of painful labor that is to be shared by man and woman.

18. The vista of thorn and thistle is diametrically opposed to the luscious vegetation of the garden and already intimates the verdict of banishment that will be carried out in verses 23–24.

20. *Eve . . . all that lives.* Like most of the explanations of names in Genesis, this is probably based on folk etymology or an imaginative playing with sound. The most searching explanation of these poetic etymologies in the Bible has been offered by Herbert Marks, who observes, “In a verisimilar narrative, naming establishes and fixes identity as something tautologically itself; etymology, by returning it to the trials of language, compromises it, complicates it, renders it potentially mobile.” In the Hebrew here, the phonetic similarity is between *havah*, “Eve,” and the verbal root *hayah*, “to live.” It has been proposed that Eve’s name conceals very different origins, for it sounds suspiciously like the Aramaic word for “serpent.” Could she have been given the name by the contagious contiguity with her wily interlocutor, or, on the contrary, might there lurk behind the name a very different evaluation of the serpent as a creature associated with the origins of life?

23 reach out and take as well from the tree of life and live forever." And
 the LORD God sent him from the garden of Eden to till the soil from
 24 which he had been taken. And He drove out the human and set up east
 of the garden of Eden the cherubim and the flame of the whirling
 sword to guard the way to the tree of life.

23. *the soil from which he had been taken.* This reminder of the first man's clayey creatureliness occurs as a kind of refrain in this chapter, first in the act of God's fashioning man, then in God's curse, and now in the banishment. It is a mere thing shaped from clay that has aspired to be like a god.

24. The cherubim, a common feature of ancient Near Eastern mythology, are not to be confused with the round-cheeked darlings of Renaissance iconography. The root of the term either means "hybrid" or, by an inversion of consonants, "mount," "steed," and they are the winged beasts, probably of awesome aspect, on which the sky god of the old Canaanite myths and of the poetry of Psalms goes riding through the air. The fiery sword, not mentioned elsewhere but referred to with the definite article as though it were a familiar image, is a suitable weapon to set alongside the formidable cherubim.

CHAPTER 4

And the human knew Eve his woman and she conceived and bore 1
 Cain, and she said, "I have got me a man with the LORD." And she 2
 bore as well his brother, Abel, and Abel became a herder of sheep 3
 while Cain was a tiller of the soil. And it happened in the course of time 4
 that Cain brought from the fruit of the soil an offering to the LORD. 5
 And Abel too had brought from the choice firstlings of his flock, and
 the LORD regarded Abel and his offering but He did not regard Cain

1. *knew.* The Hebrew verb suggests intimate knowledge and hence sexual possession. Amos Funkenstein notes that it is the one term for sexual intercourse associated with legitimate possession—and in a few antithetical instances, with perverse violation of legitimate possession. Given the clumsiness of modern English equivalents like "had experience of," "cohabited with," "was intimate with," and, given the familiarity of the King James Version's literal rendering, "to know" remains the least objectionable English solution.

I have got me a man with the LORD. Eve's naming-speech puns on the verb *qanah*, "to get," "to acquire," or perhaps, "to make," and *qayin*, "Cain." His name actually means "smith," an etymology that will be reflected in his linear descendant Tubal-cain, the legendary first metalworker. ("Tubal" also means "smith" in Sumerian and Akkadian.) Eve, upon bringing forth the third human being, imagines herself as a kind of partner of God in man-making.

2. *Abel.* No etymology is given, but it has been proposed that the Hebrew *hevel*, "vapor" or "puff of air," may be associated with his fleeting life span.

4-5. The widespread culture-founding story of rivalry between herdsman and farmer is recast in a pattern that will dominate Genesis—the displacement of the firstborn by the younger son. If there is any other reason intimated as to why God would favor Abel's offering and not Cain's, it would be in the narrator's stipulation that Abel brings the very best of his flock to God.