

# THE TREE OF THE KNOWLEDGE OF GOOD AND EVIL

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In the garden of paradise the Lord planted two special trees, the tree of life and the tree of the knowledge of good and evil.<sup>1</sup> The second tree will receive our attention here. All kinds of questions arise in respect of this tree. What is it doing in paradise, a place undisturbed by sin? Does a tree that represents evil (albeit together with “good”) really belong in God’s perfect creation, let alone the garden of paradise? And was the placement of such a tree purely to put the first people to the test? Did it only serve a negative purpose?

It is the intention in the following paragraphs to offer a possible answer to these questions and other related issues. They are my “thoughts”, that is, not a complete scholarly paper, but an attempt to think through, admittedly with some speculation, the implications of the data.

Various considerations are closely linked together in the following. Let me begin with the meaning of the name of this tree. The tree is called the tree “of the knowledge of good and evil”. If the tree is seen purely as a test for Adam and Eve, it is only natural to view its name as having something to do with this testing. The test will grant us “knowledge” about whether Adam and Eve acted “good” or “evil”. And yet the Hebrew language offers us another possibility. It is in any event clear that this “knowledge” is not an intellectual knowledge. By eating the fruit, Adam and Eve would not suddenly understand how to build an altar (“good”), or how to plan commit a complicated crime (“evil”). The expression “knowledge of good and evil” is also used in the “Books of Moses” in a different way, namely, to contrast adulthood with a childlike understanding. In Deuteronomy 1:39 this expression is used to for “small children”. The context of Genesis two and three leads us to think particularly of a specific type of mature knowledge that is missing in Adam and Eve, namely, sexual awareness.

In order to understand the connection between this tree and adult maturity – in particular, sexual awareness – we must not forget that Adam and Eve were created with adult bodies. Nevertheless, they had as yet no experience of life. They did not experience the process of growing up from baby to adult. Even if you would have been able to estimate their age on day two after creation at say, 30 years, in terms of their experience they were not adults.

However Adam and Eve were not in all respects children. They had alongside their adult bodies also the ability to think and reason. From the beginning, it seems, they could communicate in a mature way. They *spoke* with God. If we take this into account, the knowledge of good and evil of this special tree cannot be intended to give Adam and Eve to give discernment. It is clear that they already had that ability! They were forbidden to eat from the tree. This presupposes that they knew the disobeying God is “evil”, and that obeying God is “good”. They did not need to eat from the tree to learn that! Knowing the difference between good and evil does not in itself differentiate a child from an adult.

And yet the Lord apparently found it necessary to deal with them very carefully in the beginning. Despite the command in Genesis 1:28 to go into the earth and to fill it with progeny, the Lord first places Adam and Eve in the protection of a cultivated garden, the place we know as paradise. The Hebrew word *gan* (garden) suggests a park which is *marked off*, for example, by means of a large hedge.<sup>2</sup> Here Adam and Eve could discover the new phenomenon of life. Here they had to learn how they could cultivate the land and grow domesticated plants grow irrigation. This is the point of Genesis 2:5. Domesticated plants did not yet exist

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1 From Ezek. 31 we know that the other trees in Eden were mostly cedars, cypress trees and plane trees (probably *Abies Cilicia*, *Juniperus Phoenicea* and *Platanus Orientalis*).

2 This park was placed in the region of ‘Eden’ (Gen. 2:8), a Hebrew word that means ‘pleasure’. Pictures of the this park (cherubs, palm branches, flowers) were later part of the decoration of the tabernacle and temple (see e.g. 1 Kgs 6:29-36). The court of the tabernacle, God’s dwelling-place on earth, was intended to remind people of the lost paradise, which once again by God’s grace was given a provisional place in Israel (although set apart from regular human life). It is probable that the golden candlestand in the holy room was intended as a depiction of the tree of life (Exod. 25:31-35). If so, that tree may be identified as an Almond tree. In the park of Eden there was a spring from which a river flowed, dividing itself into four great rivers (Gen. 2:10). This is possibly the ‘stream of fresh water’ (less likely ‘mist’) of Gen. 2:6. In any case we may conclude that the park was to be located on a mountain (rivers flow *downwards*). There is also a spring that flows from God’s throne in the new Jerusalem. The river proceeding from this spring contains the water of life and the tree of life grows on both its banks (Rev. 22:1-2).

for two reasons. There was no rain by which they could naturally grow<sup>3</sup> and there was at that time no man who could build irrigation systems from the rivers to water the land. Through this verse we come to know a little more of what Adam and Eve had to learn in the garden. Similarly, God allows Adam to explore the animal world. The LORD brings the animals to Adam and Adam gives the different animals separate names. In this way he learns to recognise that he does not have an appropriate partner and feels lonely. The LORD wanted Adam learn to experience that feeling before that He created Eve for him. The Bible thus teaches us to consider paradise as an education centre for the first two people. And tied to this step by step education of Adam and Eve is the observation that they were not given sexual awareness. We come to this for the first time after the creation of Eve in Genesis 2:25.

*And they were both naked, the man and his wife, and were not ashamed.*

The context makes it sufficiently clear that it is not a negative shame that Adam and Eve did not have because of their sinlessness. Personal shame for one's own sexuality is in any case a positive concept in the Bible. Lack of this shame for adults is a serious sin, as Leviticus 18 makes clear. Paul instructs women to (literally) clothe themselves "with (a sense of) shame" (1 Tim. 2: 9). Elsewhere he indicates that covering the genitals belongs to God's creation of man (1 Cor 12:23-25).<sup>4</sup> The meaning of Genesis 2:25 is that Adam and Eve, like small children, had no sexual awareness. It is for this reason that they were not ashamed of their nakedness and therefore this lack of shame could not be held against them.

This fact explains why Adam and Eve only first engaged in sexual intercourse with each other after the fall (Gen. 4:1). Not that sexuality is wrong and sinful – far from it. Sexuality is part of the essence of humanity which the LORD created and has everything to do with our task to fill the earth. But it is precisely this task which Adam and Eve did *not* take up in paradise! We obviously do not know how long Adam and Eve dwelt in paradise. It may only have been a few days, or perhaps even months. But that does not matter. There was in any case sufficient time for them to have become one flesh. However, the only comment made on that is in a verse which has nothing to do directly with the story of life in paradise, but is a comment directed to the reader (Gen. 2:24). Incidentally, if Eve had conceived in paradise, a child without original sin would have been given life. But this did not happen. And everything points to the fact that this did not happen because the LORD had not yet given them sexual awareness.

All this brings us back to the question of the meaning of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil and disobedience of our first parents. Adam and Eve, who were already aware of the difference between good and evil – they knew it would be wrong to disobey their loving Creator – nevertheless deliberately eat from this tree.

It is clear that one of the consequences of eating this fruit was an awareness of their own sexuality. For the first time Adam and Eve realised that they were naked. They therefore wanted to make clothes. But, to be clear, this realisation was not a result of their sin. Sexuality, as already indicated, is a gift from the Lord intended for marriage. That it was the intention of the Lord that Adam and Eve would eventually become aware of their sexuality should be clear from the task given to them in Genesis 1:28. They were to be fruitful and multiply, and fill the earth! The gift of sexuality was essential for performing that task. At the same time, we note that it is normal and good that one's sexuality remains private. Outside the intimacy of marriage, one should cover one's own nakedness. That fact is *not* a consequence of sin. We should not think that if there had been no fall into sin, that we would be living in some kind of nudist world. Even apart from all forms of sexual temptation, our nakedness ought to remain covered. Think of the terrible sin of Ham, who gazed upon the nakedness of his father Noah. For this reason he and his descendants were cursed (Gen. 9:22-25).

The real *consequences* of this sin of Adam and Eve are explained by the LORD in Genesis 3:14ff. The main tasks of both the man and the woman in life would be cursed. The woman would have difficulty in child bearing and the man would experience difficulty in providing food.

If we reflect upon this history we can tentatively conclude that it was the intention of the LORD to allow

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<sup>3</sup> The remark that there was as yet no rain seems to suggest that the phenomenon of rain only came about with the great flood.

<sup>4</sup> Clothing is also used in heaven. The cherubs (= seraphs) even have two wings to cover their "feet" - a euphemism for sexual organs (Isa. 6:2). The "elders" in God's throne room wear clothing (Rev. 4:4). The believers who come there are also clothed (Rev. 6:11; 7:9).

Adam and Eve to eventually eat from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. However, the time for that had not yet come. God wanted them to first discover their world within the boundaries of the garden of paradise. Only when they had attained sufficient life experience and become acquainted with this world, did He wish to give them that sexual awareness. The LORD had created a special tree so that this gift could be given to them. Until they were ready, they had to keep their hands off it. Adam and Eve took of the fruit in advance. Their sin was disobedience to the LORD. The fruit was not harmful. The damage was due to their *disobedience*.

In this we see the full gravity of their sin. They deliberately sinned against the commandment of the LORD God, a God who had become much more than their Creator, although that should have been enough. God had entered into a *relationship* with them. They could hear the sound of the LORD God in paradise as He walked in the garden. They walked and talked with God (cf. Genesis 3:8.). God showed his love for them in this way. He wanted to educate them. After God had enabled Adam to discover his loneliness, He created for him a wife as an act of love. The sin of disobedience brought a serious rift in this relationship. And everyone born after their fall into sin inherit its effect in themselves.

Looking at what happened in this way, we can even view the creation of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil as a gift of love from the LORD. When we reflect upon the way in which the gift of sexuality is abused by sinful man we can understand why the LORD wanted Adam and Eve to wait until they were ready for it. Sexuality is a precious gift, but also a powerful gift. It is the means by which the LORD enables the miracle of life. But precisely this powerful gift is used by the devil as a powerful means to evil. Partly for this reason the LORD has prescribed strict measures in his law to protect it, so that may be enjoyed under his blessing. By the healing power of God's Spirit sexuality can also be a strong positive force for the furtherance of God's kingdom – and this is why the devil does everything he can to twist it toward his own goals!