

# How Genesis Supports Darwin: A New Interpretation of Genesis 3

by Joe Fitzpatrick

A few years ago I sat down at our kitchen table with my Revised Standard Bible and read again, for the first time in many years, chapter 3 of the book of Genesis, the story of Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden. I remember being very struck by the fact that there is no mention there of 'sin' or 'evil' or 'wrongdoing', no reference whatsoever to a 'fall', and no mention of 'rebellion' or 'disobedience' – all words widely used in the most popular theological interpretation of this story.

What I was struck by most of all was the concluding speech of the Lord God: "Behold, the man has become like one of us, knowing good and evil, and lest he reach out his hand...." I knew that the most common understanding of this speech was to the effect that the man and the woman in the tale, in acquiring knowledge of good and evil, were in fact attempting **to play God**, attempting to *determine for themselves* what would be morally right and wrong, and that this was an act of rebellion by these creatures against their creator. That is how Aquinas, taking his lead from St Augustine, interpreted this passage in *Summa Theologiae* (2-2, 163, 2).<sup>1</sup> Aquinas's reading became regulative for Catholic theology over the centuries. However, the best way to understand an idiomatic Hebrew phrase like "to know good and evil" is to see what the phrase means in other parts of the bible.

In the Book of Kings chapter 3, verse 9 we find the young King Solomon in a dream being asked what he would like God to give him and in his answer he prays that he may be wise *so that he can discern good and evil*; and in 2 Samuel 14, there is a passage about King David being approached by a wise woman who presents him with a complicated problem she asks him to judge for her, and she adds that David has wisdom like the angel of God *to discern good and evil*. So here are two passages from the Hebrew bible which clearly see knowledge of good and evil as something good, something positive, as amounting to nothing less than wisdom.

This clearly did not fit with the traditional, Augustinian-Thomistic interpretation of this phrase, and this was a powerful motivator, causing me to look at the Genesis tale again. Not only did this tale make no mention of sin or a fall or of rebellion or disobedience, it seemed to be saying that in eating from the fruit of the tree of knowledge humans had acquired something akin to wisdom, had gained something good, something that differentiated them from the other animals mentioned in the two creation accounts in Genesis 1 and 2, as well as from children; something that marked humans out as mature and grown up.

## Genesis 1 - 11

At this point let me remind you of the composition of the Book of Genesis. As you will recall, the first two chapters consist of two distinct accounts of creation – in chapter 1 there is the creation account from the Priestly tradition, and most of chapter 2 consists of the creation account from the Yahwist tradition. These traditions indicate the different authorships which scholars have worked out on the basis of certain stylistic or linguistic features – for example, the Yahwist tradition is so called because

in the stories stemming from this source God is referred to as Yahweh or as Yahweh Elohim, translated into English as 'the Lord God'. 'Yahweh' was the name reserved by the Hebrews for the God of Israel, as distinct from 'Elohim' which was a more generic term for God. In the first, Priestly, creation story in chapter 1, Man<sup>2</sup> is created last, he is creation's crowning glory, God's masterpiece, created in his own image. In the second, Yahwist, creation account in chapter 2, Man is created first; God forms Man from the dust of the ground and breathes his spirit into him – and Man becomes a living being, in Hebrew 'a living *nephesh*.' Following the two creation accounts is chapter 3, the story of Adam and Eve in the Garden eating from the forbidden tree of knowledge and being prevented by God from eating from the Tree of Life; this is continuous with the second creation account and is from the Yahwist tradition, reputed to be among the oldest stories that go to make up Genesis. After Genesis 3, there is the story of Cain and Abel in chapter 4, then a long list of conceiving and begettings in chapter 5 – the so-called generations of Adam - then the story of the Flood takes us up to chapter 9, then in chapter 11 there is the story of the tower of Babel.

Chapters 1-11, Genesis 1 to 11, constitute a distinct literary unit in the book of Genesis. These are the mythological chapters; they are not historical and they are not presented as history. With chapter 12 we encounter the story of Abraham and in the bible the story of Abraham and his successors is presented as history – although what passes in the early bible as history is probably what we would term legend; but there is a presumed relation to events in history. In this article my focus will be mainly on Genesis 1-11, the mythological section of Genesis; and especially on chapter 3, but I do not think you can separate chapter 3 or isolate it; it is an intrinsic part of the narrative that flows from the second creation account onwards.

In Western theology there have been a fair number of interpretations of Genesis 3 put forward – people sometimes forget that – but the interpretation that won out and gained ascendancy over all its rivals was that put forward by St Augustine of Hippo who lived in the fourth and fifth centuries AD (354-430 AD). Augustine was a great genius, an outstanding personality and a prolific writer and scholar. It is no exaggeration to say that, while in the East there was a proliferation of influential theologians, in the West no one was thought to come near Augustine in stature or reputation. The West built its theology on Augustine, and this included Augustine's interpretation of Genesis 3 and his doctrine of original sin. (The Eastern Church, by the way, never recognised Augustine as a doctor of the Church and does not accept his account of original sin.)

### **Who told you that you were naked?**

As I read and re-read the Genesis text, I became increasingly conscious of a very strange fact. At the end of chapter 2 the Yahwist author rather flamboyantly mentions that the man and his wife "were both naked, and were not ashamed", then in chapter 3 after they have eaten from the tree the couple go into hiding. The Lord God, represented in the story as a kind of Near Eastern landowner, walks in his garden in the cool of the evening and calls on the man and the woman (who are not yet named as Adam and Eve). He asks them why they are hiding and the man tells him that they hid because they were naked. But, as we have noted, at the end of chapter 2 we were told very clearly that "the man and his wife were both naked, and not ashamed" (Gen

2, 25). Here they are now, ashamed of being seen naked. A **before and after** situation in relation to human nakedness has been deliberately set up by the tale's author. Before they ate from the tree of knowledge they were unashamed of being naked; after eating from it they were ashamed. Something has happened. **My hypothesis is that they have become human, that this is a tale about a change that is wrought in the consciousness of this couple: the tale is about the breakthrough to human self-awareness.**

The proof of this hypothesis is to be found in the conversation that continues in the story between the Lord God and his two creatures. He asks them, "Who told you that you were naked?" That odd question jolts us into recognising that the Lord God is surprised that the couple know they are naked and that his assumption before speaking with them was that they were less than human. He then goes on, without waiting for an answer to his question, to ask a second question: "Have you been eating from the tree of which I commanded you not to eat?" Augustine focused on the second part of that question – "of which I commanded you not to eat" – finding that the couple disobeyed God's command. And he concluded that that act of disobedience was the first sin. But I maintain that the point of dramatic interest, the moment of confrontation between the Lord God and the couple concerns their knowledge that they were naked. It is the change that has come about in this couple that lies at the heart of this story.

That question put into the mouth of the Lord God, "Who told you that you were naked?" is the key, the "Columbo moment", when the penny drops. It shows that the Lord God assumed he was dealing with a pair of animals that were less than human; then he comes to the realisation that it is not someone else who has told them that they are naked, that *they* have changed, and the reason for the change is the fact that they have eaten from the tree of knowledge. They have become self-conscious human beings.

### **Theological Consequences**

I shall now move on to some of the theological consequences of this interpretation. There are, I believe, two negative consequences and several positive consequences. The first important negative consequence is that if the tale is about hominisation, about the breakthrough to human consciousness, then it is not about some primordial sinful act of disobedience or rebellion - and, as we have seen, none of these words occurs in the text. And if there was no original sin then humanity cannot be regarded, as it was by Augustine, as a "*massa damnata*"; the default setting of humanity is not damnation; and salvation cannot be regarded as something reserved for the predestined elite, the minority who are given the grace to be saved, as Augustine supposed.

Another important consequence is that this interpretation prevents Christianity from being set on a collision course with the scientific theory of evolution. The threat to Christianity from the theory of evolution is this: that Augustine insisted that death was a punishment for sin, original sin, and that initially human beings had been created immortal. Now you cannot subscribe to the belief that humans were created immortal and still insist that they evolved by means of natural selection. For natural selection entails the notion of development by means of death or elimination: unless certain species die out to be replaced by other species, natural selection cannot work. For

natural selection to work, three things are needed: time, random variations and death or elimination. As Arthur Peacocke, a theologian who was also a scientist, put it: "Biological death of the individual is the prerequisite of the creativity of the biological order...the statistical logic is inescapable: new forms of life arise only through the dissolution of the old: new life only through the death of the old."<sup>3</sup> My interpretation of the story told in Genesis 3 means that Christianity and evolution are not in conflict. The reason why Augustine made the claim that human beings were created immortal was because, in the story, God tells the couple "In the day that you eat of it (the tree of knowledge of good and evil) you will die" (Gen. 2, 17). Augustine accepts that when they ate from the tree the couple did not die and from this he concluded that God was not referring to the death of the couple but to death as a universal phenomenon of human life; he was saying that human beings would become mortal. However, James Barr disagrees with Augustine here, pointing out the urgency and immediacy conveyed by the words of the Lord God: "*in the day* that you eat of it, you will die". God is referring to death now, soon, and he is referring to the death of this couple – "*you* will die".<sup>4</sup> I have developed James Barr's point here and I argue that, in fact, the couple do die as soon as they eat from the tree of knowledge. They die to their old selves and are changed into something quite different, something entirely new.

### **A Rite of Passage**

I discern a pattern in the first nine chapters of Genesis, which belong to the mythological section of Genesis. These chapters, I maintain, conform to the pattern of a rite of passage. These chapters are about the emergence of human beings on the face of the earth and this emergence includes the passage of animal-like proto-humans to the status of human beings. According to the French anthropologist, Arnold van Gennep, rites of passage consist of three stages: first, the separation of the novices from their families and society; second, a stage of transition, a "betwixt and between" stage when the novices are placed outside normal societal controls, a stage often associated with lawlessness, disorder, disorientation and licence; and finally, a third stage, when the novices are reincorporated into society but as transformed, as mature adults capable of taking on adult roles and responsibilities.<sup>5</sup> The early chapters of Genesis conform to this three-stage pattern: in chapters 1 and 2 we have the age of innocence; then in chapter 3 this is ruptured, as the couple eat from the "forbidden" tree and are profoundly changed as a result, becoming separated from the rest of the animal kingdom; next comes the period of disorder and licence described in chapters 4 and 5, when Cain murders his brother Abel, violence fills the earth and we are told that God thinks about wiping humanity out and starting creation all over again.

Then Noah shows up, a noble and sinless man who "walks with God". (Gen 6, 9) With God's direction Noah and his family survive the Flood – and in myths floods are used to denote instruments of destruction and rebirth, rites of passage, and this is what we find in chapter 9 of Genesis, as the earth is reborn and Noah is commanded to be "fruitful and multiply, and fill the earth" (Gen 9, 1), a repetition of the words spoken to the original couple, denoting that what is taking place is a new creation, a totally new phase in the story of the emergence of humanity, and the beginning of history. It is at this point that God draws up the Covenant, a new alliance or a new deal that will help the new species to live lives that are pleasing to him and fulfilling for themselves.

## The basic human situation

Apart from the negative consequences I have pointed to, this interpretation also yields some important positive consequences for theology. To understand why, we have to deepen our understanding of the tree of knowledge and the tree of life. These are the two trees that stand at the centre of the garden, and the couple are told that they must not eat from the tree of knowledge. Now knowledge and life for the ancient Hebrews were attributes of God. The divine prohibition in the story serves to demarcate what is God's, the tree of knowledge and the tree of life, from what are simply parts of nature, the other trees in the garden which the couple are free to eat from. What this story reveals is that it is by transgressing the boundary separating the divine from the created order, indeed by partaking of the divine, that the couple become human.

At the end of chapter 3 of Genesis an important speech is made by the Lord God. He says: "Behold the man has become like one of us, knowing good and evil, but lest he put forth his hand and take also from the tree of life and eat and live forever...." And to prevent this happening we read that God banished the man and his wife from Eden and guarded the way to the tree of life with a revolving flaming sword. That, I believe, is what the story we have been discussing has been leading up to. The action of the Lord God at this point reveals to human beings what is the basic human situation. That is what myths do: they reveal to us the human way of being in the world, they communicate human self-understanding by locating us in relation to God, to other human beings, and, in the case of Genesis 3, to the other animals. Myths help us to understand ourselves, who we are. And what the myth in Genesis 3 shows is that human beings have emerged from nature by eating from the tree of knowledge but they have been prevented by God from eating also from the tree of life. Man has been left wanting.

Human beings are creatures *manqué*, incomplete, unfinished, deprived of the very thing their human status yearns for. If eating from the tree of knowledge made the animal human, the failure to eat also from the tree of life caused the human animal to be incomplete, in need of God to complete its humanity. The story in Genesis 3 reveals the human *existential situation*: humans achieved likeness to God by ascending to rational consciousness but failed to achieve the completion which such consciousness strives for; they have failed to eat from the tree of life and thereby to achieve union with God. Humans are broken off, unfinished, incomplete.

This is a theme of several of the Psalms:

*O God, you are my God, for you I long;  
For you my soul is thirsting  
My body pines for you  
Like a dry, weary land without water. (Ps 62)*

*Like the deer that yearns  
For running streams  
So my soul is yearning  
For you, my God. (Ps 41)*

Augustine made a similar point at the start of his *Confessions*: 'You have made us for yourself, O Lord, and our hearts are restless until they rest in you.'

## The Covenant

The Covenant was an alliance that God made with humanity, which we read of in Genesis chapter 9. The ancient Hebrews were nomadic when they wandered in the desert, and they entered into covenants with neighbouring tribes to avoid conflict and disputes. These covenants often related to access to water, pasture lands or other resources. The idea was that by means of the covenant members of the neighbouring tribe would enjoy the same rights and privileges as members of the Hebrew tribe; they would become honorary members of that racial group. So in forming a covenant with the ancient Hebrews under the leadership of Moses, which is described in the Book of Exodus, God was admitting them to his tribe. The Covenant is one of the foundations of the Hebrews' understanding of themselves as God's Chosen People. The terms of the Covenant are the ten commandments and the whole system of law that developed around it, whereby the Hebrews became people of the Law. It was the Covenant and the Law that made the Hebrews distinctive, and set them apart from other tribes and racial groups.

The rest of the Hebrew Bible is the story of the people's ups and downs with Yahweh, of their fidelity and infidelity to the Covenant. At various times they go off and copy the religious practices of other tribes, worshipping idols. For there were times when these neighbouring tribes were more successful – in battle, in life – than the Israelites and not unnaturally some of the Israelites thought that these neighbouring gods must be better or stronger than the Hebrew God, Yahweh, and so they took to worshipping these false gods. And when that happened the prophets and religious leaders would scold the people and ceremonies would be held in which the allegiance of the Hebrews to the Covenant and the terms of the covenant would be renewed. For the Covenant was seen as the instrument chosen by God to educate his people in how they should conduct their lives, and in so doing bring them into ever closer union with himself, making them more godlike.

Salvation as divinisation is the central positive theme or idea among the theological consequences I see as following from my interpretation of Genesis 3. Divinisation is also humanisation. That is the paradox of salvation: the more complete we become as divine the more complete we become as human. For the ancient Hebrews the essential attribute of God, what set him apart, was holiness; and holiness denoted integrity, unity and wholeness. So the more we grow in likeness to God the more we attain human wholeness and wellbeing.

## The Incarnation

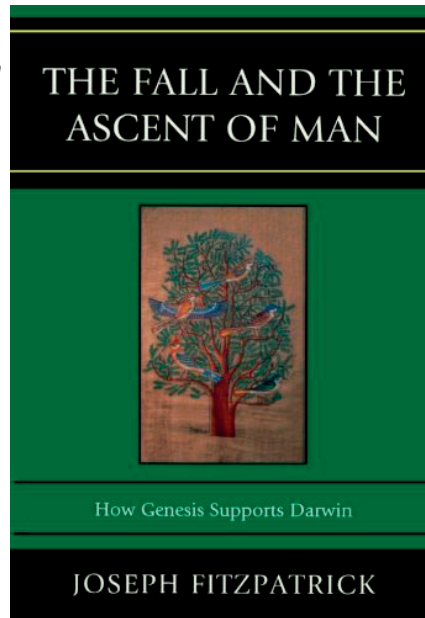
And this brings us rather neatly to the incarnation. I believe that the view I have expressed about how it was in becoming like God that the couple in the Garden of Eden become human – as the Lord God says in the concluding section of Genesis 3, "Behold the man has become like one of us, knowing good and evil" – I believe this view helps us to overcome the tendency to see Jesus as either really only divine or really only human. If human beings are human in so far as they are also divine, the notion of someone who is at once divine and human, the notion of the Godman, begins to make sense. This view is strongly endorsed by some words of the great Flemish theologian, Edward Schillebeeckx, who said: *"We cannot approach God himself, except in Jesus, in all his humanity. We only need to look at him to know*

who God is. That is the meaning of what people call the incarnation of God in Jesus of Nazareth. We may have no conception of what God is, of what 'he' could be, but we do have some conception of who Jesus is. Therefore Jesus is God's countenance."<sup>6</sup>

### Salvation History and the Tree of Life

This takes me to my final point. The trajectory of what theologians call "salvation history" – the history of God's dealings with human beings told in scripture – is often traced from Adam to Christ. Salvation history is portrayed as "Adam sinned; Christ saved; we are redeemed". What I am suggesting is that the trajectory of salvation history ought to be traced from the incident of God's prevention of the human couple gaining access to the tree of life in Eden, as told in Genesis, to the passage in the Book of Revelation, the Apocalypse, the last book of the Christian scriptures where we read in the very last chapter of how human beings at last gain access to the tree of life. See Revelation 22, 14: *Blessed are those who wash their robes, that they may have the right to the tree of life and that they may enter the city by the gates.*

Coming at the beginning and end of the Christian scriptures, the image of the tree of life provides a fitting framework for the history of salvation, the history of God's transformative gifting of himself to humankind over time. The tree of life stands for the possibility of humankind's union with God, of human beings becoming one with God, for in the story the act of eating from the tree of life symbolises our participation in the life of God himself. The tree of life is the commanding image at both the beginning and the end of the story of salvation told in the bible. That is why I have put the image of the tree of life on the front cover of my book.<sup>7</sup>



<sup>1</sup> Aquinas's words in Latin read, '*Ut scilicet per virtutem propriae naturae (primus homo) determinaret sibi quid esset bonum et quid malum ad agendum.*'

<sup>2</sup> To avoid the complications of saying 'him' or 'her' etc., I have used the generic term 'man' but to indicate that I am referring to the human being and not the male person I have capitalised the 'm' – hence 'Man'.

<sup>3</sup> Quoted in Jack Mahoney SJ, *Christianity in Evolution*, (Georgetown University Press, 2011), p. 63

<sup>4</sup> James Barr, op. cit., p. 11

<sup>5</sup> Arnold van Gennep, *The Rites of Passage*, (University of Chicago Press, 1960)

<sup>6</sup> Quoted in *Edward Schillebeeckx: Portrait of a Theologian* by John Bowden (London: SCM Press, 1983) p. 86

<sup>7</sup> Joseph Fitzpatrick, *The Fall and the Ascent of Man: How Genesis Supports Darwin*, (University Press of America, 2012).