

Dr. Vitalis-Hoffman,

This question inspired a longer essay in me, which I'm just sending to you. As a lawyer, I have been paid by the word for too long, so my postings in such classes can be wordy and can be safely ignored. This is an essay form of my thoughts, and I'll post a readers-digest version for the class.

At issue: Who was right about whether Adam and Eve would die after breakfast, God or the Serpent? Once again the answer depends on how we define "was." Up until this point in the bible we didn't have any talk (read also as: action by the Creator) of death. None at all. All Creation was just creation, without any visible destruction, unless you are a fan of entropy and think creation is an affront to all the great chaotic primordial muck. Some people cheer for the Oakland Raiders too...

God creates a garden, puts caretakers in it, and for some insane reason, puts a fruit tree in it that the caretakers are supposed to ignore. Yeah, right. God then says "any of youse guys touch this tree, you die." Then a serpent says to these prepubescent teenagers on the landscape crew "death, shmeath. Let me dole out a little peer pressure here for you." Why do we blame the serpent for anything? Who is the grown up general contractor here in the landscape architecture business?

Bill Cosby had an old routine where Noah and God are discussing the Ark. God says "Build it forty cubits by eighty cubits by twenty cubits." Noah replies: "Riiiiight... What's a cubit?"

I can imagine Adam and Eve saying to the serpent "Death? What's death? We haven't heard about that as part of the Garden of Eden diet plan."

Think about the implication of what was not in the story so far: Death held no sway. It was a square cubit in a round void. Adam and Eve hadn't even heard of pain yet, and sleep only involved apparent weight loss and increased companionship. It is not at all clear just when God created in humanity to capacity to be curious, the capacity to be obedient (or not), and the capacity to reason (or not). [I won't get into the original sin stuff I don't know enough about yet, except to say that the sin appears to be of knowing God and disobeying God rather than of seeking knowledge].

I also theorize that time was not something that meant a whole lot to people who knew nothing of death, and it is not a limiting factor for God the way it is for us temporal beings. God is not chronologically challenged the way we are.

Perhaps God "was" right in saying that knowledge would kill humanity, because we have all been dying, one at a time or in droves ever since.

Perhaps the Serpent "was" right that knowledge won't kill us, at least not immediately, because we have also been living, one at a time, or in droves, ever since. Adam and Eve didn't kick off right away after going off their diet, but their concept of death apparently

changed, and suddenly involved vanity and nudity. Freud surely had a heyday with that...

God, being not chronologically challenged, can go back and change what "was." God can do a universal "Find-Edit-Replace," and would we even know it? Part of our faith in the Creator is in coming to understand that God is not changing the world willy-nilly, at least from our perspective. Imagine waking up tomorrow to find all the colors have been flip-flopped, and grass is now pink, or imagine waking up missing not just a rib, but also the law of gravity in the firmament, or imagine a multipolar minefield of values between good and evil visible to the naked eye (life in cyberspace). I'm just being weird here, but my point is that we have time because it keeps everything from happening all at once. God can handle that, we can't. Our cellular structures appreciate those little atomic clock rules.

When there is no chronological limiting factor, that which "was," such as death to the diet breakers, becomes that which "is" or that which only might "will be." There is death now, and there is life now. There was death then, and there was life then.

Glad we cleared that up.

Now we can consider the part of the question that goes to "in the day." In the day we are born, we are destined to die. In the day we become corporeal we become something that will end based on our experience as a social species on a planet infested with life forms that retain the DNA of life, while at some stages in the life cycle, loosing consciousness of living. Knowledge of the "temporal" nature of such an existence is knowledge of death, and is a form of sadness and lamentation (it can also be a knowledge of the preciousness of life and its joyousness). We die in a way only when we know of the existence of death.

Perhaps this was/is/will be God's plan, that we cherish life more, for understanding its finiteness in our experience. In knowing that God has a plan, it doesn't mean we understand it all, nor have a feel for its schedule. What is a day to God? Why do we even bother to count them? Last night my family and I went to Temple in Frederick to observe Rosh Hashanah, one of the Jewish New Years. I forget the assigned number for the year the Jews are starting, because it just doesn't matter. The rabbi explained that the Jews have at least four New Year's Days: one for starting over in the reading cycle of the torah (last night and today), one for trees as the sap starts to run in Early Spring, one for cows as their offspring are culled to go to market in the late Fall, and one for politicians who count heads before collecting taxes (amazingly near to April 15<sup>th</sup>). Supposedly, Rosh Hashanah commemorates the date that humanity was created, because we need a calendar, while God does not. Maybe eating the fruit of the tree of knowledge was a chronologically inconsistent metaphor for the study of Torah, which of course hadn't actually been written yet....

Two side comments: As a work of literature, I am not impressed with this creation myth when it stands alone. At first glance it is boring, shallow and full of holes. It makes

more sense though in the context of not just the rest of the Bible, but in context of our growing understanding of the nature of matter, its relationship to time and space, and our changing abilities to both see and imagine things beyond our traditional senses. We live in Biblical times. We are still in the day of life. Immanuel. Our increased knowledge is now not just that we all must, die, but that we may die in Christ and rise in Christ.

Second, this line of thinking takes me back to an aspect of the Harry Potter books, which I read out loud to my kids because they weren't interested in Ecclesiastes and Micah just yet. J.K. Rowling has a series of carriages that take the kids into the Hogwarts school grounds at the beginning of each semester. These are pulled by horse-like skeletoned animals that are invisible to many, but visible only to those who have seen another person's death. Most of the young wizards and witches ride into the school each year not knowing what is pulling them in.

I pondered that the other night as my dogs dragged me across seminary ridge in a suitable fog. I was either called to ministry and study at this school of anti-magic, or just helping with my dogs' call to sniff and pee....Whatever works for God. Our animal ancestors that plant seeds of curiosity and a vague need to taste of knowledge are still with us as we tend to our gardens.

**Reader's Digest version that I posted:**

Both God and the serpent spoke truth, because humanity both lives and dies, and has lived and has died, and will live and will die. God is not chronologically challenged, but gives us time as a means of keeping everything from happening all at once and overwhelming us. Death may have no hour at all and yet it is in every hour and day.

With no knowledge of or context for understanding death or even of pain, nor for reasoning the implications of obedience or disobedience, nor for grasping the transitory nature of corporeal life, the conversations between Adam and Eve and the serpent were non sequiturs. The context for all of this is only found in the greater Bible, and really the reading and understanding of which is only possible to us as part of living life in our given day. Our time is still biblical: we now know that we live and die and live again in Christ.

- Joe Leavengood