

On Coming to Terms with Human Finitude

Many readers have likely been taught that the story of Adam and Eve is the source of the Christian doctrine of the Fall: Tempted by the serpent, Eve and Adam disobey God while in the Garden of Eden, sin is thereby infused into the marrow of the human species, and these once perfect, immortal creatures are made mortal and cast out of the Garden.

Some elements of this interpretation seem wholly valid, provided we understand that the story is not an historical account but a myth (not a falsehood), intended to express important truths about the human condition.

It is noteworthy, however, that Jews who cherish this same story generally do not have a doctrine of the Fall. There is room for interpretation, to say the least. And some interpretations do not ring true.

Various biblical scholars have observed that the story does not say that human beings were created immortal, or that death became a punishment for sin. True, God tells Adam not to eat of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, warning that in the day that he eats of it he shall die. True, the serpent disputes this warning, telling Eve “You will not die,” adding that when she eats of it her eyes will be opened and she will be like God.

The serpent seems to be telling the truth. After Adam and Eve eat of the fruit, “the eyes of both were opened,” and they do not die. If God was truthful in the warning not to eat, then God must have intended some sort of metaphorical death.

The story portrays a certain loss of naivete or innocence, not a loss of immortality. Disobeying God has consequences, but physical death is not one of them. Indeed, among various possible interpretations, perhaps the most compelling is that the worst features of our human condition are consequent to our desire to escape the finite creaturely limits of our existence. What gets us into trouble is precisely the desire to be immortal, to “know good and evil,” to “be like God.”

The fact is, we share with the rest of the animal world the limitations of our mortal coil, the toils and labors of securing sustenance, bearing offspring, and all the rest. Moreover, we’ve become painfully aware of this. We also know that we are mortal – and there’s the rub. We know that we’re in a losing battle. We will ultimately not prevail. All our attempts to deny death, to escape its realities, to dominate and reign forever, are fraught with unfortunate consequences.

Pardon me if this is a downer. In a recent column I wrote that I love life, and I do. My mortality is a burden I’d like to escape. I’m relatively healthy. But I know my life won’t last. Yet death is not punishment per se. And I do not want to deny or repress it so badly that I wittingly impose myself upon the earth and society in ways that are tantamount to grasping to “be like God.”

Ernest Becker, in *The Denial of Death*, wrote movingly of how the human species attempts to deny death by consuming other life. Add to that the resources of the planet and the freedoms and opportunities of others. Whoever consumes unnecessary stuff or tries to dominate and

monopolize the social and political space needed by others to flourish is denying death at the expense of other life.

Acceptance of one's finitude may be the most difficult challenge anyone must face. It does not come easy. Denial is perilous. Acceptance is a kind of grace.

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