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# Enigmas and Images

*Studies in Honor of  
Tryggve N. D. Mettinger*

*Edited by*

Göran Eidevall and Blaženka Scheuer

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# *The God of the Eden Narrative*

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In his recent study *The Eden Narrative* Trygve Mettinger addresses this perennial story primarily through two prisms. First, he reads it in light of texts concerning divine commandments and human obedience in Deuteronomic theology, finding that Genesis 2–3 narrates a similar divine test of obedience. Secondly, he reads the story in light of ancient Mesopotamian literature, in particular notions of wisdom and immortality as divine prerogatives in *Adapa* and *Gilgamesh*. Seen through these prisms, the issue of the Eden narrative is whether the humans will obey the divine voice or attempt to cross the border between humankind and deity.<sup>2</sup> As is evident also in his own discussion, Mettinger is not the first to identify wisdom and life as vital concepts of the story, nor is he the first to use Mesopotamian material to interpret it (although it is fair to say that Mettinger makes a few novel combinations between the comparative material, Ezekiel 28, Job 15:7f, and Genesis 2–3).

Mettinger's choice to read Genesis 2–3 in light of Deuteronomic theology, on the other hand, has not been commonly entertained in recent scholarship.<sup>3</sup> Along with a narrative perspective, Deuteronomic theology is perhaps the prism that most influences Mettinger's reading. His combining these two inspires a new line of inquiry: one might compare not only motives but the narrative worlds of Genesis 2–3 and Deuteronomic literature respectively. The present essay pursues a single question within such a study: how do narrative characterizations of God in the world of the Eden narrative compare to those in Deuteronomic literature? The issue is further delimited by focusing such divine characteristics that pertain to the readers' interpreting their position as humans in relation to the deity and the cosmos.

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<sup>1</sup> **Author's Note:** Trygve Mettinger has influenced generations of Scandinavian students of theology. One quality cherished by his Norwegian readers is his ability to combine a study of religio-historical matters with a sense of the theologically relevant. That combination is demonstrated again in *The Eden Narrative* (2007). Since Genesis 2–3 used to occupy a great deal of my time, and since Trygve had the courtesy to engage my earlier work in academic dialogue, this tribute invites further elaboration on that passage.

<sup>2</sup> Mettinger 2007, see esp. 49-60; 99-122 and in ch. 7 in particular 126-33.

<sup>3</sup> More explicit examples were offered by Alonso Schökel 1962; Lohfink 1963; Haag 1970; Berg 1988; Mullen 1997. Earlier scholars did read the story much as Mettinger does, but without referring to Deuteronomic theology, see for instance Dillmann 1892: 45-47, 50, etc.



Contemplating the character of God in Genesis 2–3, it dawned on me that I had not recognized a focus on the character of God as an important issue in literature on Genesis 2–3. Checking the matter again confirms that the more influential commentaries do not accord much space to the issue.<sup>4</sup> (There are comments on the mythological background of the text, but few directly on the divine character.) Even in studies based on narrative perspectives this has not been a major topic.<sup>5</sup> Three of the more notable exceptions to this profile are John Skinner (who concluded with a paragraph on God in Genesis 2–3), Ernst Haag (who devoted some six pages to the question), and Ellen van Wolde (who offered five pages of mainly actant analysis of YHWH God).<sup>6</sup> We return briefly to the first two towards the end of this essay.

### ***Modes of Narration and Characterization in Genesis 2–3***

Biblical Hebrew narrative employs several techniques for characterizing its proponents.<sup>7</sup> We shall review some ways of characterizing God in Genesis 2–3 after first considering a certain narrative mode in the story:

#### *1) Mode of narrative self-commentary*

There is a mode of narrative self-commentary in Genesis 2–3. Propositions by voices in the story are nuanced or questioned by narrated events.<sup>8</sup> For instance, both the serpent and the deity declare that if humans eat from the forbidden tree, they will become like gods “in knowing good and bad” (3:5, והייתם כאלהים ידעי, טוב ורע, and 3:22, והיה כאחד ממנו לדעת טוב ורע). The phrase “to know good and bad” is enigmatic. Still, it is hardly conceivable from a biblical perspective that humans knowing good and bad would dress in fig leaves.<sup>9</sup> Nor would it be expected that morally mature individuals should blame others when interrogated

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<sup>4</sup> This applies for instance to the well known commentaries by Dillmann 1892; Gunkel 1910; von Rad 1972; Westermann 1974; Wenham 1987.

<sup>5</sup> Mettinger did not comment upon it, neither did I, nor did Wallace (1985), who first coined the name Eden Narrative for the story. The same goes for Walsh 1977; Naidoff 1978; Culley 1980; Jobling 1986; Rosenberg 1986.

<sup>6</sup> Skinner 1930: 97; Haag 1970: 101-06; van Wolde 1989: 91-95.

<sup>7</sup> The following is formulated in conversation especially with Berlin (1993: 33-42), and more remotely with Bal (1997: 114-32).

<sup>8</sup> See in particular Rosenberg 1986; Burns 1987.

<sup>9</sup> See Bechtel 1995: 7, 16-17.



over their deeds.<sup>10</sup> The reader wonders how one might conceive of the name and description of the tree in a way that harmonizes with the narrated effects of eating?

Expanding on this point, the serpent predicts that if humans eat, “your eyes will be opened” (3:5, וּנְפָקוּ עֵינֵיכֶם). The next verse undermines one important implication of that proposition, namely that their eyes would have been “closed” before. Already prior to eating the woman is reported to “see that the tree is good to eat, and a delight for *the eyes*” (וּתְרָא הָאִשָּׁה כִּי טוֹב הָעֵץ לְמַאֲכָל וְכִי תֵאָוֶה) (הוא לעינים). This point is underscored by the man too being able to recognize what is good (cf. God’s טוב in 2:18) when encountering the woman in 2:23f. Of course, the narrator also reports that changes occurred to human perception after eating in 3:7 (וּתְפַקְחָה עֵינֵי שְׁנֵיהֶם וַיֵּדְעוּ כִּי עֵרַמְם הֵם). Clearly, something must have happened to the eyes, but the story does not provide unambiguous information on precisely what. These are just some examples to illustrate a mode of narrative commentary frustrating a straightforward reading of Genesis 2–3.

## 2) The roles of characters in the plot

We start our survey of narrative characterization in Genesis 2–3 by focusing the roles of characters in the plot—what Greimas would have called their agent properties. I have dealt with this issue before, based on studies of David Jobling and Ellen van Wolde, and would not repeat the argument here.<sup>11</sup> Suffice it to list a few points germane to the calculation of God’s character in the plot. Narrator voice in 2:5 implies that there is a need for a human to till the land (אדמה). However, YHWH Elohim puts the human to till the *garden*, and when a tiller for the land is finally provided in 3:23, it comes as a result of punishment—presumably contrary to the intentions of the deity. The narrator voice in 2:5 formulates an agenda that seems to be different from the one motivating the deity. So the agent properties of God in the plot of “bringing a human tiller to the soil” are not clear. The deity seems to resemble what Mieke Bal called a less predictable character.<sup>12</sup>

Secondly, YHWH Elohim declares in 2:18 the intention to create for the human a helper, an עֹזֵר כְּנֶגְדּוֹ. We return to this below. For now we register that God’s first attempt was potentially contrary to the announced plot since it generated also the serpent (3:1). This figure is instrumental in straining the relationship between אדם and עֹזֵר כְּנֶגְדּוֹ. These examples should be sufficient for

<sup>10</sup> Moral maturity seems to be the most common sense of the phrase “to know good and bad,” as in Deut 2:39; 2 Sam 19:36; Isa 7:15f. See Clark 1969.

<sup>11</sup> Stordalen 1992: 20–23; van Wolde 1989: esp. 82; Jobling 1986: esp. 26. Mettinger (2007, chapters 2 and 4.2) does not seem to consider this aspect of characterization.

<sup>12</sup> Bal 1997: 119–21, etc.



claiming that the agent properties of God in Genesis 2–3 are presented in a way that renders them ambiguous.<sup>13</sup>

### 3) *The inner life of characters in the story*

One method of characterization is the narrator providing reports on, or excerpts from, the inner life of characters in the story. Generally, if the narrator voice is reliable and if the given reports are plain, such characterizations would be taken at face value. This mode of characterization is not the more frequent in biblical literature, and also not in Genesis 2–3. Only in Gen 2:18 and 3:22 does the narrator report directly on the thought (more accurately: self-directed speech) of YHWH Elohim. The reader's evaluation of these instances depends on the evaluation of the narrator voice and of the involved expressions. We return to these.

If a report on a proponent's inner life is made by a voice from within the narrative, the reader allows for that character's perspectives to have influenced the report.<sup>14</sup> This is the case in the serpent's speech to the woman (3:4-5) on the intentions of the deity. This report invites the reader to calculate the characters of both the deity and the serpent. The outcome of such a process is certainly not plain.

### 4) *Characterization from an external perspective*

More frequently, characterization in biblical narrative occurs by reporting from an external perspective what proponents say and do. This is the common way of characterizing God in Genesis 2–3. Most reports occur in the voice of the narrator: 2:5b, 7-9, 15-17, 19, 21-24; 3:9, 11, 13, 14-19, 21, 23f. One explicit report is given by the woman and implicit reports are offered by the serpent, the man, and the deity (3:2f, and then 3:1, 10, 12, 17, 19).

The one factor that most contributes to the reader's calculating the character of a proponent from such reports is the *perspective* accorded to the narrating voice.<sup>15</sup> One biblical example might illustrate. In Genesis 22:1 the narrator voice offers an inside view revealing God's intention in testing Abraham. The following story, however, offers no comment on reflections of Abraham or fears of Isaac—even when the reported events seem to invite such comments (as in 22:7f).<sup>16</sup> The report is given as through the eyes of a non concerned spectator.

<sup>13</sup> Similarly and more elaborate is van Wolde 1989: 93-95.

<sup>14</sup> The importance of this insight to narratology was forever established by Bakhtin 1984, esp. chs. 2 and 5.

<sup>15</sup> The following is formulated in conversation with Berlin (1993: 43-82), who terms this “point of view,” and Bal (1997: 142-61), using the term “focalization.” As for Genesis, compare already Gunkel 1910: xxxix-xliv.

<sup>16</sup> For this and the following, consult Berlin 1993: 44f.



Had verse 1 not given the privileged perspective, all characters in Gen 22:2-8 would have had to be calculated from the non concerned observer's report. Even *with* verse 1 there is the option for a reader to assume the non informed perspective of, say, Isaac and explore the fundamentally disturbing plot. It is also possible to imagine an inner fight in Abraham due to his shifting between the two perspectives provided—and perhaps this is what makes Genesis 22 into a classic.

Returning to Genesis 2–3, the narrator's perspective mostly resembles that in Gen 22:2-8.<sup>17</sup> There is for instance no report on God's intention in creating a human or including a forbidden tree in the garden. 3:22 brings the prevailing external perspective openly out when YHWH God reveals that a deeper reason for prohibiting the tree had not been communicated in 2:16f. Therefore the prohibition in 2:16f must be heard as if in the voice of an external observer knowing nothing more about the incident than Adam did.

We now approach the issue of the narrator's *reliability*—in the sense of this voice providing reliable and sufficient information. The latter is more relevant in Genesis 2–3, as seen by Mettinger.<sup>18</sup> In one of the few instances where divine intention *is* provided (2:18), the narrative undermines the report by narrating a failure in God's creating the animals (2:19f, cf. 3:1). This is striking since the animal population (and human dominion over it) are usually regarded as significant (as in Psalm 104, Genesis 1, etc.). It causes the reader to ask: was the report on the deity's intention not exhaustive? Could the intention have been to create an עֹזֵר כְּגֹדֵר and also to explicate the distinction between this figure and other creatures as regards their capacity of correspondence?

Another instance of reported intention is 3:22, where YHWH God motivates the deportation of the humans. The description of the human couple in 3:7-12 as God-like is conspicuous, as argued above. The characterization is further undermined in God's confirming that while they know they are naked, the humans do *not* know the business of making clothes (3:22). Again the reader must ask if the motivation reported in 3:22 reveals the whole matter? Since the agent properties of God in Genesis 2–3 are not lucid, a reasonable solution seems to be to read *all* narrator's reports as if offered from an outside perspective—including those on divine intention, and reported in the form of divine self-directed speech. If so, the narrator in 2:18; 3:22 reports as if having been the audience and *not* as if knowing the thought and mind of God. This renders Genesis 2–3 close to a theatre play, a dramatic narrative.<sup>19</sup> That mode opens the space for a reader to reflect herself on what might have been intentions and motives behind reported

<sup>17</sup> Compare already Gunkel 1910: 10, 14, 17, etc.

<sup>18</sup> Mettinger 2007: 35, with notes 83 and 84, referring to Stordalen 2000: 256-57. Learning from Mettinger's reading, I now use the term "reliable" instead of "omniscient" to focus the salient point in the narrator's profile, see Gunn 1990.

<sup>19</sup> For dramatic narrative, see Ryken 1992: 43. This applies also to instances Mettinger counts as evidence for an "omniscient" narrator, see Mettinger 2007: 83.





speech and action of God in Genesis 2–3. All in all, one is apt to agree with Ephraem the Syrian: The Eden narrative is easy to read, but rich to explore!<sup>20</sup>

### 5) *Conventional motives and episodes*

The final mode of characterization to be discussed relates to the way biblical narrative applies conventional motives and episodes. This mode of characterization relies on the interplay between the story under analysis and systems of signs and meaning that are external to it: conventional semiotic systems of language, motives, scenes, and literature. A segment of the relevant material is analyzed in the following sections. The analysis attempts to combine all aspects of characterization considered above and to make comparisons to Deuteronomic literature as described in the opening. The material is chosen so as to pertain to how readers of the Eden narrative would interpret human life in light of the respective narrated worlds. For this purpose the more significant characterizations of God in Genesis 2–3 relate to (a) God’s creating and interacting with the cosmos; (b) God’s issuing and enforcing decrees; (c) the relationship of the deity to those opposing divine decrees or intentions.

## ***God in the Eden Narrative: Creation***

God in the Eden narrative is the originator of phenomena in the physical and cultural worlds as well as of individual humans and animals (2:4-7, 8f, 18-22; 3:1, 10, 14-19, 20, 21). Creation in various forms is a frequent topic in biblical literature. However, creation is apparently not particularly important to Deuteronomic literature.<sup>21</sup> More importantly, perhaps, there seems to be a distinct view of the cosmos in each of the two narrative worlds we aim to compare. The God of the Eden narrative leaves certain roles in the creative enterprise to what I would call cosmic instances: elements in the universe that take part in the creative work. This applies to the  $\aleph$  rising in 2:7, the  $\aleph$  watering the garden and world in 2:10, the human giving names to the animals in 2:20, possibly the  $\aleph$  (cf. below), and some cosmological function occurs also in the two conspicuous trees. Similar cosmological significance is ascribed to parts of the cosmos for instance in Gen 49:25 (blessings from water, hills, and mountains) or Job

<sup>20</sup> See his *Hymns on Paradise*, no. 1, section 3.

<sup>21</sup> References to creation occur in formulaic, perhaps traditional, expressions like Deut 4:32; 26:19; and in the sapiential Song of Moses: Deut 32:6, 15, 18. Fretheim (2005: 137f etc) argues that creation is a logical context for the Torah in Deuteronomy. Westermann (1978: 91-93) implies that some sense of creation is the logical context for blessings in Deuteronomy. Both seem reasonable, but it remains true that the Deuteronomic focus is the law or the blessing, not creation.



38:12f, 16f (the cosmic function of border locations). All this reflects a cosmology that gives latitude for a certain enchantment of the cosmos.

Enchantment of the cosmos is not part of the religious imagination of Deuteronomic theology, where not even the temple is really holy (1 Kgs 14:23; 2 Kgs 16:4; 17:10).<sup>22</sup> Moshe Weinfeld in his influential study on the topic characterized the Deuteronomic revolution thus: “[Israelite religious life] was freed from its ties to the cult and was transformed into an abstract religion which did not require external expression.”<sup>23</sup> While this statement would today be regarded as too strong, there is hardly any doubt that it still makes sense to see a “demythologizing” tendency in the cosmology of this literature.<sup>24</sup> This seems to be at odds with the cosmology reflected in Genesis 2–3. Indeed, the religious imagination behind the Eden narrative is a likely source for the kind of practices condemned, for instance, in Deut 4:15-20.

Further differences in cosmology apply. Deuteronomic theology (for instance in Deut 26:1-15; 28:1-14) would seem to accord with most biblical literature in implying that the world is good (as in Genesis 1), serving as a testimony to the greatness of the creator (as in Psalm 19).<sup>25</sup> In the Story of Eden God’s creating the animals (2:19f; 3:1) is not unproblematic. Perhaps it serves a purpose, but the narrative does not reveal that, and the resultant creatures are a disappointment (2:20)—and one becomes a trap (3:1-5). Also the inclusion of a prohibited tree in the garden intended for a morally frail human being constitutes an enigma.<sup>26</sup> At this point Genesis 2–3 looks rather more like such biblical literature that wrestles to reconcile with the world: Qohelet, the Book of Job, or Psalm 73. These imply a world that does *not* verify the morality or splendor of the creator. In Ps 73:16 the solution lies in the future world becoming morally balanced. In both Qohelet and Job the “answer” seems to be that even provided that there were a sort of justice, humans are ultimately not able to perceive it.<sup>27</sup> I would accord with Mettinger that theodicy is an important aspect of the Eden narrative.<sup>28</sup> It seems to me, however, that this theodicy is very different from the ones explored by his proponents Berger and Luckmann. Rather, Genesis 2–3 locates in that register of biblical literature so ably explored by James Crenshaw at several occasions.<sup>29</sup> This is a literature of protest and disappointment.

<sup>22</sup> For further elaboration, see Weinfeld, 1972: 191-210 (-225).

<sup>23</sup> Weinfeld 1972: 190.

<sup>24</sup> It is telling that Vogt (2006: 70-97), in his able critique of the Weinfeld hypothesis of “centralization, demythologization, and secularization,” never really argues against demythologization.

<sup>25</sup> See Deut 3:24; 4:32; 2 Sam 7:23; 2 Kgs 19:15.

<sup>26</sup> Job 4:17-21 brings out the additional implication of moral worthlessness or failure in the human made from dirt. See Stordalen 1994: 74f.

<sup>27</sup> Job 28 and 42:1-6 imply as much. As for Qohelet, its pessimism is a leading motif.

<sup>28</sup> Mettinger 2007: 58-60, etc.

<sup>29</sup> See for instance Crenshaw 1984; 2005.



The anthropologies of Deuteronomic literature and the Eden narrative respectively also merit consideration. In Gen 2:7 YHWH God breathes into the human nostrils to give life. The book of Job shows that this imagery could be taken to imply a divinely facilitated faculty in humankind.<sup>30</sup> Breath is needed for the human to speak the names of the animals (2:20), so humans may have inherited some ability of the creator also in Genesis 2–3.<sup>31</sup> Deuteronomic literature would not seem to sympathize with the idea of a divine capacity in every human. Rather to the contrary: a life in contact with God relies in Deuteronomic theology upon one's ability to hear to and obey divine commands. Human self-reflection is potentially dangerous in that it may cause one to forget God's word.<sup>32</sup>

### ***God in the Eden Narrative: Issuing and Enforcing Decrees***

Mettinger stresses the significance in the Eden narrative of a divine prohibition described with the root צוה 'command,' as in the noun מצוה, 'commandment.' This term is his best argument for reading the story as a test of human obedience to divine decrees—the feature that most explicitly links it to Deuteronomic theology.<sup>33</sup> His way of analyzing the material, however, helps formulating an insight that goes contrary to Mettinger's argument. That insight pertains to narrative portrayals of *human perception* of divine decrees and of divine motivation for and morality in such decrees.

Deuteronomic narrative is inherently didactic.<sup>34</sup> Its point of tension is whether the receivers will remember and keep the commandments.<sup>35</sup> Whether or not they shall be able to *understand* the divine word seems not to be an issue. Some passages imply that the Law is easy to perceive.<sup>36</sup> Working in the same direction are the so-called humanitarian motivations for laws that were introduced into biblical literature by Deuteronomic scribes.<sup>37</sup> A basic reasonability of the Torah is well-near necessary to Deuteronomic theology if Vogt is correct: the Torah is the means to establish the supremacy of YHWH. Similar assumptions of a readily understandable Torah are mirrored elsewhere, for instance in the eulogy of

<sup>30</sup> See Job 26:4; 27:3; 32:8; 33:4; 34:14.

<sup>31</sup> This point was made already by Koch (1989), and the view is apparently presupposed in Job 35:10f.

<sup>32</sup> Deut 8:14, 19; 25:19; 32:18; Judg 3:7, etc.

<sup>33</sup> Mettinger 2007: esp. 22–27; 49–55.

<sup>34</sup> See already Weinfeld 1972: 298–306.

<sup>35</sup> Deut 5:29; 6:6; 8:2; 11:13; 26:16; 1 Kgs 8:58; 9:4; 2 Kgs 23:25, etc.

<sup>36</sup> See for instance Deut 4:6; 30:14; 2 Kgs 17:9.

<sup>37</sup> Deut 5:15 being a prime example.



moral and cognitive merits of the Torah in Psalm 119. This apprehension of the Law would therefore rely on theological convention.

In Deuteronomic literature this view of Torah is paired to a world where the deity too is usually not hard to understand and the reader is expected to accept the moral that guides divine action. At more than a few points where the intentions of the deity might have been seen as obscure, the Deuteronomic scribe helps reading the plot in the right way. One case is the editorial remark in Gen 22:1 considered above.<sup>38</sup> Before the present framing of the Akedah story, it had the potential of being read as less flattering for the deity. However, the Deuteronomic remark directs the reader to assume that the deity acts consistently and morally justifiable (at least to some). Similar directions occur in remarks on the falls of the Israelite and Judaeon states, explanations when God regrets earlier action, and comparable remarks elsewhere in the corpus.<sup>39</sup> To the implied reader in Deuteronomic literature, God's words, intentions, and morals are perceivable and acceptable.

In this light it is hardly insignificant that the Eden narrative lacks any sign that unambiguously marks the plot as a testing of human obedience.<sup>40</sup> It is not entirely clear whether divine speech reported with the root צוה is a warning (stating a consequence) or a prohibition (with a threat). According to *HALOT* the verb צוה in Pi'el has a wide application. The fundamental sense is "to order, instruct, command, commission." When the sense is a formal decree the context often refers to the word, commandment, covenant, etc. that is being commissioned. Less formal usage of the verb is also attested. The naked use of ויצה in Gen 2:17 is not conclusive as to the precise nature of the speech act.<sup>41</sup> It has been customary to assume a legal background for the following verse (ביום אכלך מיום מות תמות), "on the day you eat from it, you shall surely die".<sup>42</sup> However, as observed again by Mettinger, that expression does not strictly follow the conventional pattern of legal phraseology.<sup>43</sup> Therefore, although it is clear that God would prevent humans from eating from the Tree of Knowledge, the exact nature of this speech act (warning or prohibition?) is not evident.

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<sup>38</sup> Mettinger (2007: 54) reflects on the same issue, leaning on earlier discussions by Veijola and Blum.

<sup>39</sup> See for instance Exod 17:7; 32:14, 25; Num 23:19; Judg 2:18; 1 Sam 15:11, 29, 32; 2 Sam 24:16; 1 Kgs 9:9; 11:33; 14:15; 2 Kgs 2:7; 18:12; 21:15.

<sup>40</sup> Compare Mettinger 2007: 54-55. The salient point is whether the *reader* knows about the test, not the protagonist. Note also that a characterization of Job's suffering as a *test* is given only by certain voices in that narrative (notably Hassatan and Elihu), is contested by Job, and not confirmed by God. It remains an open question whether or not "test" is an adequate category for Job's suffering.

<sup>41</sup> The same goes for the other, even more subtle, allusions to Deuteronomistic phraseology adduced by Mettinger 2007: 51-52.

<sup>42</sup> Clark 1969; Westermann 1974: 264, 304-306.

<sup>43</sup> Mettinger 2007: 22.

Whether the saying be understood as a warning or a prohibition, the narrative complicates the reader's apprehension of the incident. Even if בַּיּוֹם is not taken in a strict temporal sense, there is no report in Genesis of Adam dying because of having eaten from the tree. The oracle in 3:17-18 portrays a curse on the earth as the consequence, while 3:24 implies that the reaction really was a deportation from the garden.<sup>44</sup> As for Adam's death, 3:19 implies that the reason shall be that he had been created from dust—a conventional "explanation" for human mortality and frailty.<sup>45</sup> When a reader learns in 3:22 that YHWH God had not revealed the full divine motivation in 2:16f (see above), what is she to make of the consequences of eating? Taking into consideration the outside perspective of the narrator voice (above), I still think 3:24 gives the best platform for computing the meaning of God's speech in 2:16. One might perceive that humans die because, when having eaten from the Tree of Knowledge they are cut off from the Tree of Life, which means that their mortality gets the upper hand on them.<sup>46</sup> However, the need for such "narrative calculation" demonstrates that the divine commission in 2:16f is anything but plain. The implied reader of Genesis 2–3 seems to imagine a deity that is more complex and confusing than the divine character imagined by the reader implied in Deuteronomic literature.

The reader of Genesis 2–3 reflecting over apparently incomprehensible divine decrees is again not isolated in the biblical universe. The closest example is the Book of Job, with its two permissions given by YHWH to Hassatan in 1:12 and 2:6. If indeed the deity is convinced that Job has integrity (and YHWH as well as the narrator consistently stick to this conviction: 1:1, 8; 2:3; cf. 42:7, etc.) why would it be necessary to honor Hassatan's requests? This is the central issue of the book. More examples abound in sapiential theodicies and in priestly epiphanies.

### ***God in the Eden Narrative: Opposition to Divine Decrees and Intentions***

The God of Deuteronomic literature meets divine as well human opponents, and both are readily identifiable. While the existence of foreign gods is mostly taken as a given, these are not accorded much value.<sup>47</sup> (In late Deuteronomic literature opposing gods do not even really exist.<sup>48</sup>) Not once is it considered that foreign

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<sup>44</sup> Gen 3:17f then seems to imply a legal sense in 2:16f, whereas 3:24 is perhaps closer to reading a threat in God's banning the Tree of Knowledge.

<sup>45</sup> Hillers 1987.

<sup>46</sup> See Stordalen 2000: 232f. Contrary to this reading, see Mettinger (2007: 19-20)—but note that the humans *already* having eaten from the Tree of Life is not a condition for this interpretation to apply.

<sup>47</sup> See Judg 6:31; 10:14; 2 Kgs 18:34f.

<sup>48</sup> Deut 4:28; 29:16; 32:17, 21; 2 Kgs 19:18.



gods should prevent or distort God's action. The point simply is that the congregation must shun "foreign" cult, sorcery, divination, etc. in order to survive.<sup>49</sup> As for human opponents, they are equally easy to spot, and usually reported as being aware themselves of their state of opposition to YHWH. The narrated reader of Deuteronomic literature is hardly in doubt as to who is a divine opponent, and why.

Adam in Genesis 3:8, 10 is afraid, because he might appear naked before YHWH Elohim, not because he had disregarded a divine commandment. One might of course say, as does YHWH Elohim in 3:11, that Adam's awareness of his nakedness is a result of having eaten from the tree. Consequently, he *is* afraid because he has violated the divine commission. However, this is again a reader's computation of the narrative. The explicit statement is however not made, and it still seems possible to infer that Adam in 3:7 was in fact not aware of (the full implication of) what he was doing—perhaps because he had not understood the prohibition as a commandment (cf. the woman in 3:3) or because his mental faculties before eating did not allow for such an apprehension.<sup>50</sup> Genesis 2–3 would certainly not be the only passage reflecting upon the case that humans might displease the deity without being aware of it. Ps 19:13 and Job 34:32 are the more explicit examples. Such emphasis would seem to fly in the face of a Deuteronomic apprehension of the clarity of divine commandments and of opposition to such commandments.

Whether or not the serpent in Genesis 3 is to be seen as a cosmic opponent to YHWH Elohim is a disputed topic.<sup>51</sup> From a narrative point of view it is clear that the serpent opposes some scheme of YHWH Elohim (even though we are not informed about this scheme). The deity aims to prevent humans from eating, while the serpent "helps" them to eat. The serpent also "helps" the narrator scheme of bringing a human tiller to the soil, whereas the deity seems unsupportive of this scheme.<sup>52</sup> The serpent managed to prevent something that YHWH God *did* aim for: namely the humans remaining in the garden and eating from the Tree of Life. Also, the serpent clearly knows more about the Tree of Knowledge than do the humans, a characteristic that is perhaps narratively commented upon by using the noun שָׂרָפָן 'serpent' with a homonym: 'sorcerer.' In conclusion, God in Genesis 2–3 has a non-human opponent that shares in knowledge which is restricted from the humans, and who is able to frustrate divine plans. Clearly,

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<sup>49</sup> Central examples of these widespread concerns in Deuteronomic literature are Deut 7:4 (other gods); Deut 18:11 (sorcery and divination); Deut 12:2; 18:10 (condemnable cult).

<sup>50</sup> The latter view is classic subsequent to Gunkel 1910: 14, 17, 19.

<sup>51</sup> A profiled exegetical degradation of the serpent was offered by von Rad (1972: 61–62), while more nuanced reading is given for instance in Skinner 1930: 71–75.

<sup>52</sup> See above and see further Stordalen 1992: 21–23.



the God of the Eden narrative interacts with a serious opponent on much more equal terms than what is habitually portrayed in Deuteronomic literature.<sup>53</sup>

Again, the Eden narrative is not isolated in such a portrayal of God, and again skeptical sapiential literature provides the closest parallel. Job 41:4-26, in the voice of YHWH (no less), gives a praise of Leviathan.<sup>54</sup> In Job 3:8 Leviathan is a counter force to cosmic order. The present composition of Job 40–41 renders Leviathan as a stronger sequel to Behemoth, whom God seems to be fighting like a primeval force in 40:19. Job 41:4-26 strikes a balance that in part regards Leviathan as a regular creature that one could hunt for (vv. 5-9, etc.) and in part as a mythological dragon (for instance vv. 10-13, 23f). This ambiguous portrayal of Leviathan compares to that of the serpent in Gen 2–3. (And a schooled reader of biblical literature would be able to associate the two by way of Isa 27:1 or Psalm 74:11-13.<sup>55</sup>) At a redactional level, therefore, the Book of Job has the deity recognize *some* significance in a semi-divine opponent (Leviathan). Something similar must be said about the figure of Hassatan in the same book.

### ***Profiling the God of the Eden Narrative***

a) One implication from the above differences between the narrative worlds of the Eden story and Deuteronomic literature is that it seems questionable to interpret the one by way of the other. Trygve Mettinger's argument concerning the Eden narrative may therefore need to be reconsidered. I for one still seem to perceive that a closer comparison for Genesis 2–3 is the so-called skeptical sapiential literature.<sup>56</sup> This would constitute a different prism and produce other readings than what Mettinger has offered.

b) More importantly, Mettinger's argument provided impetus to compare not just the texts, but also the two narrative worlds involved, thereby also comparing perceptions of God and the world in the implied readers. Many new issues emerge from such analysis, opening new windows to the faith, religion, and world views underlying biblical literature. I mention only a few points from the above preliminary investigation.

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<sup>53</sup> See Stordalen 2000: 233, 239f.

<sup>54</sup> The noun **רָבַח** in Job 41:4 is usually rendered 'boasting,' but considering Job 11:3 and assuming a Ugaritic background, it probably reads 'song, boasting,' cf. Pope 1973: 338f.

<sup>55</sup> It now seems clear that the book of Job was written for readers familiar with large portions of the present biblical universe, see Schmid 2007.

<sup>56</sup> Stordalen 2000, *passim*, summarized p. 471: "[The Eden story] presents itself as a narrative vehicle for cultic sapiential cognition and apprehension of the world."



First, there is the portrayal of the divine world. The God of the Eden narrative does not seem to have absolute control over the plot, not to have foreseen every incident. Correspondingly, the narrated reader perceives elements of the world as cosmologically charged and also accords some kind of significance to a semi-divine opponent in the story. Such aspects need to be further explored, but one may reasonably ask if not Genesis 2–3 shifts some of the stress usually generated on the issue of theodicy in monotheistic religions by applying narrative remedies from polytheistic universes.

Secondly, there is the issue of the reader's fundamental sympathies. As compared to that of the Deuteronomic corpus, the narrated reader of Genesis 2–3 seems to identify rather more with human experience and rather less with orthodox learning. The report on the divine speech in 2:16f /3:22 reveals an inclination to not simply take a divine word at face value, but to explore by one's own faculties its wording, motivation and significance. Similarly, there is a difference of narrator perspective. Deuteronomic narrators generally see the world from inside Deuteronomic ideology, taking their theology as a given when computing, say, the histories of Israel and Judah. Even in the thorny case of Josiah, which seems to frustrate the Deuteronomic scheme of divine justice, the narrator basically sticks to the conviction of the fundamental morality of God and of the world.<sup>57</sup> He distances himself from exile and the exiled (as in Deut 31:21; 1 Kgs 8:46-53). The narrator of Genesis 2–3 on the other hand, maintains a neutral observer position also beyond what Mettinger reads as the failed test. Throughout Genesis 2:4–4:16 this voice observes how humans and God develop remedies to survive and endure the predicament "in exile" (3:19, 20, 21; 4: 2, 3f, 15). Indeed, the narrator seems to sympathize with the protagonists who are living the hardships of life trying to cope and perhaps understand it.<sup>58</sup>

Most profoundly, Genesis 2–3 with its external observing narrator voice and its narrative commentaries implies a reader who does not easily determine the will and intention of the deity. Rather to the contrary, the scheme and agent properties of the deity of Eden seem to be in part obscure for the reader as well as for the narrator. Portraying Genesis 2–3 as a report on a divine test can only serve to adumbrate this aspect of the story, exchanging its native narrative world for that of mainstream Deuteronomic stories. This seems to be a poor move indeed. Perhaps the "humanistic" and "demythologized" deity of (mainstream) Deuteronomic literature would harmonize more easily with modernistic philosophy—and therefore also communicate better with theology built upon these foundations. However, I for one sense that the narrative universe associated with

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<sup>57</sup> See for all this Laato 2003: esp. 218-25. For the record: Even if Laato is correct in assuming a subsequent emergence of a theodicy based on the vicarious death of a Davidic ruler (pp. 25-35), Deuteronomic literature would still see such a death as morally acceptable.

<sup>58</sup> Stordalen 2000: 148f.



the mainstream Deuteronomic deity is not sufficiently profound to carry the combined weight of human experience. Indeed, I am predisposed to believe that the presence of texts like Genesis 2–3 (or the Book of Job) in biblical literature imply that (someone in) the biblical audience must have felt the same way. The implied reader who is always able to apprehend and morally defend God, is challenged from within biblical literature. Interpreters should not help silencing that challenge.

c) At the same time, it seems significant that tradition provided us with Genesis 2–3 (and the Book of Job, etc.) only as part of a larger literary universe. What, then, are we to make of the differences recorded above?

In a monotheistic religion images of God will often be a prism to facets of faith and spirituality: a *Gottesbild* has a corresponding religious and moral world. Differences in cosmology, anthropology, and epistemology would point to variations in spiritual and religious experience. Earlier exegetical models for dealing with such differences typically explain the differences as caused by development over time (Wellhausen and others), in terms of competing theological traditions (von Rad and others), or as variations in the social function of religion (Gerstenberger and others). Such models still merit consideration. But it must also be remembered that while the image of God in Genesis 2–3 is in contrast to Deuteronomic theology, it is not isolated in biblical literature. Its closest parallels occur in sapiential literature, and the scribes of deuteronomic and sapiential literature were evidently not unfamiliar with each other's learning: didactic tendencies connect the two.<sup>59</sup> Also, to mention only one "crossover" (when judged from the above sketched differences): Psalm 19 sustains both the idea of the Torah as universal (as in Deuteronomic literature) and the idea that a believer might unwittingly violate it (as in Genesis 2–3). So how should one imagine a process that transmitted both the Eden narrative, Deuteronomic literature, and various "crossovers"? Obviously, it is not my intention to give a serious answer here. Thanks, however, to Karel van der Toorn, David M. Carr and others, we are now less in the dark when trying to imagine the scribal world behind biblical literature.<sup>60</sup> Given the relative historical proximity of Genesis 2–3 and Deuteronomic literature,<sup>61</sup> it seems unlikely that the modest Judaeen scribal culture should have harbored sufficient social diversity to generate *ex novo* such different theological complexes and keep them isolated from each other. Of course, individual theological positions and spiritualities may have generated as topically and socially distinct phenomena. However, we do not have them in such pristine forms, but only as mediated and negotiated in biblical scribal culture.

<sup>59</sup> See already Weinfeld 1972: 298-305, *et passim*.

<sup>60</sup> Van der Toorn 2007; Carr 2005.

<sup>61</sup> I tentatively date Genesis 2–3 somewhere in the 6<sup>th</sup>/5<sup>th</sup> century B.C.E., see Stordalen 2000: 206-13.



One must assume, I think, that every position that made it through the wringer of tradition was able to sustain over time its value in the totality of tradition—not only in its own religious or social subset. There may have been different reasons for such ability at different times: impressive historical origin, support by influential scribes, strong credibility structure in society, etc.

In any event, it seems necessary that an apprentice in the small Judaeen scribal culture must have been accustomed to theological diversity. Like present-day theologians, these scribes were presumably wrestling with the complexity in any attempt to make sense of the world and of life. Like their modern counterparts, they maintained in their profession a body of thought, religion, and spiritual practice that would not have been consistent from a logical point of view. Different theologians had different preferences, of course, and not everyone mastered everything in tradition. But it seems to me, that a scribe serving at the mill of biblical tradition must have been accustomed to negotiating competing theologies, cosmologies, anthropologies. Modern scholars may be doing these ancient scribes injustice when reducing them to single-minded Deuteronomists or priestly theologians. For this reason the differences in narrative worlds recorded above are perhaps best characterized simply as competing in ancient Hebrew theology and religion. In order to interpret them, we need to identify and reconstruct them, and if possible to imagine their historical provenance. But we also need to explore their possible relating to each other in form of development, exchange, polemics, syntheses, paradoxes, etc.

d) Why would the characteristic profile of YHWH Elohim in the Story of Eden by and large have escaped modern commentators? One reason might be perceivable in two works that *do* explicitly consider the image of God in Genesis 2–3. John Skinner and Ernst Haag provide very different analyses, but they agree in aligning the God of Eden with God elsewhere in the Bible. Haag sees YHWH Elohim as similar to the covenantal God of Israel.<sup>62</sup> Skinner includes also the New Testament in his equation: “[...] nay, in the analogy of human fatherhood which underlies the description, we can trace the lineaments of the God and Father of Jesus Christ.”<sup>63</sup> Both seem basically to assume that since there is only one God, the deity must be consistent throughout biblical literature. Such an assumption could of course effectively prevent one’s perception of the specifics in any single portrayal of God.

Biblical theology is perhaps obliged to assume as a default position that God would be consistent in the biblical record. However, regardless of one’s theological commitment, there must be a limit to harmonization. The above discourse implies that there may be much to learn in exploring the cracks between different biblical images of God, humankind, and cosmos.

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<sup>62</sup> Haag 1970: 101-102.

<sup>63</sup> Skinner 1930: 97.



In one of his earlier works, Tryggve Mettinger demonstrated why differing images of the deity serve as informative prisms to biblical faith and religion.<sup>64</sup> I have tried to argue, first, that awareness of theological complexities helps producing better historical analysis. Secondly, if humanistic scholarship ultimately serves the reconstruction of human life in a complex world, the intricacies of biblical literature might even help inspire better scholarship. I can only hope that *der Jubilar* finds the present attempt at expanding his perspectives engaging and potentially relevant.

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<sup>64</sup> Mettinger 1988.



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