Man, Soil, Garden: Basic Plot in Genesis 2-3 Reconsidered
Terje Stordalen
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What is This?
I

‘What is Genesis 2–3 about?’ Derek Beattie was neither first nor last to pose that question. In fact his note intermediated between two decades in which this theological puzzle was answered in a more prolific way than ever before. In addition to traditional investigations of sources and symbols of the story, we have seen attempts to read Genesis 2–3 as a diachronic record of the redactional history of the Pentateuch, as J’s comment upon the politics of his contemporaries, as a reflection of Hebrew wisdom traditions, of king ideology, land ideology or temple ideology. We have read new religio-historical, social, psychoanalytical and feminist approaches, and several ‘structuralist’ and semiotic approaches. Despite this host of attempts at answers, the

question is far from closed, which is of course partly due to the richness of the story—and to the astounding reception it has experienced throughout the Jewish and Christian ages. I believe Beattie himself pointed out an important additional reason for the diversity of interpretation, when, some years after his first note, he argued that there has been too much derash and too little peshat in the modern interpretation of Genesis 2–3.¹ If that is the case, then we need a new close


reading of Genesis 2–3, with due attention to language and literary characteristics.

To that reading, traditional questions for (literary or oral) sources do not apply. I do not of course deny that this apparently well composed story may have gone through a literary process with several ‘sources’ or ‘redactions’. Since, however, the final text is the only non-hypothetical object, our primary obligation should be to read that text. Now, genetic methods are not designed for simply reading text, and basically they do not occupy themselves with text as literary communication.

So we are thrown upon various semantic and literary approaches, which have of course long been applied to Genesis 2–3.1 Special recognition is due to Bruce Naidoff’s paper, to Casalis’s article, to the Proppian part of Couffignal’s study, to the main part of Vogels’ article, and, most notably, to David Jobling’s work, which in part runs parallel to this paper.2 My own approach will probably be regarded as


more historical-philologically oriented than these. Any interpreter's hope to use fully adequate models will of course remain illusory. In my view, however, this fact does not dispense with the obligation of the biblical scholar to give historical and textual arguments for the preferred methodological illusion. So I shall attempt to do something of the kind here. For those who prefer more synchronous argumentation, my paper will perhaps indicate a tiny but promising progress in the historically oriented camp. Those who prefer the traditional genetic approach, on the other hand, will hopefully be further alarmed.

II

Focus on 'Plot'

A basic approach to Genesis 2-3 is preferably taken through its narrative plot. Many would perhaps (like Joel Rosenberg1) hold that 'rhetorical purpose'—expressed in themes or structures—is more fundamental than the plot. I of course agree that involved in a story are names, symbols, transformations and so on, all of which are indeed 'non-narrative'. As long as we deal with single stories, however, the plot does seem to be more fundamental. The reader of a story must certainly recognize the 'non-narrative' paradigms (langue). But one's comprehension of their specific interrelation is based on the syntagmatic context (parole). Therefore, plot seems to be the more basic vehicle for reading stories.

Concise defining of 'plot' is, however, far from easy. As plots are syntagmatic, they are not properly defined simply by grouping paradigmatic elements like themes or symbols. Such elements may appear in different syntagms of the text. (And yet, themes and symbols are not irrelevant for identifying the plot.) Neither can this be done by purely formal criteria, like dramatic shifts (scenery, actors, etc.). A coherent plot may well start in one dramatic sphere and conclude in another, or new characters may be introduced to transform or accelerate the plot.


In forming a view of 'plot' in Genesis 2-3, I have been profoundly influenced by Robert Culley and his use of Vladimir Propp's studies.\(^1\) As for Genesis 2-3, my relation to Culley is as general as his relation to Propp—I have simply had his approach in mind, while attempting to recognize any signal of plot given in the Hebrew text. Even at first glance it appears that there are several such signals in Genesis 2-3. Indeed, the story Genesis 2-3 seems to connect several plots—possibly one reason why this relatively short text is rather more complex than most other narratives in the Hebrew Bible.

A 'method' as rough as this will demand careful demonstration for each plot, a task too extensive to be fulfilled here. I shall restrict myself to following one single narrative line only. As this line both begins and concludes the story, I shall name it 'the basic plot'. Hence large parts of the story will for now be left practically unconsidered, as will many non-narrative elements. Thus it is obvious that I intend to give only certain elements of an answer to 'what Genesis 2–3 is about'.

**Plot Signal: 'As Not Yet'**

We turn now to the question of 'plot signals' in Genesis 2–3. Ever since Hermann Gunkel, one particular parallel between Genesis 2–3 and other Near Eastern creation texts has occupied much interest, namely the description of a negative Urzustand in Gen. 2.5.\(^2\) The use of this parallel reached a peak in Claus Westermann's monumental commentary.\(^3\) Westermann asserted that, in mythologies from all around the world, creation is apprehended as an einmaliges event, and that therefore 'before' creation there was thought to be 'nothing' (p. 60). He established 'Als noch nicht... war' as a Stilform occurring in several creation stories. Reading his text, we realize that Westermann actually held it to be more than a form. In his view this formula even encloses ideological aspects of creation, and it is in fact taken to be a hallmark of creation stories (pp. 61-64). Thus, while

2. H. Gunkel, *Genesis: Übersetzt und erklärt* (Göttinger Handkommentar zum Alten Testament, 1; Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1901). One must refer, however, to the third, revised, edition from the same editor in 1910. See there p. 5. (The book was reprinted in several unchanged editions. I use the 9th edn of 1977.)
rejecting the common view of Genesis 3 as a story of original sin, Westermann was quite traditional in his opinion of Genesis 2 as a story of creation.\(^1\) The main part of Westermann’s argument was recently followed by Howard Wallace, he himself also reading Gen. 2.4b-5 as a signal that ‘creation’ is a central theme in Genesis 2.\(^2\)

A review of relevant Oriental parallels indicates that the ‘when not yet’ scheme can hardly have been a significant signal of creation stories. While many proper creation myths lack this introduction,\(^3\) the formula does occur in other myths of beginnings, like ‘Cattle and Grain’, \textit{Lugal-e}.\(^4\) or \textit{The Sumerian Flood Story}.\(^5\) A positively formulated version—stating not the deficiency, but the problem—seems to occur in \textit{Atrahasis} and in Hesiod.\(^6\) Most of these texts do contain creation episodes, and yet none of them should be classified as ‘creation myth’. The same seems to be the case even for several Egyptian and other texts used by Westermann.\(^7\) The formula does of course occur even in creation texts, like \textit{Enuma Elish}, in the so called \textit{Eridu Story of Creation}, or in Philo of Byblos.\(^8\) Today, however, \textit{Enuma Elish}—vital to both Gunkel and Westermann at this point—has lost its status as the standard measure for Mesopotamian concepts of creation.\(^9\) The occurrence of the ‘when not yet’ scheme in this epic certainly does not

4. Here as introductions, see Pettinato, \textit{Menschenbild}, pp. 86-90 and 91-96.
indicate that originally it was a characteristic of creation stories only. The evidence rather suggests that this simply was a narrative technique applied in different texts—often in stories of primaeval times.

On the other hand, the literary function of this artifact seems to be rather fixed. Stating a negative situation, it defines certain deficiencies (problems) that are going to be filled (solved) in the following narrative. This literary function is so firm that expressions from the formula may reappear verbatim in the subsequent story. Thus, at least in several Oriental texts, the ‘when not yet’ formula gives specific information about direction and theme in the following narrative.

Moving from the Oriental literature into Genesis, one first question is whether the ‘when not yet...’ in Gen. 2.5 does indeed occur at the beginning of the story. One will remember that traditional source criticism holds the ‘J’ source to start in 2.4b. I have elsewhere argued rather extensively that (the entire verse) Gen. 2.4 is to be read as an editorial note, bridging Genesis 2–3 and Genesis 1. In that case Genesis 2–3 starts with the negative statements in 2.5. It seems conventional, however, to reach a similar view even when accepting the traditional source theory. Reading 2.4b as dependant upon 2.7, one may take the proper story as starting in 2.5. Either way, we may take it for granted that ‘when not yet’ in Gen. 2.5 occurs at the beginning of Genesis 2–3.

The next question is whether the Hebrew יְהִי, constituting the ‘not yet...’ here, does conform to those literary artifacts studied above. There are only four instances in narratives of the Hebrew Bible where יְהִי accompanied by יְהִי is applied to a negative condition. Those four instances do however all refer to something yet to take place. In the two Exodus instances, the foreshadowed event seems actually to be reported: Exod. 9.30; 10.7 (cf. Exod. 12.30-33). These examples are far from parallel to the formulaic ‘when not yet’

1. The same may be said on Hebrew grounds concerning Ps. 90.2; Prov. 8.23-26; 4 Ezra 5.56–6.6.
2. T. Stordalen, ‘Genesis 2.4: Restudying a locus classicus’, forthcoming in ZAW.
4. Usually means simply ‘before’, referring to a time prior to incidents or conditions reported in the context.
5. This is not the case in Isa. 7.16 and 8.4. As prophecies we could perhaps say that they imply a coming fulfilment.
discussed above. Still they confirm that such use of ṣeq would at least not be impossible. A more distant argument for reading Gen. 2.5 as narrative 'program' for Genesis 2–3 lies in the fact that similar constructions are common in the Bible.\(^1\) Indeed, this may be said to be a cross-cultural literary technique, coinciding with the nature of narrative rather than with cultural-linguistic conventions.\(^2\)

In view not only of this general narrative tendency, but also of the semantic possibilities in Gen. 2.5, and of the literary conventions in more or less similar stories throughout the ancient Near East, we are on reasonably firm ground when assuming that the plot of Genesis 2–3 is initiated in Gen. 2.5.

III

It is vital first to identify exactly what plot is indicated. Later we will see whether and how this narrative program is actually carried out in the story. In both cases careful semantic reading will be essential.

The Nature of the Deficiencies

.protobuf is a rare noun, with only three occurrences outside Gen. 2.5: Gen. 21.15; Job 30.4, 7. In all three places it designates plants outside the cultivated sphere. The kinds of vegetation occurring in the parallelism in Job 30 are equally non-cultured plants, and the setting in Genesis 21 is the desert. So protobuf also most probably designates wild plants and scrub in Gen. 2.5.

protobuf usually designates plants used in the Hebrew economy as food either for cattle or for people. Among the 33 occurrences, there are two (or three) that seem to designate wild plants.\(^3\) There are also several indeterminable cases. In some of these, however, lack or destruction of protobuf illustrates catastrophe. This would indicate that the vegetation in question is part of the human economy and not totally 'wild'.\(^4\) More frequently protobuf simply means cultivated plants, food for

3. Jer. 14.6; 2 Kgs 19.26; possibly even Isa. 37.27 (cf. parallelism).
4. Exod. 9.22, 25; 10.12, 15; similarly Deut. 9.22; Isa. 37.27; 42.15; Jer. 12.4; Amos 7.2.
domesticated animals,¹ and sometimes even food for humans.² Most significant for our purpose is Ps. 104.14-15:

(14) Thou dost cause the grass to grow for the cattle,
and plants ( Heb) for man to cultivate,
that he may bring forth food from the earth,
(15) and wine to gladden the heart of man,
oil to make his face shine,
and bread to strengthen man’s heart (RSV).

The flora in question are subjected to determined agricultural activity (cf. the verb תָּבֵא). They seem to supply different kinds of food, possibly even bread ( מִזְבָּח). Both the general ideas and the terminology of Psalm 104 appear to be paralleled in Genesis 2–3, where at the end of the story the human couple is to eat those plants ( Heb), and to earn bread ( מִזְבָּח) with hard labour (3.18-19). So, presumably מִזְבָּח in Gen. 2.5 means some kind of cultivated plants, probably used for human nutrition.

This difference between the two types of vegetation (wild versus cultivated) is not obscured by their common link to מִזְבָּח. This term means cultivated field (Gen. 37.7; 2 Sam. 9.7; Mic. 2.2) as well as open, even unfrequented, land (Gen. 24.63; Exod. 22.30). The basic meaning of the term seems to be simply a field with vegetation.

מִזְבָּח, of course extremely frequent, has a broad range of meaning. Basically it means ‘ground’ or ‘land’, whether a piece of land, a land territory (land of a nation) or even all land—the earth. This latter meaning prevails in Genesis 1–11,³ giving מִזְבָּח connotations of wide space. From such a spatial point of view, the ‘field’ is ‘smaller’, and will be located within the ‘land’. Qualitatively seen, however, the field is ‘greater’. This term exposes one specific feature of the land: its capability to supply conditions for vegetation. That capability is not emphasized here, but is clearly implicit in the concept of מִזְבָּח.

In Genesis 1–11 the word מִזְבָּח focuses this same capacity of the field. In the major part of the so called ‘Yahwistic’ stratum of Genesis 1–11, this word simply means cultivable ground, ‘soil’.⁴ In this usage, מִזְבָּח is practically ‘non-geographic’. The soil will, however, by

1. Deut. 11.15; Amos 7.2; Ps. 106.20; Prov. 27.25.
2. Gen. 1.29; 3.18; Pss. 104.14; 105.35.
implication, be situated in the fields, especially in the cultivated ones.

Thus the spatial matrix is dominated by the land. The soil (אֶדֶם) is in the field (הָרְבִּים), located in the land (רוֹאָם). The qualitative matrix, on the other hand, is exactly inverse: the fertile potential of the land is exposed in the field and most notably in the soil. Since Genesis 2–3 is characterized by an artful vocabulary, this spatial–qualitative chiasm is not likely to be accidental. The literary canopy between soil and land appears to include spatial as well as qualitative dimensions. The main emphasis is qualitative; the land is not vegetated, not fertile. This lack, however, is presented even in the spatial dimension: vegetation is missing in the land, the entire earth.

One last term needs comment: הםusat. The root means ‘rain’. Used intransitively with the preposition לש, it designates normal rain.¹ The fertilizing element of that rain may be emphasized, as in Job 38.26. This section of Job offers motifs and vocabulary related to Gen. 2.5. The case is similar in Isa. 5.6 and Amos 4.7. So the point of YHWH Elohim’s not raining upon the land in Gen. 2.5 seems to be the lack of fertilizing water.

Reading Gen. 2.5, it is clear that the sentence falls into two halves, each again divided in two. Emphasizing the semantic connotations elaborated above, we read like this:

A¹ No wild plant of the field was yet in the land
A² and no field plant of culture had yet sprung up.
B¹ For YHWH God had not yet fecundated the land with rain,
B² and there was no human being to till the soil.

The first half of the verse (A) describes the initial situation, the second (B) the reasons for the poor state. The first part of the second half (B¹) corresponds to the first part of the first half (A¹). So we may assume that the relation will be similar between the two remaining quarters of the verse.² Lack of culture plants (A²) is due to absence of a human being to till the soil (B²). A tiller of the soil

1. Gen. 7.4; Job 38.26; Isa. 5.6; Amos 4.7 (4x).
2. A similar assumption on a more general basis is to be found in Vogels, ‘L’être humain’, pp. 524-25.
is necessary for the cultured vegetation of the land.

In sum, Gen. 2.5 initiates a plot where the aim is to bring vegetation (wild plants and cultured plants) to the entire land (cultivated and non-cultivated fields, respectively). In order to achieve this, fecundating water must be supplied, and there must be someone to till the soil.

First improvement: 'adam
This plot may be said to lie at the very core of Genesis 2–3. It is admittedly somewhat unevenly distributed throughout the story, but does—as we shall see—enclose the whole story.

(6) And a source (**стал**) went up from the land and watered (**תפאר** the whole surface of the soil.

**стал** is a much debated noun, attested only here and in Job 36.27. Its etymology is notoriously difficult. I follow Magne Sæbø, who argued that the word is cognate with Sumerian/Akkadian **İD/iid**, meaning a source, a surfacing underground river (thus LXX in this verse, but not in Job 36.27). This river is 'going up' from the sea located under the earth, which, as Sæbø pointed out, harmonizes with Gen. 2.6.1 We might add, with Francis Andersen, that if the same translation be allowed even in Job 36.27, this is the river of God himself, surfacing from the subterranean reservoir of sweet water.2

This river is watering the face of the earth. The semantic connotations of **תפאר** are not identical with those of the rain in v. 5. The root means 'drink', and is used for human drinking. When applied to land or vegetation, this verb may imply either a proper soak (Ezek. 17.7-8; Joel 4.18), or it may express the life-giving potential of such rich watering (Deut. 11.10; Isa. 27.3; Qoh. 2.6). This latter meaning is explicit in Gen. 2.10. Here in 2.6, however, the case may be slightly different.

Since the lack of irrigating water in the land is a specific deficiency within this plot, we would expect a removal of that problem to be

emphasized. But this is certainly not the case in Gen. 2.6. The story reports neither the blessing potential, nor any subsequent emergence of vegetation. We learn simply that 'the face of the soil' becomes wet. This is even more striking, for, a few verses later, we read again that land is watered: 2.10-14. That watering seems to be accompanied by the expected signs of richness and blessing in the lands (בָּרֶךְ) as well as in the garden. So we should perhaps allow for different significance in 2.6.

It has long been assumed that the function of the יָם is to moisten the dry (2.5) dust (2.7) so that YHWH may fashion it. This would correspond to the potter-like activity in 2.7. If so, the water in question is more directed towards creation of a human being than towards fertilizing the soil, and the connotation of the verb is more that of 'soaking' than that of 'fertilizing'. There are additional arguments for this interpretation.

In Job 36.28 the water in question is directed towards humanity, not towards the soil: the drops of the יָם fall on 'many people'. This may be significant, given the fact that Job 38.25-28 (using אָרָק as in Gen. 2.5, but otherwise rather similar to Job 36.28) speaks about rain falling on the earth 'where there is no one'. Now Mesopotamian texts suggest that the subterranean water does have qualities other than fertilization. The Akkadian subterranean sea is named apsu (Sumerian abzu). This is the abode for the god Enki (Ea). Enki (with a female counterpart) is regularly presented as having formed humankind in a way very similar to that in Gen. 2.7. And in some of those instances the human beings are made from 'the clay that covers apsu'.

Turning to the Hebrew context, we realize first that the subterranean ocean, from which the river of God emerges, would be tehôm. In Prov. 3.20 YHWH is credited for having created this ocean 'with knowledge', and even in Ps. 36.7 the tehôm seems to have some 'wise'

3. This term has several meanings: cf. Westermann, Theologisches Handwörterbuch zum Alten Testament, II (Munich: Chr. Kaiser, 1976), cols. 1028-30. A criterion for identifying it with the subterranean ocean is that in this sense tehôm is often linked to the clouds of the heaven, like יָם in Job 36.28; Pss. 135.6; 71.20; Prov. 3.20; 8.28. ( Cf. a possibly similar meaning in Deut. 8.7; Ezek. 31.15; Amos 7.4.)
connotations. Thus the Hebrew tehôm, from which the river flows, is perhaps not entirely unlike the Akkadian apsu. Therefore, one may assume that YHWH soaked dust in the נָפָשׁ rising from tehôm in order to create a human being. In that case Gen. 2.6 is not directed to supply the missing water, but the missing tiller of the soil.

This could explain why the watering in 2.6 is connected not to the land (as required in 2.5), but towards ‘the whole face of the soil’. That phrase is not easy to interpret. It could for once give נָפָשׁ a dimension of space; the soaked area has a ‘face’. The significance of that space would however be far from eloquent, and this interpretation would disturb the spatial matrix elsewhere identified in Genesis 2–3. A better interpretation seems to be that the top stratum of the soil becomes wet all over. So when YHWH forms dust from נָפָשׁ into דַּף, his material is all soaked in נָפָשׁ. Whatever be the case, the noun (דַּף) and the verb (יָקָם), as well as the context, suggest that the purpose in Gen. 2.6 is to prepare for the creation of the human being. Any watering of the ‘land’ is, so to speak, accidental, and in any case it is not explicitly recorded.

The actual creation takes place in 2.7. This incident is loaded with symbolism, a symbolism in which several levels of this story are integrated.¹ For the purpose of following the basic plot, however, the verse is simple. One deficiency is fulfilled: now there is a human being, taken and named from the soil, hence (by understatement) well fit to till it.

The Garden: A Spatial Twist
But the narrator makes a twist, thereby transforming the tension of the story.

(8) YHWH God planted a garden in Eden, in the east; and there he placed the man whom he had formed.

(9) And YHWH God caused all trees to spring (נָפָשׁ) from the soil, trees pleasant for the sight and good for food. The Tree of Life was in the midst of the garden, as well as the Tree for Knowledge of Good and Evil.

(15) And YHWH God removed (נָפָשׁ) the man and put him in the garden of Eden to till it and to guard it (לָצָב אֶדֶן).

1. See Gunkel, Genesis, pp. 6-7, for a learned view of the motives.
Gen. 2.9 takes up themes from 2.5. The trees for food are cultured plants like the herbs in 2.5, here more explicitly cultivable (or already cultivated?) and more explicitly nourishing. Whatever meaning we read into the two mythical trees of the garden (additional levels of meaning play here), they must by far supersede any ‘herb of the field’. So the qualitative lack experienced by the land is overwhelmingly fulfilled in the garden. Also according to 2.5, the man is ordained to tilling (עָבַד). That he is also to ‘keep’ or ‘guard’ seems to be part of regular garden procedures (cf. Isa. 27.3; 5.2).

But there are discrepancies with regards to 2.5 as well: the human being is not doing agricultural work as prescribed in 2.5, but horticultural work. Furthermore, the ‘adam is not to till the soil, but the garden.¹ This is an obviously more restricted area than ‘the land’ that lacks vegetation in 2.5.² In 2.15, a transportation is reported in two sequences. The verb in the first sequence, נָקַב, explicitly indicates a removal (cf. Gen. 5.24). By reasonable interpretation, this is a removal from the ‘land’, where the ‘adam was modelled. That assumption is possibly confirmed in 3.23 (see below). Later on we shall read that YHWH curses the soil (3.18). This curse does not seem to influence the soil within the garden, for the trees there will still need to be guarded (3.24). Furthermore, there are reasons to assume that the name מִשְׂרָת means ‘abundance’, and that it has a symbolic significance exactly opposite to the situation reported in Gen. 2.5.³ If so, the difference between this life-giving garden and the scanty land outside is obvious. Then the description of the land and the garden respectively adds to the spatial matrix of the story, suggesting that these two are different areas.

¹. There is a problem here, as both suffixes in 2.15 are fem., whereas מ is masc. GKC §122, ³b holds מ to be fem. at this place alone, although the noun has a synonymous feminine form, מִשְׂרָת. More reasonable seems the suggestion of Brockelmann (Hebräische Syntax, §16g), that מ alone is masculine, while the expression מִשְׂרָת נַעֲרָת is feminine. We note that in Ezek. 36.35 and Joel 2.3, מַעֲרָת, מ is a positive prototype to fem. מ. Similarly both מ and מ appear in Isa. 51.3 as prototypes of Zion (fem.) to come. I therefore assume that מ was indeed a concept with feminine connotations.


Spatial movement of characters is a conventional biblical way to shape space indirectly. The double report of the transport (vv. 8 and 15) emphasizes this shaping. In fact, the relocation transforms the predominantly qualitative lack in 2.5 into a predominantly spatial problem in 2.15. The qualitative deficiency of 2.5 is ‘over-solved’ in the garden, which enjoys both water and a working gardener. The spatial task, however, is ‘under-solved’ as long as the solution occurs only in the garden, and not in the ‘land’.

Water to the Garden— and to the ‘Lands’
As noted above, it is dubious whether the river in 2.6 is meant to fill the need for water in the land. But in any event, water to several ‘lands’ unquestionably flows out of the garden:

(10) And a river goes out of Eden to water (נֶפֶשׁ) the garden, and from there it divides and becomes four rivers...

For נֶפֶשׁ, see above. Here the life-giving aspect of the watering is explicit. Irrigation was a common task in gardening (Deut. 11.10; Isa. 27.3; 58.11; Qoh. 2.6; Ps. 104.13). The rivers flow out of the garden and virtually into ‘all lands’. There is, of course, no reason to assume that their function (fecundative watering) was different outside than inside. Note that the terminology of 2.5 is taken up, when two of the regions receiving the water are named the land (נָחַל) of Havilah and of Kush.

It has long been recognized that these rivers illustrate the blessing capability of the garden for the land, which is possibly reflected even in the description of luxury in the land of Havilah. The garden is perhaps a mytho-symbolic ‘place’, but its effect is seen within normal space. YHWH God fecundates, not by rain (2.5), but by water from the potent land Eden. Why not rain? We do record again that solving the problems stated in 2.5 does not appear to be YHWH’s prime concern. The explicit role of the rivers is to water the garden, whereafter the rest of the world more or less accidentally benefits.

Having ‘solved’ the problem of water, we would according to 2.5 expect a report on the emergence of wild plants. This report is not

2. See Bar-Efrat, Narrative Art, pp. 116-17, 252-55.
3. This seems to solve the puzzle of Jobling, ‘Myth and its Limits’, pp. 23-24.
given. Conditions for wild vegetation outside the garden are at this point fulfilled, but the vegetation itself seems not to be supplied. As for cultured plants outside the garden, there still is no one to till the soil.

**Concluding the Basic Plot**

This is where things stand as the story engages in three new plots. First comes the creation of animals and woman, 2.16-24 (apparently introduced with God’s discovering a new ‘lack’ that is to be fulfilled). Then occurs the debate and the eating in the garden, 3.1-7 (a more dialogic plot, introduced by the lack of shame in 2.25 and the question of the snake, linking back to 2.16-17). The third plot is the divine intervention, 3.8-19 (where the ‘plot signal’ seems to be the ‘problem’ generated as God discovers the transgression). Throughout these two first plots and until the end of the third, the story initiated in 2.5 does not develop. The land has received its water, but vegetation is missing, and the need for a tiller of the ground persists.

We need not here engage in the transformations and mediations of the three additional plots, but only record that whereas they do not contribute directly to the progress of the basic plot, they are all connected to that plot and to each other. The creation of the animals closely resembles the creation of the first human. In 3.1-7 the garden and the trees (reported in vv. 2, 8, 9, 15) are obviously present, together with the woman introduced in 2.18-23. In 3.8-19 all three curses link back: the curse upon the snake disturbs elements in the creation of animals; the punishment of woman distresses the man–woman relationship; finally, the cohesion of the different plots appears openly, when, in the end of the last plot, God takes up the hitherto sleeping terminology of 2.5:

\[
\begin{align*}
(3.17) & \ldots \\
& \text{cursed is the soil because of you.} \\
& \text{In toil you shall eat (from?) her all the days of your life.} \\
(18) & \text{Thorns and thistles she will bring forth (וּרְכָּס מוֹר) to thee.} \\
& \text{And you shall eat the cultured plants (טָמָנָה אֲשֵׁר).}
\end{align*}
\]

1. If one is to imagine any vegetation at all outside the garden, then trees would have to be thought of—cf. 2.12. I suspect, however, that this rather applies to the world of the narrator/reader.
(19) In the sweat of your face you shall eat bread, while you return to the soil (ןְּפַל), for from her you were taken (נָתַן). For dust (עָנָן) you are, and to dust you shall return.

Both categories of vegetation are brought forth in 3.18, using the same verb as in 2.5: thorns and thistles (לְקַנְצֵי וְלְקַנְצֵי) fall within the category ‘wild plants’ (לְקַנְצֵי וְלְקַנְצֵי). The phrase for cultured plants is repeated (לְקַנְצֵי עַל). Since none of this vegetation is mentioned earlier, we are left to infer that this is where they are first supplied. The tilling activity, however, is not explicitly mentioned until 3.23, where we read a very condensed conclusion of the plot initiated in 2.5:

(23) And יְהֹוָה God sent him forth from the garden to till the soil from which he was taken (לָשָבֵר אֲדָם אֲדָמָה אֵשֶׁר לָךְ מָשָׁה).

The terminology is identical to that in 2.5: אֲדָם אֲדָמָה אֵשֶׁר לָךְ מָשָׁה. 3.23 is the only place in the entire story where ‘adam is said actually to fulfil just that function. Thus the tiller requested in 2.5 is supplied here, not earlier. Like so many other phrases in this story, however, even 3.23 may have several levels of communication. The only place where the man is the object of God’s ‘taking’ (לָשָבֵר) is 2.15, where he is removed from the land and transported to the garden. As we saw above, there is spatial and qualitative tension between the garden and the land, a tension that plays a certain role in the intrigue. In this closing part of the story, the human couple is to return to the soil, which, according to 3.17, will be cursed. This curse, however, would seem to afflict only the soil outside the garden. The trees sprouting from the soil inside apparently will keep up their marvellous produce, and therefore still remain in need of protection. Perhaps we read in 3.23 a statement not only that humanity is to return to soil, but that it is to return to that very soil from which it was removed—that is, soil outside the garden. This return appears to take place in two sequences: first a retransport to the soil (לָשָבֵר, 3.19b with the verb נָתַן, hinting at 2.15), then a retransformation into dust (עָנָן, 3.19c, hinting at 2.7).

Here the basic plot is concluded. All narrative deficiencies opened in 2.5 are restored. The water has been supplied in 2.10-14, the two

categories of vegetation appear in 3.18 and the tiller is finally assigned to agricultural work upon the soil of the land in 3.19, 23.

IV

Some interesting aspects on this basic plot may be gained by reviewing Ellen J. van Wolde’s critique of David Jobling’s studies. She notes that Jobling is forced to let YHWH appear in two opposing roles within the well known Greimasian ‘actant scheme’. YHWH appears as both ‘sender’ and ‘opponent’ in the plot, ‘an ‘adam to till the earth’. In simple terms, that means that YHWH first promotes the tilling of the earth (2.5, 7; 3.23), only later to jeopardize the whole project by snatching the ‘adam away (2.8-15). Jobling’s assignment of actants is given in italics:

\[
\begin{array}{ccc}
YHWH & \text{Tiller} & \text{Earth} \\
\text{Sender} & \text{Object} & \text{Receiver} \\
\text{Helper} & \text{Subject} & \text{Opponent} \\
\text{Man, Woman, Serpent} & \text{YHWH} \\
\end{array}
\]

Quoting Jobling, van Wolde writes,

‘In sum, the same character, Yahweh, invests the Greimasian roles of sender and opponent, a mark of a profoundly ambiguous text’ (26). This is a remarkable conclusion... it is no exaggeration to speak of an unjustifiable analysis.¹

Now one might say in Jobling’s defence that he was not the one to invent ambiguous characters in this story. Paradoxical texts disturbing analytical models may be a sign of honest rather than faulty interpretation. Yet van Wolde’s observations concerning the actant scheme throw us back to yet another careful reading of the story. It will appear then, that the actant scheme should in fact be further disturbed. The basic plot in Genesis 2–3 apparently presents two ‘senders’ with partly parallel and partly conflicting intentions.²

². Jobling (‘Myth and its Limits’) sees conflict not within the plot itself, but only between the ‘tilling’ and the ‘fall’ models. He explains the ‘ambiguity’ of YHWH’s roles in the scheme (with Barthes) as a normal phenomenon of certain texts; cf. p. 26 n. 6 (p. 136).
Scheme 1: ‘A Human Being to Till the Garden’. It is never said that YHWH created the human being to till the soil. On the contrary, from his acting we may infer that YHWH made the ‘adam’ to till and guard the garden. His intentions apparently were that ‘adam should not eat the forbidden fruit, but stay in the garden forever. Accordingly YHWH did not ‘cause it to rain upon the land’, as he would presumably have done if 2.5 expressed his analysis of the situation. Rather, he watered the land incidentally, in the process of working on his own scheme—labelled ‘a human being to till the garden’. In this scheme YHWH is ‘sender’ and ‘subject’, the first human is ‘object’ (perhaps even the woman and the water supply), while the garden is ‘receiver’. This rather simple scheme has the garden as its horizon; it is the ‘inside’ scheme of the basic plot.

Scheme 2: ‘Vegetation to the Land’. It is the narrator, not YHWH, who states the lack of vegetation, water and a tiller of the ground. This deficiency—the situation—is the ‘sender’ of that scheme, which is defined in terms of the needs outside the garden. Here soil and land are ‘receivers’. (Since the initial situation refers to these two, they are also ‘logical senders’ of this scheme.) The ‘object’ to be supplied is vegetation, which demands the support of both water and someone to till the ground.

Fusion of Schemes. The conspiracy starts as actors from each of these two intrigues appear in the other—together with actors of other plots in Genesis 2–3. (The fact that even actors of the remaining plots appear in the actant schemes of the basic plot of course confirms that this plot is in fact the basic one.) Most profound for the fusion of actors is the fact that the two schemes of the basic plot are partly parallel, and partly opposed. YHWH, acting in his own scheme, will appear to be partly ‘subject’ (creation of a human being) or ‘accidental subject’ (watering of the land), and partly ‘unaware opponent’ (locating the human being in the garden) of the second scheme. Soil and land, on the other hand, will be ‘opponents’ to the first scheme, which favours the garden.

One major accelerator of the basic plot (both schemes) is the serpent. Being a main character in the dialogic plot in Genesis 2–3, he appears also in the basic plot, as ‘helper’ of the second scheme and hence as ‘opponent’ of the first. There are many connotations attached
to this figure. From our point of view, the important feature is that the serpent is one of the animals created by YHWH (יהוה ו",תא '\תא). Now, the animals (like the 'adam) were probably created from the soil outside the garden. The fauna in 2.19 (fields by implication located in the land) would seem to imply open land rather than a closed garden as living area. These animals are not reported to have been 'taken' into the garden, as has the 'adam. In fact, their failure to 'help' would perhaps indicate that they returned to the outside after having been named. In daily gardening, several of these 'beasts of the field' would be the sort of creatures from which 'adam is supposed to protect (2.15) the garden Eden.

If so, the serpent in 3.1-7 is trespassing—as serpents were possibly considered to do in Hebrew gardening, it being impossible to keep these creepy tricksters out. He is an actor of the outside, appearing inside. In terms of scheme 2, 'vegetation to the land', the serpent 'helps' the 'unwilling subject' YHWH to perform his act in the second scheme. Taking advantage of one element in the garden that YHWH does not control (the possibility that the human couple eat of both trees and become too much like God), the serpent forces YHWH to issue curses that eventually fulfil the 'outside' needs: a tiller of the soil as well as the wanted vegetation. Those same curses obviously cloak YHWH's original 'inside' scheme. No wonder that the only two actors actually hit by YHWH's curse are the 'helper' (serpent) and the 'sender' (soil) of the 'outside' scheme.

In short, therefore, the basic plot of Genesis 2–3 may be said to have two diverging schemes on top of each other, which allows the actors of the one to appear as 'foreign actors' in the other. This accounts for the apparently ambiguous character of YHWH, as well as for the

1. Cf. Ps. 104.11 (vv. 10-18).
2. There is a similar conclusion with different argumentation in Jobling, 'Myth and its Limits', p. 30.
3. Cf. the fence in Isa. 5.5, the trespassing sheep in Jer. 12.10, the fox in Cant. 2.15, and perhaps even a lion in Judg. 14.5.
4. Jobling ('Myth and its Limits', pp. 24, 26) holds humanity to be 'subject' (as well as 'object'). I doubt whether humanity in Gen. 2–3 is 'subject' at all. YHWH certainly supplies what is lacking in 2.5.
5. There is no 'marking' of man and woman by curse, as assumed by Jobling ('Myth and its Limits', p. 25).
ambivalent evaluation of the serpent’s role, and for the spatial tension between ‘land’ and ‘garden’. Foreign actors are given in italics:

![Diagram]

This shift, especially of the roles of YHWH, seems to be one major element in the intrigue of the basic plot—and indeed of the entire story. In order not to miss the point, we should be careful not to confuse the intentions of the narrator with those of YHWH. Given that the second scheme is the ‘winning’ one, it may be said to be the more fundamental, giving the basic direction of the entire story of Genesis 2–3. This, of course, harmonizes well with the fact that the deficiencies of this scheme are those introduced in Gen. 2.5.

VI

Following such an intricate story, we are of course bound to find a moral. A methodological one is that new analytical models may perhaps be equally effective mind-openers to the interpreter as forbidden fruit was to the naked couple in our story. On the other hand, they may also be just as deceptive. Therefore careful reading of the old text remains a constant must.

Additionally, there are theological points to be drawn. One is the traditional one. As YHWH is not ‘sender’ of the fundamental scheme in the basic plot, the outcome of that plot is not according to his intentions. The present state of humanity is a result of a struggle between the world ‘outside’ and the Lord ‘inside’. In other words, had not soil and serpent joined forces, we would still be tilling the garden.
Eden. This sheds interesting light upon the roles of narrator and reader in our text. As is well known, biblical narrators practically always associate themselves with the Hebrew God. Not so in this text. But, as the reader infers, both human beings and the earth would have been better off following God's scheme. So in this text, the reader will take the ideological position that the narrator for ironical purposes has seemingly abandoned.

Another point is that this story is not nearly so 'anthropocentric' as usually assumed. Throughout the story the human being is 'object' for other means. For example, 'adam is made for the garden, not vice versa. In Genesis 2–3, no more than in Isa. 51.3, or Ezek. 28.13, 31.9, is the garden 'humanity's garden'. It belongs to YHWH and presumably fills some purpose of his (or his fellow beings). This purpose apparently is kept up after the expulsion of humanity, with cherubs in the human being's guarding position. Further, soil and vegetation are not made 'for humanity', but rather vice versa. The story is of course intensely preoccupied with humanity's place, function and fate in the world. But the actual ordering of the (literary as well as logical) universe is less anthropocentric in Genesis 2–3 than (for instance) in Genesis 1. As recognized above, several additional elements play in this story. The question of 'what it is about' may be answered at different levels. From the narrative point of view, however, Genesis 2–3 is basically a story about how land became vegetated and human beings became tillers of the soil. This basic point should not be obscured when moving to those other levels of the story.

Finally, if Genesis 2–3 is a story of how YHWH's scheme was frustrated through a trickster in a garden, are we here presented with a myth? It seems to me that Genesis 2–3 is not far from being a 'myth' or 'epic', as these appear to have existed in the ancient Near East. A similar plot is for instance found in Atrahasis: after a noisy riot from the minor gods, the chief god Enlil allows humans to be created in order to take over the work from those minor deities.1 Unfortunately (?) the creators Enki and Nintu include in humanity a divine element,2 which presumably accounts for the fact that, later on, Enlil is again disturbed by noise—this time from the humans.3 By implication, the

1. See the ri-ig-ma, 'noise', mentioned in Atrahasis I, 77, 179.
3. Atrahasis I, 356; II i 7; II ii D 22, etc.
problem was that human beings were too much like the gods. As we have seen, exactly this same is the problem in Gen. 3.22. At least the final hand of Genesis 1–11 saw a connection between the curses following humanity’s ‘divine aspirations’ in Genesis 2–3 and the episode of the flood in Genesis 6–9. This is evident in Noah’s name in 5.29 (cf. 3.17). That final hand—whoever it was—did write a mythopoetic grammar in Genesis 2–3 rather similar to the one found in Atrahasis.

Does this mean that Genesis 2–3 is a myth? Today that question has lost many of its previous theological implications. We might give an affirmative answer and still maintain that if ancient theologians could use genealogies, laws and narratives paralleling those of neighbouring people, they could certainly use a ‘myth’ too, especially when it was as skilfully narrated as Genesis 2–3.

ABSTRACT

Oriental and Hebrew material confirms that Gen. 2.5 is to be read as a narrative ‘program’ for the basic plot of the subsequent story (Gen. 2–3). Careful reading indicates that the narrative nucleus in Gen. 2–3 is the account of how (wild and cultivated) vegetation appeared in the land, by provision of irrigation and a tilling man. Analysing the story according to a Greimasian actant scheme, it appears that YHWH himself only ‘accidentally’ and even ‘unwillingly’ supported that plot. His concern was with the garden, not with the land. The aims of the basic plot were not fulfilled until YHWH was forced to expel the human couple and issue curses upon the ground.