Lecture 17: The Primeval Narrative (Genesis 1-3)

History-telling in the Bible

Today we begin study of the book of Genesis by turning to what scholars call “the Primeval History” because it touches on events at the dawn of the world. These chapters comprise three blocks of stories. Chapters 1-4 narrate the creation of the world, followed by a story about the creation of the first man and woman, their expulsion from the garden due to their disobedience to a divine command, and conclude with the murder of the first couple’s younger son, Abel, by his older brother, Cain. The second narrative block is the story of the flood, in chapters 6-9. The final block is constituted by the short story about divine curtailment of human efforts at the tower of Babel through the imposition of diverse languages, leading humans to disperse throughout the world.

These three blocks cover a small period of time. The sense of passing millennia is provided by a pair of genealogies placed between these blocks, each enumerating the length individual lives. Alongside these genealogies, chapter 10 constitutes a table of the nations of the world, tracing their origins to the three sons of Noah, after the flood. This table is distinct from the genealogies, inasmuch as it focuses on the origins of various ethnic and natural groups and their locations rather than the progression of time. Taken together, these lists give a universal scope to Genesis 1-11 by treating the primeval events of humankind.

That universal perspective is equally evident in the way these chapters reflect familiarity with the themes and literature of other peoples who wrote about the dawn of time.

To give but one example of such similarities, the so-called Babylonian creation story, the Enuma Elish – whose origins lie in early Mesopotamia culture – describes the world’s creation as orchestrated by the supreme Babylonian deity Marduk. In describing the moon, the text says, “The moon he [Marduk] caused to shine, the night (to him) entrusting. He appointed him a creature of the night to signify the days.” Notice the similarity to Gen 1.14 & 16: “14 And God said, “Let there be lights in the dome of the sky to separate the day from the night; and let them be for signs and for seasons and for days and years. . . . 16 God made the two great lights – the greater light to rule the day and the lesser light to rule the night – and the stars.” The similarities here are the appointment of the moon to rule over the night, and the function given it of “signifying the days” or (in the words of Genesis) to be “for signs and for seasons and for days and years.” As Whybray points out, the Mesopotamian exaltation of the moon, sun, and stars undergoes a critique in Genesis 1, which demotes the moon to “the lesser light” and the sun to just “the greater light.” And yet, there is a palpable echo of the Enuma Elish here that suggests the Israelites inherited from this strain of tradition, along with other
influences from its neighbors, ways of thinking about the origins of what exists. They did not construct their stories in a vacuum, but utilized motifs and ideas at hand to them.

In fact, an additional comparison with the Enuma Elish will be helpful as we turn to the story of creation found in Genesis 1:1-2:3. That comparison concerns how the first few verses are to be translated.

The traditional translation, with which most of us are familiar (represented here by the New International Version ≈ KJV) reads this way: “1 In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth. 2 Now the earth was without form and void, darkness was over the surface of the deep, and the Spirit of God was hovering over the waters. 3 And God said, “Let there be light,” and there was light.”

By contrast, here is how the NRSV translates these verses: “1 In the beginning when God created the heavens and the earth, the earth was a formless void and darkness covered the face of the deep, while a wind from God swept over the face of the waters. 3 Then God said, “Let there be light”; and there was light.”

The differences between these, although perhaps not glaring, are significant. Notice that the NRSV conjoins verses 1 & 2 into a single sentence by having v. 1 specify the time when the conditions of v. 2 existed: “when God created the heavens and the earth, the earth was a formless void and darkness covered the face of the deep.” It is against that backdrop that the creation story takes its start in v. 3.

By contrast, the traditional translation treats v. 1 as a complete sentence, a statement of its own: “In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth.” Only then is the earth described as a formless void. Both of these translations are, on the face of it, defensible in terms of the Hebrew. Which is more likely?

Let's notice how the Enuma Elish begins its story: “When on high the heaven had not been named, Firm ground below had not been called by name, Naught but primordial Apsu, their begetter, (And) Mummu-Tiamat, she who bore them all, Their waters commingling as a single body; No reed hut had been matted, no marsh land had appeared, When no gods whatever had been brought into being, Uncalled by name, their destinies undetermined — Then it was that the gods were formed within them.”

Incidentally, we find familiarity with this epic in another piece of Hebrew literature, Isaiah 43:10, where the LORD proclaims, "Before me no god was formed, nor shall there be any after me," a clear play off the idea that that Marduk, the patron god of Babylon, along with other deities, had been formed only belatedly in the order of the world.

The larger point to notice, however, is that this introduction stresses what did not exist at the time of beginnings. And the text underscores this contrast by preceding the narration of creation with a statement of the conditions when this occurred: “When these things were not...then it was that the gods were formed within them.”
The beginning of this Mesopotamian epic states in negative form the conditions existing at the moment of origins.

A parallel, though reverse structure is to be found in the Egyptian work called “The Book of the Over-throwing of Apophis,” in which the sun god, Re, asserts, “Many were the beings which came forth from my mouth, before heaven came into being, before earth came into being, before the ground and creeping things had been created in this place.” While this is not a list of what did not exist prior to creation, it is still a statement of circumstances that preceded creation and provides the backdrop for creation.

But it’s not just creation literature from elsewhere in the ANE that uses this kind of structure to speak of beginnings. Let’s notice the way Genesis 2.4ff. prepares for its narrative of the creation of the man: “When the LORD God made earth and heaven – when no brush of the field had yet appeared in the earth, nor had any grass of the field risen, because the LORD God had not brought rain upon the earth and there was no human to till the ground, but a spring used to come up from the ground and water all the surface of the ground – at that time the LORD God formed the man with dirt from the ground…”

Room is cleared for the description of the creation of the male by speaking of what did not exist: no brush of the field no grass of the field, no rain and no human – nothing but a spring that watered the ground. And notice, furthermore, the way this is set up as a when…then construction, just as we observed in the Enuma Elish.

It is that commonly found pattern in the ancient Near Eastern creation stories that has led scholars to conclude it is preferable to translate the first verses of Genesis 1 as stating the conditions under which creation took place. And so the NRSV has translated this as a “when…then” construction. However, as a translation meant for use in religious communities, and thus not wanting to jar the readers too much, the translation committee fudged a bit by retaining the phrase “in the beginning” used by the KJV.

Closer to the Hebrew, as understood in light of the ANE parallels we have examined, is the translation offered by a scholar named Everett Fox: “1At the beginning of God’s creating of the heavens and the earth, 2when the earth was wild and waste, darkness over the face of Ocean, rushing-spirit of God hovering over the face of the waters – 3God said, “Let there be light!” And there was light.”

In both Fox's translation and the NRSV, the first two verses set the backdrop for the stages of creation that begin in v. 3. The state of affairs before the forging of the world is depicted as chaotic: the earth was a wild waste with darkness covering the ocean, over which a rushing wind* swirled. Darkness, water and wind were the essential attributes.

With that in mind, I want to make some observations about the actions narrated
in the subsequent verses. There are three types of action typical of the process of creation portrayed by this passage: speech, separation and evaluation. The overarching action is that of speech. Repeatedly we find the statement “And God said,” followed by “let such-and-such appear,” giving a sense of effortlessness to the process. As Mann emphasizes, the corollary to this is the instantaneous result of this divine speech: the elements of even the chaotic world respond to the divine commands.

But fairly frequently we also find speech complemented by an action of separation, as already in vv. 3-5 where we are told that after God spoke light into being, he “separated the light from the darkness,” and then acknowledged the distinction between light and darkness by calling one Day and the other Night.

This motif of separation has a couple of effects on the narrative. In the first place, it provides a sense of effort to accompany the air of effortlessness in the motif of speaking things into existence. Creation is equally about divine exertion, thus necessitating divine rest on the seventh day. But more importantly, this motif dovetails with the backdrop for creation as a chaotic environment dominated by darkness and water.

Creation, in this narrative, is not simply about the introduction of previously nonexistent phenomena like light, but also about differentiation. The light and the darkness have to be distinguished because God is forging order out of untamed material; God is subduing a chaotic environment, molding it into order.

Indeed, the notion that the world is something forged through a battle with forces of chaos is a common motif in the literature of the ANE, as Whybray reports. And even though there is not explicit battle with a chaos monster in Genesis 1, the world’s order must be wrested from chaos.

Accordingly, a major part of the function of the evaluation incorporated into each stage of the narrative is to recognize the resultant order. The repeated report “God saw that it was good” is not simply about an aesthetic judgment. While the Hebrew word tob (“good”) can mean “pleasing,” in this context it seems to come closer to the sense of “useful,” as it does elsewhere in the Bible. That is, God’s pronounces what he has wrenched from the jaws of chaos at each point as helping to form a structured, habitable environment.

So these three types of actions combine to produce a picture of the transformation of a chaotic waste into an orderly world.

And yet, God’s powers are not the only ones engaged in this story; so are the earth’s. On days 3 & 6 God says, “Let the earth bring forth.” On day three it is vegetation that the earth is to produce, while on day six it is the beasts of the land. Corresponding to that, on day 5 God summons the waters to bring forth “swarms of living creatures.” Indeed, throughout this narrative there is an emphasis on the fertility of the created order, and twice God blesses what he has made,
commanding it to be fruitful. Again, this is tied in with the theme of forging an orderly, prosperous environment out of what had been chaos.

Finally, let’s notice that the sixth day introduces into the narrative a very deliberate form of speech at the point God makes humans: “Let us make humankind in our image, according to our likeness; and let them have dominion over the fish of the sea, and over the birds of the air, and over the cattle, and over all the wild animals of the earth, and over every creeping thing that creeps upon the earth.” Only after this elaborate statement of intent does the narrative describe God creating humans. This two stage process is not found earlier in the narrative and stresses, together with the statement about humans ruling over the rest of creation, that the production of humankind was the culmination of this project of giving form and shape to undifferentiated chaos.

The orderly structure we have observed in these actions is underscored also by the overall arrangement of this narrative. And here the chart I had you download from the course web site will be helpful.

First, let’s notice that there is a topical alignment between days 1 & 4, 2 & 5, 3 & 6. Day one, as we saw, involves the creation of light and its separation from darkness. Parallel to that, day 4 sees the creation of the sun, moon and stars – the sources of light for the world. Day 2 concerns the separation of the waters, with the insertion of a dome – identified as the sky – into the midst of the waters so as to create waters below and waters above – i.e. the rain held in the sky. Corresponding to that, on day 5 God summons the waters to produce the sea creatures and calls for birds to fill the sky – the two areas of the world demarcated on day 2. Lastly, Day 3 focuses on the watery world below the sky, with God collecting the waters into bodies so as to create tracts of dry land. Parallel to that, day 6 narrates the creation of land animals and humans to inhabit those tracts of land. So there is a deliberate structure to this narrative based on an alignment of activities on parallel days.

At the same time, there is a thematic distinction between the two columns. On the one hand, the activities in column one have to do, above all, with the separation of elements from one another. This is in keeping, once again, with the circumstances said to prevail at the outset, with the earth being a formless void and darkness covering the face of the deep, while a wind from God swept over the face of the waters. The first half of the narrative is about bringing order out of chaos.

The second column, on the other hand, speaks of filling that newly created order with entities appropriate to each part of it. Consequently, this story is self-evidently structured artistically, meaning that this narrative is not meant to be anything approaching a scientific description of origins, as we would go about it, but is meant to say something about the order of the world humans inhabit.

However, the significance of this order goes beyond simply the provision of a habitable environment. Recall that the seventh day is not about the establishment
of a feature of the world, but the sanctifying of a day: “2And on the seventh day God finished the work that he had done, and he rested on the seventh day from all the work that he had done. 3So God blessed the seventh day and hallowed it, because on it God rested from all the work that he had done in creation.”

The order forged in this narrative is not simply spatial and physical, but also temporal. In fact, the first order of business is the establishment of time. The introduction of light and its separation from darkness results in the designation of the time of light as day and the darkness as night, so that at the conclusion of that day, and each of the five that follow, the statement appears, “And there was evening and there was morning, the _x_ number day.” The order created in the course of the narrative is supremely temporal. And as Whybray reports, this temporal pattern of 7 days seems to have been superimposed on actions whose number is greater than the number of days, such that (e.g.) day 3 is forced to have two creative acts: the separation of land from water & the creation of vegetation.

And capping off this succession of days structuring the human environment is the seventh day, which is to be a day of rest. It is no accident, then, that the motivation for keeping the Sabbath in the version of the Ten Commandments found in Exodus 20 references this story: “Six days you shall labor and do all your work. But the seventh day is a sabbath to the L ORD your God; you shall not do any work – you, your son or your daughter, your male or female slave, your livestock, or the alien resident in your towns. For in six days the L ORD made heaven and earth, the sea, and all that is in them, but rested the seventh day; therefore the L ORD blessed the sabbath day and consecrated it.” This explanation teases out what is implicit in the narrative: sabbath observance is built into the very structure of the world as much as any other order God has infused into it.

It is this dominating feature that almost goes unnoticed due to its pedestrian nature – the organization of temporal order – that has led scholars to see this as a product of someone allied with the religious institutions, the priestly caste, who had special concern for the observance of Sabbath as a function of the cult. In fact, notice that, besides establishing the Sabbath, this narrative reports God’s command that the sun and the moon “separate the day from the night; and let them be for signs and for seasons and for days and years.” The Hebrew words translated “signs and seasons” suggest more than simply the establishment of fall, winter, spring and summer. Indeed, the word translated “seasons” ( כָּלְחֵן) likely has to do – as the plural does elsewhere in the Torah – with the appointed religious festivals, which (in ancient Israel) were tied to the lunar calendar, determined by the phases of the moon.

These evident concerns for temporal order linked to the worship calendar are part of the reason this creation story has come to be attributed to the Priestly strand of the Torah.
As I commented earlier, Genesis 1 does not attempt some sort of “scientific” account of origins, but asserts the order and meaningfulness of what exists. And it is in that sense that scholars speak of this passage as myth. Myth, in this technical sense, does not mean a story about something you know never happened, but a story making “a poetic affirmation of what empirical description cannot express.” This P account of the world makes affirmations more profound than an empirical investigation can establish. It presents a picture of the world as an organized realm in which God’s structure rules through divine command.

Now, with this narrative, let’s compare the second creation story in Genesis 2. We’ve already noted that this narrative opens with a statement of what did not exist prior to this: “When no plant of the field was yet in the earth and no herb of the field had yet sprung up.” Despite this similarity with chapter one, the two narratives are distinct.

For example, while Genesis 1 depicts a chaotic world that needs untangling, Genesis 2 depicts an earth merely devoid of vegetation because there is no one there to tend it. In Genesis 1, vegetation appears on day 3, before humans are formed. So right off the bat we get the impression that these two narratives approach their topic from different perspectives.

In fact, Genesis 2 tells its story androcentrically. That is, it focuses on the creation of the man and what will be of service to him. Notice that after the statement of what did not exist at this point, the first thing created is the man, whom “the LORD God formed from the dust of the ground.” Only after the man’s creation does “the LORD God plant a garden in Eden,” where he puts the man. And God furnishes the garden with “every tree that is pleasant to the sight and good for food.” Notice how this narrative emphasizes creation as made for the man, after his appearance, rather than (as we found in chapter 1) the forging of an orderly world out of chaos, into which animals, vegetation and humans are then fitted. Here everything happens for the sake of the man.

That is emphasized again in the way the narrative describes the creation of the animals. This part of the narrative begins with God making the pronouncement, “It is not good that the man should be alone; I will make him a helper as his partner.” The curious thing is how God sets about this process: “So out of the ground the LORD God formed every animal of the field and every bird of the air.” The word “so” here is crucial, for it indicates that this is how the LORD goes about seeking a partner for the man. And consistent with that, he makes the animals the same way he made the man: out of the ground. And how will the LORD know when he has come up with the right match? The narrative tells us that after creating each animal, the LORD “brought them to the man to see what he would call them.” Keep that in mind, for when the LORD finally hits on the right match, it is precisely in naming “woman” that the man registers acknowledgement of his genuine partner.
In fact, there is a sense of playfulness or experimentation in this narrative: the LORD knows that the man needs a partner, but he experiments with various creatures made out of the same stuff as the man, looking to the man’s reaction to know when he lights on the right match.

And yet, this first round of experiments is unfruitful. In spite of God’s quest for a suitable partner for the man, “there was not found a helper as his partner.” This, again, underscores the androcentric character of the narrative: the animals are created in service of the man, in an attempt to find a suitable partner for him.

Having come up short in this attempt, the LORD makes a fresh attempt, introduced again with the word “so”: “So the LORD God caused a deep sleep to fall upon the man, and he slept; then he took one of his ribs and closed up its place with flesh. And the rib that the LORD God had taken from the man he made into a woman and brought her to the man.”

This time, rather than forming a being out of dust, as he did with the man and the animals, he derives a creature from the man himself. Success in this search for an appropriate partner comes only when the candidate is created out of the man and not simply from the same raw material. And yet, it is not simply the approach that is the measure of success.

Just as the LORD brought the animals to the man for his response, so he brings this creature to the man for naming, which is what the man does: “Then the man said, ‘This at last is bone of my bones and flesh of my flesh; this one shall be called Woman, for out of Man this one was taken.’” The wordplay in English between “Woman” and “Man” replicates well the wordplay in the Hebrew text (יָוָן/יוֹנָה).

Thus, while this narrative is a creation story insofar as it attempts to account for what exists, its real attempt is to account for a particular slice of the world: the relationship between men and women. I.e. it is an etiology, a story that attempts to account for a phenomenon of the world – in this case it roots the attraction of women and men to each other in their creation, in the course of which the distinction between humans and animals is established, thus distinguishing the male-female relationship and setting it apart from human relationships with other created beings.

The etiological character of this narrative becomes especially clear from its postscript: “Therefore a man leaves his father and his mother and clings to his wife, and they become one flesh.” The point of the narrative is to account for the “marriage impulse.” What is it that causes a man to take a woman to wife? It’s that a man recognizes in a woman a piece of himself.

Now from our perspective this portrayal raises a host of questions, from its androcentric view of male-female relationships to questions about other sorts of relationships. But in terms of the narrative itself, this is an attempt to account for a
This comparison of Genesis 1 and 2 has revealed significant differences between them: 1) Genesis 1 is a theocentric narrative (focused on God’s perspective) that accounts for the world as an orderly place forged out of chaos, while Genesis 2 is an androcentric narrative that attempts to account for a fundamental human impulse. Resulting from that, while chapter one speaks of the organization of a habitable environment before the creation of humans, in chapter 2 the creation of vegetation, animals and even woman are subsequent to the creation of the man, the first of God’s works.

But there are other distinctions between these stories we have noted previously, such as their different portrayals of God. In chapter 1, God is an austere being who creates at a distance; there is no hint of contact between God and what he has made, at least until the end, when he gives orders to the human couple about how they are to live. In chapter 2, on the other hand, God is intimately involved with what he creates. He fashions man and animals from the dust of the ground, while he operates on the man in order to form the first woman. Not only that, but God exhibits a playfulness here: God engages in experiments to produce a companion appropriate for the man, allowing the man to tell him when he has succeeded. The portrayals of God in these two chapters are very different.

And, of course, there is a difference in the divine names. Chapter one consistently refers to him simply as “God,” whereas chapter 2 calls him “the LORD God.” As I noted last time, the use of that compound name continues through chapter 3, creating the only narrative stretch in the book of Genesis where this compound name is used consistently throughout, to the exclusion of any other. Thus, even if chapter 2 is a self-contained narrative that intends to show the roots of the distinctive relationship between male and female, its author means us to read chapter three as the continuation of the story begun in chapter 2. So let's turn to that chapter.

As Mann notes, the third chapter entails the destruction of relationships both assumed and formed in the preceding chapter. The actions of the man and woman issue in a deep rupture in their unmediated and unimpeded relationship with God, as well as alienation from each other, and disrupts a feature of their untroubled relationship to the land and its creatures.

An important question is, what sort of appeal is able to persuade the woman to take the fateful act that leads to this rupture? We get to the heart of it in vv. 4-5, where the serpent responds to Eve’s report that God has prohibited them from eating the fruit of the “tree of the knowledge of good and evil”: “But the serpent said to the woman, “You will not die; for God knows that when you eat of it your eyes will be opened, and you will be like God, knowing good and evil.” The appeal assumes that the human couple is not all that they could be: they fall short
of divine status. What’s more, the serpent attributes this lack to sinister motives on God’s part: God has commanded that they not eat of the tree’s fruit because he knows they would gain equal status with him: “you will be like God.”

Before addressing what that means, let’s talk a minute about the identity of this serpent. In later Judaism the serpent of this story came to be understood as a sinister proponent of evil, the Devil/Satan. However, as Whybray points out, Genesis 3 describes him simply as one of the animals God had made: “Now the serpent was more crafty than any other wild animal that the Lord God had made.” Thus, the only distinction ascribed to the serpent is that he was “more crafty” or – perhaps better – “wiser” than any other wild animal created by God. Granted, his wisdom becomes the prompt for the couple to disobey God’s command. But the serpent is not described as malicious or a disguise for a dark force. Moreover, we should note that throughout the ANE serpents were regarded as extremely wise. In fact, in Mesopotamia one method of foretelling the future was to observe the behavior of snakes, for they were regarded as having unique insight.

Of course, this is not a serpent of a sort familiar to modern herpetologists: it can talk. But this is entirely in keeping with the sort of environment the story envisions, one dramatically different from the normal world of humans. Indeed, judging from the subsequent curse placed on the serpent, requiring it to travel on its belly, the story envisions that in this primeval era, serpents had some sort of legs. In that type of setting, a talking serpent is not a peculiar feature. It’s part of the primeval environment.

So we have the wisest of creatures making a bid he says is in the couple’s best interests. Is he lying? Let’s look first at his promise that by eating the fruit of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil the couple would become like God. Here again is his promise: “You will not die; for God knows that when you eat of it your eyes will be opened, and you will be like God, knowing good and evil.” The measure of whether this proved true or a lie is God’s statement on the outcome as he prepares to jettison the couple from the garden in v. 22: “Then the Lord God said, “See, the man has become like one of us, knowing good and evil…” In this divine assessment the promise of the serpent had been realized: they had gained similarity to God. And what constitutes that similarity, as the serpent had promised, is a type of knowledge bestowed by the fruit: knowing good and evil. But what does that mean?

The traditional answer is that knowing good and evil has to do with being able to discriminate between right and wrong. But that seems unlikely, since the narrative assumes their ability to distinguish right and wrong from the outset. Certainly the prohibition against eating fruit from a certain tree presumes that the two already know right from wrong. Moreover, the serpent’s appeal is based on the assumption that humans have an innate sense of right and wrong. Without that, he
would not be able to appeal to their sense of injustice that God has withheld something good from them. Thus, it is unlikely that “good and evil” means “right and wrong.”

Another possibility is that “good and evil” are a figure of speech called a merism. That is, they represent two extremes, like “day and night” in the phrase, “I worked day and night” – i.e. “constantly.” Used this way “knowing good and evil” would mean being acquainted with everything that needs to be known. While this scene yields an expansion of knowledge that impels the couple to put on makeshift clothing to cover their nakedness, nothing in the passage suggests acquisition of encyclopedic knowledge.

A better approach would be to compare other passages where the phrase “knowing good and evil occurs, such as Deuteronomy 1.39, which allots the promised land to the children of the rebellious people who left Egypt: “And as for your little ones, who you thought would become booty, your children, who today do not yet know good and evil, they shall enter there; to them I will give it, and they shall take possession of it.” Knowledge of good and evil is something these children do not possess, although the words “who today do not yet know good and evil” assumes that they will acquire it, suggesting that it is a property gained through maturation.

In this connection, we need to take a look at 1 Kings 3, where Solomon, just after taking the throne, appeals to God for – and receives – wisdom: 7And now, O LORD my God, you have made your servant king in place of my father David, although I am only a little child; I do not know how to go out or come in. . . . 9Give your servant therefore an understanding mind to govern your people, able to discern between good and evil; for who can govern this your great people?” Notice that this appeal for wisdom is placed against a confession of inability: “I am only a little child; I do not know how to go out or come in.” “Going out and coming in” is a common figure of speech in biblical Hebrew for conducting one’s affairs. Solomon’s claim to be but a child who doesn’t know how to get along in life is set in the context of his assuming the role of king; it is an expression of humility about taking on this responsibility, a recognition that he needs more wisdom about conduct than he has.

Accordingly, Solomon appeals for “an understanding mind to govern the people,” which he further describes as the ability “to discern between good and evil.” In this case, admittedly, the phrase is a little different, since the talk is of discernment between good and evil. And yet the context suggests a notion similar to the knowledge of good and evil as something lacking among children (according to Deut 1). And the antidote to Solomon’s condition of not knowing how to conduct himself is the acquisition of wisdom. And this wisdom is what enables him to discern between good and evil.
In fact, in both 1 Kings 3 and Genesis 3, it is quite reasonable to understand the pair “good and evil” not as a moral category, but more utilitarian: a beneficial course of action rather than a harmful one. Something like this meaning for “good and evil” is found in a speech by Moses in Numbers 13, when he sends spies into the land of Canaan to scope it out: “see what the land is like, and whether the people who live in it are strong or weak, whether they are few or many, and whether the land they live in is good or bad, and whether the towns that they live in are unwalled or fortified.” Obviously the qualification of the land as “good or bad” in this context is not a moral category, but an inquiry about the utility of the land: is the land the sort of place one would find hospitable and serviceable?

I would suggest that what is offered the woman and the man in Genesis 3 is just this sort of wisdom: the ability to choose one’s own way in life by evaluating the options. Indeed, we can find confirmation of this in the report of the woman’s consideration of what this fruit might obtain for her: “So when the woman saw that the tree was good for food, and that it was a delight to the eyes, and that the tree was to be desired to make one wise, she took of its fruit and ate.” The woman’s conclusions that the tree was good for food and delightful to look at are based on her own observation. The piece of information she gained from the serpent was that “the tree was to be desired to make one wise.” The wisest of the animals has led the human couple to obtain wisdom of their own, making them like God. They have the ability to choose their own course in the world rather than relying on God’s direction. The serpent was offering them valid goods.

If that’s so, what about the most immediate consequence of their action? The story of the joining of man and woman in chapter 2 concludes with the statement, “And the man and his wife were both naked, and were not ashamed.” By contrast, the first outcome of the man and woman after eating fruit from the forbidden tree is reported this way in 3.7: “Then the eyes of both were opened, and they knew that they were naked; and they sewed fig leaves together and made loincloths for themselves.” Clearly the lack of shame at the end of chapter 2 has been replaced by a sense of shame that goads them to clothe themselves.

In the church, since the days of Augustine, this has often been interpreted to mean that what was bestowed on the couple was sexual knowledge. In fact, however, nothing is specifically said about them being ashamed in front of each other, while the imposition of pain in child-bearing as a punishment assumes that child-bearing would occur anyway, hence sex. More to the point, however, their sense of nakedness is depicted as having to do specifically with God. When God comes strolling through the garden in the evening, the man and his wife hide, so that God is forced to call out for them. Adam responds, “I heard the sound of you in the garden, and I was afraid, because I was naked; and I hid myself.” The awareness of being naked is not at all about being aware of sexuality, but about
gaining a sense of what one needs. It is not simply their discovery of nakedness, but (even more so) their response to it that is significant: they clothe themselves, they hide. They have learned how to behave circumspectly, which is a component of wisdom. They now know how to care for themselves because they have a sense of their needs. They have become wise.

Well, what about the serpent’s promise that God’s threat of death would not be executed? He appears justified by the outcome: they did not die; they were simply expelled from the garden.

Perhaps, though, this death sentence takes the form of the loss of immortality. Isn’t that what God imposes in v. 19: “By the sweat of your face you shall eat bread until you return to the ground, for out of it you were taken; you are dust, and to dust you shall return?” Well, let’s see.

Note that the phrase “until you return to the ground” sets the extent of time when hard labor will be necessary: until you return to the ground. The statement “for out of it you were taken” explains why going to the ground is a return: the ground is their source. Similarly, “you are dust, and to dust you shall return,” states that principle more broadly: you will return to the substance from which you were made. It reiterates the explanation of the phrase “until you return to the ground.” There is no sense of a new limitation.

Accordingly, v. 19 underscores the punishment specified in vv. 17-18: “cursed is the ground because of you; in toil you shall eat of it all the days of your life; thorns and thistles it shall bring forth for you; and you shall eat the plants of the field.” This curse breaks the intimate relationship between man and the ground from which he was taken. Rather than crops blossoming in cooperative soil, “thorns and thistles” will arise. The curse is not that man must till the ground for food (anymore than that now, for the first time, he is consigned to eat vegetation), but that he will eat food “in toil.” That is underscored in the initial phrase of v. 19: “By the sweat of your face you shall eat bread.”

Correspondingly, v. 18’s consignment of the man to such toil “all the days of your life” – i.e. “as long as you live” – is reiterated in v. 19 in the phrase “until you return to the ground.” Death here is a measure of how long hard toil will be man’s lot. Nothing in these verses suggests that death is a new feature in the world; the new feature is the imposition of hard labor throughout one’s life.

Indicating, above all, that immortality is not being withdrawn is the Lord’s utterance in vv. 22-23: “Then the Lord God said, “See, the man has become like one of us, knowing good and evil; and now, he might reach out his hand and take also from the tree of life, and eat, and live forever” – therefore the Lord God sent him forth from the garden of Eden, to till the ground from which he was taken.”

The reason for expelling them from the garden is not that it is an environment where disobedience is out of place; it is specifically to bar access to the tree of life,
whose fruit would inoculate them against death. What is lost by expulsion from the garden is not immortality, but *access* to it.