

As It Is Written

This month we begin by examining the NRS translation of Genesis 2:17:

but of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil you shall not eat, for in the day that you eat of it you shall die."



However, we all know that Adam and Eve do not die on the day they eat the fruit. How do we reconcile the plain meaning of the text with the rest of the biblical narrative in which Adam and Eve are expelled from the Garden of Eden to die of old age? To address this question, we need to understand the cultural context of the ancient Hebrew audience who first heard this story.

We begin by noting that it is not the so-called “forbidden fruit” that confers mortality upon Adam and Eve. Rather, they become mortal because once expelled, they no longer have access to the Tree of Life. Just to make this point, here is a paraphrase of 2:17 that incorporates God’s reasoning expressed in Gen 3:22:

... but of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil I will expel you from the Garden and, no longer having access to the Tree of Life, you will become mortal as when you were made.

Culturally, the motif of immortality as a transient state occurs in many ANE (Ancient Near East) and Greek legends¹. In these narratives, a theme common to all of them is that some substance (plant, fruit, water, etc.,) confers temporary immortality when ingested. Thus, so long as one has access to this substance, immortality is maintained. However, when access to the substance is denied immortality is lost and mortality is regained.

This idea can be found in another Ancient Near Eastern narrative, the Epic of Gilgamesh. In this story, Enkidu (Gilgamesh’s best friend) dies whereupon Gilgamesh begins a search for the secret of eternal life. In time,

¹ For a list of additional legends and myths about immortality, see Wikipedia’s entry for Ponce De Leon’s Fountain of Youth.

he discovers a plant that, when eaten, confers immortality. Later in the Epic, a serpent steals the plant and Gilgamesh, no longer having access to the plant reverts to his original mortal existence.

The parallel to Genesis is striking. In Genesis, man is initially created mortal but becomes immortal after gaining access to the Tree of Life. Later, in order to prevent man from eating from the Tree of Life (Gen 3:22) he is expelled and, no longer having access to its fruit, man reverts to a mortal existence.

One interesting note: an ancient Jewish legend attributes the long lives of Adam and Eve (and their descendants) to the gradual decline of the effect of the Tree of Life.

Now, go and study