

# As It Is Written

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## Abstract:

*This essay argues that the reason behind the expulsion of Adam and Eve from the Garden of Eden is explained by a metaphor in which “the knowledge of good and bad” (hadda’at tov vara) symbolizes the sexual awareness acquired at the onset of puberty. Represented this way, the expulsion was necessary because the existence of procreative immortal beings within the confines of the Garden would result in disastrous overpopulation.*

## *The Expulsion of Adam and Eve*

### Introduction

In Genesis 2:9 of the second creation story – Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden – we first encounter the enigmatic *The tree of the knowledge of good and bad*<sup>1,2</sup>. However, we do not learn of the significance of the Tree until verses 16 and 17, when God is quoted as saying,

“You are permitted to eat from any tree in the garden; however, should you eat from the tree of the knowledge of good and bad, you will surely become mortal and subject to death.”<sup>3</sup>

In this essay, I will focus on the meaning and significance of the phrase, “knowledge of good and bad” translated from the Hebrew text, הַדְּעַת טוֹב וָרָע (*hadda’at tov vara*). Moreover, I will use the transcription, *hadda’at tov vara*, instead of “the knowledge of good and bad” from this point forward<sup>4</sup>.

*Hadda’at tov vara* is theologically significant because the meaning of the entire story rests squarely on a correct understanding of what it represents. To this end, I will simply assert without proof that the second creation story is a literary work and manifestly not a story meant to be a scientific or

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<sup>1</sup> Most older commercial Bibles translate the Hebrew as “good and evil”. However, a review of newer scholarship reveals that the word *bad* (in the sense of *unfit* or *unsuitable*) is a better reflection of its intended meaning. See, for example, (Sarna 1989) p. 19, or (Westermann 1984) p. 243

<sup>2</sup> The tree of knowledge of good and bad/evil is unique to the second creation story. As noted below, the tree of life occurs in a wide variety of ANE stories (including this one) (Sarna 1989) p. 18

<sup>3</sup> Unless otherwise noted, all translations are mine.

<sup>4</sup> Largely because I want to avoid the debate of whether the Hebrew is to be translated as “good and evil” or “good and “bad”.

historical representation of creation. Rather, the story is a metaphor explaining, among other meanings, how mankind came to be expelled from Eden and separated from God<sup>5</sup>.

The proximate cause for mankind's expulsion arises from having gained *hadda'at tov vara*. Adam and Eve were warned of the consequences of gaining such knowledge – that they would no longer have access to the tree of life<sup>6</sup> – yet they chose to eat the fruit anyway. Evidently *hadda'at tov vara* acquired from eating the fruit was such as to render their presence in Eden untenable. Our first task, then, is to answer two questions: first, knowledge of what? Second, in what way would *hadda'at tov vara* render them like God and so require their expulsion from Eden?

To answer the first question we need to understand what is meant by *tov vara* (literally, “good and bad/evil”). *Tov vara* is widely recognized as a merism, a combination of two contrasting words used to refer to an entirety. For example, when we mean to say that someone searched thoroughly, everywhere, we often say that someone searched *high and low*. The phrase “high and low” is a merism. On this point, there is no controversy. I know of no recognized scholar who does not view *tov vara* as a classic merism.

## Survey of Theories for “Good and Bad”

The real question is “knowledge of what?” Of what did Adam and Eve become aware (Genesis 3:7) after they ate the fruit? On this question oceans of ink has been spilled. Fortunately, professor Gordon J. Wenham has summarized the prevalent theories in his commentary on Genesis<sup>7</sup>. I'll re-summarize them here:

1. *Hadda'at tov vara* is simply a description of the consequences of ignoring God's commandments. Man acquired the knowledge of evil by disobeying the command not to eat of its fruit. Had man not disobeyed, he would have known only good. Under this theory, the tree plays its part in the opportunity it offers, rather than the qualities it possesses: like a door whose name announces only what lies beyond.
2. *Hadda'at tov vara* means moral discernment – knowing the difference between right and wrong. This interpretation has not been taken seriously since the late 1800s because, given the narrator's assumptions, it is absurd to suppose man was not always expected to exercise moral discernment or that he acquired such capacity through eating the fruit.

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<sup>5</sup> Often referred to as “*the fall of man*”, St. Paul refers to this separation as sin (Romans 5:12 RSV). In Hebrew the words sin and separation derive from the same root word and are synonymous.

<sup>6</sup> The Tree of Life is a very common motif in ANE creation stories. It is a metaphor representing the immortality gained by eating of its fruit (Friedman 2003) p. 17. Moreover, Sarna argues that since mankind was originally mortal (having been created from mortal, perishable earth) to be immortal required continual ingestion of its fruit (Sarna 1989) p. 18. To be denied access to the tree of life, therefore, was a sentence of death.

<sup>7</sup> (Wenham 1987) pp. 63-64

3. *Hadda'at tov vara* means omniscience. The argument against this interpretation is the plain meaning of the text in which Eve who may have hoped to gain wisdom (3:6) along with Adam gained only shame and awareness of their nakedness.
4. *Hadda'at tov vara* means wisdom and is a variation of #3. Proponents of this theory argue that the couple's attempt to gain wisdom was an act tantamount to idolatry because by eating the fruit in opposition to God's warning they symbolically attempted to gain a self-sufficient wisdom untethered to that provided by the LORD.
5. *Hadda'at tov vara* refers to moral autonomy and, in one form or another, has received substantial scholarly acceptance. In a nutshell, moral autonomy is the idea that the human person is free to choose between right and wrong without reference to God's revelation and that mankind acquired the freedom to act against God's will, by eating of the fruit of the tree of *hadda'at tov vara*.

The major problem with the moral autonomy theory is the same as that described for moral discernment (#2 above). The primordial couple could not have acquired moral autonomy by eating the fruit because they already autonomous, that is beings originally created with free will. Had this not been the case, the initial warning issued to Adam (2:9) would make no sense<sup>8</sup>.

6. *Hadda'at tov vara* refers to sexual awareness. Support for this argument is compelling and is arguably the most widely accepted among scholars who regularly publish in peer reviewed journals. This is the interpretation I believe makes the most sense and its explanation consumes the rest of this essay.

### Sexual Awareness as "*Hada'at Tov Vara*"

Elsewhere in the Bible, we learn that *hadda'at tov vara* is an awareness or knowledge that the very young and the very old do not possess but all other humans do possess (Deut 1:39 and 2 Sam 19:35[36])<sup>9</sup>. Asked rhetorically, what kind of awareness do humans in, say, their mid-twenties possess that a three year old child and a ninety year adult do not? One [obvious] answer is the sexual awareness that emerges with puberty. After puberty the nature of sexual awareness is simply the recognition of erotic desire where before there was none. With respect to the very young and very old,

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<sup>8</sup> Proponents of this theory also advance the argument that the expulsion of the king of Tyre from the "Mountain of God" (Ezekiel 28:6) parallels that of the Eden expulsion. My analysis and response to this argument can be viewed in the Appendix

<sup>9</sup> See the Appendix for a detailed treatment of *tov vara* as sexual awareness from these two verses.

then, erotic desire – the natural expression and biology of a sexual being – is absent in the former and long gone in the latter.

If sexual awareness is in view, the overriding metaphor in the second creation story is that Adam and Eve were created in an initial state of innocence and prior to eating the fruit “*were both naked and not ashamed*” as is characteristic of prepubescent children (2:25).

Following this analogy, then, to gain *hadda’at tov vara* is to experience puberty – the onset of sexual awareness and biological ability necessary to procreate and respond erotically to sexual stimuli. From the earliest times and in many (all?) cultures, puberty is often celebrated as a coming of age ceremony – the transition between childhood and adulthood. Metaphorically, coming of age is often represented as innocence lost and procreativity gained.

But, procreativity presents a problem within the closed confines of the Garden Eden<sup>10</sup>. Were immortal beings allowed to reproduce disaster would ensue. In the absence of death, the Garden would be overrun. Hence the need to remove Adam and Eve from the garden and thereby lose access to the Tree of Life and immortality. As mortal beings now living in an unbounded world, procreation would pose no problems.

Consider the literary implication of the rest of verse 3:22. Here it is again but paraphrased for effect,

... , the man has become like one of Us, able to create others like him<sup>11</sup>; but now, he might stretch out his hand, and take moreover from the tree of life, and cause himself to eat and live forever

The consequence of sexual maturation, symbolized by acquiring *hadda’at tov vara*, is the ability to create other humans. As procreative beings, Adam and Eve are functionally like God able to create other humans (albeit biologically, not divinely). In this they are functionally like God. Because they bear the power of creation, they must leave Eden to avoid overpopulation.

In this exegesis I follow Brettler's understanding<sup>12</sup> that *hadda’at tov vara* refers symbolically to the knowledge of one's sexual nature. Brettler writes,

The connection between procreative sexuality and mortality is compelling and was well understood even in antiquity – if people

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<sup>10</sup> The Hebrew word usually translated as ‘garden’ means enclosure and is derived from the Hebrew word for defend. In Hebrew, ‘garden’ connotes an enclosure that is largely impenetrable.

<sup>11</sup> Or “in his image”. This is a euphemism for having children (see Genesis 5:3)

<sup>12</sup> (Brettler 2005) pp 44-46

were to be both sexually procreative and immortal, disastrous overpopulation<sup>13</sup> would result.

The great medieval scholar, Ibn Ezra viewed sexual awareness to be the meaning of *hadda'at tov vara*. Of Ibn Ezra, Nahum Sarna writes,

"Ibn Ezra, followed by many scholars today, understood carnal knowledge to be intended meaning of the tree of knowledge of good and bad since the first human experience after eating the forbidden fruit is the consciousness of nudity ...; moreover, immediately after the expulsion from Eden it is said, "Now the man knew his wife Eve."<sup>14</sup>.

Prof. Claus Westermann, writing in his Genesis commentary cites a long list of scholars who support the interpretation that *hadda'at tov vara* refers to sexual awareness and the ability to procreate, including H. Gressmann, H. Schmidt, and H. Gunkel, and many others<sup>15</sup>

It's fair to say that today many (if not most?) modern scholars agree that the sexual awareness that accompanies the biological process of sexual maturation is the meaning of *hadda'at tov vara*. If one accepts this theory, then the point at which the primordial couple become aware of their sexuality is after eating the fruit (Genesis 3:7). Having eaten, the two become sexually aware of the erotic nature of their relationship. Note that the coverings they make only cover their genitals<sup>16</sup>. It is God who later provides conventional clothing to the couple immediately prior to their expulsion.

## Appendix

### Argument Against Scriptural Support for Moral Autonomy

Proponents of the moral autonomy theory argue that the expulsion of the king of Tyre<sup>17</sup> from the "Mountain of God" parallels the expulsion of Adam and Eve from Eden. This argument merits a closer examination. Here's the text in question. God, speaking through His prophet, Ezekiel says to the king of Tyre that ...

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<sup>13</sup> (Brettler 2005) At p. 295, Brettler provides references supporting the ANE's understanding of the dangers of overpopulation- see ref #24

<sup>14</sup> From (Sarna 1989) p 19.

<sup>15</sup> (Westermann 1984) p 242-244

<sup>16</sup> The Hebrew word for the coverings literally means 'belt', but is commonly translated in most commercial Bibles as loincloths.

<sup>17</sup> The king was probably Ethbaal who reigned in Tyre from about 591 BCE to 573 BCE and is thought to be the subject of Ezekiel's cherub in Eden (per Josephus). Google "Ithobaal III" for further information.

Because your heart is proud having said, "I am a god" and yet you are but a mortal and [are] no god though you compare your mind with the mind of a god..." (Ezekiel 28:2 RSV).

Ezekiel then continues, comparing this expulsion with that of Adam and Eve.

"You [the king] were in Eden, the garden of God ... You were blameless in your ways from the day that you were created, until iniquity was found in you ... so I cast you as a profane thing from the mountain of God, and the guardian cherub drove you out from among the stones of fire." (Ezekiel 15-17, RSV)

The comparison is superficial because it only applies to the fact of the expulsion. In other words, the comparison goes no further than the fact that both the king and Adam/Eve were expelled from their respective homes. Furthermore, the comparison of the king with Adam is not clear. Prof. Michael Heiser and others argue Ezekiel is referring to the serpent in Eden<sup>18</sup>, not the king as the analog to Adam.

No matter who/what is expelled, there is another dimension that the moral autonomy proponents overlook. To wit, in no way does the text lend support to the idea that the king actually acquired God-like wisdom. His offense was one of hubris; he thought of himself as divine. As a god. Compare this with Genesis 3:22 when God announces that the couple are being expelled because they *had become* like God.

"Behold, mankind has become like one of us knowing good and bad"

In other words, Adam/Eve do not view themselves as God. They were expelled not because of what they thought of themselves, but because the knowledge they acquired, *hadda'at tov vara*, made them creative beings thus precluding their continued presence in Eden.

## Hadda'at tov vara as Sexual Awareness

### Knowledge of (*hadda'at*)

The Hebrew word הַדָּעַת (*hadda'at*) means "the knowledge of". To this end, there are two related aspects to this understanding, its literal and figurative meanings. Its root, *yada*, in its various forms means knowledge, awareness, cognition. One of its more common usages in the Bible is to represent *yada* as carnal knowledge acquired through sexual intercourse. This usage is attested in the well-known euphemism "Adam knew Eve his wife" and its parallels (Genesis 4:1; Genesis 19:8; Numbers 31:17, 35;

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<sup>18</sup> (Heiser 2009)

Judges 11:39 and 21:11; 1 Kings 1:4; 1 Samuel 1:19). It is also used to describe the knowledge of sexual perversions such as sodomy (Genesis 19:5; Judges 19:22) and rape (Judges 19:25)<sup>19</sup>.

## Biblical Support for *Tov Vara* as Sexual Awareness

Very young children are not capable of having erotic feelings (barring certain medical conditions) much less act on those feelings. The very old find themselves in a similar, but not exact, situation. While they intellectually know about and remember their sexuality, most elderly people lose the ability to act on their erotic urges if, indeed, they even have any. Keep this in mind when reading 2 Samuel 19:35-36. Here we read of Barzillai who, when asked by king David to continue on to Jerusalem with him, declines somewhat facetiously, by virtue of his age – or more specifically, by virtue of his age-related infirmities,

But Barzillai said to the king, "How many years have I still to live, that I should go up with the king to Jerusalem? <sup>35</sup> Today I am eighty years old; can I know *tov vara*? Can your servant taste what he eats or what he drinks? Can I still listen to the voice of singing men and singing women? Why then should your servant be an added burden to my lord the king?

While there is no explicit reference to sexual ability, context surely permits it especially when taken in context with Deuteronomy 1:39 in which God has told the first generation of Israelites that they would not be allowed to cross over into Canaan. But, says God,

As for your little ones, who you thought would become booty, your children, who today do not yet know *tov vara*, ...

In this verse, *tov vara* is not possessed by the children but evidently they are destined to acquire *hadda'at tov vara* later when they are older.

A final clue that *tov vara* refers to sexual awareness is that it is consuming the *fruit* of the tree that confers awareness. In the ANE (and many other) cultures, fruit is associated with fertility and reproduction. In Genesis 1:28, mankind is commanded to be "fruitful" and multiply. Elsewhere the phrase "fruit of [the,her, their,your] womb" occurs over 20 times in the Bible. Here the word fruit is a metaphor for child[ren]. In the second creation story, eating the fruit metaphorically confers the ability to be fruitful, i.e., procreate.

## Works Cited

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<sup>19</sup> Other examples in which a form of *Yada* is used in place of sexual intercourse (or, in some cases, rape) are, but not limited to, Genesis 4:17, 4:25, 9:24, 19:4-35, 24:26, 38:26, Numb 31:18, Judges 21:12, etc.)

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