

Because There Was No Rain

A Study of Genesis 2:4b-9: Why the Human Was Created

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Note the translation¹ of Genesis 2:4b-5;

... In the day when the LORD God made the earth and the heavens, (5) every plant of the field had not yet come to be in the earth and no herb of the field had yet sprouted because the LORD God had not caused it to rain upon the earth, and there was no one to work² the ground.

This verse is an example of biblical parallelism, a very common literary technique in which the ancient Hebrew authors delighted. Its literary nature turns out to be important for the interpretation of these verses (vv. 4b-9). As is so often the case in biblical interpretation, a phrase's meaning is often not revealed by a literal reading of the text. Rather, its meaning arises from the literary structure of the text.

So, let's look carefully at the parallelism of v. 4b-5 and ask what this text tells us about the next four verses (vv. 6-9). Note that v. 4b-5 presents two problem statements and their causes:

Problem Statement	Reason
Plants of the field could not exist	Because they lacked water supplied by the rain.
Herbs of the field could not exist	Because they lacked a cultivator

¹ Unless otherwise noted, all translations are my own.

² The verb used here, עָבַד (avod) connotes manual labor. The noun form (eved) of this verb is often translated as 'slave' or "bond servant".

In this verse, we need to resolve the difference between ‘plant’ (רִיבֹן = *seach*) and ‘herb’ (עֵשֶׂב = *eisev*). One obvious difference from the table above is that for the former flourishing requires only water (in the form of rain), while the latter requires a human, presumably to supply water via irrigation³. With this in mind, perhaps a more meaningful translation would be something along these lines:

(4b) in the day when the LORD God made the earth and the heavens, every [kind of] wild plant was not yet in the earth and no crops had yet sprouted because the LORD God had not caused it to rain upon the earth, and there was no one to work the groundⁱⁱ.

Genesis 4b-5 informs us that wild plants need only water to grow, but that water alone is insufficient for crops (cultivated plants). Crops also need a human cultivator. With this distinction in mind, the parallel structure of 4b-5 elegantly foreshadows the reason why the human was created:

- In verse 6, God enables wild plants to grow by causing rain to fall on the earth.
- In verse 7 God creates the human to cultivate the crops.
- In verse 8 God creates a garden for the cultivated plants.
- In verse 9 the human is placed in the garden.

Problem Statement	Reason	Solution
Wild plants could not exist	Because they lacked water supplied by the rain.	God brings rain
Cultivated plants (crops) could not exist	Because no cultivator was present to supply water.	God creates a human and a garden for him to cultivate.

³ This is indeed the case. In the Ancient Near East, especially in the Mesopotamian region, the climate was such as to require crops be irrigated.

Verse 6 solves the first problem. Verses 7-9 solve the second. The creation of the human enables cultivated plants to grow.

Now reread Genesis 4b-9 with the parallelism in mind:

(4b) in the day when the LORD God made the earth and the heavens, (5) every [kind of] wild plant was not yet in the earth and no crops had yet sprouted because the LORD God had not caused it to rain upon the earth, and there was no one to work the ground. (6) So, rain clouds arose from the earth and all the surface of the ground was caused to drink. (7) Then the LORD God formed the man from the dust of the ground and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life, and the man came to life.

So, the LORD God planted a garden in Eden, to the East, and there He placed the man whom He had formed.

In the first creation account, God creates mankind to rule over all of God's creation – a ruler of sorts; God's vice-regent on earth. By contrast, in the second creation account, God creates a single human for the sole purpose of cultivating plants within a single garden. Which raises a fascinating question: what's outside of the garden? Well, wild plants for one (v 6). However, an even more fascinating question is this one: is the second creation account is really about creation? Perhaps the author, in using a single human couple, means to reveal something deeper; something that depends on our understanding Adam and Eve as slaves of a sort; slaves destined for all eternity to work the ground of the garden?

Is this a bridge to far? Well, the primordial couple rule over nothing. Indeed, the needs of the Garden's crops govern their lives. But worse, neither took on their role voluntarily. Just as automotive manufacturers invented and placed robots on an assembly line to rivet door panels in place, so God formed the human and placed him in the garden to cultivate crops for all eternity. Even people serving life terms for murder eventually die. The sweet release of death was not to be for Adam and Eve. Or was it?

Now go and study

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ⁱⁱ In the late 1950s, Dr. Meredith Kline at the Westminster Theological Seminary advanced the suggestion (which was later confirmed) that *seach* means wild plants, and *eisev* means cultivated plants, or crops. This coheres tightly with verses 6 and 7 in which God provides for the wild plants by causing rain and for cultivated plants by creating man