

**CONTEXT &
CONNECTIONS**

**RESOURCE
#3-1**

**SAMPLE
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LIVING THE WORD

Narrative Lectionary



Context & Connections

Background Notes

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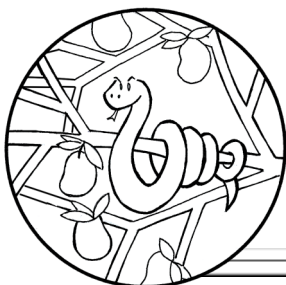
Living the Word: Contexts & Connections (Narrative Lectionary, Year 3)
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Creation and Fall

Promises Made, Promises Broken

The Point

God loves us, even when we do the wrong thing.

Key Verse

The man and his wife hid themselves from the presence of the LORD God among the trees of the garden.
-Genesis 3:8

Summary

God created the first human out of dust, breathing life into him. God provided all the trees and fruits of the garden for Adam and Eve to eat except for the tree of knowledge. A serpent tempts Eve into eating the fruit, who in turn tempts Adam. The two were ashamed and hid from God.

Accompanying Text

And forgive us our sins,
for we ourselves forgive everyone indebted to us.
And do not bring us to the time of trial.
-Luke 11:4

Contexts

Linguistics

- There are two important Hebrew puns in the text:
 - ♦ God creates a person (Heb: *'adam*) from the dust of the ground (Heb: *'adamah*). This pun shows the intimate connection between humans and the land.¹ The emphasis of the word *'adam* is on personhood and humanness. When the author wishes to highlight the first person's gender, (as in 3:6, 8), they switch to the word *'ish*, which specifically means a "male" or "husband."
 - ♦ The snake is more crafty (Heb: *'arum*) than the other creatures, and its craftiness leads people to realize that they are naked (Heb: *'arumim*). This pun shows the limits of craftiness in seeking true knowledge.²
- The expression "good and evil" (Heb: *tov varab*) in 2:17 and 3:5 is an idiom meaning "everything." It is not meant to designate moral or ethical knowledge.³
- In 2:7, God uses dust (Heb: *'aphar*) to make the first person. This word is chosen to show that God did not use a strong, durable material like clay, but a fragile material. The word illustrates the fragility of human existence.⁴

Geography/Setting

- The geographical description of the rivers and the garden (2:10-14) ground the story within a Middle Eastern world. More specifically, the description of the beginning of creation as dry without any plants (2:5) as opposed to a watery chaos (1:2) points towards the setting of a people living in the desert.⁵

History

- This story is concerned with the origins of human beings, of pain, and of death, and as such, is considered "Prehistory" in the Bible.⁶ Scholars have debated when the story was eventually written down, but many date the text to the time of the reign of Solomon (c. 970 BCE).⁷ Regardless, the story goes back to an ancient set of oral traditions.⁸ The story is shaped less by the historical context of being written down than by its origins (see **Literature/Genre**).

Culture/Religion

- The cultural assumption of the passage is that people are actively involved in agriculture. We see this through the pun on *'adam/ 'adamah* and in God putting the man in the garden "to till and keep it," which can also be translated "to cultivate and take care of it."⁹ The assumption of an agricultural livelihood helps to explain the punishments in 3:17-19.
- The religious assumption of the passage is that there is an intimate link between Creator and people, but also that the relationship between the Creator and people is broken. The story serves to show the Israelite people that their relationship with their God (Yahweh) goes back to the origins of humanity. However, it also serves to show why the Israelite people do not enjoy a relationship wherein God walks in the garden and talks with them.¹⁰

Literature/Genre

- The passage is connected with the chapter that came before it (they are both about creation), but distinct in that it has a different story to tell. This passage moves from the grand story of creation of the whole world to the intimate story of the first people and the beginnings of their relationship to God. The main character in the whole narrative is God, but in a masterful bit of storytelling, the humans "steal" God's role as main character, for a short time.
- The passage falls into the genre of folk-tale and more specifically into the category of origin story. As a folktale/origin story, it is important to understand two things. 1) Though it belongs to the Israelites specifically, the story speaks to themes that are common to all humanity. The story goes way back to the time of oral cultures and the first peoples' attempts to make sense of their world. 2) Folktales are always existential stories. They are not meant primarily to give information or to entertain. Rather, they are meant to show why *you*, the listener, are in the situation that you are now.¹¹

Authorial Intention/Occasion

- The teller of the folktale is interested in explaining origins. "The subject of the text —creation, offense, origin of hardship, pain and death—belongs to the context of primeval event about which there are stories the world over."¹²

Audience

- In its original oral form, the audience was the primitive ancestors of the tribes of Israel. In its earliest stages of writing, the story served as a backdrop for of the reign of King Solomon. When it later became incorporated into the Book of Genesis, the story became the backdrop of the history of the Israelite people as a whole. Regardless of the stage of the story's development, its point was to set the stage for the people's history and to show them the beginnings of their relationship to God.¹³

Common Misunderstandings

- The fruit was not an apple. The text says nothing about what kind of fruit Adam and Eve ate. The tradition of the apple goes back to the medieval church and the association of the word for apple (Latin: *malus*) with the word for evil (Latin: *malum*).¹⁴
- Eden is not “paradise” in the sense of a place of ultimate leisure. That interpretation comes through the influence of the Greek poet Hesiod and the Qur'an. Rather, for the teller of the tale in Genesis, from the very beginning, human existence always includes occupation (tilling and keeping) and human community. The aftermath of human disobedience is not the creation of work, but the pain that goes with it.¹⁵

More Information

- For those interested in a [very] detailed study of folk-lore and its role in Genesis (and elsewhere): <https://archive.org/details/folkloreinoldte00frazgoog>.
- For those interested in the Middle Eastern setting of the text and parallel stories in Mesopotamian mythology: <http://www.i-cias.com/e.o/mesopotamia.htm>.

Connections

Narrative Lectionary Connections

- **Last Week** – It is the first week, starting right from the beginning!
- **Next Week (Genesis 15:1-6)** – This week’s passage leaves us at a cliff hanger. But we do know that the original relationship between God and people has been broken. In between the weeks’ readings, we have a series of stories about things getting worse: Cain kills Abel, the flood happens, and the hubris of the tower of Babel. But all of this prehistory of things getting worse points us to Abram. In Abram, later to be renamed Abraham, we see how the general promises that God made about creation become specific promises of a nation and of descendants. From the general story of the origins of the human race, we zoom in on the story of a specific person with whom God forms a relationship.
- **Other Year 3 Connections** – The story of creation, with its emphasis on God sending rain to water crops, is recalled in 1 Kings 17 (11/1/20), when Elijah prophesies a drought in Israel.

Other Bible Connections

- In Romans 5:12-21, Paul uses the story of Adam to illustrate the greatness of God’s gift in Jesus.
- In John 8:44, the writer alludes to the serpent in Genesis 3:1.
- In John 20:22, the writer describes Jesus breathing the Holy Spirit into the disciples in language resonant with Genesis 2:7.

Thematic Connections

- **Annual Theme: Our God, Revealed in the Story** – As discussed above, the passage today is a story that stretches back to the beginnings of human society and is shared by many cultures. Knowing this, we see that when humans first started to talk about God and God’s relationship to people, they used the form of story. Every time that we read about God’s creation of humanity, we reinforce the importance of story in revealing our relationship to God.
- **Unit Theme: Promises Made, Promises Broken** – Our story today also sets the theme of the rest of Israel’s history. The first people are blessed with God’s promise of abundance, care, and relationship. However, Adam and Eve reject God’s promise and break that relationship through hope of selfish gain. In the coming stories of the history of Israel, we will see this cycle of God’s gracious promise and Israel’s selfish rejection repeated again and again.

Liturgical/Seasonal Connections

- This is a good story to read again as we enter into fall and the harvests that will soon come. It inspires us to think about our role in tilling and keeping the soil, and the way that we treat the creation that God has entrusted to us.

Hymns/Music

- There are many hymns that deal with the wonder of God’s creation, such as “How Great Thou Art,” “Beautiful Savior,” and “All Things Bright and Beautiful.”
- Some hymns deal explicitly with planting and harvesting: “We Plow the Fields and Scatter,” “For the Fruit of All Creation.”
- Some praise songs with creation as the theme are “The Earth Is Yours” by Gungor; “Let Creation Sing” by Hillsong; and “Countless Wonders” by Chris Tomlin.

Media Connections

- The first episode of the History Channel series *The Bible*, contains a useful illustration of the original oral nature of the creation story.
- The movie *Prometheus* contains an alien-filled alternate take on the story of the origin of humankind.
- Aldo Leopold's book *A Sand County Almanac* contains short, easy to read essays on the nature of humanity's connection to the earth and our responsibilities as tillers and keepers.

¹Claus Westermann, *Genesis 1-11: A Commentary*, trans. John J. Scullion, S.J. (Minneapolis: Augsburg Publishing House, 1984), 199.

²Ronald Hendel, "Genesis" in *The Harper Collins Study Bible Including Apocryphal/Deuterocanonical Books*, ed. Wayne Meeks, et al. (New York: HarperCollins Publishers, 2006), 9.

³Gerhard Von Rad, *Genesis: A Commentary*, trans. John H. Marks (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1961), 79.

⁴Westermann, *Genesis 1-11*, 206.

⁵Von Rad, *Genesis*, 74.

⁶Westermann, *Genesis 1-11*, 190.

⁷"Introduction to the Pentateuch" in *New Jerusalem Bible*, ed. Alexander Jones et al. (New York: Doubleday, 1990), 8.

⁸Claus Westermann, *Genesis: An Introduction*, trans. John J. Scullion, S.J. (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1992), 22-24.

⁹*New Jerusalem Bible*, 19.

¹⁰Westermann, *Genesis: An Introduction*, 53.

¹¹Westermann, *Genesis: An Introduction*, 5, 21.

¹²Westermann, *Genesis 1-11*, 190.

¹³"Introduction to the Pentateuch," 8.

¹⁴Von Rad, *Genesis*, 85.

¹⁵Von Rad, *Genesis*, 78.