

# THE MAN, THE WOMAN AND THE SERPENT (GEN 3:8-20)

## Probed and Proven, Banned and Blessed

*Ma. Maricel S. Ibita*

### The Story

*<sup>8</sup>They heard the sound of the LORD God walking in the garden at the time of the evening breeze, and the man and his wife hid themselves from the presence of the LORD God among the trees of the garden.*

*<sup>9</sup> But the LORD God called to the man, and said to him, "Where are you?" <sup>10</sup> He said, "I heard the sound of you in the garden, and I was afraid, because I was naked; and I hid myself." <sup>11</sup> He said, "Who told you that you were naked? Have you eaten from the tree of which I commanded you not to eat?" <sup>12</sup> The man said, "The woman whom you gave to be with me; she gave me fruit from the tree and I ate."*

*<sup>13</sup> Then the LORD God said to the woman, "What is this that you have done?" The woman said, "The serpent tricked me, and I ate."*

*<sup>14</sup> The LORD God said to the serpent, "Because you have done this, cursed be you among all animals and among all wild creatures; upon your belly you shall go, and dust you shall eat all the days of your life. <sup>15</sup> I will put enmity between you and the woman, and between your offspring and hers; he will strike your head and you will strike his heel."*

*<sup>16</sup> To the woman he said, "I will greatly increase your pangs in childbearing; in pain you shall bring forth children, yet your desire shall be for your husband, and he shall rule it over you."*

*<sup>17</sup> And to the man he said, "Because you have listened to the voice of your wife, and you have eaten of the tree about which I commanded you, 'You shall not eat of it,' cursed is the ground because of you; in toil you shall eat of it all the days of your life; <sup>18</sup> thorns and thistles it shall bring forth for you; and you shall eat the plants of the field. <sup>19</sup> 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.”*

<sup>20</sup> *The man named his wife Eve, because she is the mother of all the living.*

<sup>21</sup> *And the LORD God made garments of skins for the man and for his wife, and clothed them.*

**T**he text under study is about the role of the curse/consequences spoken by the Deity to the serpent, the woman and the man in Gen 3:8-20. This text, especially Gen 3:14-15, is usually referred to as the *protoevangelium* or the “first announcement of good news” linked usually with the dogma of the Immaculate Conception. According to D. A. Panella, this claim is problematic in five aspects. One, the history of the Vulgate translation of the Hebrew pronoun *hû* (“he” in English) evinces indefiniteness. This word could be translated as ‘it’ (*ipsum*), or it could also be understood as ‘they,’ since it relates back to a collective noun. The LXX has a more specific development of Messianic ideas in which *hû* is translated by the masculine pronoun *autos* even if the antecedent is neuter. In the Vulgate, it was translated as ‘she’ (*ipsa*) although the old Latin versions prefer *ipse* (he). Two, the serpent, *nâbâs*, has a very complex ancient Near Eastern symbolism connected especially with magic and fertility. Three, the reference to the Virgin Mary, as the woman in Gen 3 according to some Catholic theologians, can not simply be ignored, even if independent authors deny such typical or full allusion. Four, the key word, *šûp* has a very approximate meaning whether it would be regarded as to ‘grasp’, ‘bruise’ or ‘strike’. Five, Christian tradition since the 6<sup>th</sup> century erroneously reads the Vulgate text as Mary’s triumph over evil and the devil. What adds to the confusion is also the Pauline reference that Christ is “born of a woman” in Gal 4:4 and his contrast between Christ and Adam, thus, for some, Eve and Mary in Romans 5:12-19. Because of this, the Fathers of the Church thought that as Mary brought the Victor over sin on earth, so Eve has brought sin and death. Moreover, because it was used in Mariological sense in the encyclicals *Ineffabilis Deus* (Pius IX), *Munificentissimus Deus*, and *Fulgens Corona* (Pius XII), literal sense has

been applied to Mary even if the documents cited above referred to the erroneously translated Vulgate.<sup>1</sup>

Recent literary and cultural researches on the book of Genesis, however, reveal otherwise. Added to this would be the voices of many woman exegetes who would like to clarify the confusion, draw deeper meaning from the story, and re-appropriate it for believers today. This paper, by looking at such advances, would like to ask the following questions: Why is it that the serpent was not probed but instantly proven guilty and given verdict? How is it that among the three of them, the serpent was the only one directly cursed? What about the consequences on the man and the woman? This paper would also like to find out how the curse on the snake functions in the chiasm that the text forms in order to find a new way of reading the narrative in our own time, a reading that seeks a blessing in between the lines of curse and consequences.<sup>2</sup>

The periscope in question can be outlined as follows:

- I. *Introduction* (3:8)
  - a The Lord God walking in the garden
  - b The man and his wife hiding
  
- II. **A** Questioning of the Man (3:9-12)
  - B** Questioning of the Woman (3:13)
    - C** The serpent was proven, verdict given (3:14-15)
  - B'** Consequences to the Woman (3:16)
  - A'** Consequences to the Man (3:17-19)

---

1. For a more complete treatment, see D. A. Panella, "Protoevangelium," in *New Catholic Encyclopedia*, vol. XI (New York: McGraw Hill Book Co., 1967), 910-911.

2. Charles Conroy claims that the whole of Gen 1-11 is a series of stories of "God's abiding presence and non-abandonment." See C. Conroy, "Abraham's Journey of Faith," in *Journeys and Servants* (Quezon City: Catholic Biblical Association of the Philippines, 2003), 1-17, especially 1-7.

III. *Conclusion* (3:20-21)

- b' The man named his wife Eve
- a' God the Tailor/Divine Dressmaker clothed them  
as they were sent out to the East of Eden

These verses form part of the second creation narrative with the entry into the world of 'sin' and 'punishment' (Gen 2-3).<sup>3</sup> Though many scholars classify this generally as a myth,<sup>4</sup> Meyers particularly

---

3. The researcher would like to put these words in quotation as a basis for the traditional reading of the text. This paper shall prefer to follow some scholars today who read the story as humanity entering into growth and maturity over against the usual misogynous reading. For a more detailed treatment, see Phyllis Trible, "A Love Story Gone Awry," *God and the Rhetoric of Sexuality*, OBT (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1978), 72-139. Meyers is of the same opinion stating even that it is time now to have a rereading of the text and that remaining in such a traditional reading is a distortion. Thus, for her, it is a story that deals with the harsh realities and enigmas of our life. For more details, see Carol Meyers, *Discovering Eve: Ancient Israelite Women in Context* (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1988), 79, 87-94. Gerhard Von Rad says that it is about post-paradise life and the great disorders of our present life. It is also a protology, a story that is put in the past so that Israel may ask about the future. See G. Von Rad, *Genesis: A Commentary* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1972), 100-102. For Walter Brueggemann, it talks about how to live with creation in God's world on God's terms. It is a reflection of what knowledge does to human community in Genesis. See W. Brueggemann, *Genesis: Interpretation* (Atlanta: John Knox Press, 1982), 51. Susan Niditch considers this story as a tale of emergence, a process of passage; see Niditch, *Chaos to Cosmos*, (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1985), 34ff. Terence Fretheim regards this as a statement about a condition. See T. Fretheim, "The Book of Genesis," in *New Interpreter's Bible Commentary*, vol. I (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1994), 369. Karen Armstrong views it as a "story of beginnings"; see K. Armstrong, *In the Beginning: A New Interpretation of Genesis* (New York; Alfred A. Knopf, 1996), 32. Still Lawrence Boadt classifies it as the "story of the first sin". See L. Boadt, "Genesis," in *International Bible Commentary: A Catholic Ecumenical Commentary for the Twenty-first Century*, ed., William Farmer (Minnesota: The Liturgical Press, 1998), 364. For other works on Genesis, see John Kselman, "The Book of Genesis: A Decade of Scholarly Research," *Interpretation*, (October 1991): 380-392.

4. See Meyers, *Discovering Eve*, 79ff; Boadt, "Genesis," 350; Thomas Mann, *The Book of the Torah: The Narrative Integrity of the Pentateuch* (Atlanta: John Knox Press, 1988), 10; Dianne Bergant, "The Medium is the Message," *The Bible Today* (January 1997): 5-9; Michael Maher, *Genesis, Old Testament Message 2*, (Delaware: Michael Glazier, 1982), 34ff.

classes it as comprising two genres of folk literature: creation myths and etiologies. They are “tales meant to help human beings come to grips with the nature and the meaning of their own existence.”<sup>5</sup> As a means to understand the reality of life, it is a “story that expresses a fundamental truth too profound to be told in a purely historical or scientific fashion.”<sup>6</sup> Meyers added that our text also contains some particles of a “third genre, that of a wisdom parable” expressed mainly in the dialogue between the serpent<sup>7</sup> and the woman.<sup>8</sup>

This narrative is attributed to J or the Yahwist. Since it is presumably written during the Solomonic enlightenment or shortly thereafter, scholars have varied interpretations of the reason for its writing. For Von Rad, it is a time when so much ancient sacred tradition has reached its crisis. The author was the last one to pass on a myth with archaic piety with lots of older traditions taken and redacted by the author.<sup>9</sup> It may also be an illustration of the Solomonic effort to overcome every mystery and to manufacture every new knowledge considering that knowledge is power, and it leads to the freedom to act and the capacity to control as Brueggemann would say.<sup>10</sup> For him, this text may also be considered as showing “the role of wisdom in an aggressive *royal* context” as seen in the David-Bathsheba story (II Sam 11-12), or the Isaian indict to the king of Assyria who by his won wisdom was able to plunder the people by removing boundaries (Is 10: 13-14). It may also suggest the accusation

---

5. Meyers, *Discovering Eve*, 79.

6. Bergant, “The Medium is the Message,” 5.

7. Leon Kass said that the conversation is about the awakening of the voice of reason and the fueling of the imagination to consider possibilities other than the merely given ones, and that, by asking the Bible’s first question, the serpent produces the first conversation. See also Bill Moyers, “Temptation,” *Genesis: A Living Conversation* (New York: Doubleday, 1996), 46.

8. Meyers follows the suggestion of Albright that the association between the female and the qualities of wisdom as a Semitic background. He said that that connection between the woman and Wisdom in the Bible is not limited to Genesis, it is climaxed in the personification of Wisdom in Proverbs 8. See Meyers, *Discovering Eve*, 79, 91-92.

9. Von Rad, *Genesis*, 99.

10. Brueggemann, *Genesis*, 51-52.

to the king of Tyre who claimed divinity and is therefore sentenced to death (Ez 28:2-10).<sup>11</sup>

The Book of J, however, sees this story as a “sophisticated parable of the decline of David’s kingdom from imperial grandeur to division and turbulence.”<sup>12</sup>

With this background, this paper shall classify Gen 2-3<sup>13</sup> using the three genres discussed above. *Creation* would be from “the day that the LORD God made the earth and the heavens (2:4b) to the completion of creation by finding a suitable helper and partner for the man, making them one flesh (2:24). *Wisdom* would begin from the moment that the couple became one flesh, naked yet unashamed (2:25) going up to pun on *arûm* (cunning) and *’arûmmîm* (naked) until the couple ate of the fruit of the tree of knowledge of good and evil and their eyes were opened: they saw themselves as naked, thus they sewed fig leaves together and made loincloths for themselves (3:7). The third part, Gen 3:8-20, is the focus of this paper. The text under study will be limited to the narrative of the curse (*arûr*) of the snake which instantly became the accused in connection with the consequences<sup>14</sup> that ensued from the act of the man and the woman.

---

11. Ibid.

12. *The Book of J*, translated from Hebrew by David Rosenberg and interpreted by Harold Bloom, (New York: Grove Weidenfeld, 1990), 187.

13. The tremendous work of Tribble remains a classic in the rereading of this narrative. Besides Tribble’s, this paper will also employ recent works of various biblical scholars. The researcher would like to suggest that Tribble’s treatment of “eros” as “condemned and contaminated” at the close of the story is to highlight its redemption in her discussion of the Song of Songs. See Tribble, “Love Lyrics Redeemed,” in *God and the Rhetoric of Sexuality*, 144-165. A brief description of the Genesis story as it journeys in the tradition (Jewish/ Intertestamental/ Christian) is provided by Boadt in “Genesis,” 348-360, 364; while a detailed study of Gen 3 in the Christian tradition is provided by Elaine Pagels, *Adam, Eve and the Serpent* (New York: Vintage Books, 1988).

14. Fretheim said that interpreters have hesitated to use the language of judgment (or punishment) often narrowly conceived. He classifies 3:16-19 as “consequences of their own deeds.” See Fretheim, “The Book of Genesis,” 369.

The story ends with the Deity clothing the man and the woman.<sup>15</sup> This paper classifies this portion as *etiology* story. The banishment of the couple<sup>16</sup> to the East of Eden (3:22-24) would be like an epilogue of the entire two chapters.

A closer look into the unfolding of the text is now due so that a “bite of wisdom” may be found in the traditionally “forbidden eating of the fruit” with the hope that in between the “curses” and the “consequences” is a trace of blessing.

### ***Introduction***

- 3:8a *They heard the sound of the LORD God walking in the garden at the time of the evening breeze,*  
3:8b *and the man and his wife hid themselves from the presence of the LORD God among the trees of the garden.*

There are two parts in this introductory verse. The characters are the LORD God, and the man and his wife who hid when they heard the sound of the Deity in the garden. Did the serpent hide also? Where did it go after 3:5? The setting is laid. The characters are in the garden at the time of the evening breeze. The initial action of the characters are also set, the first ever “hide and seek.” The man

---

15. Jonathan Magonet, *A Rabbi's Bible* (London: SCM Press, 1991), 113, as quoted in Tamara Eskenazi, “Torah as Narrative and Narrative as Torah,” in *Old Testament Interpretation: Past, Present and Future* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1995), 27. Magonet noted that in the Hebrew version, Gen 2:4b to 3:21 is unbroken. He said, “It is only in the Christian chapter divisions, presumably because of the later importance attached to the story of the Fall, that make the artificial division at the beginning of chapter 3, thus isolating the episode of the snake.” See also Tribble, “A Love Story Gone Awry,” 105; Michael Maher, *Genesis* (Delaware: Michael Glazier Inc., 1982), 34; Richard Clifford, “Genesis,” in *New Jerome Biblical Commentary* (Quezon City: Claretian Publications, 1993), 12-13; E. Speiser, *The Anchor Bible: Genesis – Introduction, Translation and Notes* (New York: Doubleday and Co., 1979), 21; as opposed to other scholars that begin with 3:1 like Victor Hamilton, *The Book of Genesis Chapters 1-17*, (Grandrapids: W.B. Eerdsman, 1990), 186.

16. Meyers, *Discovering Eve*, 87.

and the woman are hiding “among the trees of the garden.” Were they together? Was it any tree or the tree of knowledge of good and evil? Is it the tree of life? Is it the fig tree from where they got their clothes (3:7)?

### ***The Accused***

- 3:9a *But the LORD God called to the man,*  
3:9b *and said to him, “Where are you?”*  
3:10a *He said, “I heard the sound of you in the garden,*  
3:10b *and I was afraid, because I was naked; and I hid myself.”*  
3:11a *He said, “Who told you that you were naked?*  
3:11b *Have you eaten from the tree of which I commanded you not to eat?”*  
3:12a *The man said, “The woman whom you gave to be with me;*  
3:12b *she gave me fruit from the tree and I ate.”*
- 3:13 *Then the LORD God said to the woman, “What is this that you have done?”*  
3:13b *The woman said, “The serpent tricked me, and I ate.”*

The question<sup>17</sup> of the Deity “Where are you?” does not just locate the other characters, it also asks for the reason why they are not there as manifested by the answer of the man. Do the three of them always go for a walk together? If the serpent uttered the Bible’s first question,<sup>18</sup> the second question belongs to the Deity, and it started

---

17. Kidner noted that this is a question rather than a command, “for God must draw the man out of hiding,” rather than “Why are you hiding?” which would imply the silliness of their hiding from God. See D. Kidner, *Genesis*, TOIC (Downers Grove: Inter-Varsity, 1979), 70, as quoted in Victor Hamilton, *The Book of Genesis Chapter 1-17* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: W. B. Eerdsman, 1990), 193.

18. D. Bonhoeffer considers this verse as the “first conversation about God.” See D. Bonhoeffer, *Creation and Fall*, trans. John C. Fletcher (London: Collins, 1959), 70, as quoted in Hamilton, *The Book of Genesis*, 189. On the contrary, Brueggemann commented that even if we have here the first theological talk, God here becomes the object of discussion. It is not a dialogue *with* or *to* God but *about* God. Here, God has been objectified. See Brueggemann, *Genesis*, 47-48.



for food and a delight to the eyes, and that it was to be desired to make one wise. She ate of it and gave some to her husband (3:6) because they are one. It is only when the man ate of it (oneness completes in the act) that their eyes were opened and they realized that they were naked. We can see that the accused did not admit their transgression but their act of self-justification was an attempt to exculpate themselves.<sup>22</sup> Oneness was blamed by the man<sup>23</sup>(3:12) while deception of the serpent was invoked by the woman, at the interrogation of the Deity. With this scheme, the serpent is now under scrutiny.

### ***The Accursed***

If the woman was given only one chance to answer the query of the Deity, far worse is the plight of the serpent. Though the serpent caused the first ever conversation in the Bible, it was not even given the chance to utter a single word in this pericope. The craftiest animal is now silent (or silenced?). Using the **question-excuse-answer** cycle above, the next in line to be questioned and expected to give an excuse was supposed to be the serpent. Westermann said that the distinction between the humans and the serpent points out to the basic meaning of responsibility that people have to answer for what they do.<sup>24</sup> Or was it not questioned because of the possibility that the serpent might excuse itself? Or would it not explicitly blame the Deity instead for creating the tree of knowledge of good and evil yet posing a prohibition to the humans to partake of it – just as the man did, but only more subtly (The woman whom *you* gave to be with me...[3:12])? “J has given us no candidates for culpability, except perhaps Yahweh, already portrayed as a bungler in his creation of

---

22. Maher, *Genesis*, 45. See also Bruce Vawter, *On Genesis: A New Reading* (New York: Doubleday, 1977), 81.

23. “The man saw God’s good gift as the source of his trouble.” John H. Sailhamer, “Genesis,” in *The Expositors Bible Commentary*, vol. 2, ed. Frank E. Gaebelin (Michigan: Zondervan, 1990), 54. See also Vawter, *On Genesis*, 81, and Robert Alter, *Genesis: Translation and Commentary* (New York/London: W. W. Norton & Co., 1996), 13.

24. Westermann, *Genesis 1-11*, 255.

candidates for Adam.”<sup>25</sup>

At any rate, the narrative (or the trial) was cut short. The serpent was proven guilty and given the verdict (without due process).<sup>26</sup>

### ***The Curse***

- 3:14a The LORD God said to the serpent, “Because you have done this, cursed be you among all animals and among all wild creatures;
- 3:14b upon your belly you shall go, and dust you shall eat all the days of your life.
- 3:15a I will put enmity between you and the woman, and between your offspring and hers;
- 3:15b he will strike your head and you will strike his heel.”

This part is the center of the chiasm as illustrated above.<sup>27</sup> The first “curse” came from the LORD God and though indirectly given as stated by the passive voice (cursed be you<sup>28</sup>), it is directed to the serpent. What is the power of the curse? Why the serpent?

---

25. *Book of J*, 183; Westermann, *Genesis 1-11*, 255-256.

26. For Von Rad, the mention of the serpent is incidental because the author wanted to shift responsibility as little as possible to the man, personifying “evil” as coming from without him yet not objectifying it. See Von Rad, *Genesis*, 88.

27. Hamilton also noticed the chiasm formed by the trial and consequences text (Gen 3:8-20) but he did not address its function. See Hamilton, *The Book of Genesis*, 196.

28. Speiser translates this also as “ban” so as not to include the other animals in the “curse.” See Speiser, *Genesis*, 26-24. Hamilton followed this suggestion and elucidates that there are two Old Testament formulas. One uses “ban”, when it does not follow the reason presented as a cause for the curse (Gen 3:17; 4:11; 9:25; 49:7, etc). The other uses “curse” plus relative particle and verb or participle. The pronouncement here of the curse is followed by the act that prompts the curse. See Hamilton, *The Book of Genesis*, 196. See also P. Bus, “Deuteronomie XXVII 15-26: Maledictions ou exigences de l’alliance?” *Vetus Testamentum*, 1967: 478-479. If that would be the case, is there a relationship between the ban on the serpent and the banishment of the couple? See Meyers, *Discovering Eve*, 87, and Clifford, “Genesis,” 12. On the contrary, many scholars translate the word here as “curse”. See *Book of J*, 185; Fretheim, “The Book of Genesis,” 363; Clifford, “Genesis,” 12; Nahum Sarna, *Genesis*, in *JPS Torah Commentary* (Philadelphia/New York/Jerusalem: The Jewish Publication Society, 5749/1989), 27. Westermann provides a concise discussion in his book including what J. Scharbart said, “it is curse and so banished.” See Westermann, *Genesis 1-11*, 258-259. This paper favors this commentary that settles the dispute and provides a deeper discussion on “cursing”.

Pilch said that the *curse* is a form of communication (word, gesture, symbolic action) intended to direct damage, harm, trouble, disaster, even death, toward a person or object.<sup>29</sup> It expresses a disapproval, and can range from a spontaneous, explosive rage to a carefully considered rendering of an adverse judgment.<sup>30</sup> This second type is what constitutes the present text, not only because of its careful succession (serpent-woman-man) but also the poetry<sup>31</sup> that J put in the mouth of the Deity. Likewise,

cursing can also be considered a 'speech-act' since a curse is simultaneously a verbal utterance and a deed performed (...) Curses are often expressed in the subjunctive mood and the passive voice, and the agent is not always specified... The speaker in such cases has done something...the utterance of the curse itself. And the person addressed has not yet been afflicted by the deed mentioned but has immediately become the accursed."<sup>32</sup>

The curse, according to Pilch, entails two elements: the irrevocably mysterious power of the words, and the involvement of the Deity who makes the curse effective or not. In the case of Gen 3, he also said that it also speaks of the culture of the people who recount it, and their audience. In the pericope, it may appear that our Deity is Mediterranean, living in an honor and shame society. Therefore,

When God's creatures disobey, they dishonor or shame God. Blasphemy by definition is dishonoring or shaming God. In a world where these are the core values, a superior shamed by an inferior is bound to extract satisfaction (sometimes known as revenge). Hence, God has no choice but to curse disobedient creatures.<sup>33</sup>

---

29. John J. Pilch, "The Power of the Curse," *The Bible Today* 36, No. 5 (September-October 1998): 314.

30. Lester K. Little, "Cursing," in *Encyclopedia of Religion*, ed. Mircea Eliade (New York: Macmillan, 1987), 182.

31. Meyers, *Discovering Eve*, 92.

32. Little, "Cursing," 184. See also Westermann, Genesis 1-11, 257ff.

33. Pilch, "The Power of the Curse," 314. See also Little, "Cursing," 182.

If one will follow the sequence above and the declaration of the woman against the serpent, its case is not so much that of “disobedience” but more so on being the trickster,<sup>34</sup> the cause of the disobedience. From being the “more crafty” (NRSV), the “more subtle” (RSV) animal that the LORD God created – one which speaks and questions (3:1) and one which knows that the tree of good and evil will “open the eyes of the creatures making them like God” (3:5), and that even if they will eat of it, “they will not die” (3:4) – the serpent withdrew to the background in the second part of the story. The first part is attributed to it solely. Being a dynamic character in the conversation in 3:1-5, the serpent was given the role to awaken in the woman the desire to eat of the fruit. It initiated the search for wisdom in the story. It was given the role of “thickening the plot of the story.”<sup>35</sup> Then it receded into the background when its narrative function was accomplished.<sup>36</sup> It became a passive character, proven and given verdict (3:14-15). Thus in this context, the judgment on the serpent provides another way for the author to shift the story to its resolution. It leads to the motif of etiology<sup>37</sup> as it describes the serpent in its present state (3:14b). This is introduced as a ‘curse’ to the animal (3:14a). The next verse also explains the abhorrence that

---

34. Here, this paper shall combine the “mediator” and “trickster” qualities of the serpent as proposed by Susan Niditch, *Folklore and the Hebrew Bible*, (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1993), 46 as a response to Westermann, *Genesis 1-11*, 258. See also Niditch, *Chaos to Cosmos*, 36, and *Underdogs and Tricksters: A Prelude to Biblical Folklore* (San Francisco: Harper and Row, 1987), and her article on “Genesis,” in *Women’s Bible Commentary*, ed. C. Newsom and S. Ringe (Kentucky: Westminster John Knox Press), 1998, 17. Bruce Vawter also considers the serpent as a “trickster;” see Vawter, *On Genesis: A New Reading* (New York: Doubleday, 1977), 77.

35. Sir Ramakrishna was asked: “Why, God being good, is there evil in the world?” He answered, “To thicken the plot.” as told by Megan McKenna and Tony Cowan, *Keepers of the Story* (New York: Orbis Books, 1997), 45. This anecdote is presented to highlight the role of the serpent in the story but not to directly connect the serpent with evil, thus, with Satan. This topic deserves closer attention, which is outside the limits of this inquiry.

36. Clifford, “Genesis,” 12.

37. Westermann, *Genesis 1-11*, 258ff.

exists between people and the serpent, among the reptilian animals.<sup>38</sup> This will exist for generations to come (3:15a), with the antagonistic reactions of both parties (3:15b). By having the serpent at strategic locations: in *creation*, it can be presumed that it is included in 2:19 as the LORD God formed every beast of the field; in *wisdom* (3:1) and in *etiology* (3:14-15), the serpent was like a hinge that opens up the plot of the story to its resolution. “It is a technique to move the plot of the story.”<sup>39</sup>

Now, it is noticeable that although the state of the serpent was changed, and animosity is predicted, the ultimate curse, i.e., death, is not effected or conferred. The serpent is not forever banished from being a part of creation! It is only demythologized from the usual symbolism that it carries in the Near East traditions – that of a Deity and of fertility. It is seen above by the monologue of God with it, as compared to the LORD God’s dialogue with the man and the woman.<sup>40</sup> Vawter argues that J’s interest is only in the man and the woman and not in the serpent. More so, he said that even if J is appreciative of etiology, J is not concerned with the serpent as a symbol of evil but just as a symbol of unexplained source of mischief and wrong for which no accounting is given.<sup>41</sup> However, it is to be noted that even the LORD God, in the sentence meted out to the serpent, has acknowledged what it had done for better (as a culture bringer<sup>42</sup>) or for worse (its deception or trickery).

### *The Consequences*<sup>43</sup>

**B’**      16a      To the woman he said,  
                         “I will greatly increase your pangs in childbearing;

---

38. H. F. We, “Reptiles,” in *The New Encyclopedia Britannica*, 15<sup>th</sup> edition. See also Fretheim, “The Book of Genesis,” 363. It is regrettable that the issue of *protoevangelium* is far too broad to discuss in this limited space.

39. Brueggemann, *Genesis*, 47.

40. Nahum Sarna, *Understanding Genesis: The Heritage of Biblical Israel* (New York: Schocken Books, 1966), 26.

41. Vawter, *On Genesis: A New Reading*, 81.

42. It is helpful to see Niditch, *Folklore and the Hebrew Bible*, 44-46. See also her commentary on “Genesis,” in *Women’s Bible Commentary*, 17.

43. Fretheim, “The Book of Genesis,” 369; Hamilton, *The Book of Genesis*, 194-204.

in pain you shall bring forth children,  
16b yet your desire shall be for your husband, and he  
shall rule it over you.”

Parallel to the one verse probe (*What* is this...) and accusation (that *you* have done) above (3:13) is this verse of “consequential judgment” (3:16). Niditch calls this “disappointment and disapproval.”<sup>44</sup> One can perceive that the woman, usually referred to as the “temptress,” is never blamed nor cursed by the Deity explicitly unlike the serpent and the man<sup>45</sup> (*Because you have...cursed...*[ 3:14, 17]). Here in J, it is the first time that the blessing of fertility is directly given to the woman<sup>46</sup> even if it is accompanied by pangs of childbearing (16a *birthing?*) and pain in bringing forth children (16b also in rearing them up?). The oneness is broken but individuality starts. Does the “desire for her husband” speak of the struggle for oneness again? Does the text suggest a desire without being consummated, and therefore incomplete as paralleled to the “desire for wisdom,” the knowledge of good and evil projected conjunctively yet achieved disjunctively?<sup>47</sup>

How about the line “he shall rule over you?” Tribble’s interpretation here of the role of the male is

...neither a divine right nor a male prerogative. Her subordination is neither a divine decree nor the female destiny. Both their positions result from shared disobedience. God describes this consequence but does not prescribe it as punishment.<sup>48</sup>

Or even if others would see it as a punishment rather than a consequence, it still carries within it a blessing.<sup>49</sup> Westermann said that

---

44. Niditch, *Chaos to Cosmos*, 37.

45. Sarna, *Genesis*, 28; Fretheim, “The Book of Genesis,” 363.

46. Hamilton, *The Book of Genesis*, 200.

47. See Walter Vogels, “Like one of us, knowing good and evil: Knowing Tob and Ra (Gen 3:22),” (*Semeia* 81, 1998): 145-157.

48. Tribble, “A Love Story Gone Awry,” 128; Hamilton, *The Book of Genesis*, 20. See also the extensive work of Meyers on this verse based on archaeology and anthropology in Meyers, *Discovering Eve*, 95-121.

49. For Sarna, it presupposes Gen 1:28. See Sarna, *Genesis*, 27; also Westermann, *Genesis 1-11*, 263.

[i]t does not in any way alter the fact that the woman achieves the fulfillment of her being and her honored place in the community by belonging to her husband and being a mother. The pains of pregnancy and birth in no way diminish the dignity of womanhood and motherhood, as 3:20 expressly confirms.<sup>50</sup>

- A'** 17a *And to the man he said, "Because you have listened to your wife, and you have eaten of the tree about which I commanded you, 'You shall not eat of it,' cursed is the ground because of you;*  
17b *in toil you shall eat of it all the days of your life;*  
18 *thorns and thistles it shall bring forth for you; and you shall eat the plants of the field.*  
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."*

Verse 3:17a forms an inclusio of active *because you* and a passive *because of you*. The first one refers to his offense; the second to its consequence. The former seems to be an accusation of disobedience because he did not listen to the voice of prohibition of the Deity (2:17; 3:17[!]). Instead, he listened to the woman (a charge of idolatry?), and did not even discern what she did. The woman is the subject of five verbs in 3:6. The man just ate! Could it be said that three faults are accorded to the man: disobedience to the Deity, idolatry<sup>51</sup> and the lack or absence of risk or passivity in seeking wisdom?<sup>52</sup> The ground, therefore, is indirectly cursed *because of him*. Not that the ground from which everything came<sup>53</sup> would not be

---

50. Westermann, *Genesis 1-11*, 262.

51. Tribble, "A Love Story Gone Awry," 129.

52. Niditch, "Genesis," 17.

53. The man, Gen 2:7; every tree that is pleasant to the sight and good for food, the tree of life also in the midst of the garden and the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, 2:9; and the animals, cattle and birds, Gen 2:20.

fertile but that the man would only reap of it *in toil* and *by the sweat of his face* (17b, 19) unlike before (2:15-16). This seems to be commensurate to the pains of childbearing of the woman (3:16) and tells of the etiology why the land *bears thistles and thorns* (3:18, experiences of famine, the geographical location of Israel?)<sup>54</sup> Likewise, it talks about the nature of the food that they eat (plants, bread [3:18-19]). It also describes agriculture/farming as man's earliest occupation.<sup>55</sup>

The last pronouncement of the Deity talks for the first time not of death as cessation of life but of “return to the ground, for out of it you were taken, you are dust and to dust you will return” (3:19). Etiologically, this assumes death rather than makes it a part of the sentence or consequence<sup>56</sup>. Tribble noted that the union with the *adamah* (ground) means life in the beginning, but now it has become associated with death.<sup>57</sup> But then, this last verse also seems to talk of the cycle of life, the seasons that they have in Palestine, and the oneness among all of God's creation. With these considerations, this paper is inclined to welcome the *harmony* that it presents, i.e., all of God's creation's oneness with the ground, which even if in toil, will yield in fertility of the plants and bread that people need for sustenance. Even after the expulsion from the garden which is in the epilogue of our text (3:22-24), God's commission for the man to work is retained. The vocation destined for the man in Gen 2:15<sup>58</sup> was received as and remains as a gift. The ground is burdened with the curse because of the man (3:17b) but it will still give people bread.<sup>59</sup> The return to the earth at the end of a life of hard work can be good – at death, he was “old and full of days.”<sup>60</sup>

---

54. Carol Meyers, “Everyday Life: Women in the Hebrew Bible,” in *Women's Bible Commentary*, 251-259. See also Meyers, *Discovering Eve*, 93.

55. Sarna, *Genesis*, 28.

56. Fretheim, “The Book of Genesis,” 364.

57. Tribble, “A Love Story Gone Awry,” 132.

58. Brueggemann, *Genesis*, 46; Fretheim, “The Book of Genesis,” 364.

59. Westermann, *Genesis 1-11*, 265.

60. *Ibid.*

### **Conclusion<sup>61</sup>**

- 20 The man named his wife Eve, because she is the mother of all the living.
- 21 And the LORD God made garments of skins for the man and for his wife, and clothed them.

Following all of the things said above about life and fertility, it is noticeable that the woman is named mother (fertility) of all living (life). But why the double naming?<sup>62</sup> She was named *woman* by the man in 2:23, completing the second creation account in Gen 2 by naming all that God has created (2:20). From having a generic name in 2:23, she now has a particular name that expresses her nature and destiny, positively and sympathetically. “Her having the child bearing capacity marks her with human and divine qualities, the sacred and the profane both being implicit in her procreation and incubative roles.”<sup>63</sup> Yet from being a mother goddess she is not demythologized and naturalized,<sup>64</sup> and given as a gift. The naming is in tension between being pejorative (mastery of those that one can name)<sup>65</sup> or favorable (completion of creation’s transformation and a cry of joy).<sup>66</sup> But at any rate, along with the serpent, her physiological function also

---

61. Scholars have varied comments on this as an insertion but this paper takes it as part of the narrative. For discussion on this topic, see Westermann, *Genesis 1-11*, 267ff.

62. The naming of Eve is in itself a broad topic. Detailed discussion maybe gleaned from George Ramsey, “Is Name-Giving an Act of Domination in Genesis 2:23 and Elsewhere?” *Catholic Biblical Quarterly* 50 (1988): 24-35; and Scott Layton, “Remarks on the Canaanite Origin of Eve,” *Catholic Biblical Quarterly* 59 (1997): 22-32.

63. Niditch, *Chaos to Cosmos*, 36.

64. Sarna, *Genesis*, 29.

65. Brueggemann, *Genesis*, 51; Tribble, “A Love Story Gone Awry,” 133-134.

66. Von Rad, *Genesis*, 95-96. For Hamilton, the naming is Adam’s act of faith that people will emerge from them, that they shall not be the last being of the human race. Motherhood is a gift. See Hamilton, *The Book of Genesis Chapters 1-17*, 206ff. According to Sarna, it is an affirmation of life, implied in 3:15 and made more central in 3:16; see Sarna, *Genesis*, 29. See also C. Westermann, *Genesis: An Introduction*, trans. John Scullion (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1992).

symbolizes how she facilitates as a character in the passage of initial life (garden) to reality (East of Eden).<sup>67</sup> The woman remains to be the especially appropriate link between life in God's garden<sup>68</sup> and life in the thornier world to which all of us are consigned.<sup>69</sup>

In 3:21, the presentation of the Deity as the Divine Tailor/Dressmaker completes the scene. The LORD God covers their "shameful nakedness"<sup>70</sup> and speaks of the Deity's compassion towards the couple. It seems to be the best that the LORD God could give them, an explicit bestowal of blessing after the consequences of their actions were pronounced. The very "earthly" story talks about the man and the woman becoming like God who knows good and evil, and God who is so human in responding mercifully and compassionately to disobedience.<sup>71</sup> As the LORD God implicitly pronounced the harmony that humans have with the ground, and all of creation in the beginning, so too, "harmony and reconciliation" are achieved as the story ended. The LORD God's crafting of skin garments for the couple "confirms a continuing personal bond with each, while the gift of clothes from common donor binds the couple to each other."<sup>72</sup>

These two verses on the man, the woman and the LORD God as signs of reconciliation and restoration of relationship are both necessary for survival in the "East of Eden."<sup>73</sup> God has shown to the couple his continued solicitude despite everything that happened.<sup>74</sup>

---

67. Niditch, *Chaos to Cosmos*, 37.

68. Or is it *our* garden? See *Book of J*, 177.

69. Niditch, "Genesis", 18.

70. Contrast Gen 2:25 from Gen 3:7-10.

71. With regard to Gen 3:22-24, Vogels says that just like the legend of Ea and Adapa in the Gilgamesh epic, the LORD God had to drive the couple out of the garden so that they may not reach out for the tree of life. In such a case, they would possess the two divine qualities that ancient peoples attribute to the deities, i.e., knowledge of good and evil and immortality (life). See Vogels, *On Genesis: A New Reading*, 87-88. If this happens, the *humans* would truly die, for by then, they would be *divine*.

72. John J. Pilch, "Clothes," in *The Cultural Dictionary of the Bible* (Collegeville: The Liturgical Press, 1999), 14.

73. Sarna, *Genesis*, 29.

74. Vawter, *On Genesis*, 87.

Conroy calls this tender gesture as “God’s abiding presence and non-abandonment.”<sup>75</sup> A deeper appreciation of this non-abandonment is the comment of Levine that when Adam and Eve left the Garden of Eden, God went with them. Proof of this is the scarcity of scriptural material on the Garden of Eden after Genesis, and the fact that in the succeeding chapters and books of the Old Testament, God was still *talking with the people*.<sup>76</sup>

As a whole, Brueggemann has captured the essence of the story when he says that

[t]he sentence (3:8-19) and the final action (3:20-24) still hold surprise. Guilt is not in question. The situation is clear. Since Chapter 2 (v. 17) everyone has known that death follows guilt that violates boundary. Perhaps the sentence of 3:8-19 is heavy. But it is less than promised, less than legitimate. The miracle is not that they are punished, but that they live. Graciousness in this narrative is not just in verse 21, after the sentence, God’s grace is given in the very sentence itself. Perhaps by one man comes death (Rom 5:12). But the news is that life comes by this one God (cf. Jn 6:68-69). The sentence is life apart from the goodness of the garden, life in conflict filled with pain, with sweat and most interestingly, with the distortion of desire (3:16). But it is nonetheless life when death is clearly indicated. This is not a simple story of human disobedience and divine displeasure. It is rather a story about the struggle God has in responding to the facts of human life. When the facts warrant death, God insists on life for his creatures.<sup>77</sup>

---

75. Instead of viewing Genesis 1-11 as a series of sin and punishment, Conroy reads this portion as a series of stories of God’s abiding presence and non-abandonment. They are as follows: the clothing of the first couple before they were banished East of the Garden (Gen 3); the mark that the LORD God has put on Cain so that nobody is allowed to kill him (Gen 4); the presence of the Ark and the rainbow as God’s insistence on life after the deluge (Gen 11); and the sending of Abraham to be a blessing to other people (Gen 12:1-3) scattered from Babel (Gen 11). See Charles Conroy, *Journeys and Servants*, CBAP Lecture Series 2003 (Manila: Catholic Biblical Association of the Philippines, 2003), 1-22.

76. Quoted from Amy-Jill Levine in the open forum of her presentation on “Jesus and Judaism: Why the Connection Still Matters” during the Catholic Biblical Association of the Philippines’ (CBAP) 5th Annual Convention, Tagaytay City, July 24, 2004.

77. Brueggemann, *Genesis*, 49-50.

## Summary and Implications

This paper tries to see through the narrative in which the serpent has played a good role in the unfolding of the story. As a literary device, it thickens the plot and accompanies it towards its resolution. As a literary hinge, it goes “smoothly”<sup>78</sup> (*arum*) from the myths of creation to wisdom to etiology in the Hebrew folklore. As a character, Niditch said that as the serpent partakes of our “sacred-human dichotomy,” it is thus a “betwixt and between creature, one appropriate for linking paradise and reality.”<sup>79</sup>

The closer reading done on the curse/consequences to the serpent, the woman and the man yield a “bite size” amount of blessing compared to the traditional “fall” and *arur* story. As a result, the narrative continues to challenge us today in three ways. First, it leads to the task of re-imagining women and a greater attention to them. Second, it directs to the re-imagining of the whole creation, that the “blessing” of the “essential goodness of the world has not been altered” in a “reality that is dynamic.”<sup>80</sup> Third, it impels a re-imagining of the LORD God, i.e., the reality of a merciful, forgiving, loving God who insists on life and does not abandon his creatures, a deviation from a divine being who is vindictive, cruel and one awaits our every “fall” to say, “Gotcha!”<sup>81</sup> or “*Hala...*!”<sup>82</sup> These attempts

---

78. *Book of J*, 180-181.

79. Niditch, *Chaos to Cosmos*, 36.

80. *Ibid*, 37.

81. Richard Gula, *The Good Life: Where Morality and Spirituality Converge* (New York/Mahwah: Paulist Press, 1999), 41.

82. “The Filipino child is introduced to a moral and spiritual world when he [sic] is told ‘*hala!*’ This is a word of warning about the dire consequences he [sic] will encounter for having alienated the spirits, believed to be sources of well-being. We know *hala* is derived from the word Allah; this leads us to believe that when this word is spoken, it has supernatural sanction. In quite the same fashion, the Bible advises that in order to attain well-being or wholeness, one must first fear the Lord for this is the beginning of wisdom (Prov 1,7). (...) The primal warning *hala*, emanating as it were from the unseen world of the spirits has its counterparts in other religions and cultures. We may say that people’s religiosity has been shaped by their response to the *hala* experience.” See Jaime Belita, “Introduction: And God Said, *Hala!*,” in *And God said...HALA! : Studies in Popular Religiosity in the Philippines* (Manila: DLSU Press, 1999), v.

may initially push us to the “east of the garden” but then,

“A woman in childbirth suffers because her time has come, but when she holds the child in her arms, her joy returns again...

Although you go forth weeping, carrying the sheaves to be sown, You shall come back rejoicing, carrying the sheaves full grown.”<sup>83</sup>

---

83. Carey Landry, “Dance in the Darkness,” in *Glory and Praise: Songs for Christian Assembly*, vol. 2 (Arizona: North American Liturgy Resources, 1980), 17-18. See also Gen 4:1; Jn 16:21; Ps 126:6.

**Ma. Maricel S. Ibita**  
St. Vincent School of theology  
221 Tandang Sora Avenue  
P.O. Box 1179  
1151 Quezon City, Philippines  
gimelas@yahoo.com