Ellen A. Robbins

_The Storyteller and the Garden of Eden_


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Ellen A. Robbins lectures Hebrew Bible in the Department of Near Eastern Studies at John Hopkins University in Baltimore. The book at hand is, in essence, a close reading of Gen 2–3. The book comprises 180 pages and includes eight chapters: (1) “Zeno in the Garden of Eden” (1–14); (2) “Introduction to the Text” (15–22); (3) “What’s in a Name?” (23–45); (4) “Crime and Punishment in Eden” (55–80); (5) “Mortal or Immortal?” (81–104); (6) “The Snake” (105–19); (7) “On the Characters and Their Motivation” (120–43); (8) “The Storyteller and His Story” (144–55). A translation with notes (157–62), bibliography (163–72), index of subjects (173–75), index of Hebrew words and phrases (176) and index of authors (177–80) follow. The book is a clear testimony to the author’s ability to carefully analyze a very controversial and much-discussed text and to provide fresh and creative insights in its interpretation. She rightly points out that modern readers are programmed by centuries of tradition to interpret the text in a specific way (as the fall” of humanity) with a specific antagonist (“Satan” disguised as a “serpent”) to such an extent that any suggestion to look at the text from the “dominant interpretation” results “in profound dissonance” (109). Robbins’s reading indeed challenges traditional interpretations and readers of the book’s conscious and unconscious presuppositions.
In the first chapter Robbins challenges the interpretation of Gen 2–3 as it “exists in the popular imagination” (1). According to this interpretation it is “the story of Adam and Eve, the hapless couple who ate an apple from a tree forbidden by God, Eve having been tricked by a snake (who may have been Satan in disguise), and then, because of their disobedience, were expelled from their earthly paradise where we’d still be if it weren’t for all the foregoing” (1). Robbins points to a number of inconsistencies in this widely accepted interpretation, inter alia, that in the account as it appears in Gen 2–3 the couple is not named at all; they are simply “the human being” and “the woman.” Further, the account (and references to the creation of human beings elsewhere in the Hebrew Bible) does not seem to suggest that the story is about the “sin” of disobedience that should be regarded as the “original sin” affecting humanity to this day. Robbins argues that the narrative taken at face value should rather be read as “a meditation on what it means to be human, on our uniqueness among creatures, our peculiar qualities and the drawbacks to our existence, composing a story that purports to explain how this all come about” (145).

Robbins points out that Gen 2–3 currently appears in a specific context (the so-called primeval history in Gen 1–11) with a specific theological “plan” that influences the way the text is now read. It appears between the account of the cosmic creation narrative (Gen 1) and the story of Cain and Abel (Gen 4), but it does not fit the context extremely well. Now Gen 2–3 seems to explain how a perfectly created world “turned into the vale of tears we know today” (2) and how this world “is continuing to go downhill” (2), because it is followed by the story of the “first” murder. Robbins argues that the garden of Eden story is only rarely referred to in the rest of the Hebrew Bible and argues that it originated as “an oral composition that was meant to enlighten and entertain its audience” (7). She proposes to “take the story out of the matrix into which it was later integrated and consider it as a stand-alone work” (7). Read in this way, “it sheds the implication of catastrophic change from a perfect creation of godlike humans by a sure-handed creator” (7), and it becomes possible “to read the story on its own terms, before its integration into the book of Genesis and the slant this puts on it” (7–8). According to my mind, this “isolation” of the story of the garden of Eden by Robbins is at the same time a positive and negative aspect of the study. On the positive side, it allows Robbins to conduct a fairly detailed and insightful close reading of the narrative. On the other hand, she is quite critical of the redactor(s) who embedded the narrative in its current context. She rarely engages the possibility that the redactor(s) might have incorporated the garden of Eden story to skilfully reinterpret earlier traditions. Consequently, her treatment of the narrative remains for me an “add-on.” I cannot help but wonder what the results would have been if Robbins applied the same meticulous close reading to the context of the narrative.
According to Robbins, her close reading indicates that the garden of Eden narrative is not “a sad story in which humankind has fallen from a previously paradisiacal state” (9–10), as is also implied by popular reinterpretations of the story (e.g., Milton’s Paradise Lost). It is also not a perpetual condemnation of women for bringing “sin” into the world or a condemnation of Satan in the guise of a malicious snake for leading humanity astray. In spite of the fact that Zeno’s paradox can be applied to biblical interpretation (i.e., the ultimate goal of complete understanding can never be achieved), a close reading will help us along the way by giving us indications of “how the text itself asks to be read” (14). The aim of her work is to show that clues in the work itself “converge to reveal a story that is not intended to explain the fall of man, but rather our rise to full humanness, to our status “little lower than a god” (14).

In her close reading of Gen 2–3 Robbins chooses to follow a thematic approach. She does not interpret the text as a continuous whole, but after a brief general introduction to the text (see ch. 2) she elaborates upon the significance of the human beings’ (lack of) names, the question of the exact nature of their crime and the resulting punishments pronounced by YHWH Elohim, the question whether the human beings were created immortal and “lost” immortality due to their “sin,” the significance of the figure of the “snake” in the narrative, and a discussion of the characterization of each of the four main characters: YHWH Elohim, the human being, the woman, and the snake. This approach has its pros and cons. On the one hand, the thematic approach addresses each of the author’s identified “misconceptions” in the traditional interpretation of the narrative in a decisive and convincing manner. On the other hand, the methodology of necessity leads to much repetition of the same issue, and the reader never gets any overview of the structure and basic building blocks of the narrative as such.

The introduction to the text is not an introduction to the text as such but rather an elaboration upon the narrator’s style. Robbins indicates that “the narrative was built upon a series of puns that its original audience would have gotten immediately” (15). The divine character is referred to as YHWH Elohim throughout—according to Robbins an indication of this character’s divine status, that is, “Yahweh, a god” (17). Human characters are not named at all; rather, they are called “the human being” or “the man” for the male character and “the woman” for the female character (see 17–18). It is problematic that translation tradition tends to “depersonalize the character of God in the story” (18) by translating YHWH with “the Lord,” and at the same time “personalizes” references to the human beings by “turning generic characters into individuals” (19). The main human characters in the garden of Eden are simply that: “generic members of their species” (19), as often is the case in the genre commonly classified as a fable. According to Robbins, it is important to recognize the style of the narrator, because this awareness will enable readers to spot later additions to the text. While his style is accessible, the identity
of the narrator remains a mystery. Robbins prefers to refer to him simply as “the Storyteller” (20). While Robbins makes some profound observations in this chapter on the text, I regard the absence of remarks about the text as a shortcoming. In this regard, the translation and translation notes provided in an appendix (157–62) are helpful but still do not address questions of the text’s structure and building blocks.

In her close reading of the narrative with emphasis upon the style of her “Storyteller,” Robbins departs from the presupposition that the narrative is an “origin story” (55) with an etiological intention: it seeks to explain “the existence of particular details of our reality” (55). It is easy to recognize “that the story of the Garden of Eden is etiological, containing explanations for, among other things, the existence of weeds and labor pains and the peculiar locomotion of snakes” (55–56). The punishments received by the snake, the human being, and the woman in Gen 3:14–19 are particularly good examples of etiologies. However, two texts disrupt, according to Robbins, the flow of the garden of Eden narrative and the style of the “Storyteller” and should be regarded as later additions (albeit inserted before the text of the primeval history reached its final form). The first is Gen 2:24, an “etiology for marriage” (71) that stands “outside the situational logic of the story” (72) and does not “flow from within the narrative” (73) but has an “explanatory function” (73), as is clearly indicated by it being introduced by the expression ‘al-kēn “that is why” (73). The second is Gen 3:20, an addition that “contradicts the gist of the woman’s punishment that highlights her subordinate status and the trials of maternity” (127). Here the narrator, “unlike the narrator in the remainder of Genesis 2–3, is speaking in retrospect, after procreation had already occurred” (128); thus “the narrator looks back on the events of the story as relating to a later time” (128). The addition continues in 3:21, which “describes God (in the third person) clothing the humans” (128). As was the case with the placement of Gen 2–3 in the context of the primeval history, Robbins is highly critical of the disruptive character of these additions; consequently, they also remain “add-ons” in the flow of the narrative.

After these elaborations on Robbins’s presuppositions and point of departure, I will be brief regarding the content of the various chapters. In chapter 3 Robbins emphasizes the important role that language plays in the interpretation of the garden of Eden narrative. She points to the importance of wordplay, such as hā-ādām “the human being” and hā-ādāmā “the soil”; hā-ʾiš “the man” and hā-ʾiššā “the woman”; ʿārūmmām “naked,” ʿārūm “judicious,” and ʿērōm “naked”; ʿārūm “judicious” and ʿārūr “cursed”; ʾēṣ “tree,” ʾeṣeb “pain” and ʾiṣṣābōn “toil.” Robbins argues that the hā-ʾādām—hā-ʾādāmā wordplay is crucial to the interpretation of the narrative, as it indicates the material link between the “soil” and the “human being.” It is also ironic: an inescapable link exists between human being and soil. It is a “harsh reminder of the human’s mortality put in terms of his origin” (29; see Gen 3:19). Mortality is also the focus of the adaptation of the idiomatic expression
that human beings were formed from clay. In Gen 2:7 “clay” becomes “dust from the soil” (see also 3:19). “Despite our unique status among creatures, dust is and has always been our origin and ultimate fate” (39).

This point is strongly argued in chapter 5, “Mortal or Immortal.” The garden of Eden story is not about humanity’s “loss” of immortality. Human beings, created from “dust,” were frail, mortal beings right from the start. The “tree of life” (as the šību ʾıṣṣāḥir LŪ “an old man is grown young” plant in the Epic of Gilgamesh) is “a source of rejuvenation rather than immortality” (102). Humanity’s “sin” is not (and would not have been) eating from this tree from time to time but rather, as Robbins argues in chapter 4, “Crime and Punishment in Eden,” eating from the tree of knowledge. That single act “elevated” humankind to the divine level as beings with “a fully functioning adult intelligence” (79). It distinguished them from the animals, also created from the soil. But being wise “can lead to a sense of autonomy, away from reliance on God” (79). According to the garden of Eden story, “human intellectual capacity is not something that God wants us to have,” hence the prohibition against eating the fruit of that single tree and hence the depiction of the woman’s act as “a violation of a divine commandment” (79) because this capability makes us “like gods.” By “disobedience” humanity elevated itself to one level of divinity (knowledge). By expelling them from Eden God prevents humanity from attaining the second divine-like attribute (immortality), because “once outside the Garden of Eden the means of prolonging life is no longer available to us” (103).

According to Robbins, the divine punishments of the snake, the human being, and the woman indicate that the issue at stake in the garden of Eden narrative is the fluidity of the boundary between the spheres of the creator and the created that resulted from the actions of these three characters. All three receive “humiliating” punishments. The snake goes from “judicious” to “cursed,” and its new form of locomotion (going on its belly) is a particularly humiliating experience. In chapter 6 (see also ch. 7) Robbins argues extensively that the snake is not Satan in disguise but simply a character in the story. Snakes are not necessarily negative symbols in the Hebrew Bible (see Num 21). The snake (probably chosen as character for its purported ability to constantly rejuvenate itself) is “judicious,” and that quality leads to human beings’ elevation to the divine sphere. That quality is reversed in its “new” existence as a “cursed” animal going about on its belly, eating dust, and living in a constant state of enmity with humanity. The human being goes from a fairly carefree existence to an existence of hardship and toil, and the woman receives a particularly harsh punishment: multiple pregnancies accompanied by severe pain and a lower social status—she is subjected to the male human being’s “rule.”

In chapter 8 Robbins argues that the anonymous “Storyteller” was someone with great sympathy for the “human condition” who masterfully created an often “lighthearted”
story contemplating the origin of our harsh existence. He “depicts us as earthbound creatures materially identical to other animals, created by God for a particular purpose, to work the soil from which we were first formed” (146). We, however, from the beginning “strove to improve our lot” and through the initiative of the woman “we attained a measure of godlikeness ... a cognitive faculty that the Storyteller identifies by the idiomatic expression ‘knowing good and bad’” (146). To this God responded in a twofold way. “By means of punishments, He turned our lives into a struggle for survival, undermined our ability to perform the tasks for which we were created, and disrupted our relationship to the materials of our origin” (146). Further, God “eliminates the possibility we once possessed of overcoming mortality (albeit temporarily) by eating from the Tree of Life” (146). The Storyteller emphasizes the paradox of our existence. Our “godlike” qualities become a punitive measure against us. He is especially sympathetic to women’s harsh existence. The dominant patriarchal social order of his time and women’s suffering at childbirth is seen as a punitive measure for the woman’s “greater” role in the elevation of human beings to “godlike” status. Robbins indicates that it is “a sad fact that the story he composed has functioned as the justification par excellence for patriarchal institutions” (147). She concludes that “the purpose of the story is to allow us to weigh in the balance our mortality, the fragility of our lives, over against our exceptional status in the world, made manifest in our ability to take pleasure in this tale of how we came to be as we are” (152).

I do not regard Robbins’s analysis as “the” definitive voice in the interpretation of Gen 2–3. Her analysis lacks integration in the larger picture of the primeval history, and her identification of later additions in turn lacks integration in the context of the narrative. More detailed attention to aspects of narrative analysis (e.g., space, time, plot) would have enhanced her reading of the garden of Eden story. However, she emphasizes the very important aspect of the use of language in the narrative and makes an important contribution in reading the story as an etiology answering the question of the “how” rather than the “why” of the “human condition.” Her reading indeed challenges the “traditional” interpretation of the narrative and forces readers to look at an old narrative through a new lens.