Reading Genesis 3 from a utopian perspective*

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A detailed exegetical analysis allows us to discover important aspects that define the roles of the woman and the man in the myth of the transgression (not "fall"!) in Genesis 3:1-19 (2:5-3:24). Social practices, transformed into traditions, have made us see certain incorrect interpretations of the text as "natural". It is hence an important task to deconstruct such interpretations and set the foundations for a new reading of such a paradigmatic text as this one, whose deeper meaning makes us think of the future in hope.

1. Entering the text

Genesis 3 conveys a myth "of origins", not cosmogonic[1] but anthropological. As a myth, it refers to an event that "happened" *in illo tempore*, but what it really does is "interpret" events that were lived *in the horizon of the production of text itself,* in other words, the life of Israel in a particular moment of its history. Going back to the "origin" means to seek the meaning, orientate, explore possibilities, place divinity at risk, and connect with the absolute. Each myth is configured to "say" something about the present, not the past. The "past" of the myth is the meaning of the lived "present".

So, what is happening in the life of Israel when Genesis 3 is being written?

A simple reading, literal or critical, shows there is a "problem". This is not the story of a salvific event as in the case of the exodus; nothing is being celebrated. On the contrary, everything is prohibition, danger of death, intrigue, doubts about the veracity of God, fear, hiding, excuses, blaming others, punishment, pain, suffering, portents of death, expulsion, conjuring. Curiously, the positive elements are: a) those suggested or promised by the serpent (3:4-5), though it will be punished for this (vv. 14-15); and b) the woman's gesture of "giving" the fruit to her husband (v. 6b), though this, too, becomes negative in the excuses he later offers (v. 12b). The "tree of knowledge" is positive as it provides wisdom, but the results, on the level of interpretation, will be adverse. Concerning the other tree, the "tree of life", never was any fruit eaten from it, so it was never effective. The only positive elements in chapter 3 are the information –secondary as they might be in the global narrative– about the name of the woman (v. 20) and Yahweh's offering of clothes for protection (v. 21).

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* This is a slightly revised version of "¿Quién pecó primero? Estudio de Génesis 3 en perspectiva utópica", *RIBLA* 37 (2000), 15-26.

[1] For this distinction, cf. J. Severino Croatto, *Experiencia de lo sagrado y tradiciones religiosas. Estudio de fenomenología de la religión* (Estella: Verbo Divino, 2002) 241-259 (definition of myth on pp. 207-216). Brief summary in, "El mito como interpretación de la realidad. Consideraciones sobre la función del lenguaje de estructura mítica en el Pentateuco", *RIBLA* 23 (1996) 17-22. The insistence of G. Gorgulho in the same issue of *RIBLA* on the "demythification" worked on these stories about origins ("La historia primitiva. Génesis 1-11", 31-42, cf. p. 34) denotes a certain imprecision surrounding what a myth is and a lack of confidence towards its presence in the Bible. A change of perspective from the Mesopotamian myths, and the controversy against other Gods, particularly astral, is found in Genesis 1-11 *precisely in mythical language*; the essential difference is that now the myths are "Hebrew", and express an Israelite vision of the world and history that no longer coincides with the vision of other cultures in that context.

The whole chapter moves around the *negative* isotopy. It is the ideological instance that shapes the issues and motivations. Something negative is presented, with the resort to symbolic and mythical language. Myths do not "criticize" nor evaluate like the prophets, who address actual people who are part of reality. Myths show *the way things are*, resorting to an imaginary event of the origins. But myths can also "criticize" reality by the way they talk. This is the case of Genesis 3.

Let us trace three lines, upon which we will then inscribe the mythical event, the text of the myth and the reality it addresses:

----------Event of the myth ----------

----------T-E-X-T----of ---the----myth----------

----------P-r-e-s-e-n-t-------r-e-a-l-i-t-y----------

The text (middle line) is *what* we all read, our starting point.

The literal reading only connects it to the level above: the narrative would be speaking about what actually happened *in illo tempore.*

The purely critical reading, relates it only to the level below: the myth would be speaking about reality. Both readings, in fact, take place at a distance; they are reading a text from a different era.

On the contrary, the actual recipients of the text read it *in both directions* at the same time. The "event of the myth" was understood as having really happened –otherwise it would be of no value to establish reality or provide "meaning" to what it was interpreting– but they "realized" it was referring to their *own* reality, which they knew how to "read" through the coded language of the symbols and images used in the myth.

Our own reading must begin, in order to continue hermeneutically, from this third way of reading a mythical text, such as the one we are studying.

2. The gender issue

The two human characters in Genesis 3 had been introduced in chapter 2, in two different ways:

In a rather long myth on the origin of human beings (2:5-9 [10-14] 15-17), which spoke about the formation of a generic or collective *'adam* (=human being), both male and female[2].

Then, another short myth (2:18-24[25]) conveyed the episode of the "construction"[3] of the woman by Yahweh Elohîm. In this case, the woman is not extracted from the "male" as such –who does not exist yet- but from *'adam, the human being.* From one of its "sides" (better than "ribs"), that is, through splitting *'adam* down the middle, Yahweh builds a "woman". Only here does a differentiation between the sexes begin. If what is built is the woman, with the new generic name of *'iššâ*, the rest –that is, the other half, or side– will be

[2] Cf. the development of this interpretation in *Crear y amar en libertad. Estudio de Génesis 2: 4-3:24* (Buenos Aires: La Aurora, 1986) 43. More recently "On the semiotic reading of Genesis 1-3: A response from Argentina", *Semeia* 81 (2000) 187-210 (p 193 and *passim).*

[3] This particular term is chosen by the writer of the myth, most likely to connect the woman with three terms related to the home: *banâ* ("to build"), *bayit* ("home"), and *ben* ("son"). The three terms are related.

the man, though he it is still being called *ha'adam*. This term is masculine, and is fitting to designate the male from here on.

Correctly read, the text suggests that woman appears *before man*, both taken from the previous *'adam* (generic). Only by means of the "difference" are they constituted as persons. In the extended myth (2:5-17) it is assumed there are *women and men* that were created by Yahweh. "They", male and female, are in *'adam*, as will be so well expressed by the serpent, and interpreted by the woman in their dialogue in 3:1b-3 (compare the "*you* shall not eat of verse 3a and "*thou* shall not eat" of 2:17a).

It is not the case of a "virtual" presence of the woman in 2:17 (as she will be taken from the man who is there), but of a person who hears the commandment and the prohibition together with the man. This correlation between 2:16-17 and 3:1-3 is more easily understood if the myth of 2:18-25 is placed between brackets for a moment. Then, effectively, one can go from 2:17 to 3:1. The gender plural, implicit in the myth of the formation of the human being (2:5-17) is explained in 3:1, because what is important in the transgression myth[4] of chapter 3 is the intervention of the two thematic roles differentiated by gender.

3. How the different "actants" interact

Chapter 3 works with two human characters, who were already introduced in the previous chapter. However, the text begins to mention the serpent, which will also "act" in the narrative. The initial phrase describes it as the most astute of all the animals that "Yahweh God had made" (v.1a), reminding the reader of the present text about what had been written in another one (1:25a "and God *made*...")[5]. The accuracy of the description cannot be denied. The serpent is, in fact, an astute and skillful animal.

Yet, in the following line (1b), when we hear "the" serpent speak, we realize we are on another level, the symbolic. But the symbol is the trans-signification (second meaning) of something that belongs to the realm of experience, which is revealed to us in one form or another (first meaning, non-symbolic), and so it leads us *analogically* to a semantic correlation that is only visible in transparency *through* the first meaning[6].

In other words: what is said in verse 1a about the real serpent is the basis for understanding the serpent-symbol in verses 1b-5.

In addition, verse 1b closes the polysemy of the symbol of the serpent[7]. If we consider the deadly character of the serpent, we start off on the wrong foot, and we miss the path traced by the text. Verse 1b has indicated only one characteristic of the serpent, which is also over-

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[4] We say "transgression" and not "fall", as is so commonly used, including among exegetes (cf. G.Gorgulho, 35: "original fall"). The representation of a "fall" presupposes a superior state from where someone falls, and in the case of Genesis 3, the issue is the Christian notion of Adam an Eve as originally endowed with certain *preter*natural gifts (neither *super*natural as grace, nor natural as intelligence or will) such as justice, immortality, infused knowledge and integrity. This later speculation, all things considered, distorts the meaning of the biblical text, weakening the force of the desire to "be like God" with which this myth is constructed: it is a fully human creature, not a semi-divine being, the one who steps beyond the limits, wanting to be like God.

[5] Not so in the Yahwist version itself, in 2:19 ("and God *shaped* ...")*.*

[6] For a further development of this description of the symbol, cf. *Experiencia de lo sagrado*, 81-89

[7] *Ib,* 164

determined ("the *most* astute of all the animals…"). From here on, we will operate according to this linguistic sign, instead of maintaining a polysemy already canceled by the text itself[8].

It is of great interest, then, to know what this astute and wise serpent has to say.

Its intent to contradict Elohîm (v. 1b) is broken by the correction from the woman (v. 2), who centers the prohibition only on the tree "that is in the middle of the orchard". From all other trees "we may eat"[9]. As soon as the woman mentions the death penalty included in the prohibition (end of v. 3)[10] she is interrupted by the serpent who denies that threat (v. 4, emphatic). At this point, the serpent adds the lapidary phrase (v. 5) that portrays Elohîm as a God who is jealous of its divine *status*. The serpent "knows" what Elohîm "knows" and transmits it to the woman. In the words of the serpent there is a clear *promise*: far from causing death, eating from "the tree of knowledge" will bestow a divine quality, such as knowing "what is good and bad". It is best to translate the Hebrew formula *tôb wara'* this way, rather than "of good and evil". The text does not refer to the capacity of discerning "between" good and evil (an ethical interpretation)[11] but rather to the capacity to know what is good and bad for this or that person, in specific circumstances (see below). This knowledge belongs only to God, not to human beings. That explains the phrase "you will be like God, (consequently) knowing what is good and bad". After this, the serpent provisionally leaves the scene, until it is confronted by Yahweh Elohîm for its sentence (v. 14). The woman remains, apparently alone, in front of the forbidden tree with the words of the serpent (v. 5).

Before commenting on verse 5, which is very important, it is a good idea to pause and ask why the serpent speaks to the woman and not to the man. Traditional readings have delighted in deducing that the serpent, cunning as it is, addresses the woman because she is *weak,* easier to tempt, and more compliant than man.

The text can be read from another perspective, more in keeping with the flow of the narrative. It is permissible to speculate, at least. Perhaps the text wants to associate both figures, as two complementary aspects of the mystery of life, the feminine principle (woman) and the masculine (the serpent)[12]. Woman is the giver of life, the serpent lives on the fertile land. Also perhaps, tradition has chosen the woman as a suitable interlocutor, due to the fact

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[8] What this text specifically excludes is the sense of the serpent as a symbol of death. It is not the case *in this myth* (in others it may be different).

[9] Which does not mean that *de facto* they ate; the myth is not interested in this. In 3:22b we are told that at least they never touched the "tree of life" (see v. 23). This is not always noticed; cf. my article, "On the Semiotic Reading of Genesis 1-3: A response from Argentina", *Semeia* 81 (2000) 187-210 (p. 203, responding to an article by Walter Vogels in the same issue, 151-152).

[10] The addition of "nor touch it" (which was not present in the prohibition of 2:17) is usually the cause for accusing the woman of distorting the word of Yahweh. It seems that the expression does not mean "do not even get near", because that would attribute a dangerous quality to the tree (="do not touch it, lest you will die"), rather it is a simple variation of "do not eat", because it is evident that in order to take the fruit from the tree one has to get close to it and touch it. As a matter of fact, in what follows that phrase of the woman is not taken into account.

[11] The Gods are not defined as such because of this, but rather by "doing/undoing" good or evil. On the "ethical" interpretation of "knowledge of good and evil", cf. Walter Vogel, "Like One of Us. Knowing *tôb* and *ra'* ", *Semeia* 81 (2000) 147-150.

[12] In Hebrew the word *nahaš* ("serpent") is masculine.

that the issue is one of "eating"[13]. At home[14], the one who discerns what is good for eating *is the woman.* That is why in this myth, far from being diminished, the woman plays the leading role. At the end of verse 5 (which closes the dialogue), the reader knows only in an indirect way (due to the verbs in the plural in the dialogue of vs.1b-5) that the male is also present, but the reader does not know whether the male is listening or intervening. He is rather ignored. If the serpent represents higher knowledge[15], the text *exalts* the woman by giving her the leading role[16].

This role of the woman is reinforced in verse 6a, the axis around which the sense of the initial episode circulates (vv. 1-7). The "seeing" of the woman –"to see" is the verb at the beginning of v. 6–, connotes the discovery of something valuable, and an intellectual exercise that analyzes the opportunity of something. The woman does not "eat" at once. First she "sees". The content of her "seeing/fathoming" is expressed in three parallel syntagms, very well constructed indeed: she "sees":

1. "That (the tree) is *good*	for food"
2. "That it is appetizing	to the eyes"
3. "That it is *desirable*	for acquiring intelligence"[17]

The three qualities of the tree (left hand column) are practically interchangeable; they refer to the attractive, pleasing, and desirable. In the right hand column, the "what for" of those qualities is indicated. A prosaic reading would say that what is mentioned here are the different functions of the tree, the nutritious (syntagm 1), the aesthetical (2) and finally the cognitive (3). In fact, it is all about the fruit of a *tree* that is for "*eating/*not eating". It is so good, that even to the eyes it becomes appetizing[18]. But this is precisely the level of *manifestation* of what the tree is and which generates its symbolic trans-signification.

Now, the third syntagm makes explicit this symbolic value, by reminding us that it is the "tree of *knowledge* of what is good and the bad". Eating from certain trees (fruit, leaves, stems, or roots) can contribute to intelligence (the basis of our symbol), but the specification

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[13] It is the most important lexeme of Genesis 2-3 (23x), always in relation to plants, from 2:9, later in 2:16-17 (4x), in our text 3:1-7 (7x), in the demand (4x in vv. 11-13), in the punishment of the serpent (v. 14b), in an iterative way in the sentence to the man (5x in vv. 17-19a), and finally in the myth of expulsion from the orchard v. 22b).

[14] The text actually places us in the context of the *bait* (home), in spite of the fact that we are in the *gan* (orchard). It is "supposed", for the reader of the text, that there is a home. The setting is not the countryside.

[15] This is the principal symbolic value of the serpent, cf. *Crear y amar en libertad*, ch. 4. ("La mujer escucha a la maestra de sabiduría), and later, pp 126-131 ("El símbolo de la serpiente").

[16] The interpretation of the serpent as representing death or evil has blurred the role of the woman in this scene.

[17] Each syntagm is formed by three metrical accents, which explains the three references to the tree, when it would have been enough to mention it only the first time. On the other hand, the triple insistence concentrates the reader precisely *on the tree*, whose qualities are described.

[18] The noun "appetite" or the adjective "appetizing" refers to the eating, not to the aesthetics (cf. in Numbers 11:4, the same lexeme referring to the manna). For some reason this same word was chosen.

"of what is good and bad" indicates that the text refers to a different level, symbolic, of course.

The three syntagms, therefore, are reduced to a single idea: the acquisition of knowledge.

Choosing what is good and tasty to eat –an everyday event in the concrete life of a home– is the symbolic means to indicate that *wisdom* is "valued" in the first place by the woman. *She* is placed in the act of discerning. Secondly, wisdom is "acquired" first by the woman (v. 6a "she took from its fruit and ate", three words in Hebrew). Only then, after all this, and again due to her initiative, "she *gave* it to her husband who was with her, and (he) ate". If one pays attention, the woman continues to play the leading role. *She* had taken the fruit, and now *she* gives it to her husband. *Only then*, not beforehand, does the male constitute a subject, though of only one action, "eating".

It has been deduced from all this that "the woman sinned first"; even worse, that she *tempted* the male. The author of 1 Timothy deduces that "Adam was not deceived; but the woman was over-deceived[19], in whom transgression has come to be" (2:14). The text seems to imply that *only the woman* became a transgressor[20]. However, Genesis 3:7 attributes eating (=transgression) to both the woman and the man. However, it should be taken into account, that it is *the woman*, not the man, who seeks wisdom, who ponders the means to acquire it, who reaches it first, who shares it with her partner.

It is convenient at this point to distinguish between two things. The main intention of the myth is to indicate that this acquisition of wisdom was a mistake due to the way in which it occurred (see below about the *referent* of the text). Yet on the other hand, the narrative describes *functions* of the characters, and in this case, the woman plays a much more relevant role than man.

Behind all this, one can assume there is a social location where the woman particularly excels. At home she is "intelligent", she knows how to choose what is "good for eating". And these qualities, which relate to everyday life, transmit another sort of quality to the woman, on a far more subtle and higher level, where the values of knowledge and wisdom become manifest. One should consider, perhaps, all the references to prognostication, to prediction. She "saw that the tree was good…for intelligence". Among social practices, those related to intuition are more frequently performed by women (the narrative of the necromancer of Endor is just one example, cf 1 Samuel 28:6-19[21]).

When the woman and the man ate from the tree of knowledge, their eyes were opened (a metaphor for "acquiring intelligence", cf v. 5$^{a}\beta$) and they saw they were naked. In another publication, my commentary on Genesis 2-3, I discussed the symbolism of nakedness in this text[22] . According to 2:25 the couple knew about their nakedness without being ashamed. It makes no sense that they "discover" now that they are naked. Faced with this incoherence, many have resorted to allegory or spiritualization, which are foreign to a myth. The matter is much more serious, as shown in verses 8-11. It is clear there that:

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[19] With this expression we want to translate the intensive form of the verb in the participle *exapatetheísa,* while the text says that Adam did not *epatéthê*, using the plain form of the verb.

[20] This text is analyzed by Cristina Conti, "Infiel es esta palabra. 1 Timoteo 2,8-15", *RIBLA* 37 (2000) 41-56.

[21] Samuel does not inquire about a male necromancer, but directly about a *female* necromancer (v 7)

[22] *Crear y amar en libertad,* 131-135 *(excursus* 3).

a) The couple hide "*from* Yahweh Elohîm" (v. 8), not from each other;

b) The fear before Yahweh is "because I am naked" (v. 10b);

c) The awareness (the man speaks) of being naked is the result of having eaten from the tree of knowledge (as Yahweh himself clarifies, v. 11).

In this first dialogue of the divine judge –which is with the man and not the woman- nakedness indicates a *distance* of the couple from Yahweh Elohîm. What is the reason for the fear before God's presence? Would it not be that nakedness, now elevated to the symbolic level, "signifies" an identification with the Gods ("naked" in the representations) of the Canaanite context, a superior cultural context where Israel had gone to "eat" new forms of wisdom and civilization? Such wise and fecund Gods were the holders and givers of wisdom so clearly manifest in the Canaanite/Phoenician or Egyptian culture of the time.

If the myth is read in this way –in which the historical referent gave rise to the interpretation carried by the narrative[23]– we realize its depth and seriousness. It is referring to a critical situation in Israel, in which the old option for Yahweh (cf Joshua 24:14-24) falls short, generating the infiltration and assimilation of new and strange, but nevertheless, important Gods.

In this part of the text (3: 8-11), if we pay attention, there is a significant change. If in the first episode (vv 1-7) *the woman* was the main character in her capacity to talk to the serpent, in 8:11 God intentionally addresses *the male.* Why? Because at this point the text puts us in a "political" context, which is related to the following issues:

The social practices: the magnificent accomplishments of the kings, which made them "great"

The gender practices: the *kings* brought about the cults of other Gods by introducing foreign women into the royal harem (cf. the case of Solomon in 1 Kings 11, a prototypic case indeed); it did not occur the other way, in which foreign males acted as mediators.

A naïve consideration of this text (1 Kings 11) will interpret two inaccurate elements: 1) that as "women swayed Solomon's heart to other Gods" (v. 4) *they* (the women) were guilty of the religious deviations of the king; 2) that the issue is a religious-cultic one.

A correct reading, on the other hand, clearly deduces that Solomon's women are not accused at all; only *he* is accused. There is not a single word against the women. Yahweh judges *Solomon*, in the same way as he confronts the *male* in Genesis 3:8-11. Even more remarkable, is the care taken by the text with the threefold sentence (vv. 14-19): *accusing* the serpent (v. 14, "*because* you have done this) and the male (v. 17 "*because* you listened to the voice of your wife and ate from the tree which I had forbidden you), yet only transmitting the sentence to the woman, without registering any assessment or cause (v. 16). Such a difference cannot be dismissed.

One has to realize that the text refers to *kings (male)* who bring in women from other cultures and, therefore, other cults. The opposite situation is not even imagined. As the practice was that of a masculine dynasty, one has the impression that the women from outside introduced evil. Had there been queens and female dynasties, the text would have said: "*men* swayed the hearth of queen so and so". The biblical myth is interpreting concrete realities and practices; it is not speaking of universal anthropological concepts.

If we turn back to Genesis 3, the narrative is not speculating about the woman being "the first", acting as the mediator, rather it refers to the man being the last one, that is, the decisive one, the one who closes the circle of transgression. That is the reason why Yahweh's

[23] Exegetical details in *Crear y amar en libertad,* 137.175-180

request (vv. 8-13) begins with the man and not the woman. We have seen above that the thematic role of the woman is rather symbolic, while the man's is real, according to the intention of this myth, which refers to the responsibility of the kings and the powerful in "taking" the fruit offered, the wisdom of neighboring cultures (with their legitimizing Gods). Precisely because the myth reflects a patriarchal and monarchical society, where power is exercised by males, the essential role in the transgression is carried out by *the male,* while the woman precedes him in another central role, undoubtedly symbolic in this myth: her active participation in the discerning act of "eating" and in wisdom practices. In the myth as a whole, 3:1-6bα is merely an introductory episode. We see later that the very brief information of verse 6bβ ("he ate"), becomes, in the questioning by Yahweh (vv. 8-13), the central episode concerning responsibility. This responsibility of the male is reaffirmed ("and I ate") at the precise moment in which he puts the blame on the woman (v. 12)[24].

This is why the interrogation of the woman is very brief (v. 13a). Only two words in Hebrew: "What (is this you) have done?"[25]. What seems an imbalance, is actually a balance in the text: in the initial episode, in which the woman was the protagonist in the act of discerning (vv. 1-7), the male barely took part; in the second –the judicial demand (vv. 8-13)– the male is pursued extensively by the divine voice, while the woman is merely asked what is already known, with the evident intention of switching over immediately to the other actor, the serpent (v. 13b), whom Yahweh starts blaming at the very beginning of the sentence (v. 14a).

4. A fixed destiny or an interpretation of the present?

It is appropriate to consider briefly the sentences given to the woman (3:16) and the man (vv. 17-19). In both, the suffering aspect is highlighted in those functions that are seen as proper to women (giving birth) and peasants, men who work the land (the struggle for daily food). The text is precise: *it is not* saying that the punishment for women is to give birth, *nor* for men to till the soil. The emphasis is on *the way* these functions are carried out: the suffering entailed[26]. The reference is to what was –in the social practices of the time when the text was produced– most characteristic of each sex.

1) The woman's suffering is expressed by two poetic lines, the first points to suffering at the time of giving birth ("I will greatly multiply your suffering and your pregnancies; in pain you shall bring forth children") while the second shows that the yearning of the woman for the man will turn into subjection ("your yearning shall be for your husband, yet he shall rule over you").

In this reading, the prevailing and only isotopy is that of sexuality.

Another possible reading takes into account the semiotic elements of the text and widens the theme of suffering to a more extensive social field:

a I will greatly multiply your suffering

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[24] The male does not answer the question "Who told you that you were naked?" (v. 11a) because Yahweh himself answers: "Have you been eating from the tree of which I forbade you to eat?" (v. 11b). The plural of v. 7a, turns to singular in v. 11. Not because the woman has been forgotten, rather because *in the actual life that the myth is interpreting*, it is men who exercise the power that makes them "like God".

[25] Not "Why have you done this?" (*JB*); this would be a stronger expression of blame.

[26] The Hebrew root *'sb* "suffering/tiredness", is part of both sentences: *'issabôn* and *'eseb* in v. 16a, and *'issabôn* again in v. 17.

b and your pregnancies[27]: in pain you shall bring forth children

b' Your yearning (shall be) for your husband

a' yet he shall rule over you.

In this alternative, the kind of suffering that has to do with sex is indicated in the center (**b** and **b'**), while in the extremes (**a** and **a'**) the reference is to pain of all sorts, which can be understood in a much wider social frame[28].

2) The male's suffering is indicated in vv. 17bβ-19^{a}α, and begins precisely with the concept:

With suffering you shall get your food from it[29] every day of your life; it shall yield thorns and thistles for you and you shall eat the grass of the field; by the sweat of your face you shall eat bread[30].

It is important to point out that the punishment for the male is not work –as is usually understood– but the struggle to get food. The lexeme "to eat" appears three times in this brief sentence, associated with suffering, a deficient vegetation and sweat on the brow. It is a reflection on the difficult experience of the rural-worker, who has to cultivate a soil that is hostile, dry, and full of stones, such as that of Palestine. This condition is "interpreted" as the result of Yahweh's curse on the soil (v. 17bα). *Because* the soil is damned, it cannot produce what the peasant expects. He wants bread, but this cannot be made from thistles, thorns, or grass. In order to produce wheat or barley, with which to make bread, he will have to sweat.

The text is very concise. Those who read it literally –as a "fact" that really happened– end up with a determinist interpretation which is also incoherent. It is determinist, because Yahweh Elohîm's sentence, pronounced in the origins and pointing to the future, defines the *destinies* of the human beings, according to their social roles[31]. It is incoherent, because we would then have to admit that many women who do not have children or men who do not till the soil are unaffected by this destiny of suffering.

This is the first alternative for reading the mythical text, which we indicated in the diagram of paragraph 1. It is an invalid alternative. One must turn to the third possibility, the one that takes into account the original event, which "gives meaning to", or interprets, the reality lived at the time of the production of the text, but that also understands that the myth *emerges from a present situation* (see above, at the end of paragraph 3)

5. The utopian perspective of the text

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[27] "And your pregnancies" seems to be metrically excessive, the word in Hebrew is best associated with "your suffering", reinforcing the first reading already seen above. In this case, the LXX understood it was better to read another similar term, which means "your laments" (*kaì tòn stenagmón sou* < Hb.. *hegyônek,* instead of *heronek)*

[28] Further details in *Amar y Crear en Libertad,* 143-144.

[29] This is a compromising translation. The Hebrew text literally says "you will eat it (fem.)", with a direct object in the feminine with no antecedent except *'adamâ* ("cursed be the soil because of you"), which makes no sense. Probably, in the present redaction in which the act of "eating" is affirmed, the verb "to eat" replaced "to plough", the previous verb that was more coherent with the context and the grammar: "you will *plough* it (the *'adamâ*)".

[30] Only up to this point, because what follows ("until you return to the soil...") is not punishment, but the time limit for the punishment.

[31] This incorrect reading produced, in part at least, the speculation about a sin which would be transmitted to all human beings from the very beginning (the "original sin").

Traditionally, Genesis 3 is understood as a text that "determines" the social roles of women and men. The fact that, in this text, the divine allocutions are differentiated by sex does not mean that they cannot be understood as two aspects of the same reality. In the process of procreation and education of the family, the man also has a role to play, in the same way that women join in the rural tasks in many cultural contexts. In this kind of text, the most distinctive elements of the social experience are highlighted, although the meanings intertwine.

Nevertheless, what remains is the issue of whether the myth of Genesis 3 "determines the destinies" –to use an expression from the Semitic cultural context–[32] of the human beings, women and men. Literalist readings have only deepened this understanding, already internalized even in those who read the text on the correct level, which is that of the myth.

Everything changes if we read the myth from where it actually begins. If the narrative began at 3:14 (up to 3:19) it would be natural to conclude that God determines the destinies of the woman and the man in an irrevocable way. If it began at 3:1 one could practically arrive at the same conclusion. But the myth of transgression (3:1-19) begins –thematically and redactionally– at 2:16-17, when Yahweh Elohîm allows the first couple to eat from all the trees of the orchard, but forbids eating "from the tree of knowledge of what is good and bad" (v. 17). This antecedent is the clue to the whole myth. In fact,

God does not put human beings in their present condition; the first project is that of a human being who can transform the earth and make it fruitful through his work (2:5.15);

The prohibition indicates a limit that must be respected by freedom;

The way in which the prohibition is announced ("you shall not eat") and the consequent punishment ("die you shall die") is customary to the ear of the Israelite who reads this myth, because it is the language of the Sinaitic laws, which also appeal to conscience and freedom, and which could also be disobeyed.

Now, what was done wrongly the first time, can be done rightly the next time.

To be precise, the myth of Genesis 2-3 is interpreting a reality, a situation of identification of Israel with other Gods through a non-critical assimilation of their cultures, a situation particularly generated by the only ones who could pretend to be "like God", due to knowledge-power, that is, kings.

What about the future?

The text of Genesis 2-3 is not isolated from the corpus of the cosmovisional texts of Israel. Biblical *inter-textuality* helps us to understand that deep down, this myth is proposing a "never again" that allows for a new beginning, so that the result would not be that of Genesis 3:16-19, *but rather that of 2:15-17, the original project of Yahweh Elohîm.*

This is the utopia that the myth of Genesis 2-3 offered the first recipients and that it offers to us, today's readers.

6. Conclusion

[32] To bestow destinies, to be in possession of "the tablet of destinies" (*tup šimâti)* is a common reference in Mesopotamian myths. "Destiny" is not an adequate word, since *šimtu* (sing.) does not refer to a distant future, a certain "afterwards", but rather to the present, to what a person or an element of the cosmos *must do*. The best translation would be "bestow /possess the tablet of norms", or functions/ tasks, which is assigned to each one by divine design.

Why do we say "utopia" instead of using the typical vocabulary of "eschatology"? It happens that when we use this last word, we think of a rupture in history, a distant "afterwards" totally in God's hands. Of course this is the specific language of many texts. However, "utopia" does not put the accent on an "afterwards", but rather on an *existing* position of movement "towards". Secondly, utopia –as the etymology of the word indicates– moves us towards a moment that never arrives, which is always beyond and which necessarily implies that it must constantly be *redesigned.* It must always be ahead, in the future, as a mirage on the road. Far from undermining the "reality" of promises, the utopian attitude sets better limits to the transcendent and the phenomenal, the divine and the human, and prevents sanctifying (as in every form of theocracy) any intent to see an "already" as a total and maximum revelation, when it is no more than a "not yet", which is always before us.

Applying the utopian approach to the narrative of Genesis 2-3, read in the context of so much human suffering –typologically condensed in the strong expressions of 3:16-19– it is possible to imagine *different* human conditions. Not in order to return to an original ideal –as the biblical perspective blocks the way back– but rather to understand that it is always possible to construct a future history that is different from the one that now causes such suffering and sorrow.

Far from being fatalistic, the myth of Genesis 2-3 suggests that it is possible to imagine a different future[33].

[33] This is usually the redactional perspective of the prophetic books, particularly through the re-readings. For this reason, I have given my commentary on 3-Isaiah (55-66) the title *Imaginar el futuro* [Imagining the future]. *Estructura retórica y querigma del Tercer Isaías (*Buenos Aires, Lumen, 2001).