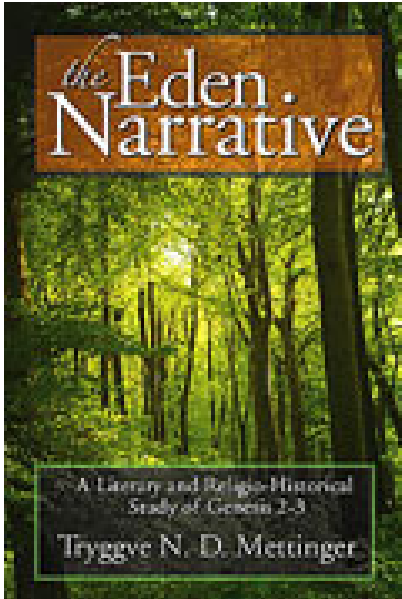


RBL 12/2008



Mettinger, Trygve N. D.

The Eden Narrative: A Literary and Religio-historical Study of Genesis 2–3

Winona Lake, Ind.: Eisenbrauns, 2007. Pp. xvii + 165.
Hardcover. \$29.50. ISBN 1575061414.

Howard N. Wallace
United Faculty of Theology
Melbourne, Australia

Can anything new grow in the garden of Eden? One could be excused for thinking that scholars might have exhausted all the options when it comes to the interpretation of Gen 2–3. It is due to both the intricacies of this particular biblical text and to the rigor of the Professor Mettinger’s analysis that we encounter in this book new thoughts on such familiar material. This is a work that will both stimulate the scholar of Gen 2–3 and set before the student a brief yet clear and comprehensive study of this classic text.

The starting point for this study was the observation that in both the Adapa Myth and the Gilgamesh Epic wisdom and immortality were closely connected. “Might this combination of motifs in the two Mesopotamian texts be able to shed light on the Eden Narrative” (xi), considering that wisdom and immortality are symbolized by the two trees in the biblical story? The relation of the trees of knowledge and life in Eden has often been questioned by scholars, and suggestions have been made that their existence indicates different sources in Gen 2–3 or that they are in some other way doublets. Mettinger decided to determine for himself “how many special trees sound exegetical ecology could tolerate in the Garden of Bliss” (p. xi) and above all what the narrative’s theme(s) is/are. The complementarity of the two trees remains a working assumption throughout the book. Mettinger sets out further principles for his work in chapter 1. As well as investigating the

theme of the narrative in Gen 2–3, he asks whether the “poet,” as he calls the latest writer of the narrative, developed the present narrative from a preliterate story about the first man in Eden. Such an investigation requires a tradition-historical approach.

In chapter 2 Mettinger undertakes a “narratological analysis of the Eden Narrative,” examining the unity of the final narrative, the scenes and plot, the characters, and the “focalization” (point of view) and voice within the narrative. The plot, Mettinger concludes, is about a divine test of obedience to God’s command to the first humans. The tree of knowledge is the object of the test, while the tree of life is the potential reward. The result of disobedience is that death becomes the inescapable fate of humankind. In this context the narrator, God, and the reader are all aware of the test and the existence of the two trees. The characters, however, know of only a prohibition against eating of one tree. They are unaware of the existence of the second, life-giving tree. In this “neatly integrated” narrative, there is also a special irony developed when the characters’ knowledge does not equal that of the reader and others. This is particularly the case in relation to the ambiguity of the designation of different trees as “in the midst of the garden” (Gen 2:9; 3:3; pp. 36–37).

In chapter 3 the focus moves to the theme of the narrative, to be distinguished from subject, plot, and motifs. While there are a number of motifs within the narrative (especially death versus immortality) and the subject may be a test of obedience to the divine command, the theme has to do with disobedience and its consequences. The associated thesis is that “obedience to the commandment leads to life, disobedience to death” (64). Mettinger, building on the work of Eckart Otto especially, argues that there are certain affinities between Gen 2–3 and Deuteronomistic texts on divine tests of Israel’s obedience (51–54). He sees a Deuteronomic theology of retribution operating in the Eden Narrative. The story provides a basis for the human loss of Eden analogous to the Deuteronomic explanation of the loss of the land through disobedience. The two trees in Eden represent immortality and knowledge, the latter in terms of universal knowledge, a divine prerogative.

The fourth chapter discusses the genre and function of the Eden narrative. In a clear and careful discussion, Mettinger argues that the Eden narrative meets the criteria of “myth,” both validating the ideal of obedience to law and God’s will and explaining the hardships of suffering and death in human life (70–74). He will later say that the Eden poet was aware of proceeding at the level of myth even though that concept could not be expressed in ancient Hebrew language and thought. The narrative is broadly representational (126). Mettinger further argues in chapter 4 that the role of the serpent in Gen 2–3 can be traced to a dialogue between the author and the preceding tradition of the “chaos battle myth.”

In chapters 5 and 6 Mettinger turns his attention to the traditions from which Gen 2–3 was developed, respectively the Adamic myth in Ezek 28 and the association of wisdom and immortality in the Adapa Myth and the Gilgamesh Epic. An “original myth” can be derived from Ezek 28 with the elements of a primeval first man, a garden, sin, and expulsion. Wisdom and immortality also play a part in that tradition, the former an “integrated part” of the myth, while immortality is “an unsubstantiated claim” in the text (90–93, 97). The “poet” of Gen 2–3 has developed this tradition with a focus on the divine command, the curses resulting from disobedience, the trees representing the earlier abstract notions of wisdom and immortality, and the extension of the first man to a couple representative of all humanity. In chapter 6 similarities and differences between Adapa and Gilgamesh and Gen 2–3 are explored. In both Mesopotamian stories the human represents humanity at large, and the prerogative for granting immortality lies with the divine assembly in each. In each the hero gains wisdom from his personal deity, Ea, but cannot (Gilgamesh) or does not (Adapa) attain immortality. That is, says Mettinger, a major difference with the Eden narrative, where immortality was available as a reward for obedience to command.

Chapter 7 presents a synthesis of Mettinger’s findings and arguments. He concludes with a very brief discussion (134–35) of the date and literary integrity of the Eden narrative. He does not go into detail in regard to the matter of date but sets out some of the main indications for a postexilic date, which he generally accepts.

As I indicated at the start, this is a book that will stimulate both the scholar and the student of Genesis. It sets out broad positions well and yet argues for a clear line within that breadth. Its focus is, in the end, a historical-critical study of the Eden Narrative (123) seeking to ascertain what the narrative said in its own time through a discussion of theme and prior traditions. While the argument is well set out, in the end one is still left with questions. At times the argument builds on what is not said in the narrative as much as on what is said. This is particularly so in seeing the subject as a divine test. As Mettinger admits in the end, it becomes a story about a divine commandment and test with sin as the outcome without any of the usual words for command, test, or sin employed (135). The “omniscient reader” is left to presume a good deal about the story and may not be so omniscient after all. The curiosities and ambiguities of the narrative remain more, I fear, than Mettinger would want (Is the ambiguity of the two trees so neatly solved by seeing one as a test and the other as a reward when the story does not actually say so clearly? Who is lying in Gen 3:1–7?). Mettinger admits, regarding theodicy, that not all issues are clarified in the text (133). The list is, however, longer than just the matter of theodicy. Mettinger’s argument for Deuteronomic associations in the command and curses (51–52) is, also, not wholly convincing. There is also the need, especially in a primarily historical-critical study such as this, for further discussion of the sexual motifs in the story. They do

not play a major role in the present form of the story but are certainly there and need discussion. On the other hand, Mettinger's brief discussion on ontological boundaries between the human and divine is helpful.

There is, as I have tried to say, much that is of value in this book, and it certainly deserves a place on both the scholar's bookshelf and in the class bibliography. There is also much one can take issue with, but that can also be the sign of a good book. Mettinger sees the Eden narrative as a sophisticated piece of literature; with that I would agree. There is much in it that entices the careful scholar into new perspectives. Maybe the greatest challenge and the greatest temptation in a story about temptation is to try and make too explicit what is in fact written between the lines (see 133).