

# The Fall Rise of Man

Christopher Hitchens often addressed his audience as “Brothers and Sisters.” I find it inspiring that this tough-minded, atheist intellectual thought of people in this way. So in that spirit...

Brothers and Sisters. Good morning and Happy New Year.

“The Fall of Man”. I’ve long been fascinated with this myth. Good, Evil, Knowledge, Shame, Temptation, Punishment, Paradise, Banishment. It’s got everything but the talking snake. This short chapter takes on lots of big topics, and is such a central myth to Western religions, that it seemed to me there’s something here worth exploring.

Now I approach this as the myth it is. I talk about God, Adam and Eve as I would talk about Zeus, Apollo and Athena – as characters in the myth. And I’m taking Joseph Campbell’s lead that myth is a series of metaphors attempting to get at some underlying truth.

That said, it’s fair to ask “so what?” Why bother with a story from the Iron Age written by superstitious people who were ignorant of so much of what we now know about the world? Isn’t this story a reflection of their ignorance and superstitions?

I think it undoubtedly is. But is there something more?

After all, this story was written by our distant relatives, humans, just like us, approximately 2,500 years ago. That’s about 50,000 begets if you’re calculating. As humans, it’s no surprise that these people would puzzle through basic questions about their existence. The creation myth of the first two chapters attempts to answer the questions “How did we get here?” and “Why is there something instead of nothing?” The third chapter ask questions like “How did we get to be the way we are?” and “What does the future hold?” The questions it attempts to answer and the themes it grapples with must have been heavy on their minds. And while they puzzled these questions in scientific ignorance, it was also done in a far less cluttered and complex world, where they lived very close to the Earth, dealing with the basics of survival. Their relationship to their environment was very different than ours is today.

It’s in this context that I approached my interpretation of this myth: as written by our relatives, with a unique perspective lost to us, attempting to understand their place in the world. And I started with the possibility that our ancestors might be saying something that’s worth listening to.

So let’s get to it...

The myth opens with the serpent telling the woman that she’s not going to die, as God told her she would, if she eats from the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil. In fact, eating the fruit will

open her eyes. So she eats and she doesn't die. Then she gives some to Adam and he eats and he doesn't die.

I was taught that the serpent deceives Eve into eating the fruit and that Eve tempts Adam into eating it. But in Chapter 2 God told Adam and Eve in no uncertain terms that they would die if they ate from that tree. Does that make God the deceiver? Because, not only did they not die, they, ironically, have become immortalized through this story.

Not to be too hard on God here. He seems to me like a parent who is exaggerating risk to protect his children. He may well have said: "Don't play with that stick or you'll poke your eye out!" All parents want to decide how and when their children get exposed to the harder realities of the world. The movies we allow them to watch, the Websites we allow them to access, the places we allow them to go. We dole out exposure as we feel our children are ready for it. All parents approach this differently, but what's certain is that we can't protect them forever. We can't be catchers in the rye. Because whether it's today or 2500 years ago, children have to leave.

Now the woman, Eve, gets a bad rap. She gets blamed for being suckered by the serpent and further for corrupting Adam. But is that what's happening? The way I see it, Eve is a really good listener. Maybe these ancestors of ours tried to fathom their own minds, their thoughts that seemed like voices in their heads. And maybe they pondered their own ancestors, and tried to imagine what it would have been like to first have thoughts. Might it have seemed like voices coming from outside their minds? Might it have seemed like a serpent whispering in their ears? Eve is listening to her own thoughts, wrestling with the choice between ignorance and knowledge, between living with her eyes closed or open. And she reasons God's threat of death is a bluff, as children can often see through their parents' idle threats. She's an adolescent listening to her own thoughts and making her own choices. She's testing the limits of parental authority and separating herself from her father.

As far as corrupting Adam goes, the myth says: "She also gave some to her husband, who was with her, and he ate it." There's no arm twisting happening here. It sounds to me like we have a woman who courageously trusts her own mind and breaks the rules. She leads the way, and then brings her husband along with her. What we have is a wife helping her husband make a hard choice. Does that sound familiar to anyone else?

Now the first thing they do after they eat is recognize their nakedness and cover themselves with fig leaves. They're ashamed of their bodies, right? Well, shame is never mentioned. I think readers project their shame onto the scene, which later gets used by institutions as a method of control. But let's think metaphor. By eating from the Tree, they are stripped of the protection of their childlike ignorance. Their choice to eat the fruit is laid bare for judgment. And as soon as they commit the act, their realization that they broke the rules hits them like a...like a ton of apples; like that moment immediately after breaking a window because you were playing catch with the baseball too close to the house. You know, when you go "Oh crap, now I've done it!" It's not shame of their physical nakedness, it's guilt of their act. Or, to put it

another way, they've developed a conscience. They may have made the right choice by choosing knowledge over ignorance, but that doesn't mean they don't feel bad about their disobedience. And it doesn't mean daddy ain't going to be mad.

And oh, is he mad.

Serpents are cursed to forever crawl on their bellies and be in conflict with man. Women are forever given the pains of childbirth and required to be ruled over by their husbands. Men are forever condemned to hard labor: "By the sweat of your brow you will eat your food until you return to the ground."

Tough stuff.

But life for our ancestors was tough. This was an agrarian civilization where day to day survival was uncertain. They must have asked themselves why life was so difficult. We're humans, we want answers. "That's just the way it is" isn't all that satisfying, even though that often is the best explanation. So they created a myth that gave meaning to their suffering: to having to break their back to feed their families, to having to endure the excruciating pain and risk of childbirth.

The punishment, of course, isn't just for Adam and Eve, it's an eternal punishment for all men and women. Some interpret this as Original Sin. The idea that we are born sinners and need salvation. This interpretation has been very successful in capitalizing on our natural human insecurities. Clearly, our ancestors would have understood, at some level, that humans are inherently flawed. And that some of our flaws, no doubt, are inherited from our parents. Just as we pass down some of our flaws to our children. But we inherit and pass down our goodness as well. It's interesting to consider how Western civilization may have evolved differently had the emphasis been on Original Goodness over Original Sin.

Finally, the story concludes with Adam and Eve's banishment from the garden. God stiches some clothes for them and sends them on their way, guarding the entrance with an angel and a flaming sword.

And they're gone, never to return. Paradise is forever in their rear view mirror. Sounds kind of like nostalgia. That romanticizing the past as a simpler, better time. But this story says that there is no going back to an idealized past. Time moves forward. Children grow up. Each generation leaves Eden anew. And not only is paradise lost to the past, there's no promise of paradise in the future. It's not something to live for. It's not something to die for. And it's certainly not something to kill for.

Now they don't go into the world naked. God provides them with the clothes on their backs. But that's all. He imparts no wisdom, no teachings, no fatherly advice. They have the knowledge of good and evil, and only a fledging conscience to help choose between the two. Imagine for a moment what that would be like. Terrifying. Lonely. With their difficult lives,

maybe that's how our ancestors felt – having to make their way without a structure for moral guidance. Not a bad reason to create God.

But 2500 years later, we can learn from our long history of successes and failures. We have art, literature and culture to help guide us. We have our communities, our friends and our own experiences to draw from. And we have learned enough about the world to move beyond our superstitions. These are the tools we need to use to forge our moral compass and what we equip our children with as they go on their way.

In the final scene, I think of Adam and Eve as characters in a so many movies we've seen, such as Benjamin and Elaine at the end of The Graduate, where our heroes head down the road into an uncertain future. Isn't that the journey we travel every day? The journey we set our children on? The journey of our species? It can be frightening – the unknown future. So frightening that we create stories, even fantasies, to tell ourselves about what the future holds.

In this story we are left with Adam and Eve departing on the road to become the parents of all humanity. This is a beautiful metaphor. What seems to me to be a requirement as we head down the road into our collective uncertain future. The simple recognition that we are, indeed, all brothers and sisters.

For that, I say "Thank you Man. Thank you Woman. And thank you Snake."