Review of: "The Eden Complex: Transgression and Transformation in the Bible, Freud and Jung"

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of the article

“The Eden Complex: Transgression and Transformation in the Bible, Freud and Jung” by Sanford Drob in *Qeios* ID: 6V7ACV.2, https://doi.org/10.32388/6V7ACV.2

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Being a biblical scholar, I review this article from the capacity of biblical interpretation, concerning the biblical story of transgression and expulsion of Adam and Eve from the garden of Eden, and of broader cultural studies about reception history, intertextuality and typology.

My review evaluates strengths and weaknesses of this article, concerning (a) the interpretation of the biblical story; (b) its broader typological application with a view to transgression and transformation; and (c) the correlation between biblical studies and psychoanalysis, to the extent that I can evaluate this as relative outsider to psychology.

1. **The Biblical Eden Narrative and Its Interpretation**

The Eden narrative (Genesis 2:4b-3:24) is at the heart of this article. The article is elaborate on psycho-analytical approaches, but thin on biblical studies regarding the Eden narrative. Counting by the 73 bibliographical references (‘footnotes’) at the end of the article (pp. 15-19), there is only one note (footnote 38), which distinctly focuses on the Eden narrative, and even that reference is from a psycho-analytical viewpoint: “M.P. Osmond (2000). The Adam and Eve story is an exemplar of an early-like variant of the Oedipus complex. *Journal of the American Psychoanalytic Association*, 48(4), 1295-1325”. The article admittedly includes consideration of a “Kabbalistic understanding of Eden” (pp. 8-9), but again, this is only part of the psycho-analytical survey of highlighting Jung’s understanding of the Eden narrative.

There are various literary and religio-historical studies of the Eden narrative which could also have been consulted, including but not limited to the following examples:

Mettinger, Tryggve N.D. *The Eden Narrative. A Literary and Religio-Historical Study of Genesis 2-3*(Winona Lake: Eisenbrauns, 2007).

Van Ruiten, Jacques. "Eve's Pain in Childbearing? Interpretation of Gen 3:16A in Biblical and Early Jewish Texts," in*Eve's Children. The Biblical Stories Retold and Interpreted in Jewish and Christian Traditions*, ed. Gerard P. Luttikhuizen (Themes in Biblical Narrative 5; Leiden: Brill, 2003), 3–26.

Vogels, W. "The Power Struggle between Man and Woman (Gen 3,16b),"*Biblica* 77 (1996) 197-209.

Wallace, H.N. *The Eden Narrative* (Harvard Semitic Monographs 32; Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1985).

Wold, Benjamin. "Genesis 2-3 in Early Christian Tradition and 4QInstruction."*Dead Sea Discoveries* 23 (2016): 329-46.

The inclusion of literary studies of the Eden narrative could have helped to evaluate the understanding of this narrative as a paradigm of "transgression and transformation" from multiple angles, including, but not limited to the psycho-analytical viewpoints, in order to establish a truly cross-disciplinary perspective. For instance, is the understanding of the Eden narrative in terms of transgression and punishment/transformation the only way in which interpreters read this story?

The article (p. 4) refers to the understanding of the Eden narrative in six respects: God's instruction; the serpent's claim; Eve succumbing to temptation; human transgression; divine punishment; Eve's naming after the expulsion. In Drob's understanding, the transgression is a transformative experience, because, "as a result of *transgression*, the key elements of the human condition, self-consciousness, ethical choice, work, suffering, work, mortality and reproduction take form. Indeed, it is through their transgression that Adam and Eve become *human*" (p. 5). The article further describes the nature of the transgression as a matter of "reality testing" targeting "conventional reality", thereby making a sophisticated elaboration on theoretical reflections by Jacques Lacan (p. 10) and applying the "transgression" as addressed in Genesis 3:16-19 to developments from dependence to autonomy in the parent-child relationship.

Yet does this understanding of the Eden narrative do complete justice to its interpretation? According to some ancient readings of the Eden narrative, it is not self-consciousness, but "evil conscience" which is implicated in the fall of humankind (Flavius Josephus, *Jewish Antiquities* 1.46). Further, the naming of Eve as mother of all that lives occurs in Genesis 3:20, preceding the verses on the expulsion of Adam and Eve from Eden (Gen 3:22-24). In the biblical narrative, the way to "autonomy" is even aided by God, who helps Adam and Eve with clothing (Gen 3:21). The setting of Eden already anticipates on reproduction (Gen 3:20) before the expulsion from Eden, just as early Jewish interpretation does (cf. e.g. *Jubilees* 3.8-14), but it is only the accompanying circumstances of hardship for both man and woman, which are addressed in divine discourse in Genesis 3:16.17-19.

Another question concerns the issue of eating from the fruit of the tree of knowledge of good and evil and its application to "reality testing" in the interest of transformation toward autonomy. Perhaps there is more of a twilight sense to 'knowledge'

here, since the Hebrew sense of 'knowing' (KBL, pp. 364-66) includes experience, skill, and even a sexual sense of sexual intercourse. This does not mean that sexuality by itself is at the forefront of the "transgression", since sexuality and procreation are strongly implied in Genesis 2:24-25, without involving any shame about nakedness. Yet the transgression brings in a different sense of 'nakedness' and opened eyes to another reality (Gen 3:7). If then 'knowing' (Hebrew *yadah*) and 'knowledge' (Hebrew *da-at*) also indicates participation in good and evil, this results in an implicated subject with an 'evil conscience'. This implicated subject with an evil conscience about the knowledge of good and evil is perhaps also what Paul the apostle warns against in 1 Corinthians 14:20: "be babes in evil, but in thinking be mature" (RSV). In that sense, transgression is not a neutral, cognitive act of "reality testing", but "eating from the fruit of the tree of knowledge of good and evil" symbolizes taking part in good and evil, within the Eden narrative as a symbolic tale. This still raises questions about the patriarchal context of the Eden narrative, but that is a further matter of typologies of understanding the Eden narrative (see § 2 below).

Nevertheless, the article does include interesting explorations into the reconsideration of "transgression" as a "form of *poesis* (from the Greek to produce, form or create), a "talking cure" that "expels one from Eden", deconstructs one's normal, routinized discourse, goes beyond the "garden" of cultivated meaning, and as per Hess and Rorty, enters an unknown forest and enables one to discover or create something new" (p. 13). Yet this sense of knowledge, of a "traumatic notion of 'reality'" (p. 11), beyond institutionalization, could just as well be linked with a Promethean myth, and it is an open question whether this fully applies to the Eden narrative. Another interpretation could consider the transgression as a first rupture in a series of subsequent ruptures in an originally holistic sense of knowledge and language. That is, the divine discourse cursing the serpent in Genesis 3:15 has been interpreted as "the first moment in which a split between man and the rest of the animal kingdom is recorded" (Alter 1996: 13). In that case, it is not the pursuit of knowledge by itself which is at stake, for humankind was already involved in it by giving names to all living beings (Gen 2:20), but an implicated sense of knowledge of good and evil, which brings about disjunctions between humankind and the rest of the world. Admittedly, emulation of the divine is an issue in both the Eden narrative (Gen 3:6.22) and Promethean myth, but the "evil conscience" attributed to humankind in early Jewish interpretation of the Eden narrative (Josephus, *Ant.* 1.46) appears absent from Promethean myth.

2. Transgression and Transformation among Typologies of Understanding the Eden Narrative

The article's central concern is with interpreting the Eden narrative in terms of (the power of) transgression and transformation. This is based on psycho-analytical close readings of Jung's studies. Yet other models of interpretation may apply to the biblical Eden narrative than only this psycho-analytical typology of transgression and transformation. Let me note three other typologies of understanding the Eden narrative.

a. An Aetiological tale

With its setting in the primeval age, the Eden narrative could be understood as an aetiological tale, explaining certain predicaments of the human condition as a rupture from an originally more harmonious world. As a matter of fact, ancient Jewish interpretation of the Eden narrative also understands divine discourse against the serpent in Genesis 3:15 as

depriving the serpent of speech, having so far supposed the existence of “a common tongue” among all creatures (*Ant.* 1.41, 1.50). Or the expulsion from Eden is interpreted as a process which also involved the disjunction between the human species and all other living creatures with regard to an originally holistic sense of speech and language involving all living creatures on earth (*Jubilees* 3.28). There is a formal analogy between biblical narrative and Greek mythology regarding the transition from a blissful state of the earth in a mythical primeval Golden Age as giver of abundance to a degenerated state of human toil to a resisting earthly produce. A recent study on the aetiology of Greek myth (Koning 2022: 164-82) also identifies “origin myth” as concerned with “three stages of creation: theogony, cosmogony and anthropogony” (166).

b. A Wisdom tale

The Eden narrative may also be understood as wisdom tale, with symbolic meaning to it. As such, Genesis 2-3 also has a prominent place in ancient sapiential tradition (cf. Wold 2016). An ancient sapiential understanding of the Eden narrative in the Qumran text *4QInstruction* strongly implies that the “garden” is a figure for the earth’s abundance with a human responsibility for it, whereas an unproductive setting of “thorns and thistles” is linked with human unfaithfulness (4Q423 [*4QInstruction*^{e}] frg. 2). In this Qumran text, the pursuit of knowledge is even imperative from the understanding of God as “God of knowledge”, and the knowledge of good and evil is not by itself sinful, but related to the “inheritance of Enosh, together with a spiritual people” as a hallmark of an understanding spirit over against “the spirit of flesh”, which “does not know the difference between [goo]d and evil” (4Q417 [*4QInstruction*^{c}] 2 i 16-18; translation from García Martínez and Tigchelaar 2000: 859). Yet this could be a further development of sapiential tradition as compared with biblical tradition.

c. Gender and Feminist Interpretation

What about feminist interpretations of the Eden narrative? The article makes no reference in the footnotes to feminist criticism of Genesis 3, whether Christian (E.C. Stanton; K. Millett, M. Daly, P. Trible, M. Bal) or Jewish (C. Meyers), as surveyed by, e.g. Ilana Pardes at jwa.org (“Creation According to Eve: Beyond Genesis 3”). Pardes urged against reading the Eden narrative in isolation, apart from the larger context of Genesis 1-11 as primeval stories about creation and re-creation, fall and rise of humankind. In this line of reading Genesis, the Eden narrative about transgression and expulsion is a first of a series of ruptures in primeval times before the age of biblical patriarchs and matriarchs. Carol Meyers (1983; 1988) reinterpreted the Eden narrative, moving away from a traditional understanding in terms of sin/transgression toward its understanding as a “wisdom tale” “whose purpose is to address the complexities of human life for both women and men” (Pardes, jwa.org). This feminist interpretation also emphasizes the ongoing role of the female in the biblical narrative of Genesis in claiming partnership with God in the work of creation, through parental procreation, and in “maternal naming-speeches” (Pardes, jwa.org).

These examples of other typological interpretations of the Eden narrative indicate the diversity of readings of biblical narrative, to which a psycho-analytical approach may also have to relate in one way or another.

3. Biblical Narrative and Psychoanalysis

Since I am not trained in psychoanalysis, my comments on biblical narrative and psychoanalysis will be more brief.

Psychology of religion and psycho-analytical approaches to biblical texts have become more established in recent decades. Carl Jung has been credited with coining the term “complex” in a psychological context, to begin with, so it is appropriate that the article prominently discusses Jung’s studies with a view to defining an “Eden complex”.

Yet the article does not discuss how does an alleged “Eden complex” may be phenomenologically compared with known psychological complexes, such as the “Oedipus/Electra” complex, the “persecution” complex, the “inferiority” complex, the “superiority” complex, the “Madonna-whore” complex (polarized male perceptions of women in general), the “God” complex, the “guilt” complex, and the “martyr” complex (www.medicinenet.com). In order to establish an hypothesis on an “Eden complex”, I would think that this broader conceptualization of the complex among other complexes is an issue which merits further attention. This is especially the cases, since the article seeks to replace the “Oedipus complex” by the “Eden complex”, regarding child-parent relations and psychological development or individuation toward autonomy.

Another critical issue with regard to the nexus between biblical narrative and psychoanalis, following feminist approaches to the Eden narrative, concerns feminist critique of Jungian psychology (cf. e.g. Goldenberg 1976; Rowland 2002; Wehr 2015). Reflection on this matter is absent from the article, which makes it harder to evaluate how the involvement of gender in the Eden narrative plays a role in the article’s paradigm of an “Eden complex”. As a matter of fact, the article follows Jung’s observations about the banishment of “Adam and Eve, whom he had created as images of his *masculine essence* and his *feminine emanation*, to the extra-paradisial world, the limbo of the ‘shards’” (p. 8; italics mine), without further commenting on this essentialism in the understanding of the divine and God.

4. Evaluation and Conclusions

Having reviewed this article, it is time to turn to an evaluation and conclusions with regard to the strengths and weaknesses of the argumentation.

Strengths

The article draws on a broader theoretical framework of psycho-analysis, involving not only Freud and Jung, but also thinkers such as Jacques Lacan and Richard Rorty, also including Jung’s relation to ‘Kabbalistic interpretation’. It gives psychic room to meta-reflection about the Eden narrative with regard to “modes of symbolic and mythological thinking that were ignored or debased within a modern scientific culture” (p. 13). The article’s reading of the Eden narrative is a highly philosophical exercise, which involves an understanding of Jung’s depth psychology as giving “rise to both cultural and individual transgression/liberation” (p. 13). This philosophical exercise which provides psycho-analytical meta-reflection on the Eden narrative has some merit by itself, even though my evaluation has aimed to illustrate that biblical studies also provide other models of understanding Genesis 2-3 than in terms of “transgression and transformation”. Yet the article does also include caveats, asserting that “the majority of moral and ethical transgressions do not lead to new values or cultural or even personal renewal” (p. 14). Nevertheless, the article’s discussion of the Eden narrative does apply depth psychology to the pattern of prohibition/transgression and its role in human development (p. 14).

Weaknesses

Having noted the absence of discussion of feminist interpretations of the Eden narrative and of feminist critique of Jung's psychology, the hypothesis of an "Eden complex" as a "traumatic notion of 'reality'" may be at risk of replacing one patriarchal narrative (Oedipus complex) by another (Eden complex), without including critical considerations about gender issues. Further, the idea, referring to "Jung's childhood fantasy", that "God *wanted* Adam and Eve to sin, and that God himself is ultimately transgressive", leading the way to an interpretation that the Eden narrative refers to the "potentially transformative, if at times dangerous, power of transgression" (p. 14), runs up against much of the ancient Jewish and early Christian interpretation of this biblical narrative. What is more, it is an open question whether a traumatic "Promethean" sense of transgression in the pursuit of knowledge is fully applicable to the reading of the Eden narrative. With the moral connotations to transgression in the Eden narrative and its interpretation history in mind, one ends up with an "evil conscience" of humankind in the case of Adam and Eve, and with a more neutral, cognitive sense of "reality testing" in the pursuit of knowledge in the case of Prometheus.

In sum, the psycho-analytical lense of this article may be thought-provoking and provide some new theoretical reflection, but a completely convincing argument for an "Eden complex" should have been more ambitiously cross-disciplinary, also involving more of biblical studies and possibly other typologies of the Eden narrative in comparative respects. In the present form, it stands as an interesting hypothesis with some critical merits, but it does not completely convince me as a reviewer.

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