Sin and Death in Genesis 3[1]

Hiraku Kumon

1. Introduction

The story of the Fall has posed some difficulties for commentators. There are some oddities in the narrative that have drawn the attention of commentators. One of the issues that leads to this conclusion is the following verse:

Gen 2:17

וּמֵעֵץ הַדַּעַת טוֹב וָרָע לֹא תֹאכַל מִמֶּנּוּ כִּי בְּיוֹם אֲכָלְךָ מִמֶּנּוּ מוֹת תָּמוּת

but of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil you shall not eat, for in the day that you eat of it you shall surely die." (ESV)

The problem is as follows; despite God's warning, physical death was not the consequence from eating from the tree. Was, then, the snake correct in claiming that eating from the tree will not result in death (Gen 3:4)? The present article attempts to solve this problem by attempting to show how the story of the fall can be a unity by reconstructing how the original readers would have understood the text. It hypothesizes that many of the so-called problems may have arisen from modern day notions of *sin*,

---

death, and *life* rather than those of the authors. Some of these problems may be solved by re-constructing ancient thought patterns by correlating patterns of usage in the Hebrew Bible, and by applying them to our reading of the story of the Garden of Eden. I begin by briefly outlining some recent advances in linguistics, and reconstructing the Hebrew understanding of SIN and DEATH (Henceforth, the small caps will be used to refer to the concept of sin in a language neutral manner). Then I outline Biblical Hebrew concepts of SIN and DEATH, and finally show how these concepts are linked in the Fall narrative and how they help to make the Fall a more readable coherent story.

2. Reconstructing SIN, and Reading the Fall as a Unity

Our idea of SIN influences our reading of the Fall narrative. Before we address the Fall narrative, it is important to understand how meaning operates in abstract words like sin. I do this by introducing Cross-Linguistic Semantics and Frame Semantics.

2a. Cross-Linguistic Semantics

Understanding a foreign language must include a process of defamiliarizing oneself of the meanings of one's own language and becoming familiar with the meanings of another language. This is true above all in abstract lexemes. Bilingual studies and cross-linguistic studies have shown that abstract lexemes (*friend, revenge* etc.) of a language have less correspondences in other languages than concrete lexemes (*mountain, hand* etc.).[2] Consider the Japanese abstract word, *amae*. Even though the meaning of the word is familiar to a person fluent in Japanese, there is no corresponding word in English. Proposals such as "play baby", "coax", "act spoilt" seem to capture aspects of *amae* but they do not entirely correspond in meaning.[3] The proposed

---

[2] See: Annette M. B. De Groot, "Bilingual Lexical Representation: A Closer Look at Conceptual Representations" in *Orthography, Phonology, Morphology, and Meaning*, ed. Ram Frost and Leonard Katz (Amsterdam: Elsevier Science Publishers B. V, 1992), 392., and Cliff Goddard and Anna Wierzbicka, *Words and Meaning: Lexical Semantics across Domains, Languages, and Cultures* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), 208.

[3] For an array of proposed glosses, see Anna Wierzbicka, *Understanding Cultures through Their Key Words: English, Russian, Polish, German, and Japanese* (Oxford: Oxford

---

translations color *amae* with negative connotations, even though *amae* is not necessarily negative. This difficulty in construing a positive meaning to the idea of *amae* in English illustrates the difficulty of describing concepts in foreign languages; there is no neat one to one cross-linguistic correspondence between lexemes. Moreover, if short-cuts are made by using the closest word or phrase, it may lead the mind to avenues of thought that are not implied in the original language. Each language captures different aspects of experiences of the world, and colors it in its own particular way. It follows that the first step to understanding foreign concepts is to gain insight into one's own language and the habits of thought that this language entails.[4] The dangers of the influence of English (rather than Biblical Hebrew) applies also to the Garden of Eden narrative. Our own native word *sin* can guide the mind to an English avenue that is not implied in the Hebrew.

2b. Frame Semantics

According to cognitive semantics, words are not containers of neatly packed knowledge, but are rather described as points of access to structured knowledge.[5] This structured knowledge of the world is called a **frame**. The meaning of a word should not simply be represented by what seems central to its meaning, but also by its frame. For instance, the words *coast* and *shore* both refer to a strip of land adjacent to the sea. However, it would be erroneous to conclude that the meanings of the two words are the same. Indeed, consideration of the physical background (i.e. the frame) of the two words shows that there are differences in the meaning of the words; *coast* assumes that it is the perspective of a person looking from the land out towards the sea, while *shore*

University Press, 1997), 238-242.

[4] The idea of the habits of language assumes a particular standpoint in the problem of linguistic relativity. I take a position that although languages do not determine how one thinks, they *influence* thought. Such a position is unavoidable given recent cross-linguistic studies of abstract lexemes (For instance, see Wierzbicka, *Understanding Cultures through Their Key Words*).

[5] Vyvyan Evans and Melanie Green. *Cognitive Linguistics: An Introduction* (Mahwah: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, Publishers, 2006), 221.

assumes that it is the perspective of a person looking from the sea towards the land.[6] Thus for *coast* and *shore*, it is not the reference (a strip of land adjacent to the sea), but the frame (in this case, the viewpoint) that distinguishes between the two meanings. Cognitive semantics conceives meaning at this structural level, where the relationship between the central and the frame together constitute the meaning.

The idea of frames is not restricted to lexemes with physical reference. Abstract lexemes can also be described through the idea of frames; for instance, the case of *disappointment*:

> Disappointment is the way somebody feels who had wanted something to happen, who had reason to believe that it was going to happen, but who has found out that it wasn't going to happen. In order for us to have an understanding of these words, we have to have experienced such feelings as wanting, expecting, etc., and we also have to understand the characteristic historical features of the associated scenes.[7]

According to this definition, the frame for *disappointment* consists of four stages: 1) Wanting something to happen, 2) Having reason to believe it would happen, 3) Finding out it would not happen, 4) Feeling something bad. This frame should be distinguished from the **scene**, that is, the total experience of somebody who is disappointed. If we imagine the totality of all experiences that someone has in his experience of *disappointment*, there is much more than simply wanting something, believing that it was going to happen, finding out that it would not happen, and then feeling bad. For instance, there may have been a cause for someone wanting something; a girl may have waved candy in front of a boy's face, shortly before eating it for herself. This cause that leads to wanting, however, is not included in the frame of

---

[6] Ibid., 229.

[7] Charles J. Fillmore, "Scenes-and-frames Semantics," in *Linguistic Structures Processing*, Fundamental Studies in Computer Science vol. 5. ed. Antonio Zampolli (Amsterdam: North-Holland, 1977), 55-81.

disappointment. That is, English *disappointment* directs little attention to the agent who causes it, because not all *disappointment* has an agent that causes it. Moreover, imagine that the boy quickly got over his feeling of *disappointment*. This scene of recovery is a possible stage after *disappointment*, but it is not part of its frame, because not all *disappointment* is followed by recovery. On the other hand, "wanting something to happen" is always a part of disappointment, as there is no *disappointment* without a longing. Thus we must distinguish between a scene and the frame of a word; a word (and its frame) can place boundaries onto a scene, instructing our mind to think so far, but no further. Furthermore, a word forces the mind to see the scene in a very specific way; it forces the mind to ignore some things, and pay attention to others. If we return to *disappointment*, the definition above does not include the short moment of perplexity that precedes the bad feeling of disappointment. This brief experience of perplexity is irrelevant in English; this could be proved by correlating real-life usages of the word *disappointment*, and showing that the idea of perplexity does not co-occur in the context of the word *disappointment*, at least in a frequency as high as the idea of wanting something, believing in it, and finding out otherwise. On the other hand, the elements that a frame gives prominence to in a scene are very specific. For instance, *disappointment* is always a feeling and only a feeling; examination of the contexts of usage reveals that the word co-occurs with words for feeling, and not, for example, with words for thinking. One "*feels* disappointed", not "*thinks* disappointed". It is true, that people can describe themselves as *disappointed*, even if they don't *feel* anything. Yet this is beside the point, because as soon as this person says he is *disappointed*, he implies that he *feels* something through the use of language. In summary, the frame instructs the mind on **how to think** about experiences, bounding the scene, and organizing the scene by attracting particular attention to certain aspects of a scene and by silencing other aspects of a scene.

Different languages have slightly different meanings in abstract words, because each language gives different instructions about how to think through a scene. If we return to Japanese *amae*, the fact that it cannot be translated satisfactorily into English can be explained as a result of Japanese having a different way of thinking

about the same scene. English does not have a word that makes people think about interactions between people as an interaction between a superior who takes care for an inferior, and of the inferior feeling safe as a result of this protection.[8] If a Japanese and an English person witnessed the same scene of a woman acting with *amae* towards her husband, the Japanese person would be able to describe the scene as *amae*, while the English man is perplexed as he does not know how to think about the scene; the scene cannot be structured by any English words, and the English man is left to approximate the scene with derogatory phrases like "acting spoilt". In order to overcome cultural barriers, it is necessary to uncover the ways of thinking, that is, the frame of words in other languages.

2c. The Biblical Hebrew Way of Thinking About SIN

The findings from linguistics discussed above are helpful when thinking about SIN in the Hebrew Bible. The whole way of thinking (i.e. the frame) of SIN should be captured in our definition, rather than simply a point in a series of events. In this regard, Kiuchi's study of *ḥāṭā* and *ḥāṭṭā't* is a major advance in the study of these lexemes.[9] The study centers around the usages of *ḥāṭā* and *ḥāṭṭā't* in Lev 4–5, but also expands to contexts outside legal literature. I will not attempt to recite his argument here, but I will show that elements of this understanding can be applied to the fall narrative, and that Kiuchi's definition is strongly supported by how the fall narrative is narrated; we may go beyond the intuitive judgement that the narrative is related to *ḥāṭā* and

---

[8] For a more complete definition, see Wierzebicka, *Understanding Cultures*, 238-242.

[9] Nobuyoshi Kiuchi, *A Study of ḥāṭā and ḥāṭṭā't in Leviticus 4–5* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2003). Trevaskis has written a critique of Kiuchi's monograph in which he argues that there are serious logical errors in Kiuchi's analysis of Lev 5 (Leigh M. Trevaskis, "On a Recent "Existential Translation of *ḥāṭā*,'" *VT* 59 (2009): 313-319). However, the so-called logical errors he identifies are not as serious as he claims at one point of his article (ibid., 316), and merely consists of a different interpretation of Lev 5 (as he himself seems to acknowledge, see ibid., 319). Moreover, the article argues that there is no evidence for Kiuchi's interpretation of Lev. 5 (ibid.) but fails to mention Kiuchi's reasoning for his interpretation of Lev 5:1-4, that seems to be strong evidence for his interpretation (see Kiuchi, *A Study of ḥāṭā and ḥāṭṭā't in Leviticus 4–5*, 11-12).

ḥāṭṭā't in one way or another. Kiuchi's study is groundbreaking in that it demonstrates that *ḥāṭā* and *ḥāṭṭā't* are abstract lexemes that go beyond the English word *sin* in that the Biblical Hebrew way of thinking focuses on "hiding oneself".[10] He demonstrates this by examining various usages of *ḥāṭā'* and *ḥāṭṭā't*, showing that the majority of the contexts of usages are best understood to have a component of spiritual self-hiding.[11] It should be noted that the difference between English SIN and Biblical Hebrew SIN is not necessarily a difference in scene, but a difference in what aspects of the scene are given salience, and how the scene is bounded.

Below is what I believe to be Kiuchi's definition, if adapted to our two semantic principles outlined above; I juxtapose a definition of English *sin* for the sake of contrast:

ḥāṭā'

A person (X) wants to do something contrary to what another person (Y) wants. **X hides himself** from himself, from Y, and from what Y wants, and consequently does what he wants to do. Now, X is not like he was before. He typically thinks "I am not bad".

sin

God wants people not to do something (Z), but a person **does** this something.

OED defines *sin* (verb) as "to commit sin" and defines *sin* (noun) as "an act which is regarded as a transgression of the divine law and an offence against God". The

---

[10] Even a cursory reflection on the use of *ḥāṭṭā't* as an inner drive in Gen 4:7 shows that there is a psychological element in *ḥāṭṭā't*, that is not present in English *sin*. See Kiuchi's monograph for more details.

[11] This paper focuses on *ḥāṭā* that focuses on spiritual self-hiding. *ḥāṭṭā't* has the same frame of reference, but more often focuses on the resultant state of self-hiding, but also has a usage in Gen 4:7 that animates *ḥāṭṭā't* and thereby focuses on the inner drive of an individual. At the very least, it is clear that there is more of a psychological meaning to *ḥāṭā* and *ḥāṭṭā't* than English *sin*.

background discourse behind English SIN would seem much shorter than Biblical Hebrew SIN. Rarely has *sin* got to do with the inner person; its concern is with the action. The term is conduct oriented, not existential. Yet there is a stint of religiousness in the term, as *sin* is always an offense against God's laws, whereas *ḥāṭā'* and *ḥāṭṭā't* can be against man (Gen 43:9).

ḥāṭā' is a way of thinking through and analyzing experience, just as the English verb *sin*. Indeed, both verbs can be used to describe the same scene. However, there are some notable differences. In order to understand the difference, it would be pertinent to introduce the idea of **focus**. If we return to the difference between *coast* and *shore*, both of these had the same reference. This reference is, physically, the focus of the scene. The frame, or the background (if we use a visual expression), however, was different, and consisted of the difference between the two words. In other words, the frame is a background for something that is in focus. The same mechanics underlie abstract words. In the case of *sin*, the idea of *doing* (in bold above) is in focus, and the rest of the definition forms the frame (or background) for this action.

How, then, do English and Biblical Hebrew differ in their concepts of SIN? The scene that these words describe are the same; both can be used to describe a scene where somebody works against the will of another. However, the two words differ radically in three areas:

1) *Sin* focuses on an action, whereas *ḥāṭā'* focuses on something that people do to their inner being, concurrent to their acts of transgression.

2) The frame of *ḥāṭā'* has different boundaries to the frame for *sin*. Its scene stretches further back than English *sin*, starting from wanting, and prolongs past the act itself, including the end condition of the wrongdoer (X is not like he was before). Moreover, what constitutes *ḥāṭā'* is generally the inner psychological flow in the scene (wanting, hiding oneself, becoming something different), whereas *sin* is concerned with actions (both physical and mental) and directs relatively less attention to the psychology of the perpetrator.

3) English *sin* is always against God, where *ḥāṭā'* can also be against other humans (e.g. Gen 43:9), although the vast majority is *ḥāṭā'* against God.

While there are substantial differences in the two lexemes, the meaning of *ḥāṭā'* is not beyond the reach of English speakers; it is merely the case that we cannot understand *ḥāṭā'* by talking about English *sin* because they are quite different concepts. In fact, a consideration of a scene in which someone goes against someone else's wishes precipitates these very concepts. People make excuses for transgressing, people do not want to see the person they are disobeying, and there is a noticeable difference in the person after they have acted, and they stubbornly deny that they are wrong. The only difference between us and the speakers of Biblical Hebrew is that the latter stringed together these observations and turned it into a word through repeated reference to this chain of events, while in English, the same did not happen. While English has words that roughly correspond to parts of the scene (e.g. *excuse*) it by and large must use a string of words to describe *ḥāṭā'* (e.g. a mother saying to her guilty looking child "what are you hiding from me?"). It follows that our definition of *ḥāṭā'* cannot be a simple equation between *ḥāṭā'* and *sin*, but rather the definition must be a long description of the chain of events, as presented above.

It is pertinent at this point to return to the grand idea in Cognitive Linguistics. Words are not neatly packed pieces of information, but are a point of access to structured knowledge. In other words, the structured knowledge does not simply belong to a single word; a word is only an instance of the structured knowledge being manifested. There are other possible outlets for this structured knowledge. For instance, if we return to Japanese *amae*, the meaning can be manifested through the lexeme itself, but also through action; knowledge of the concept leads to non-linguistic physical action. It could also be implied in the way we tell stories about a scene, even if we do not use the word itself. In sum, a single word does not have monopoly over the meaning, but rather, it shares the structured knowledge with other outlets of meaning. The structured knowledge is the most fundamental unit, and words are only a potential outlet of these knowledge structures. The same may be said for *ḥāṭā'*; we expect the chain of

events to be manifested outside the word, in stories.

2d. The Fall as a Story of *ḥāṭā*ʾ

Abstract lexemes are outlets of habitual ways of thinking about scenes. I have outlined above in the definition of *ḥāṭā*ʾ and *ḥaṭṭāʾt* what the way of thinking assumed in *ḥāṭā*ʾ and *ḥaṭṭāʾt* was. It is therefore not surprising that this same way of thinking is exhibited in stories, even when the word itself is never used in the story. One of these stories is the story of the fall of man. The chain of events are reflected in the following way:

*ḥāṭā*ʾ and *ḥaṭṭāʾt*	The Story of the Fall
1. A person (X) wants to do something	Gen 3:6 (The woman's desire to eat from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil.)
2. contrary to what another person (Y) wants	Gen 2:16-17 (The LORD God's command to the man not to eat from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil.)
3. X hides himself from himself, from Y, and from what Y wants	Gen 3:2-6 (Beginning with a "dim understanding" [12] of the command, continuing with a switch in focus from the LORD God to the tree, and culminating in an action of eating that brings with it completion of self-hiding.)
4. and consequently does what he wants to do	Gen 3:6 (The Man and Woman eat from the tree.)
5. Now, X is not like he was before. He typically thinks "I am not bad".	Gen 3:7-13, 20 (Realization of nakedness, a new found fear of God, lack of recognition of one's own guilt and even of punishment.)

---

[12] Kiuchi, *A Study of ḥāṭā and ḥaṭṭāʾt in Leviticus 4–5,* 67-69.

The correspondence between *ḥāṭā*ʾ and *ḥaṭṭāʾt* on the one hand, and the story of the Fall on the other is self-evident. The fact that the way SIN is portrayed in the story is quite typical of the Hebrew Bible has already been noted by Gordon Wenham, who calls it a "paradigm of sin" and further claims that the story explains "what constitutes sin and what sin's consequences are."[13] However, it is possible to make a bolder claim, that this is "*sin* and its consequences" in terms of English, but that it is SIN itself in terms of Hebrew, because Hebrew SIN includes the consequences in its meaning. Thus the story does not include hiding and finger pointing by chance; in fact, this is central to *ḥāṭā*ʾ, and to see it as a peripheral part of the story may be to miss the point of the story. Each part of the story is indispensable to understanding *ḥāṭā*ʾ and therefore the story is a unit, and not an amalgam of different stories as Westermann may claim. For instance, Westermann claims that the name "the tree of the knowledge of good and evil" was added later in Gen 2:9, 2:17. He bases his claim on the fact that the tree is never called by this name in Gen 3.[14] But the view that the story is a unity seems more natural given the meaning of *ḥāṭā*ʾ; that is, it is important to note that the woman fails to name the tree, because this serves to portray the process of her hiding from God's command.

The rearrangement of the Fall narrative in terms of *ḥāṭā*ʾ above illustrates that different cultures may have surprisingly different paths of thought. Where English *sin* pays little attention on the way the person changes through the process, Hebrew *ḥāṭā*ʾ places much focus on this. The question, then, is not "why does the narrative not conform to how English thinks about SIN?" but "given this is a typical Hebrew SIN narrative, how did the author utilize the idea of SIN on this occasion?" I aim in what follows to give an answer to one of the significances of the way SIN is portrayed in the Fall; the idea of death.

3. Adam's SIN and DEATH

The historical prototype of SIN and DEATH as portrayed in the Fall plays an

---

[13] Gordon J. Wenham, *Genesis 1–15* (WBC; Texas: Word Books Publisher, 1987), 90.
[14] Claus Westermann, *Genesis 37-50* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Publishing House, 1982), 223.

important role in theology because of its privileged position both literarily and historically. In terms of its literary position in the Pentateuch, it appears towards the beginning and consists of background knowledge for what follows. In historical terms, it helps us to understand our current status in the world as descendants of Adam and Eve. However, there is not yet a consensus on the role of DEATH, particularly in solving the problem of what is meant by DEATH in the Fall.

3a. Previous Solutions

Interpretations concerning death in the Fall narrative have typically clustered around Gen 2:17 and Gen 3:19 for obvious reasons:

Gen 2:17

וּמֵעֵץ הַדַּעַת טוֹב וָרָע לֹא תֹאכַל מִמֶּנּוּ כִּי בְּיוֹם אֲכָלְךָ מִמֶּנּוּ מוֹת תָּמוּת

"but of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil you shall not eat from it, for on the day that you eat from it you will surely die." (my translation)

Gen 3:19

בְּזֵעַת אַפֶּיךָ תֹּאכַל לֶחֶם עַד שׁוּבְךָ אֶל־הָאֲדָמָה כִּי מִמֶּנָּה לֻקָּחְתָּ כִּי־עָפָר אַתָּה וְאֶל־עָפָר תָּשׁוּב

"By the sweat of your face you will eat bread, until you return to the ground, for from it you were taken; for you are dust, and to dust you will return." (my translation)

The last phrase of Gen 3:19 is clearly talking about physical death; humans die and rot, eventually becoming part of the dust. The question is the relationship between this phrase and the earlier phrase in Gen 2:17. Is Gen 3:19 to be read as the fulfilment of the warning? Or does the fact that the couple did not die "on the day" prevent us from interpreting the phrase as the fulfilment of the warning in Gen 2:17? Commentators have proposed two kinds of solutions to this problem.

Solution 1: Genesis 2:17 has been mistranslated

A representative example of an interpretation in line with the first type of solution is that made by Speiser. This type of solution claims that Gen 2:17 has often been mistranslated, and that in actual fact, it should be translated "on the moment you eat of it, you shall be doomed to die."[15] This translation would fit better in the story, as it fits well with Gen 3:19 that only guarantees death without offering a date for it. Such an interpretation would be convenient for understanding the Fall narrative, but grammatically it is weak. Speiser says nothing in terms of the grammar to justify reading the infinitive absolute in the way that he does. Furthermore, the major grammars of Biblical Hebrew are unanimously against him.[16] Moreover, if his interpretation is based on his understanding of the verb *mwt*, he must present evidence that "to become mortal" is a sense of the verb.[17]

A similar line of thought has been explored by Hamilton. Hamilton claims "the verse is underscoring the certainty of death, not its chronology."[18] He supports his claim with 1 Kings 2:37 where Solomon utters to Shimei "on the day (*b^eyōm*) you go out.... you shall surely die" and yet the execution is not fulfilled on the day. That is, he claims that pragmatically it does not mean a literal day. This, however, raises questions. Can Solomon be a point of comparison with the LORD God, even when the latter is substantially more powerful? Again, does not the Fall narrative hinge on particular events that took place as soon as the couple ate from the tree? Even though Hamilton is correct in examining the pragmatics of 1Kings 2:37 and recognizing that in this context

---

[15] E. A. Speiser, *Genesis* (AB; New York: Doubleday & Company, 1964), 17.

[16] Joüon-Muraoka (JM§123e) Gesenius (GKC§113n), and Waltke (*IBHS*§35.3.1f) have given "you shall surely die" as an example of cases where the infinitive absolute strengthens the idea of the verb in their respective grammars. In face of opposition from the major grammars, Speiser's view is impossible to defend on grammatical grounds.

[17] *HALOT* and *DCH* give the sense "to become mortal" occurring in the Garden narrative and Ps 82:7. This sense is based on Morgenstern's article (see Julian Morgenstern "The Mythological Background of Psalm 82" in *HUCA* 14 no.1 (1939): 72-76). However, the sense "to become mortal" is not convincing in both passages. In the case of the Fall, Morgenstern's sense "to become mortal" is invented in order to solve the problem that this present article is dealing with, and does not derive from sound analysis of the OT concept of DEATH.

[18] Hamilton, *Genesis Chapters 1–17*, 172.

the literalness is irrelevant, this is not an equally valid argument in the case of the Fall. Each context must be considered for its own sake. Thus the first type of solutions is unsatisfactory.

Solution 2: "Death" in Genesis 2:17 is not primarily physical

Proponents of the second view include Leupold,[19] Collins,[20] Wenham,[21] Calvin.[22] These commentators would point to the events that happened "on the day" that the couple ate as the reference of death. This, of course, is not a physical death. It is rather the end of one way of life, and a beginning of another way of life. This view can usefully be split into two further subcategories.

The first is one held by Leupold and Collins, who see death as taking place as soon as the pair ate from the tree (Gen 3:6). This is death of a certain attitude towards God. The couple became incapable of acting towards God as they had before they had eaten from the tree. Noteworthy is the fact that in this case, the agent of death is the humans. It is not God who brought about death as an executioner, but it is the humans who brought it about for themselves, just as if they had killed themselves. Death is a reflex of eating from the tree. In order to strengthen this view, it is necessary to show that death (*mwt*) can mean a non-physical death, and also to try and specify what this death is. In other words, we must go beyond an opportunistic parallel with the way English talks about relationships as dead or alive.[23] English talks about relationships being dead or alive, and relationships can be killed and revived, but this is by no means a universal: for instance, Japanese does not talk about relationships in this manner. Biblical Hebrew also seems not to evince such a metaphor.

---

[19] H. C. Leupold, *Exposition of Genesis* vol. 1(Michigan: Baker Book House, 1977), 128.

[20] C. John Collins, *Did Adam and Eve Really Exist?* (Illinois: Crossway, 2011), 115.

[21] Wenham, *Genesis 1–15*, 83.

[22] John Calvin, *Genesis* trans. John King (London: Banner of Truth Trust, 1965), 127.

[23] English has a conceptual metaphor: A RELATIONSHIP IS ALIVE. A conceptual metaphor "is defined as understanding one conceptual domain in terms of another conceptual domain" Zoltán Kövecses, *Metaphor: A Practical Introduction*, 2nd ed. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), 4.

The second subcategory is a view held by Wenham and Calvin who see death as expulsion from the Garden (Gen 3:23). The logic behind this is that life outside the garden is alienation from God and is not true life. This transition from the first state to life outside is termed "death". It should be noted that apart from the reference of death, another subtle shift has occurred; the agent of death is now God as He brings death, that is, expulsion, onto man. Physical death (Gen 3:19) is only a necessary side-effect. Of course, expulsion is an important element of the Fall, but the problem with this view is in equating the concept of expulsion with death. Is there any evidence that the verb *mwt* is used to refer to expulsion? The proponents of this second view seem to lack any evidence in this area. The simplest solution concerning the reference of "you will surely die" seems to actually lie somewhere between the two, as I will attempt to show in what follows.

3b. Death from a Divine Perspective

Previous solutions have faltered, either because they opportunistically equated English ideas of DEATH with OT DEATH, or because a certain OT idea of death is proposed without giving evidence that such a sense exists. In what follows, I aim to show that another sense of death exists in OT, and that this sense best fits into Gen 3:16. This sense can be defined as follows:

DIVINE PERSPECTIVE ON DEATH

God wants people to do something (Y), but someone (X) does not do Y. **When this happens, God thinks: X has died.**

Important in this definition is that people do not necessarily think that they have died. This death is not the physical death that humanity is familiar with; rather, it is death from a divine perspective. This cause and effect between transgression and death seems to be assumed in many places within the Hebrew Bible, leading to the hypothesis that this chain of events was a part of Biblical Hebrew thought. This meaning seems not to be the most prominent meaning of Biblical Hebrew *mwt* but it seems to be a Biblical

concept that is constructed by the authors of the Hebrew Bible. The fact that such a way of thinking about "death" does not exist in English does not constitute an argument against its existence in Hebrew. In order to argue that a different sense exists in Hebrew, it is important to show that there are multiple contexts in which this meaning leads to the simplest reading of the text. If multiple texts have the same context and seem to assume the same frame that English *death* does not fit, then it is possible to suggest that this is an indigenous sense that must be recognized as a sense existent in Hebrew but alien to English.

The clearest support for this concept is from Lev 18:5.

Lev 18:5

וּשְׁמַרְתֶּם אֶת־חֻקֹּתַי וְאֶת־מִשְׁפָּטַי אֲשֶׁר יַעֲשֶׂה אֹתָם הָאָדָם וָחַי בָּהֶם אֲנִי יְהוָה

You shall therefore keep my statutes and my rules; if a person does them, he shall live[24] by them: I am the LORD. (ESV)

What is meant by the idea of "live" (*ḥyh*)? Does a person who obeys live forever? Or does it mean "sustain life" until eventual death?[25] Or is it, as some[26] have suggested and I also will suggest, an OT concept that those who obey God are alive in God's eyes? The first view is difficult to prove or disprove, but it seems difficult to read Leviticus as being particularly interested in eternal life. The second view presents even more difficulties. The penalty of disobeying God in Lev 18 is not physical death, but the *krt* penalty (Lev 18:29). Quite clearly, if the implication for disobeying is not physical death, then the life being assumed in Lev 18:5 must mean more than physical life; the person who disobeys is not "alive" while physically living under the *krt* penalty. Even though

the death penalty is invoked in other sections of Leviticus, the fact it is not invoked in Lev 18 shows that DEATH in Leviticus may not be limited to physical death, and that there is a DEATH that humans can suffer while physically living; a death that is contingent on obedience to God's commands.

A second passage that is most simply interpretable through our concept is Prov 12:28.

Prov 12:28

בְּאֹרַח־צְדָקָה חַיִּים וְדֶרֶךְ נְתִיבָה אַל־מָוֶת

In the path of righteousness is life, and in its pathway there is no death. (ESV)

Some textual problems need addressing. First, *derek n°tībâ* has been judged as meaningless.[27] This may not be the case, as *n°tībâ* may be a specific reference concerning the type of road, and thus serve to specify *derek* (see Judg 5:6).[28] Second, the use of *'al* with a noun is rare, and according to Fox, when it is appended to a noun, it normally implies a modal nuance.[29] Thus Fox suggests emending to *'el*. Similarly LXX and Targum read *'el*. The use of *'al*, however, may be wider than Fox believes. It can be used as a nominal "nothing" (Job 24:45) and it can also be paired with a nominal predicate without a modal meaning (Prov 31:4).[30] Therefore it is not inconceivable that Prov 12:28 is a lone example of *'al* being used as simple negation with a nominal as seems to be the readings of the Massoretes.[31] In any case, life and death are contrasted in these verses, and correlated to conduct. If we keep the massoretic vowels, this life is characterized by "no-death"; in other words, "life" here does not simply mean "a good

---

[24] See GKC §76i for the root *ḥyh.*

[25] Proponents of this view include John E. Hartley, *Leviticus* (WBC; Dallas: Word Books, 1992), 293.

[26] See for example Nobuyoshi Kiuchi, *Leviticus* (AOTC; Nottingham: Apollos, 2007), 332. Wenham's position lies somewhere between Kiuchi and Hartley (Gordon Wenham, *The Book of Leviticus* [NICOT; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1979], 253).

[27] Michael Fox, *Proverbs 10–31* (New Haven: Yale University, 2009), 560.

[28] Mark Smith "Words and their Worlds," in *Biblical Lexicology: Hebrew and Greek: Semantics, Exegesis, Translation*, ed. Ebhard Bons, Jan Joosten and Regine Hunziker-Rodewald (Berlin: DeGruyter, 2015), 19-29.

[29] Fox, *Proverbs 10–31*, 560.

[30] This is coherent with the fact that *'al* is often used with imperfects rather than jussives (GKC §107p).

[31] See also GKC §152g that suggests this is a compound noun.

life". It is best analyzed by our formula above, that obedience leads to "life" in a dimension invisible to humans. Moreover it is "on the path" that there is life, and not "at the goal of the path". We expect "at the end of the path is life", if a physical life/death were of concern, as in Prov 14:12; 16:25.

Furthermore, Prov 7:26-27 uses the concept of DEATH to describe what happens when one disobeys conventional wisdom by being enticed by the strange woman:

Prov 7:26-27

כִּי־רַבִּים חֲלָלִים הִפִּילָה וַעֲצֻמִים כָּל־הֲרֻגֶיהָ
דַּרְכֵי שְׁאוֹל בֵּיתָהּ יֹרְדוֹת אֶל־חַדְרֵי־מָוֶת

For many are the slain she has toppled,[32] and numerous are all those killed by her. Her house is the ways of Sheol, descending to the chambers of death. (my translation)

Quite clearly, the strange woman is not a murderer; rather, it is her seduction into extra-marital affairs that is being referred to as murderous. But who sees murder? The context suggests that the pair will not be discovered, as the strange woman implies they will be safe (Prov 7:19-20). Moreover, the one who commits adultery presumes himself to be alive. DEATH is not discerned by any of the partakers. Only the Biblical author seems to see death. We must assume that those enticed by her into her house are in that moment descending into death, in an invisible dimension, as it is not the punishment being referred to but the action of adultery itself. Furthermore, the passage also assumes a context of breaking a commandment that prohibits adultery. The couple probably have hidden themselves from the divine commandments, so that they do not even recognize that they are transgressing (Prov 7:14). Only those who acknowledge the divine commandment can perceive this DEATH. Thus it fits within the definition of DEATH proposed above, with the meaning and context conforming to our definition; transgression of divine commands leads to God thinking that somebody has died. The idea of a non-physical death is typical in Proverbs.[33] The question is

---

[32] Reading here an unmarked relative clause.

not whether it is non-physical, for it is unquestionably so; it is a question of how to define this death. Waltke suggests that this non-physical life is characterized by the destruction of a relationship with God.[34] Although this observation is ultimately correct, it is also important to recognize that the context of this type of DEATH does not raise the idea of relationships with God. In other words, it is unlikely that the frame itself includes the idea of relationships, for it is the English mind that conceptualizes RELATIONSHIPS in terms of LIFE and DEATH, and it is this that has led scholars to link OT sense of DEATH with relationships. Of course, our definition of DEATH entails the end of a relationship too, but this is not a salient feature of this death; the point is not that death is the end of a relationship with God, but rather that to God, a person who does not obey is dead, even though people perceive this person as alive. The idea of DEATH is different from a divine perspective to that from a human perspective. Such a difference is by no means trivial. The things that lead people to stray from God's will are literally instruments of death with real threats to life, as the description of the strange woman shows. Things that seem desirable and harmless to people can in fact be very dangerous from a divine perspective.

The idea of a divine perspective of death may be explicated further by recognizing that there are hints of ideas about the afterlife in Proverbs; the path of life leads upwards, contrary to the other path that leads to Sheol (Prov 15:24). Elsewhere, in the Psalms, David describes how he cannot escape the divine presence, even if he hypothetically descended into Sheol (Ps 139:8). In such a world view, physical death may be less of an important matter compared to modern day cultures that increasingly deny the afterlife. It is therefore natural that in divine eyes, the defining moment is not physical death but rather the moment that people decide their own destiny through their attitude to divine commandments. This world view of DEATH, reconstructed by correlating meanings and contexts of DEATH is one of the senses of DEATH in the OT; when the scene is transgression followed by a non-physical death, it is our sense of

---

[33] See for a summary Bruce K. Waltke, *The Book of Proverbs: Chapters 1–15* (NICOT; Grand Rapids: William B Eerdmans, 2004), 104-107.

[34] Ibid., 105.

death that is involved. It is a sense not present in Present day English, and therefore we must defamiliarize ourselves with our own semantic frames and venture into the Biblical Hebrew frame.

3c. Reconstructing a Hebrew Reading of the Fall Story

The sense of DEATH described above can be applied to the Fall. The command is given in Gen 2:17 that they should not eat from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, because on the day they eat from it they will surely die. The context and meaning is wholly coherent with the meaning of DEATH proposed above, and very similar to Lev 18:5. There is therefore no need to retranslate Gen 2:17 in order to create a more coherent story as has been done by some commentators. This view places too much faith in translation, failing to recognize that some concepts like DEATH are highly culturally sensitive and cannot be translated. The solution must be sought in the idea of non-physical death. This is not simply the death of a relationship, but rather the death of man from a divine perspective at the moment a man strays from a divine commandment. How, then, should we read Gen 3:19?

Gen 3:19

בְּזֵעַת אַפֶּיךָ תֹּאכַל לֶחֶם עַד שׁוּבְךָ אֶל־הָאֲדָמָה כִּי מִמֶּנָּה לֻקָּחְתָּ כִּי־עָפָר אַתָּה וְאֶל־עָפָר תָּשׁוּב

"By the sweat of your face you will eat bread, until you return to the ground, for from it you were taken; for you are dust, and to dust you will return." (my translation)

First, it is interesting that the Hebrew root *mwt* is not used in this section, even though physical disintegration is clearly being referred to. This may be in order not to confuse the two different concepts, particularly as this was humanity's first encounter with DEATH. The action that led immediately to spiritual death seems also to have been followed by a divine ordination of physical death as a punishment. But there are more direct links here to our concept of DEATH. The last two phrases give a reason and consequence "for you are dust, and to dust you will return." These two phrases seem to refer respectively to spiritual death and physical death. The first phrase is the symptom

of a change in divine perspective. When the man was first created, he was formed (*yṣr*) and made into a living being (*nepeš ḥayyā*) (Gen 2:7). In Gen 3:19, the same creation is referred to but in a more detached manner. Rather than formed, the man was taken (*lqḥ*) from the ground, and rather than being called a living being, he is now called dust (*'āpār*). This new divine perception forms the basis for the LORD God's ordination of physical disintegration. Such a revised description of man reflects the LORD God's attitude towards man, and perhaps also reflects that to God, the man is already dead. Thus the idea of physical death (as expressed in English *death*) is not unrelated to spiritual death, but rather, they are directly related. This concern with their change in state is echoed in Gen 3:22. Man is now like one of the heavenly beings, something that was not meant to be, and this is used as a reason not to allow continued physical existence.[35] This is implemented through banishment from the garden (Gen 3:23). Interestingly, banishment is not instituted in order to end the relationship between man and God contra Wenham's version[36] of spiritual death; the relationship has already been destroyed. Rather it is the destruction of the relationship between the couple and the LORD that leads to banishment.

The divine perspective contrasts sharply with the view of the couple. The couple seem oblivious of their DEATH, and instead celebrate life:

Gen 3:20

וַיִּקְרָא הָאָדָם שֵׁם אִשְׁתּוֹ חַוָּה כִּי הִוא הָיְתָה אֵם כָּל־חָי

The man called his wife's name Eve, because she was the mother of all living. (ESV)

The name Eve (*ḥawwāh*) is most likely linked to the root for "life", and

---

[35] It should be noted that the root *ḥyh* is used in the sense of physical life here, not the sense of spiritual life as in Lev 18:5. This needs not be a counterargument to what I have proposed above. Rather, as I have argued throughout, it is the context that should be allowed to distinguish senses. In the case here, the context indicates physical life, as nothing about commandments is mentioned in the context, and instead, Gen 3:23 evokes physical death by pointing out that Man was taken from the ground.

[36] Wenham, *Genesis 1–15*, 83.

thereby linked to the explanation of the name in the second half of the verse.[37] This act suggests that there is a level of unawareness of their present situation. Whoever the "living" refers to, whether it is only their children or also includes themselves, there seems to be little prompting in the immediate context that justifies such a name. Collins claims that Adam had seen a hint of mercy in the curses (most likely referring to the curse of the snake), and that this is "likely an expression of faith in the divine words of judgment-and-grace of verses 14-19."[38] But this line of argument seems weak on two counts. First, the promise for defeat on the part of the snake is different from an idea of life. Secondly, there is little in the context that suggests that the couple's attitudes has taken a turn for the better. The verse must be read as a continuation of the couple's changed behavior in Gen 3:7-13. If we adopt this context, there is a deep irony about the naming: the couple are not only oblivious of their new found nature, they also deny it. Although the couple show that they are aware of the problem of life and death, they perceive themselves to be alive, aligning themselves with the lies of the snake that they surely would not die (Gen 3:4). Thus, just as SIN began with a dim understanding of the commandment, it continues by mistrusting and overtly protesting against the LORD's words, and is characterized by a deep divide between divine perspective and human perspective, not least in the idea of DEATH. Indeed, this narrative is not the only place where the distinction is important in exegesis; distinguishing between the two perspectives is important also in interpreting DEATH in Leviticus. If we take DEATH in Leviticus to be DEATH from a divine perspective, then some texts interpreted as talking about corpses may in fact be about physically alive people who have transgressed God's commandments.[39]

It seems pertinent also to make some other observations on the overlap between the Hebrew concepts of SIN and DEATH. If we follow our definitions of these two concepts, SIN and DEATH overlap significantly in the story. Both involve the command not to eat in Gen 2:17, and both refer to the events directly following the eating in Gen 3:6. But while SIN focuses on the couple's self-hiding and the subsequent change in state, DEATH focuses on the change in divine perspective concerning the couple as a result of the change in state. In other words, the Fall narrative intertwines both the divine perspective of events and the human perspective of the events, adding depth to the story that retells how humans became stubbornly rebellious against their God. The symptoms of these concepts are scattered across the narrative; from the description of the changes of the couple (Gen 3:7-13; 20) to the change in divine perception of the couple (Gen 3:16-19; 23-24). Thus these two concepts seem to have had an influence on how the story was written, just as our knowledge of the word *disappointment* influences how we organize our stories about *disappointment*.

4. Conclusion

The present article has aimed to show that oddities that we may recognize in reading the Fall story are illusions made by English thought patterns, and do not derive from the semantics of the Hebrew text. Correlation of the Fall story with other Biblical Hebrew patterns of thought show that the story follows paths of Biblical Hebrew thought that are not immediately replicable in English. Specifically, SIN and DEATH are both foreign concepts that are crucial in structuring the story. If we choose to ignore these concepts and instead assume that English concepts or German concepts or any other native language concepts are the only way to interpret the story, we end up forcing square pegs into round holes. In contrast, the approach of this paper has been to allow the text to speak for itself by correlating its contours with patterns found in other portions of Scripture. It is my hope that by reading the story of the Fall in a way that allows the concepts of SIN and DEATH to play their due indigenous roles, the depth of the story is restored, and thereby our reading more closely approximates the flow of thought intended by the Fall story's author.

(Graduate Student, University of Wisconsin-Madison)

---

[37] The second radical is *waw* rather than *yod*. Williams surveys the various opinions formed because of this oddity, but finally concludes that seeing the name as related to "life" is the most judicious option (A. K. Williams "The Relationship of Gen 3:20 to the Serpent." *ZAW* 89 [1977]: 357-374.).

[38] C. John Collins, "What Happened to Adam and Eve?" *Presbyterion* 27, no.1 (Spring 2001): 31.

[39] See Lev 21:11 and Kiuchi's comment (Kiuchi, *Leviticus*, 391-396).

List of Abbreviations:

AB	Anchor Bible
AOTC	Apollos Old Testament Commentary
DCH	*Dictionary of Classical Hebrew*
ESV	English Standard Version
GKC	*Gesenius' Hebrew Grammar*
HALOT	*The Hebrew and Aramaic Lexicon of the Old Testament*
HUCA	*Hebrew Union College Annual*
IBHS	*An Introduction to Biblical Hebrew Syntax*
JM	*A Grammar of Biblical Hebrew*
NICOT	New International Commentary on the Old Testament
OED	*Oxford English Dictionary*
OT	Old Testament
VT	*Vetus Testamentum*
WBC	Word Biblical Commentary
ZAW	*Zeitschrift für die alttestamentliche Wissenschaft*