

Sin and Death in Genesis 3¹



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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

וּמִעֵץ הַדַּעַת טוֹב וְרָע לֹא תֹאכַל מִמֶּנּוּ כִּי בַיּוֹם 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*,

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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 spoiled" 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.