



relationships disrupted

Gen. 3:7 Then the eyes of both were opened, and they knew that they were naked. And they sewed fig leaves together and made themselves loincloths.
 8 And they heard the sound of God walking in the garden in the cool of the day, and the man and his wife hid themselves from the presence of God among the trees of the garden. 9 *But God called to the man and said, "Where are you?"* 10 *And the man said, "I heard the sound of you in the garden, and I was afraid, because I was naked, and I hid myself."* 11 *God said, "Who told you that you were naked? Have you eaten of the tree of which I commanded you not to eat?"* 12 *The man said, "The woman whom you gave to be with me, she gave me fruit of the tree, and I ate."* 13 *Then God said to the woman, "What is this that you have done?"* The woman said, "The serpent deceived me, and I ate."
 14 *Then God said to the serpent,*
"Because you have done this,
cursed are you above all livestock
and above all beasts of the field;
on your belly you shall go,
and dust you shall eat
all the days of your life.
 15 *I will put enmity between you and the woman,*
and between your offspring and her offspring;
he shall bruise your head,
and you shall bruise his heel." . . .



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ELAINE WAINWRIGHT points to ecological questions we can reflect on when we read Genesis 3:7-15.

The First Reading from the Tenth Sunday in Ordinary Time (Gen 3:9-15) highlights an issue inherent in our lectionaries. Our Scriptures are written predominantly in the form of lengthy narratives or poetry while our lectionary readings tend to be short selections from the Scriptural texts. And it requires a significant literary and theological wisdom to make the selections meaningful. Such wisdom does not seem to have informed the choice of opening verse for the First Reading of the Tenth Sunday in Ordinary Time (Gen 3:9-15). As the fuller text of Gen 3:1-15 makes evident, Gen 3:9 cannot be separated from at least Gen 3: 8 given the connective "and" at the beginning of Gen 3:9; and, narratively, Gen 3:17 provides the broader context for both verses and what follows in Gen 3: 9-15.

These familiar texts have a long history of interpretation. Pope Francis, in *Laudato Si'*, recognises that "biblical texts are to be read in their contexts with an appropriate hermeneutic" (par 67) and the encyclical invites us to use an ecological hermeneutic, in the face of the current degradation of Earth and all its constituents and people.

Pope Francis notes further that "the creation accounts in the book of Genesis contain, in their own symbolic and narrative language, profound teachings about human existence and its historical reality." He goes on to lay

out what he sees as “three fundamental and closely intertwined relationships: with God (the Holy), with our neighbour (the Human) and with the Earth itself (Habitat)” (par 66) (my parenthesis). These three categories give significant lens for an ecological reading of biblical texts.

The immediate literary context for Gen 3:9-15 is verses 7-8. First, the woman and man find that on eating the fruit of the tree in the middle of the garden “their eyes were opened and they knew that they were naked” (Gen 3:7). The actions awaken a new consciousness. They see both the world and each other in a new way – not with the innocence of before but with a knowing that has them recognise their nakedness. Their new knowing also calls for a response, and so they take “fig leaves” from their habitat to function as loincloths – habitat and human function together to seek to restore right relationships.

Norman Habel (*Earth Bible Commentary Series*) says of this new state that they are “no longer ‘simple’ and innocent”. Rather they are “on the way to wisdom”, but Gen 3:8 makes it evident that the journey toward a new wisdom is now treacherous, marked by the experience of estrangement from God (hiding themselves among the trees) and from their naked human bodies (sewing fig leaves together).

We have brought “enmity” between the Earth, its waters and all its resources because we have not respected the right relationships established by God. However this “enmity” could be reversible. The way forward will be challenging and conflictual, but there is hope.

The ecological reader will recognise in the choice made by the man and woman of Gen 3 a violation of the triad of right relationships between habitat, human and holy. This echoes through Gen 3:8–13. Verse 8, for instance, evokes the *sound* of God *walking in the garden in the cool of the day*, a powerful image of right relationship between habitat and holy. In this same context, the human couple hide from the presence of God, using the trees as their camouflage, thus highlighting the rift their actions have caused in that same triad of habitat, human and holy. The conversation which follows between God and the human couple in Gen 3:9-13 widens this rift.

The Holy One begins the conversation, asking the male where he is in the garden, indicating that there has been a break-down in relationships. Habitat is no longer a place of right relationship but of disjuncture. The man is afraid of his nakedness and he hides. He also sets up a cycle of blame as the Holy One questions whether he has broken the boundaries of right relationship by eating what was prohibited. The woman joins the cycle, blaming the serpent. These verses call for significant reflection as we seek to address the spiralling devastation that our choices are causing in our habitat and our responsibility for that devastation.

The harshest language characterising the breakdown of right relationships is directed at the serpent: “Cursed are you” (Gen 3:14). This is confronting language that can alert contemporary ecological readers to the horror of the ecological degradation of our day and to human responsibility for that degradation. How challenging it would be for us to receive as severe a divine critique as that directed to the serpent of Genesis 3. We are responsible for the breakdown of right relationship with so much of our habitat, Earth.

We have contaminated Earth’s waters and brought degradation to much of its land. We have brought “enmity” between the Earth, its waters and all its resources because we, like the serpent, have not respected the right relationships established by God.

However, this “enmity” could be reversible as Gen 3:15 suggests. The way forward will be challenging and conflictual, but there is hope.

Gen 3:9-15 is a “poetic” text evoking new meanings when we read it in new contexts – the contemporary ecological crisis being one of them. Let us take time with this text in our own contexts so that it may open up new meanings and responses for us to the radical challenges of our day, in particular those coming from Earth and Earth creatures. 

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