

Rethinking Adam in the Garden¹

Richard G. Howe, Ph.D.

Genesis 2:15 "Then the Lord God took the man and put him in the Garden to tend and keep it."

I. Introductory Comments

- A. Gen. 2:15 is commonly taken to mean that God's original purpose for man in the garden was to work it and be a steward of it.
- B. I submit that this interpretation is wrong given certain grammatical, exegetical, and theological considerations.
- C. I should like to suggest that Gen. 2:15 says nothing about Adam's responsibility to the garden, but rather, says something about Adam's responsibility before God.²

II. Rethinking the Standard View

- A. The Hebrew word translated 'put' in Gen. 2:15 is different from the Hebrew word translated 'put' in Gen. 2:8.
 - 1. In verse 8, the word for 'put' is the general Hebrew word *sum*.³
 - 2. But in v. 15 there is a different Hebrew word for 'put.'
 - a. It is the word *nuach* meaning 'rest' (from where the name 'Noah' comes).
 - b. Old Testament scholar John Sailhamer says that the writer "uses a term that he elsewhere has reserved for two special uses:
 - (1) "God's 'rest' or 'safety' which he give to human beings in the land (e.g., Ge 19:16; Dt 3:20; 12:10; 25:19) and
 - (2) "the 'dedication' of something before the presence of the Lord (Ex 16:33-34; Lev

¹ Most of the material for this outline (except that pertaining to the *Septuagint* and the *Vulgate*) comes from various studies produced by Dr. Thomas Howe, Professor of Old Testament and Biblical Languages at Southern Evangelical Seminary in Charlotte, North Carolina (<http://www.ses.edu>). For another Old Testament scholar who takes a similar perspective see, John D. Currid, *Genesis*, Vol. 1, (Auburn, MA: Evangelical Press, 2003).

² It is true that even those commentators who hold the standard view that Adam bore some responsibility toward the garden go on to say that this responsibility was subsumed under the greater responsibility of being a steward before God. I will argue, however, that even with this take on the narrative is incorrect.

³ Since both Thomas Howe and John Salihamer (see footnote 4) work and write in the original Hebrew, I must take personal responsibility for the Hebrew transliterations used here. Since I do not know Hebrew, I have had to defer to the transliterations used in Robert Young, *Young's Analytical Concordance to the Bible*, 22nd American ed. rev. by Wm. B. Stevenson, (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing, 1973).

16:23; Nu 17:4; Dt 26:4, 10)"⁴

- c. Further, the sense of the verb is causative, meaning that God "caused Adam to rest" in the garden.

B. But for what purpose was Adam caused to rest in the garden?

1. Many English translations have Adam in the garden for some purpose related to the garden.
 - a. The *King James Version* says "to dress it and to keep it."
 - b. The *New King James Version* says "to tend and keep it."
 - c. The *New International Version* says "to work it and take care of it."
 - d. The *New American Standard Bible* says "to cultivate it and keep it."
2. The problem with these translations is that the pronoun in verse does not agree in gender with the word 'garden.'
 - a. Since pronouns have to agree with their antecedents in number and gender, the pronouns (pronominal suffixes to the verbs) here cannot be referring to 'garden.'
 - b. The endings of the verbs (pronominal suffixes) are feminine but the word 'garden' is masculine in Hebrew.
 - c. Thus, 'garden' cannot be the object of the verbs.
 - d. There is no word in the context which agrees in gender of the verb endings (pronominal suffixes).
3. There are only two options in understanding the grammar here.
 - a. This instance here in v. 15 constitutes an exception to the rule that pronouns have to agree with their antecedents in gender.
 - b. The seeming inconsistency of the genders indicates that the verbs are not referring to the garden and that something else is meant by the grammar.
 - c. It is the latter of these two options that I am arguing for.
4. Why do most English translations opt for translating the antecedents of the pronouns as garden?

⁴ John H. Sailhamer, *The Pentateuch as Narrative: A Biblical-Theological Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1992): 100. The outline formatting of Sailhamer's words is my own.

a. The *Septuagint*

- (1) Some English translations perhaps follow the *Septuagint*⁵ which changes the gender of the pronoun.
 - (a) ἐργάζεσθαι αὐτὸν καὶ φυλάσσειν (*ergadzesthai auton kai phulassein* = to work it and to keep)
 - (b) It is interesting to note that even the *LXX* does not supply a pronoun after the infinitive φυλάσσειν (*phulassein*, to keep).⁶
- (2) The key here is the masculine pronoun αὐτὸν (*auton*, him [it])⁷ which agrees in gender with παραδείσῳ (*paradeisō*, garden).⁸
- (3) Thus, by changing the gender of the pronoun, the *LXX* changes the grammar of the text to make 'garden' the antecedent of the pronoun (pronominal suffixes) and thus the object of the verbs.
- (4) Interestingly, the *LXX* may also be responsible for the way some English translations fail to distinguish the two notions of 'put' in vv. 8 and 15 since it uses the same word for 'put' in both (ἔθετο, *etheto*)⁹

b. The *Vulgate*

- (1) The Latin *Vulgate* produced by Jerome around AD 400 was the principle text used in translating the earliest English versions of the Bible.¹⁰
- (2) It is perhaps even more likely that current English translations are influenced by the long history of English translations stemming from those based on the Latin *Vulgate*.
- (3) In Gen. 2:15, the Latin says *ut operaretur et custodiret illum* (to serve and watch

⁵ The name *Septuagint* comes from the Greek meaning "the 70." It is the Greek translation of the Old Testament which was completed around 200 BC. It is often abbreviated by the Roman numeral for seventy: *LXX*.

⁶ φυλάσσειν (*phulassein*), present active infinitive of φυλάσσω (*phulassō*), I watch, I keep

⁷ αὐτὸν (*auton*), accusative masculine singular of αὐτός, αὐτή, αὐτό, he, she it.

⁸ παραδείσῳ (*paradeisō*), locative or dative of παραδείσος (*paradeisos*), garden. Though the gender is masculine, it is translated into English as neuter in order to conform to proper English grammar which often treats inanimate objects as neuter.

⁹ ἔθετο (*etheto*), 3rd person singular, 2nd aorist middle indicative of τίθημι (*tithāmi*), I put, place, lay

¹⁰ F. F. Bruce, *History of the Bible in English*, 3rd ed. (New York: Oxford University Press, 1978), 14.

over it)

(4) The key here is the insertion of the demonstrative pronoun *illum* (it, that)¹¹ which agrees in gender with *paradiso* (garden)¹²

(5) Further, the Latin uses the same word for 'put' in both v. 8 and v. 15 (*posuit*)¹³

(6) It is likely that the Latin *Vulgate* was itself influenced by the *LXX*.

5. Since the endings in Hebrew do not agree in gender with any noun in the context, this suggests that the verbs are to be taken as abstract in meaning.

6. The Hebrew verbs in Gen. 2:15

a. The word 'tend' translates the Hebrew word '*abad*' and is most often translated elsewhere as:

(1) 'serve'

Deut. 6:13 "You shall fear the LORD your God and **serve** Him, and shall take oaths in His name. (see also: Ex 3:12; 8:1; 9:1)

(2) worship(ers)

2 Kings 10:19 "Now therefore, call to me all the prophets of Baal, all his servants, and all his priests. Let no one be missing, for I have a great sacrifice for Baal. Whoever is missing shall not live." But Jehu acted deceptively, with the intent of destroying the **worshippers** of Baal.

b. The word 'keep' translates the Hebrew word '*shamar*' and is elsewhere translated 'keep' in the sense of obeying or keeping a command. (Gen. 17:9 is the next occurrence of '*shamar*.')

Genesis 17:9 And God said to Abraham: "As for you, you shall **keep** My covenant, you and your descendants after you throughout their generations.
Gen 18:19 "For I have known him, in order that he may command his children and his household after him, that they **keep** the way of the LORD, to do righteousness and justice, that the LORD may bring to Abraham what He has spoken to him."

c. In some passages, the words are used together as 'serve' and 'keep' as in serving the

¹¹ *illum*, accusative masculine singular of *ille, illa, illud*, it, that

¹² *paradisō*, dative masculine singular of *paradisus*, garden

¹³ *posuit*, 3rd person singular, perfect active indicative of *pono*, I put, I place

Lord and obeying His commands.¹⁴

Deut. 10:12-13 "And now, Israel, what does the LORD your God require of you, but to fear the LORD your God, to walk in all His ways and to love Him, to **serve** the LORD your God with all your heart and with all your soul, {13} "and to **keep** the commandments of the LORD and His statutes which I command you today for your good?"

7. Contextually, there was no reason that Adam needed to tend and keep the garden before the fall.
 - a. All of his food was already provided for him by God. (1:29; 2:9)
 - b. Working the ground in order to provide for himself was a curse that was a result of the fall. (3:17-19)
8. The significance of resting the man in the garden is not to demonstrate man's relationship to the garden, **but rather to provide a setting for the story to demonstrate man's relationship and responsibility to God.** Sailhamer notes: "The man was 'put' into the Garden where he could 'rest' and be 'safe,' and the man was 'put' into the Garden 'in God's presence' where he could have fellowship with God (3:8)"¹⁵
 - a. In the following verses (2:16-17) we see for the first time God commanding Adam. This serves as the occasion for Adam to obey (*shamar*) God.
 - b. In verses 2:18-22 Adam was giving the opportunity to worship or serve (*abad*) God by trusting God to supply the good for him.
 - (1) Note that God brought all the animals before Adam for him to name them. (v. 19)
 - (2) Adam was not able to find a "helper comparable to him," which is to say, that Adam was not able to find his own good. (v. 20)
 - (3) God caused a deep sleep to fall on Adam, indicating that Adam took no part in supplying his own good. (v. 21)
 - (4) This scenario is a picture of the Gospel in which we cannot supply for ourselves our own good.

¹⁴ Interestingly both the Greek of the *LXX* and the Latin of the *Vulgate* use the same word for keeping or watching the garden in Gen. 2:15 and for keeping the commandments of the Lord in this Deut. 10:13 passage. In Gen. 2:15 the *LXX* has φυλάσσειν (*phulassein*, present active infinitive of φυλάσσω (*phulassō*), I watch or keep), and in Deut. 10:13 the word is φυλάσσεσθαι (*phulassēsthai*, present middle infinitive; cf. also Gen. 18:10; 26:5; Ex. 12:17; 20:6; Deut. 5:13). In Gen. 2:15, the *Vulgate* has *custodiret* (3rd person singular, imperfect active subjunctive of *custodio*, *custodire*, I watch, I guard) and in Deut. 10:13 the word is *custodias*, 2nd person singular, present active subjunctive).

¹⁵ Sailhamer, *The Pentateuch as Narrative*, 100.

- (a) That which is our good is not supplied by the works of our own hands.
- (b) Rather, God supplies the good for us.

9. The parallels between this and Deut. 30:15-16 are deliberate, for Moses is writing this narrative of the garden while the nation is in the wilderness waiting to enter the Promised Land.

III. Conclusions

- A. Rethinking Adam in the garden casts a different theological light on the responsibility that Adam bore there.
- B. Rather than Adam bearing any responsibility toward the garden, Adam's responsibility was toward God: to worship and obey Him.
- C. Further, the significance of the change of direction of Adam's attention before and after the fall is retained.
 - 1. Before the fall, Adam's attention was directed upwards toward God.
 - a. Adam was to obey God by keeping God's commandment not to eat of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil.
 - b. Adam was to worship God by trusting God to supply the good.
 - 2. After the fall, Adam's attention was directed downwards toward the ground. (3:17-19)
 - a. Because of the curse, the ground was now the source of Adam's sustenance.
 - b. Because of the curse, the ground would yield its food to Adam only with much toil and sweat.
 - c. Adam's reorientation toward the ground was a portent of Adam's future to "return to the dust" out of which he was taken.
 - d. Ultimately, even the ground itself could not give Adam life.