

## Rethinking Adam in the Garden<sup>1</sup>

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Gen 2:8-15 *"The LORD God planted a garden eastward in Eden, and there He put the man whom He had formed. {9} And out of the ground the LORD God made every tree grow that is pleasant to the sight and good for food. The tree of life was also in the midst of the garden, and the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. {10} Now a river went out of Eden to water the garden, and from there it parted and became four riverheads. {11} The name of the first is Pishon; it is the one which skirts the whole land of Havilah, where there is gold. {12} And the gold of that land is good. Bdellium and the onyx stone are there. {13} The name of the second river is Gihon; it is the one which goes around the whole land of Cush. {14} The name of the third river is Hiddekel; it is the one which goes toward the east of Assyria. The fourth river is the Euphrates. {15} Then the LORD God took the man and put him in the garden of Eden 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. From this view arose a robust Protestant "work ethic" in terms of which work is seen as part of God's original purpose for humans.
  1. *Westminster Larger Catechism*: "The providence of God toward man in the estate in which he was created, was the placing him in paradise, appointing him to dress it, giving him the liberty to eat of the fruit of the earth ..."<sup>2</sup>
  2. Henry Morris in his *The Genesis Record: A Scientific and Devotional Commentary on the Book of Beginnings* said: "At this point, Adam was instructed merely to till the ground in the garden of Eden, to dress it and keep it. Even though there were as yet no noxious weeds, the ground was so fertile and the plant cover so luxuriant that its growth needed to be channeled and controlled."<sup>3</sup>
  3. In the book *The Making of the Christian Mind: A Christian World View and the Academic Enterprise* edited by Arthur Holmes, there is an article by Joseph Spradley titled "A Christian View of the Physical World": "The doctrine of creation teaches

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<sup>1</sup> Most of the material for this outline (except the section on the *Septuagint* and the *Vulgate* (see notes 13 and 18 respectively)) comes from various studies produced by Thomas A. 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).

<sup>2</sup> Q. 20.

<sup>3</sup> Henry Morris, *The Genesis Record: A Scientific and Devotional Commentary on the Book of Beginnings* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1976), 92.

that nature is not divine but is God's handiwork assigned to human responsibility for its care and protection" after which Spadley cites Gen. 2:15.<sup>4</sup>

4. E. Calvin Beisner in his *Prosperity and Poverty: The Compassionate Use of Resources in a World of Scarcity*: "Growth in Christian maturity then means not only increasing righteousness, holiness, and truth ... but also growth as workers fulfilling God's purpose for all mankind to cultivate and keep the earth (Genesis 2:15)."<sup>5</sup>

5. Norman Geisler, in his *Systematic Theology III: Sin and Salvation* said: "Before the fall, Adam and Eve were told to 'subdue' the earth (Gen. 1:28); they were to 'work' and 'take care of' the Garden (2:15), not destroy it; to rule over it, not to ruin it; to cultivate it, not pollute it."<sup>6</sup>

C. I would like to submit an alternative interpretation given certain grammatical, exegetical, and theological considerations.

D. To this end, 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.

1. 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.

2. I will argue, however, that even this take on the narrative is unwarranted and unnecessary.

## 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.

Gen 2:8 "The LORD God planted a garden eastward in Eden, and there He **put** the man whom He had formed."

Gen 2:15 "Then the LORD God took the man and **put** him in the garden of Eden to tend and keep it."

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<sup>4</sup> Joseph Spradley, "A Christian View of the Physical World," in Arthur Holmes, ed., *The Making of a Christian Mind: A Christian World View and the Academic Enterprise* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 1985), 67.

<sup>5</sup> E. Calvin Beisner, *Prosperity and Poverty: The Compassionate Use of Resources in a World of Scarcity* (Wheaton: Crossway, 1988), 29-30.

<sup>6</sup> Norman Geisler, *Systematic Theology III: Sin and Salvation* (Minneapolis: Bethany House, 2004), 127.

1. In verse 8, the word for 'put' is the general Hebrew word *sum*.<sup>7</sup>
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, in his *The Pentateuch as Narrative: A Biblical-Theological Commentary*, says that the writer "uses a term that he elsewhere has reserved for two special uses:
    - (1) "God's 'rest' or 'safety' which he gave to human beings in the land (e.g., Gen. 19:16; Deut. 3:20; 12:10; 25:19) and

Deut. 3:20a "until the LORD has given rest to your brethren as to you, and they also possess the land which the LORD your God is giving them beyond the Jordan. ..."

Deut. 12:10 "But when you cross over the Jordan and dwell in the land which the LORD your God is giving you to inherit, and He gives you rest from all your enemies round about, so that you dwell in safety,"

- (2) "the 'dedication' of something before the presence of the Lord (Ex. 16:33-34; Lev. 16:23; Num. 17:4; Deut. 26:4, 10)"<sup>8</sup>

Ex. 16:33 "And Moses said to Aaron, 'Take a pot and put an omer of manna in it, and lay it up before the LORD, to be kept for your generations.' "

Num. 17:4 "Then you shall place them in the tabernacle of meeting before the Testimony, where I meet with you."

- c. Further, the sense of the verb is causative, meaning that God "caused Adam to rest" in the garden.
- d. One should note that the LXX does not distinguish the 'put' of v. 8 from the 'put' of v. 15 but instead uses the same Greek word ἔθετο.<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> Since both Thomas A. Howe and John Sailhamer (see footnote 8) 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 deferred to the transliterations used in Robert Young, *Young's Analytical Concordance to the Bible*, 22<sup>nd</sup> American ed. rev. by Wm. B. Stevenson, (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing, 1973).

<sup>8</sup> 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.

<sup>9</sup> 3<sup>rd</sup> per. 2 aor. mid. ind. of τίθημι, I put, I place.

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.<sup>10</sup>
  - a. The Wycliffe Bible (1382-1395) says "that he schulde worche and kepe it."
  - b. The *Matthew's Bible* (1537) says "to dresse it & to kepe it."
  - c. The *Geneva Bible* (1560) says "that he might dresse it and kepe it."
  - d. The *Douay-Rheims Bible* 1610 "to dress it, and to keep it."
  - e. The *King James Version* (1611) says "to dress it and to keep it."
  - f. The *American Standard Version* says (1901) "to dress it and to keep it."
  - g. The *Revised Standard Version* (1946) "to till it and keep it."
  - h. The *New American Standard Bible* (1963) says "to cultivate it and keep it."
  - i. The *New International Version* (1978) says "to work it and take care of it."
  - j. The *New King James Version* (1982) says "to tend and keep it."
  - k. The *New Revised Standard* (1989) "to till it and keep it."
  - l. The *English Standard Version* (2001) says "to work it and keep it."
2. The obvious question to ask here is this. If I am alleging that this is an unwarranted translation of the phrase, how can all these English translations get it wrong?
  - a. Are you suggesting, Richard, that everyone has missed what your brother and a few other OT scholars were able to catch?
  - b. For an explanation, see the "Objections" below.

C. So, what exactly is the problem with these translations?

1. 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.'

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<sup>10</sup> See the "Objections" below for an explanation of why all English translations translate the verse differently than what I am arguing for here.

- b. In the Hebrew, the endings of the verbs (pronominal suffixes) are feminine but the word 'garden' is masculine.
  - c. Thus, 'garden' cannot be the object of the verbs.
  - d. What is more, there is no word in the context which agrees in gender with the verb endings (pronominal suffixes).
2. There are only two options in understanding the grammar here.
- a. Either this instance here in v. 15 constitutes an exception to the general rule that pronouns have to agree in gender with their antecedents.
  - b. Or 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 for which I am arguing.
3. 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.
4. 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, e.g., Deut. 10:12-13, the words are used together as 'serve' and 'keep' as in serving the Lord and obeying His commands.

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?

- d. 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. <sup>11</sup>
5. Contextually, there was no reason that Adam needed to tend and keep the garden before the fall.
- a. First, all of his food was already provided for him by God. (1:29; 2:9)

Gen. 1:29 "And God said, 'See, I have given you every herb that yields seed which is on the face of all the earth, and every tree whose fruit yields seed; to you it shall be for food.' "

Gen. 2:9a "And out of the ground the LORD God made every tree grow that is pleasant to the sight and good for food. ..."

- b. Second, working the ground in order to provide for himself was a curse and judgment that was a result of the fall. (3:17-19)

Then to Adam He said, "Because you have heeded the voice of your wife, and have eaten from the tree of which I commanded you, saying, 'You shall not eat of it': "Cursed is the ground for your sake; In toil you shall eat of it All the days of your life. {18} Both thorns and thistles it shall bring forth for you, and you shall eat the herb of the field. {19} In the sweat of your face you shall eat bread till you return to the ground, for out of it you were taken; For dust you are, and to dust you shall return."

6. 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**

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<sup>11</sup> 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 (*phulassesthai*, 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* (3<sup>rd</sup> person singular, imperfect active subjunctive of *custodio*, *custodire*, I watch, I guard) and in Deut. 10:13 the word is *custodias*, 2<sup>nd</sup> person singular, present active subjunctive).

**demonstrate man's relationship and responsibility to God.**

7. John Sailhamer again 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)"<sup>12</sup>
- 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.

"And the LORD God commanded the man, saying, 'Of every tree of the garden you may freely eat; {17} 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.' "

- b. In verses 2:18-22 Adam was given the opportunity to worship or serve (*abad*) God by trusting God to supply the good for him.

"And the LORD God said, 'It is not good that man should be alone; I will make him a helper comparable to him.' {19} Out of the ground the LORD God formed every beast of the field and every bird of the air, and brought them to Adam to see what he would call them. And whatever Adam called each living creature, that was its name. {20} So Adam gave names to all cattle, to the birds of the air, and to every beast of the field. But for Adam there was not found a helper comparable to him. {21} And the LORD God caused a deep sleep to fall on Adam, and he slept; and He took one of his ribs, and closed up the flesh in its place. {22} Then the rib which the LORD God had taken from man He made into a woman, and He brought her to the man."

- (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
- (a) This indicates that Adam took no part in supplying his own good. (v. 21)
- (b) The next occurrence of a "deep sleep" is Gen. 15:12 when God institutes His unilateral covenant with Abram, again pointing to the fact that Abram took no part in establishing the covenant.

Gen 15:12 "Now when the sun was going down, a deep sleep fell upon

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<sup>12</sup> Sailhamer, *The Pentateuch as Narrative*, 100.

Abram; and behold, horror and great darkness fell upon him."

- (4) These scenarios are a picture of the Gospel in which we cannot supply for ourselves our own good.
- (a) That which is our good is not supplied by the works of our own hands.
  - (b) Rather, God supplies the good for us.
  - (c) This is why, by the way, the promised land is described twenty times as "a land flowing with milk and honey." (Ex. 3:8, 17; 13:5; 33:3; Lev. 20:24; Num. 13:27; 14:8; 16:13, 14; Deut. 6:3; 11:9; 26:9, 15; 27:3; 31:20; Joshua 5:6; Jer. 11:5; 32:22; Ez. 20:6, 15)
  - (d) This is what Rom. 4:4-5 tell us:

"Now to him who works, the wages are not counted as grace but as debt. {5} **But to him who does not work** but believes on Him who justifies the ungodly, his faith is accounted for righteousness ..." (emphasis added)

8. 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.

"See, I have set before you today life and good, death and evil, {16} in that I command you today to love the LORD your God, to walk in His ways, and to keep His commandments, His statutes, and His judgments, that you may live and multiply; and the LORD your God will bless you in the land which you go to possess."

### 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)



Then to Adam He said, "Because you have heeded the voice of your wife, and have eaten from the tree of which I commanded you, saying, 'You shall not eat of it': "Cursed is the ground for your sake; In toil you shall eat of it All the days of your life. {18} Both thorns and thistles it shall bring forth for you, and you shall eat the herb of the field. {19} In the sweat of your face you shall eat bread till you return to the ground, for out of it you were taken; For dust you are, and to dust you shall return."

- 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.

#### IV. Objections

- A. If this is the way to read the original Hebrew here, why do all English translations have it differently?

Answer: The history of the English Bible indicates that perhaps both the Septuagint and the Latin Vulgate have had a tremendous influence upon English translations.

##### 1. The *Septuagint*

- a. Some English translations perhaps follow the *Septuagint*<sup>13</sup> which changes the gender of the pronoun.

(1) ἐργάζεσθαι αὐτὸν καὶ φυλάσσειν (*ergadzesthai auton kai phulassein*) = to work it and to keep

(2) It is interesting to note that even the *LXX* does not supply a pronoun after the infinitive φυλάσσειν (*phulassein*), to keep).<sup>14</sup>

- b. The key here is the masculine pronoun αὐτὸν (*auton*, him [it])<sup>15</sup> which agrees in

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<sup>13</sup> The *Septuagint* is name given to "a compilation of various translations carried out by a large number of translators over 200 or more years translating the Hebrew Bible into Greek." [Thomas A. Howe, BS1001 Biblical Criticism" class notes 2019, p. 2]. The *Septuagint* is designated by the Roman numerals *LXX* meaning "the 70" due to the legends surrounding the origin of the translation.

<sup>14</sup> φυλάσσειν (*phulassein*), present active infinitive of φυλάσσω (*phulassō*), I watch, I keep

<sup>15</sup> αὐτὸν (*auton*), accusative masculine singular of αὐτός, αὐτή, αὐτό, he, she it.

gender with παραδείσω (*paradeisō*, garden).<sup>16</sup>

- c. 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.
  - d. 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 the *LXX* uses the same word for 'put' in both places (ἔθετο, *etheto*)<sup>17</sup>
2. The *Vulgate*<sup>18</sup>
- a. The Latin *Vulgate* produced by Jerome around AD 400 was the principle text used in translating the earliest English versions of the Bible.<sup>19</sup>
  - b. 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*.
    - (1) In Gen. 2:15, the Latin says *ut operaretur et custodiret illum* (to serve and watch over it)
    - (2) The key here is the insertion of the demonstrative pronoun *illum* (it, that)<sup>20</sup> which agrees in gender with *paradisō* (garden)<sup>21</sup>
    - (3) Further, the Latin uses the same word for 'put' in both v. 8 and v. 15 (*posuit*)<sup>22</sup>

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<sup>16</sup> παραδείσω (*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.

<sup>17</sup> ἔθετο (*etheto*), 3<sup>rd</sup> person singular, 2<sup>nd</sup> aorist middle indicative of τίθημι (*tithāmi*), I put, place, lay

<sup>18</sup> The Vulgate, or Latin Vulgate is "a collection of translations which differ both in origin and in character. ... The Vulgate, therefore, is far from being a unity, and the only justification for calling it 'Jerome's Vulgate' (as we often do) is that there is more of his work in it than there is of anyone else's." [*Biblia Sacra Iuxta Vulgatam Versionem*, 5<sup>th</sup> ed. (Stuttgart: 2007), from the preface of the 1<sup>st</sup> ed., xxxiii]

<sup>19</sup> F. F. Bruce, *History of the Bible in English*, 3<sup>rd</sup> ed. (New York: Oxford University Press, 1978), 14.

<sup>20</sup> *illum*, accusative masculine singular of *ille, illa, illud*, it, that

<sup>21</sup> *paradisō*, dative masculine singular of *paradisus*, garden

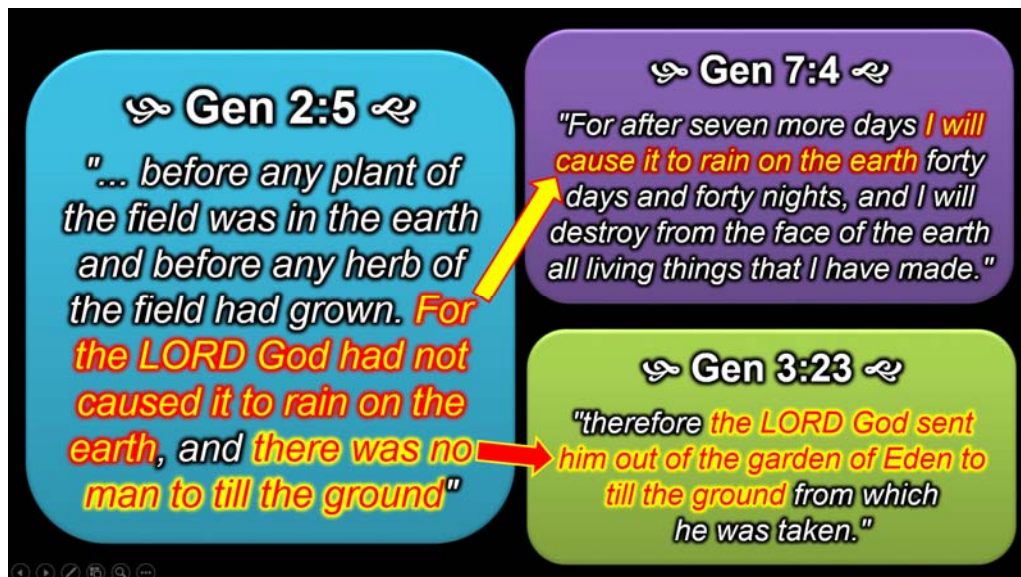
<sup>22</sup> *posuit*, 3<sup>rd</sup> person singular, perfect active indicative of *pono*, I put, I place

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

B. Does not Gen. 2:5 indicate that man was originally placed in the garden to till the ground?

Answer: I think the verse fits well into the overall narrative.<sup>23</sup>

1. The assumption some might make is that the ground could not bring forth the plants unless and until there was a man to till it, as if the tilling of the ground was causally related to the coming forth of the plants.
  - a. The verse also says that God had not caused it to rain on the earth which might lead one to the same assumption, i.e., that until there was rain, the plants could not come forth.
  - b. However, we see in the very next verse that the whole face of the ground was watered by a mist that went up from the earth. The implication is that the plants would come forth apart from the rain.
  - c. By parallel, the plants also would come forth without any man tilling the ground, as is indicated in verse 9.
2. What I think is going on here is that you have nested in verse 5 a preview of two significant manifestations of the coming curse and judgment because of the fall.
  - a. Notice the parallels between 2:5 and 3:23/7:4.



<sup>23</sup> I am indebted to Thomas A. Howe for his interpretation of Gen. 2:5 here in light of the overall argument.

- b. The notion of God causing it to rain occurs next in reference to God bringing forth the flood in judgment on the earth.
- c. Likewise, the man tilling the ground is a curse and judgment as a result of the fall as indicated in Gen 3:23.
- d. Remember, when Israel is reading this narrative, they are already experiencing rain and tilling.
- e. But it was not so in the beginning.
  - (1) There was no rain until the flood as judgment because of sin (Gen. 6:5-7).
  - (2) There was no tilling of the ground until God sent Adam out of the garden to till the ground after the fall because of sin (Gen. 3:23).