

RECONSIDERATIONS

EXPLORING A BIBLICAL UNDERSTANDING OF LIFE AND CULTURE

SEPTEMBER 2002

VOLUME 2, NUMBER 1

GENESIS CHAPTER THREE

A few years ago I enjoyed the privilege of attending a conference on pragmatism that brought the who's who of pragmatists together at the City University of New York. Richard Bernstein, Richard Rorty, Nancy Fraser, Hilary and Ruth Anna Putnam, Richard Poirier, Hans Joas, Richard Posner, and several others each took a turn at the podium.¹ While there were many fascinating and engaging moments over the two day period, the single most entertaining moment came in the final session when Stanley Fish presented an extemporaneous summation of the conference. In his inimitable style, Fish took his audience on a hilarious romp over a wide terrain, but in the process he also took us to the biblical text and wove the story of pragmatism into the third chapter of Genesis. Given the fact that Professor Fish is as well-versed in *Paradise Lost*² as he is practiced in unprincipled pragmatism,³ he is more than qualified to reflect on both the third chapter of Genesis and the history of pragmatism.

Fish argued, only somewhat facetiously, that Genesis chapter three records the moment when pragmatism first entered human history. When the wily serpent directed Eve's attention away from the authoritative word of God and toward her own ability to weigh the consequences of alternative beliefs, he drew her into a pragmatic frame of mind. Pragmatism rejects every

external authority and rests, instead, on the ability of the individual to make sound decisions by judging the consequences that are likely to flow from a particular course of action. The individual is to think for herself. This is just what the serpent encouraged Eve to do. He did not insinuate himself into the place of God, he simply suggested that Eve put her own pragmatic considerations in God's place. She seems immediately to have become convinced that this was a reasonable thing to do. She also quickly learned that one of the reasons why pragmatism falls short in the end, is that none of us has clear enough insight into the future to be able to make good judgments on the basis of consequences that have yet to occur.

Just as one can find pragmatism in the Genesis text, one can also find pragmatism's not-so-distant cousins that go by the family name of postmodernism. "Has God really said...." the serpent began. One need not be terribly clever to see the parallels between recent trends in criticism and this famous query with which Genesis three opens. Operating from a hermeneutic of suspicion, the serpent coupled the dissolution of authorial intention with a strong misreading of the text that was rooted in the marginalized experience of the woman in the face of Father-God/Husband-Man hegemony. Somewhat more seriously, one could go on at length about the

Fish argued. . .
that Genesis chapter
three records the
moment when prag-
matism first entered
human history

ways in which the work of Jacques Derrida and other contemporary critics is embedded in Genesis chapter three. While Derrida's discussion of "the scandal of the deconstruction of God"⁴ relies more on the story of the tower of Babel than it does on the earlier chapters of Genesis, the deconstructive process is clearly underway in Genesis three, and the difficulties of listening to God and speaking about him are in place. By the conclusion of the chapter, we are deeply enmeshed in the Heideggerian tensions of Being and Language that, on the one hand, plague our corrupted and cursed experience in this fallen world, and, on the other hand, remind us of the paradise we have lost.

As fascinating as these pragmatic and postmodern moments are, however, the ability of the Genesis text to anticipate a modern view of knowledge is probably even more significant than its ability to anticipate pragmatist and postmodern thought. When the serpent tempted Eve to view knowledge as both a means of emancipation from God and a means of becoming like God, he offered a view of knowledge that has dominated much of the modern era. Knowledge has been understood in the modern, western world as both freedom and power, and this is just how the serpent presented it to Eve. "In the day that you eat of [the tree of knowledge]," the serpent maintained, you will be free, for "your eyes will be opened." "In the day that you eat of it," you will have power, for "you will be like God. (Genesis 3.5)" In the end, it was neither postmodern hermeneutics nor unprincipled pragmatism that tempted Eve. It was the intoxicating possibility that knowledge could make her like God.

There is a troubling element of this temptation to knowledge, however, that we tend to overlook. It appears in the serpent's initial words as recorded in verse five: "For God knows..." These three words should have been enough to put Eve on her guard, and they ought to put us on our guard as well. Even before we get to the rest of the sentence, there is trouble

enough in these first three words, for they tempt us to rely more heavily on our powers of explanation than any finite creature ought to do. They suggest that it is possible to know the mind of God where God has chosen not to speak his mind. They suggest that it is possible to explain God's ways where he has chosen not to explain his ways. In uttering these three simple words, the serpent tempts Eve and Adam, and you and me, with the thought that a finite power of explanation can know the mind of God and stand in judgment over him.

One way to speak of this power of explanation is as the attempt to "justify the ways of God to men."⁵ This is the famous phrase that Milton employs in the opening pages of *Paradise Lost*, and it expresses the good intentions of many friends and defenders of God. This

is not a simple matter and it is hard to speak about it briefly, but we would do well at least to be cautious when we contemplate justifying the ways of God. Specifically, we should resist the temptation to explain or justify the ways of God where he himself has not granted us explanations or justifications. Explaining why God had prohibited Adam and Eve from eating the fruit of the Tree of the Knowledge of

Good and Evil may seem a harmless enough exercise, but there is a serious problem in taking on the task. God had asked Adam and Eve not only to forego the knowledge of good and evil, he had also asked them to leave with him the reason for this prohibition. He had asked Adam and Eve to trust him with the matter rather than to trust their own powers of explanation. For the serpent to suggest to Eve, therefore, that she could know what God himself had chosen not to reveal was problematic from the start. It does not matter how the serpent concludes his sentence. God had made it clear that Adam and Eve were to trust him on this one. To choose, instead, to rely on the strength of their own explanatory powers, where God had chosen to be silent, turned out to be both foolish and tragically wrong.

Knowledge has been
understood in the
modern, western world
as both freedom and
power, and this is just
how the serpent
presented it to Eve.

Admittedly, there is something intellectually satisfying about explanations. They play an important role in our lives, and the intellectual curiosity that leads us to them has been instilled in us by our Creator. Intellectual satisfaction, however, should not be equated with or reduced to our ability to provide explanations. While the pursuit of valid explanations is often a compelling pursuit, there are also times when letting go of that pursuit is still more compelling. There are times when not having an explanation is intellectually more compelling than having one. There are times when ignorance is more compelling than knowledge, mystery more compelling than explanation, and silence more compelling than words. One of these times comes when God himself is silent. When God forbids us knowledge and offers no explanation for his prohibition, we do well to trust him so completely that we trust not only his word but his silence as well.

Is this all to suggest that before their fall Adam and Eve lived a quiet, small-minded, boring life and that we ought to do likewise? Without question, the answer is an emphatic "No!" In their innocence Adam and Eve knew a wonderfully rich life in a good world that had been created by the word of God, and which, by that same word, had been given to them for their pleasure. Adam and Eve both lived a fuller life than any of us can manage even in our fantasies. They laughed and talked, and played and worked, and kissed and sang—and they thought more deeply than any ten of us will do in a lifetime. They explored and inquired, reflected and created; and they undoubtedly questioned, calculated, and explained in a way that would have made any post-modern critic, soft-minded

pragmatist, or hard-headed rationalist envious. They did all of this, furthermore, in good faith and for good reason. We cannot recreate their garden, nor can we return to their innocence, but we can remember that what made perfect sense in our parents' state of innocence makes perfect sense today as well.

Before Eve decided to trust the voice of her own reason over the voice of God, she had, for good reason, trusted a God who had spoken at some points and remained silent at others. She had quite reasonably and happily left with God what he had chosen not to reveal to her. Nor did she take this course as a result of some blind leap of faith. She had every reason to trust him as the good Creator of a good world and as a friend with whom she had walked in the Garden. Her faith in God and her willingness to leave with him what belonged to him were fully justified. It was her misguided decision to place her faith in her own explanatory powers that needs to be called into question. Neither Eve, nor Adam, nor any of us are justified in thinking that we are capable of explaining God or of justifying his ways where he has not done so for us. To do so would require the ability to stand above him, and this is not a justifiable position for finite creatures to take vis-a-vis their Creator. What Eve learned, and what we would do well to learn with her, is that it is far more compelling to trust a God who transcends explanation than it is to look for an explanation that transcends God.

*Richard V. Horner, Director
Christian Study Center of Gainesville*

The Christian Study Center is Pleased to Announce The First Annual

SUMMER INSTITUTE

June 1-4, 2003

Designed to equip and encourage undergraduate students to face the challenges of the university, the summer institute will convene for the first time on June 1-4, 2003.

We welcome students from universities and colleges across the nation.

Spread the word and check our web site or give us a call for further information.

FALL PROGRAMS AT THE STUDY CENTER

CLASSES

IS THE CHURCH THE VILLAIN OF HISTORY?

Dr. John Sommerville, Professor, History, University of Florida

Mondays - September 9th through 30th - 7:30 pm

PUZZLES, PROBLEMS, AND POSSIBILITIES: AN ASTROPHYSICIST REFLECTS ON THE STATE OF THE UNIVERSE

Dr. George Lebo, Professor, Astronomy, University of Florida

Mondays - November 4th through December 2nd - 7:30 pm

THE ENDURING TRUTHS OF GENESIS CHAPTER THREE

Dr. Richard V. Horner, Director, The Christian Study Center of Gainesville

Tuesdays - September 10th through November 19th - 7:30 p m

Late Night at The Ox - Tuesdays - September 10th through November 19th - 9:00 pm

USING THE COMPUTER TO IMPROVE YOUR STUDY OF THE BIBLE

Dr. Jed Keesling, Professor, Mathematics, University of Florida

Thursdays - October 10th through 24th - 7:30 pm

THE CHURCH AND CULTURE WORKSHOP

THE CHURCH AND POSTMODERNISM READING GROUP

September 18: McLaren: *A New Kind of Christian: A Tale of Two Friends on a Spiritual Journey*

October 16: Webber: *Ancient-Future Faith: Rethinking Evangelicalism for a Postmodern World*

November 13: Jacobs: *A Visit to Vanity Fair: Moral Essays on the Present Age*

December 11: Horton: *A Confessing Theology for Postmodern Times*

All Church and Culture Reading Groups will meet at Noon at the Study Center

FALL PROGRAMS AT THE STUDY CENTER

ADDITIONAL READING GROUPS

CHRISTIANITY AND THE ARTS

This Reading Group will begin at 9:00 PM, September 9th and will continue monthly on October 7th, November 4th, and December 2nd. Topics and readings will be announced.

GRADUATE ROUND TABLE

This discussion group, led by Todd Best, Research Assistant and Intern at the Christian Study Center, will be reading *The Call* by Os Guinness. Please check our website for dates and times.

THE CULTURE SEMINAR

presents

DR. J. KAMERON CARTER

Assistant Professor in Theology and Black Church Studies at Duke University

“It was a Glorious Resurrection...”:
On the Paschal Shape of Black Existence in Douglass’ 1845 Narrative

October 28, 2002 • 4:00-6:00 p.m.

reception following

THE KEENE CENTER IN DAUER HALL AT THE UNIVERSITY OF FLORIDA

Dr. Carter’s academic interests range from systematic theology and theological exegesis to philosophy, literature, and cultural studies. He draws significantly on patristic and medieval approaches to theology in engaging the contemporary theological and cultural imagination. His book *Race: A Theological Account* will be appearing with Oxford University Press in the spring of 2003.

Co-sponsored by The Institute of Black Culture

CULTURE SEMINAR READING GROUPS:

In conjunction with Dr. Carter’s Lectures, The Study Center will also host two reading groups.

Frederick Douglass: *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass*: Wednesday, September 25th - Noon

James Cone: *God of the Oppressed*: Wednesday, October 23rd - Noon

– BOOKS WORTH READING –

John E. Smith, Harry S. Stout, and Kenneth P. Minkema, editors, *A Jonathan Edwards Reader* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1995), and John Piper, *God's Passion for His Glory* (Wheaton: Crossway Books, 1998).

We modern Christians, who need models of what it means to love the Lord our God with a whole mind, would do well to look to the eighteenth-century theologian, philosopher, and pastor, Jonathan Edwards (1703-1758). In Edwards, one finds a well rounded, deeply intellectual, and passionate lover of God. Though he is often remembered only for his historically famous sermon "Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God," Edwards' writings encompass a vast array of topics, and *A Jonathan Edwards Reader* makes this breadth readily available. We encourage you to consult this helpful work for a sampling of the sermons, personal letters, philosophical works, and theological treatises that reveal the man who has been identified as America's first great philosopher and as colonial America's finest theologian.

Edwards serves as a model of what it means to love God with a whole mind in at least three ways. First, he studies the created order seriously and views learning about creation as learning about the Creator. In some cases, as in "The Spider Letter," Edwards sticks more closely to intricate and precise observations. In other cases, Edwards offers less scientific detail, but reflects deeply on the way that natural processes reflect greater spiritual realities. He adeptly makes imaginative connections, yet without betraying science. In "Images of Divine Things," for instance, Edwards sees the silkworm as a "type of Christ, which, when it dies, yields us that of which we make such glorious clothing. (17)" He

remarks that squirrels, who are charmed to their death by snakes, serve as a picture of the ever-present appeal of sin, and he also views the process of the blossoming and ripening of fruit as parallel to the processes of growth in the life of a Christian. And in all these observations Edwards frames his reflections in a thick biblical theology, allowing "the book of Scripture to interpret the book of nature. (20)"

Second, Edwards serves as a model of loving God with a whole mind without neglecting the heart or emotions. In one of his most popular theological works, "Religious Affections," Edwards builds a case for genuine religion that is both thoughtful and affectionate. Responding both to the anti-supernaturalism of the Enlightenment and to what he viewed as an over-emphasis on emotional experience in the American revival movement, Edwards makes clear that there is both spirit and truth in true religion. He argues that genuine faith is not necessarily marked by ecstatic emotional overcomings, yet it will produce a deep affection for Jesus Christ, who alone can truly satisfy our affections.

Third, Edwards serves as a model of loving God with a whole mind by being seriously engaged with both the scriptures and philosophical thought at the same time. In "The End for Which God Created the World," an essay found not in the *Reader* but in a captivating biography by John Piper called *God's Passion for His Glory*, Edwards demonstrates that while the Bible is his authority, he is also engaged with the philosophical and theological thought of his day. Rather than merely throwing out a Bible verse or two and expecting readers to buy his point of view, Edwards demonstrates the veracity of biblical perspectives through rigorous philosophical discourse and weds philosophy and theology in compelling fashion. In this particular essay, he argues that the purpose of everything is to show God's mag-

nificance, and he asserts that this purpose is accomplished through God's provision for the good of his people. In the first half of the essay Edwards makes his case through a thorough and robust philosophical argument, apart from scripture. In the second half of the essay, he argues the same point but from the biblical text. Having argued on purely philosophical grounds, Edwards argues, finally, that philosophical grounds alone are not enough. The affirmation and authority of biblical revelation are also needed.

Edwards' compelling understanding of the human condition, of the created order, and of the God behind it all makes the reader want a similar understanding. One also longs to follow Edwards' example of offering our minds up to God in a way that would allow us to conclude with him that, "True religion, in great part, consists in holy affections." ("Religious Affections," *Reader*, 141)

*Todd Best, Intern/Research Assistant
Christian Study Center of Gainesville*

BUILDING FUND UPDATE

Would you like to help the Study Center encourage the university community in the exploration of a biblical understanding of life and culture? If so, please join our effort to build a much-needed classroom that will greatly enhance the Study Center's work.

Currently, we have received \$1,500 toward our goal of \$50,000.

Please help us reach our goal of \$50,000 by December 31, 2002

THANK YOU FOR YOUR INTEREST AND SUPPORT

The Christian Study Center is funded solely through the generous contributions of those who share our commitment to serve the university community with a biblical understanding of life. We invite you to join us as a financial partner.

I would like to contribute to the work of the Christian Study Center. Enclosed is my tax-deductible contribution of:

\$25 \$50 \$100 Other \$_____ This is a Monthly or One Time contribution.

I would like to help you build a classroom for the Study Center.

Enclosed is my tax-deductible gift of: \$_____

I wish to pledge \$_____ month toward the building fund between now and December 31, 2002.

Please make your tax-deductible contribution payable to: Christian Study Center of Gainesville and return this form with your check to the Center at: 112 NW 16th St., Gainesville, FL, 32603

Please add me to your mailing list:

NAME _____

ADDRESS _____

E-MAIL _____

Please add the following to your mailing list:

NAME _____

ADDRESS _____

E-MAIL _____

CHRISTIAN STUDY CENTER OF GAINESVILLE, INC.
112 NW 16TH STREET
GAINESVILLE, FLORIDA 32603-1827

NON-PROFIT ORG.
U.S. POSTAGE PAID
GAINESVILLE, FL
PERMIT NO. 1

"Reconsiderations" is a bi-monthly publication of the Christian Study Center of Gainesville. Its purpose is to explore a biblical understanding of life and culture and to offer resources to those who seek to serve God with a whole mind. If you do not wish to receive "Reconsiderations," please let us know by e-mailing us at info@christianstudycenter.org or calling us at 352-379-7375.

Editor: *Richard V. Horner*

Co-Editor: *Todd Best*

Notes:

1. The papers of this conference are collected in *The Revival of Pragmatism: New Essays on Social Thought, Law, and Culture*, Morris Dickstein, editor (Durham: Duke University Press, 1998).
2. Stanley Fish, *Surprised by Sin: The Reader in Paradise Lost* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1967, 1997).
3. Stanley Fish, *The Trouble with Principle* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1999).
4. "Introduction," Peggy Kamuf/Jacques Derrida, in *ADerrida Reader: Between the Blinds*, Peggy Kamuf, editor (New York: Columbia University Press, 1991), p. xxxiii.
5. John Milton, *Paradise Lost* (New York: Penguin Books, 1961), Book I, line 26.

The Christian Study Center of Gainesville exists in order to encourage the university community in the exploration of a biblical understanding of life and culture.

Christian Study Center
of Gainesville

112 NW 16th Street
Gainesville, Florida 32603

352-379-7375
www.christianstudycenter.org

Dr. Richard V. Horner
Director