

Loss of Immortality?

Hermeneutical Aspects of Genesis 2–3 and Its Early Receptions

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1 Introduction: The Loss of Immortality as a Receptional Dimension of Genesis 2–3

Especially within the Christian tradition, there is a widespread notion that the first human beings were created to be immortal, making physical death the bitter consequence of human sin. For example, the first canon of the Council of Carthage from 418 C.E. states:

“If any man says that Adam, the first man, was created mortal, so that whether he sinned or not he would have died, not as the wages of sin, but through the necessity of nature, let him be *anathema*.”¹

The Protestant teachings differ little from this position. From the Reformation period up to the present time, there is a common, often implicit assumption in confessions and in doctrinal literature that humankind was created immortal, after which death entered the world through sin.² However, there are also some newer approaches that see death as a natural part of creation, while death only becomes a frightening and threatening element under the influence of sin.³

The Jewish tradition seems to be ambiguous as well. There is a remarkable strand of thought in the rabbinic tradition holding to the idea that humankind was mortal from the beginning, so sin does not cause death in general, but *early* death.⁴ Adam, for example, is said to have been appointed a life span of 1000 years, which is equal to one of the Lord’s days. But since he made a gift of seventy years to David, he died at the age of 930, as can be read in Gen 5:5.⁵

¹ NR 338/DS 222.

² See SCHMID, *Dogmatik*, 150f.156; BARTH, *KD III/2*, 729; see also PANNENBERG, *Theologie II*, 306; AHLBRECHT, *Tod*.

³ See STOCK, *Tod*, with reference to HÄRLE, *Dogmatik*, 488.

⁴ GINZBERG, *Legends V*, 129f. See also Str-B III, 227–229.

⁵ GINZBERG, *Legends I*, 61.

Nevertheless, the rabbinic tradition also highlights the notion that there would be no death without sin,⁶ which on the other hand implies that there is a possibility for the righteous ones to enter the Paradise alive and to continue living there forever. This status is attributed to Enoch, Bithiah, the daughter of Pharaoh, Hiram, the king of Tyre, Eliezer, Abraham's servant, Elijah, Jonadab the Rechabite and others.⁷ *Pesiqta Rabbati* 42:1 states explicitly:

"When God created Adam He created him so that he might live forever like the ministering angels [as it is written] 'And God said, Behold man has become like one of us', just as the ministering angels do not die, so he will not know the taste of death ... But since he did not abide by His commandments, death was consequently decreed for him."⁸

In the apocalyptic tradition, a similar statement can be found in *I. Enoch* 69:11, a text from the so-called "Similitudes" which is very hard to date, but likely belongs to the 1st or 2nd century C.E.:⁹

"For men were created exactly like the angels, to the intent that they should continue pure and righteous, and death, which destroys everything, could not have taken hold of them, but through their knowledge they are perishing."

The midrash *GenR* 12:6 counts immortality among the original, but now lost qualities of Adam:

"R. Yudan in the name of R. Abun: The [missing] six [that is, the numerical value of the *vav*] correspond to six things that were taken away from the first man, and these are they: his splendor, his immortal life, his stature, the fruit of the earth, the fruit of the tree, and the primordial lights."¹⁰

This interpretation is still accepted among modern interpreters of Genesis 2–3 such as Karl Budde,¹¹ Johannes Meinhold,¹² Ephraim A. Speiser, Klaus Koch,¹³ Jan Gertz,¹⁴ Erhard Blum,¹⁵ André LaCocque,¹⁶ just to name a few, all together hold that the first humans were created immortal. However, such an interpretation is hardly possible.¹⁷

⁶ GINZBERG, *Legends* V, 129f.; Str-B, 228f.

⁷ See the discussion in GINZBERG, *Legends* V, 95f.

⁸ See KUGEL, *Bible*, 71.

⁹ See UHLIG, *Henochbuch*, 474.

¹⁰ NEUSNER, *Genesis Rabbah*, 124.

¹¹ BUDDE, *Urgeschichte*, 23.

¹² MEINHOLD, *Erzählung*, 128.

¹³ KOCH, *Adam*, 213.

¹⁴ GERTZ, *Adam*, 230f. and n. 42.

¹⁵ BLUM, *Gottesunmittelbarkeit*, 22ff.

¹⁶ LACOCQUE, *Trial*, 100f.

¹⁷ As the majority of scholars seems to hold, see e.g., JACOB, *Buch*, 121; STECK, *Paradieserzählung*, 103; WOLFF, *Anthropologie*, 150; DOHMEN, *Schöpfung*, 295 and 295 n. 216, with bibliography. For general questions concerning this topic see NICKELSBURG,

2 A Look Behind the Scene: Was Humanity Created to Be Immortal According to Genesis 2?

When approaching this question, it is helpful to provide some preliminary clarifications in order to contextualize the theme of mortality or immortality within the overall story of Genesis 2–3. The biblical Paradise story is one of the foundational texts of Western culture. It is perhaps one of the best known texts in world literature. The popularity of this text contrasts sharply with our inability to understand it properly. The most commonly known elements associated with this text in a popular perspective – for example Adam, the original sin and the apple – are not really central to it. The human individual, Adam, is not mentioned in the Hebrew text, rather the protagonist is always called אָדָם, which means “man” in Hebrew and not “Adam” because of the article. Adam only shows up in the consonantal text of the Bible for the first time in Gen 4:1. The term “sin” – let alone “original sin” – does not occur in Genesis 2–3 either. The reader has to wait until Gen 4:7 for his or her first encounter with the explicit notion of “sin.” The forbidden fruit is not botanically identified in Genesis 2–3. Its traditional Christian identification with an apple has its roots in the Latin reception history of Genesis 2–3 which equated the evil “*malum*” humankind had done with the specific fruit “*malum*” “apple.”¹⁸

Yet these kinds of problems created by reception history are not the most troubling or most important ones for understanding Genesis 2–3. The whole story line of Genesis 2–3 has been obscured by the huge and admittedly rich reception history which has its own value and which has been explored by many scholarly contributions.¹⁹ Since especially Paul and Augustine of Hippo, it has become commonplace to subscribe to the fall of humankind from a glorious primitive state into the deplorable present state of sin. Of course the events in the garden are clearly depicted as the transgression of a given prohibition and a successive punishment, so there is a very basic element of decline which cannot be denied. Nevertheless, the biblical story of Paradise is much more ambiguous about the relationship between the *primitive* state and the *present* state of humankind. A small booklet by James Barr from 1993²⁰ and an article by

Resurrection; LEVISON, Portraits; CALLENDER, Adam; ELLEDGE, Life. As for the Qumran literature see GLICKLER CHAZON, Creation.

¹⁸ For identifications in the Jewish tradition (fig, grape, *etrog*, nut) see GINZBERG, Legends V, 97.

¹⁹ See e.g. ANDERSON, Genesis; LUTTIKHUIZEN, Paradise; VAN RUITEN, Interpretation; NAGEL, Auslegung; METZGER, Paradieserzählung; TRILLHAAS, Felix culpa; KÖSTER, Urstrand.

²⁰ BARR, Garden.

Hermann Spieckermann, written in the year 2000 and entitled with just one word “ambivalences,”²¹ have poignantly drawn attention to the fact that the storyline of Genesis 2–3 is not merely leading from a glorious situation to a deficient one, but from one ambivalent status to another one.²²

This contribution cannot go into the details of the biblical text;²³ however, this much should be obvious for any reader – besides all admitted multiperspectivity and ambiguity: Genesis 2–3 is organized thematically as a large chiasm. The situation before the fall contrasts the situation after the fall in an inverted manner. Before the fall, the human beings were very close to God, even familiar with him, but deprived of any knowledge. After the fall, they are expelled from the immediate vicinity of God, but they have gained the knowledge of good and evil. Hermeneutically speaking, the Paradise story deals with the common human experience that applying their own reasoning towards life necessarily creates distance between humankind and God.

It is therefore helpful to see that, biblically understood, the knowledge of good and evil is not a hybrid or sinful wish of the human beings to take God’s place. King Solomon, for example, is praised by God in 1.Kings 3 for having chosen for himself an “understanding mind to govern your people, able to discern between good and evil.” (1.Kings 3:9).

Rather, “knowledge of good and evil” means the capacity and necessity to make reasonable and responsible decisions which is an everyday task for every mature human being. Little children do not yet have the knowledge of good and evil:

Deut 1:39: “And as for your little ones, [...], your children, who today do not yet know good from evil [...].”

Likewise elderly men do not have the knowledge of good and evil anymore:

2.Sam 19:36: “Today I [sc. Barzillai] am eighty years old; how can I still discern what is good and what is evil?”

Instead, every grown up has this knowledge:

1QSa 1,10f.: “[...] when he has reached twenty years, when he knows about good and evil.”

Genesis 2–3 apparently interprets this basic human ability as a theologically relevant element that necessarily entails a fundamental distance to God rather than as something which needs to (or even could) be avoided.

²¹ SPIECKERMANN, *Ambivalenzen*.

²² For some Jewish approaches in that direction see GRADWOHL, *Bibelauslegungen*, 49–51.

²³ See for a more detailed treatment SCHMID, *Unteilbarkeit*.

In doing so, Genesis 2–3 just strives to understand how this situation came about. It is hard to detect any narrative elements that idealize the life in paradise. There is just one sentence – not more – which describes ordinary human life before the fall, and this sentence is Gen 2:25:

Gen 2:25: “And the man and his wife were both naked, and were not ashamed.”

We even do not know for sure whether this is a positive statement. In the historical context of Gen 2:25, is it more decent to be dressed or to be undressed?²⁴ At any rate we should be cautious about applauding the nakedness from a modern, neoromantic stance. Be this as it may, the *narrative* reason why this is said is the fact that seven verses later, in 3:7, the man and his wife notice their nakedness and try to hide it:

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 loincloths for themselves.”

What about the topic of immortality within the overall story line of Genesis 2–3?

At first glance, the traditional notion of an original immortality which was lost after the fall would fit perfectly into this chiasmic arrangement of the Paradise story. This would be just another element contrasting the situations before the fall and after the fall. In addition, God’s threat in 2:17 “you shall surely die” would be narratively fulfilled. Humankind, after its fall, has to die. Since God is not a liar, he accomplishes what he announces.

But upon further review, there are far too many problems for such a thesis of an original human immortality in Genesis 2–3 to be maintained.²⁵

First, Gen 2:7 states: “YHWH God formed man from the dust of the ground.” “Dust” in the Hebrew Bible functions clearly as a metaphor for transience, for being mortal.²⁶

Secondly, in the punishment sentences in Gen 3:14–19, there is only one instance where the topic of death is brought up again, in 3:19. However, this verse does not claim that humankind from now on has to die in contrast to the situation before. Death is not mentioned among the elements of punishment themselves; it only appears in the second of the two כִּי sentences providing a further explanation of the preceding statement.

Gen 3:19: “By the sweat of your face you shall eat bread until you return to the ground, for (כִּי) out of it you were taken; for (אֲדָמָה) you are dust, and to dust you shall return.”

Thirdly, the formulation of 3:22b would be surprisingly odd:

²⁴ See HARTENSTEIN, *Beobachtungen*.

²⁵ See already the objections made by GUNKEL, *Genesis*, 10; see also SARNA, *Genesis*, 18f.

²⁶ See e.g. Qoh 3:20; 12:7 and the discussion in MÜLLER, *Sterblichkeit*, 73–85.

Gen 3:22: “Then YHWH God said, ‘See, the man has become like one of us, knowing good and evil; and now, he might reach out his hand and take also from the tree of life, and eat, and live for ever.’”

This sentence apparently does not reckon with the possibility that the human beings could *again* become immortal after having lost their original immortality a short while earlier. Rather, the prohibition of the tree of life is now mandatory, because after the humans have gained knowledge immortality is the main element which still very clearly distinguishes God and humans.

Fourthly, it has often been observed that 2:17 is formulated similarly to a legal rule involving death penalty.²⁷

Gen 2:17: “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* (מוֹת תָּמוּת).”

The commentaries often have drawn attention to the so called מוֹת יִרְמָה-sentences for capital crimes in the Covenant Code in Exodus 21–23.

Exod 21:15–17: “Whoever strikes father or mother *shall surely be put do death* (מוֹת יִרְמָה). Whoever kidnaps a person, whether that person has been sold or is still held in possession, *shall surely be put do death* (מוֹת יִרְמָה). Whoever curses father or mother *shall surely be put to death* (מוֹת יִרְמָה).”

There are, however, two noteworthy dissimilarities. Gen 2:27 is formulated in 2nd person and in active voice, “you shall surely die,” Exod 21:15 is in 3rd person and in passive voice: “he shall surely be put do death.” But this can be easily explained. The change in person is due to the narrative situation in Genesis 2, and the active voice has to do with the fact that in Gen 2 there is no legal system to execute punishments beside God himself. A look into similar passages where the expression “you *shall surely die* (מוֹת תָּמוּת)” is used in the Hebrew Bible can corroborate this point. In almost every instances מוֹת תָּמוּת is used to describe a capital punishment executed by God himself and immediately, as for example in Gen 20:7:

Gen 20:6–7: “Then God said [to Abimelech of Gerar] in the dream, ‘... Now then, return the man’s wife [i.e. Sarah to Abraham]... But if you do not restore her, know that you *shall surely die* (מוֹת תָּמוּת), you and all that are yours.’”

Or in Numbers 26, it is said of the rebellious Exodus generation:

Num 26:65: “For YHWH had said of them, *They shall surely die* (מוֹת יָמָה) in the wilderness. And there was not left a man of them, save Caleb the son of Jephunneh, and Joshua the son of Nun.”

²⁷ See OTTO, *Paradieserzählung*, 181. Symmachus and some other Greek and Latin manuscripts interpret the latter part of the verse: *thnætos esæ/mortalis eris* “you shall be mortal” (WEVERS, *Septuaginta*, 86, see KUGEL, *Bible*, 70).

In Judg 13:22, Manoah tells his wife:

Judg 13:22: "... *We shall surely die* (מֹות הָמוּת), because we have seen God."

In Ezek 3:18, God is directly speaking to the prophet:

Ezek 3:18: "If I say to the wicked, '*You shall surely die* (מֹות הָמוּת),' and you give them no warning, and do not speak to warn the wicked from their wicked way, in order to save their life, those wicked persons shall die for their iniquity; but their blood I will require at your hand."

And finally, in 2.Kings 1:16, Elijah is telling king Ahaziah:

2.Kgs 1:16: "Thus says the Lord: Because you have sent messengers to inquire of Baalzebub, the god of Ekron, – is it because there is no God in Israel to inquire of his word? – therefore you shall not leave the bed to which you have gone, but *you shall surely die* (מֹות הָמוּת)."²⁸

Fifthly, as A. Kapelrud²⁹ noticed some time ago, the ancient Near Eastern parallel texts for the motive of immortality, such as Gilgamesh and Adapa, show a similar pattern: "man is deprived of his possibility of attaining everlasting life by unexpected forces,"³⁰ in Gilgamesh even in form of a serpent. The loss of *the chance* to become immortal, and not the loss of an original immortality, is a traditional element in Ancient Near Eastern mythology.

Therefore, the following conclusion is unavoidable for the historical interpretation of Genesis 2–3: death was thought to be an integral part of human life from the very beginning of creation. There was, however, a virtual chance to attain immortality by eating from the tree of life, which was not forbidden before the so-called "fall." Nevertheless, this chance was in fact also non-existent from the very beginning because of humans' lack of knowledge. The motive in the speech of the woman, "not to *touch* the tree in the middle of the garden," which goes beyond the divine command in Gen 2:17 reveals that they would not have eaten from it.

²⁸ As the description of the conflict between Ahimelech and king Saul shows, the formula מֹות הָמוּת may have been an ancient privilege to the king, before it was theologically interpreted and transferred to the realm of God: 1.Sam 22:16: "The king said, '*You shall surely die*, Ahimelech, you and all your father's house.'"

²⁹ KAPELRUD, VT.S 1993. See also MÜLLER, Deutungen; ID., Erkenntnis.

³⁰ KAPELRUD, VT.S 1993, 61.

3 Death and Immortality in Early Receptions of Genesis 2–3

The suggested historical meaning of Genesis 2–3, is, of course, not identical with its reception history. In this reception history, it is first of all important to note that there seems to be hardly any literary reflex on this text in the Hebrew Bible. This was a major problem for those assigning a monarchic date to this text in past scholarship. However, a broader consensus has been emerging at least in the European discussion that Genesis 2–3 is probably a Persian period text because of the shape of its theological positions.³¹ It reflects a certain development in the history of religious thought, making it very unlikely that Genesis 2–3 is an early text. It presupposes and universalizes the deuteronomistic notion that land can be lost by disobedience, and it criticizes traditional wisdom positions concerning human knowledge.

From this perspective the silence about the Paradise story in the Hebrew Bible is not very astonishing. There are, however, quite a few reflections on Genesis 2–3 found in Early Jewish Literature from the 2nd and 1st century B.C.E.

The most well known *early Jewish* receptions of Genesis 2–3 can be found in two somewhat cryptic and very short allusions from Ben Sira (Sir 25:24) and the Wisdom of Solomon (Sap 2:23–24).³² Ben Sira was probably written in the first half of the 2nd century B.C.E., while the date of the Wisdom of Solomon is more disputed. Nevertheless, a majority of scholars tend to date it to the end of the 1st century B.C.E.³³

Sir 25:24: “From a woman sin had its beginning, and because of her we all die.”

Sap 2:23–24: “For God created man for incorruption, and made him in the image of his own eternity, but through the devil’s envy death entered the world, and those who belong to his party experience it.”

Both passages seem to develop or presuppose the understanding that death entered the world through the so called fall, implying *vice versa* that the first humans being created as immortals. Can the source of this notion of human immortality be found here, in these earliest receptions of Genesis 2–3?³⁴ This seems to be the case, but a further glance in both books reveals that the situation is more complex.

³¹ See e.g. OTTO, *Paradieserzählung*, 173–185; WITTE, *Urgeschichte*, 158–166; SCHMID, *Un teilbarkeit*; SCHÜLE, *Prolog*, 149–217; ARNETH, *Fall*, 227–236.

³² See the overview by SCHÜNGEL-STRAUMANN, *Frau*.

³³ See e.g., ZENGER, *Einleitung*, 396–416; KAISER, *Apokryphen*, 79–106; ID, *Anweisungen*, 57–116; BLISCHKE, *Eschatologie*, 44–47.

³⁴ KUGEL, *Bible*, 69f., is thinking in that direction.

3.1 *Ben Sira*

It has often been noted that the verse Sir 25:24 with its concept of the origin of death is an astonishingly foreign matter in the book. J.J. Collins, for example, states: “Sirach 25:24 [...] is anomalous in the context of Ben Sira.”³⁵ Otherwise, the book of Ben Sira thinks of death as a regular and common feature of creation.³⁶ Most clearly, Sir 14:17 states

“All living beings become old like a garment, for it is an eternal law to die.”

The same conviction can be found in Sir 17:1–2:

“The Lord created man out of earth, and turned him back to it again. He gave to men few days, a limited time [...]”

Or in 41:3–4:

“Do not fear the sentence of death; remember your former days and the end of life; this is the decree from the Lord for all flesh [...]”

These passages seem to be very clear: Humankind was created as mortal, not immortal, from the very beginning. What then about Ben Sira 25:24? There are two possible explanations. The first solution could be to understand the expression “to die” not in the sense of “to become mortal,” but meaning to only have a *short* life, to die *early*.³⁷ This would be in accordance with statements like Sir 1:12 or Sir 30:24:

Sir 1:12: “The fear of the Lord ... gives ... long life.”

Sir 30:24: “Jealousy and anger shorten life, and anxiety brings on old age too soon.”

Another passage in Sir 26:1–2, in the immediate context of Sir 25:24, explicitly links a long life with a good wife:

Sir 26:1–2: “Happy is the husband of a good wife; the number of his days will be doubled. A loyal wife rejoices her husband, and he will complete his years in peace.”

One could paraphrase the sequence of Sir 25:24–26:2 as follows: as the first sinful wife brought early death, every good wife will bring a long life.

Generally, Ben Sira is very critical of women and stresses the negative impact women have on male life. This stance is quite traditional as it is

³⁵ COLLINS, Fall, 297.

³⁶ See COLLINS, Fall, 296–301; SCHÄFER, Adam, 72f.

³⁷ See LEVISON, Eve. COLLINS, Fall, 298: “In light of these sentiments, it is possible that Ben Sira was laying the blame for sin and death on woman in general rather than on Eve in particular;” cf. also SCHÄFER, Adam, 72 and Sir 17,2a, where the pronouns are shifting between singular (“Adam”) and plural (“mankind”) (LEVISON, Eve, 618 n. 3).

reminiscent of concepts in Proverbs 1–9 warning against the strange woman, especially in chapter 7.³⁸

A second way to explain the peculiarity of Sir 25:24 within the book could be to consider Sir 25:24 as a redactional addition, introducing the connection between the genesis of death and the fall of the woman in Genesis 2. There are some indications in the overall structure of chapter 25 which could support this solution, but it would lead to far from my topic to pursue these clues further at this point.

At any rate, it is far from clear that the book of Ben Sira already associated the so-called fall with the loss of an original immortality of the humans. Rather, the opposite is true: for Ben Sira, mortality is a feature of creation. Sin, induced by women or not, causes not death as such, but rather an early death.

3.2 *Wisdom of Solomon*

While the case of Ben Sira is difficult, the Wisdom of Solomon seems to offer a clear position stating that the original state of humanity including the concept of genuine immortality.

Sap 2:23–24: “For God created man for incorruption, and made him in the image of his own eternity, but through the devil’s envy death entered the world, and those who belong to his party experience it.”

The creation of humanity is depicted as an image of divine eternity. Consequently death came into the world through the devil, obviously an allusion to the accordingly interpreted serpent from Genesis 3, a trait otherwise known and elaborated in the Life of Adam and Eve 10–17, 2.Enoch 31:6, 4.Macc 8:18, Rev 12:9.³⁹ In addition, we find the statement in Sap 1:12 that “God did not make death.”

Isn’t this an obvious enough statement? But again, looking into the context of the rest of the book, there are also conflicting passages which take a contrary stance. For example Sap 7:1 reads as follows:

“I also am mortal, like all men, a descendant of the first-formed child of earth [...]”

³⁸ An especially glaring example of Ben Sira’s misogyny can be found in Sir 42:12–13: “Do not look upon anyone for beauty, and do not sit in the midst of women; for from garments comes the moth, *and from a woman comes woman’s wickedness*. Better is the wickedness of a man than a woman who does good; and it is a woman who brings shame and disgrace.” This text might be of some importance for the understanding of Sir 25:24, because it doesn’t seem to be far fetched to interpret the phrase “from a woman comes woman’s wickedness” might allude to Genesis 3 again. See SKEHAN/DI LELLA, *Wisdom*, 483.

³⁹ WINSTON, *Wisdom*, 121–123; HOGAN, *Background*, 19; GEORGI, *Weisheit*, 409. For other interpretations of the “devil” as referring to Cain see LEVISON, *Portraits*, 1f.

Sap 7:1 not only states that all men are mortal, but by using the imagery “child of earth” obviously also implies that the first human being was created mortal as well.⁴⁰

How are these inconsistencies to be dealt with? Recent approaches to the Wisdom of Solomon⁴¹ have convincingly shown that “death” does not just denote the end of life. It is seen in a multi-perspectival way in the book: “Death” can mean *physical death*, but in many cases it refers to something which may be termed “*spiritual death*” – meaning the death of the soul while a person is still alive. Obviously, the Wisdom of Solomon is drawing on a distinction commonly known in ancient Alexandria, as some passages in Philo suggest. Although these texts may have been written down somewhat later than the book of Wisdom of Solomon, there are nevertheless hints that they rely on older traditions. The double notion of death is made explicit in Philo’s *Legum allegoriae* 1:105–107, in his exegesis on Gen 2:17:

Philo, L.A. 1:105–107: “Death is of two kinds, one that of the man in general, the other that of the soul in particular. The death of man is the separation of the soul from the body, but the death of the soul is the decay of virtue and the bringing in of wickedness. It is for this reason that God says not only ‘die’ but ‘die the death’ indicating not the death common to us all, but that special death properly so called, which is that of the soul becoming entomed in passions and wickedness of all kinds. And this death is practically the antithesis of the death that awaits us all.”⁴²

The mention of immortality in the Wisdom of Solomon, then, is to be understood as a spiritualized notion of the everlasting qualities of a righteous human being. Or as J.J. Collins puts it: “The wise and righteous individual is immortal because righteousness and wisdom are immortal.”⁴³ Let me corroborate this view with a few passages from the book.

Sap 1:12–15: “Do not invite death by the error of your life. [...] For righteousness is immortal.”

Sap 6:18: “[...] to follow her laws [sc. the laws of wisdom] is assurance of immortality.”

Sap 15:3: “For to know you [sc. God] is complete righteousness, and to know your power is the root of immortality.”

⁴⁰ See COLLINS, Fall, 297: “Even the Wisdom of Solomon, which says emphatically that God did not make death and that it entered the world by the envy of the devil (Wis 1:13, 2:23–24), is most probably referring to spiritual death and taking mortality for granted.” See also BLISCHKE, Eschatologie, 114–116.

⁴¹ KOLARCIK, Ambiguity, 163; see also MILLER, Immortality.

⁴² Translation from HOGAN, Background, 11.

⁴³ COLLINS, Death, 191. See also 187: “In short the Wisdom of Solomon shares the conviction of Proverbs and Sirach that wisdom confers ‘life’ in a transcendent sense, but unlike them it envisages that life as immortality in the presence of God.”

Apparently this spiritual concept of immortality was not commonly understood or accepted among the audience the book of Wisdom addresses. The book speaks of some “foolish” people who think that also the righteous ones just die like all others:

Sap 3:1–4: “But the souls of the righteous are in the hand of God, and no torment will ever touch them. (2) In the eyes of the foolish they seemed to have died, and their departure was thought to be an affliction, (3) and their going from us to be their destruction; but they are at peace. (4) For though in the sight of men they were punished, their hope is full of immortality.”

The foolish ones make no distinction between physical and spiritual death, whereas the righteous ones know that their souls will live on thanks to their righteousness. To be sure, the Wisdom of Solomon thinks that both are right, as the immortality of the soul is contingent upon the way a person lives his or her life.⁴⁴ For the foolish ones it is indeed true that they will die an ultimate death.

To sum up: It seems more convincing that Sap 2:23f. is not alluding to an original physical immortality, but to spiritual immortality, which is attainable through a life full of righteousness.⁴⁵ The “death having entered the world” means spiritual death, the death of the soul before or when the body physically dies. This interpretation is also imposed by the immediate context preceding Sap 2:23 in Sap 2:22:

“And the [ungodly] did not know the mysteries of God, nor did they hope for the reward of holiness, nor did they choose the prize for blameless souls.”

3.3 *1.Enoch*

What seems to be true for Ben Sira and the Wisdom of Solomon also seems to be the case in some strands of the apocalyptic tradition. The book of 1.Enoch,⁴⁶ for example, never addresses the origin of death explicitly. Nevertheless, in 15:3–7, within the Book of Watchers, 1.Enoch clearly assumes that “the fleshly human nature was thought to be inherently mortal.”⁴⁷

1.Enoch 15,3–7: “Wherefore have you [sc. the angels] left the high, holy, and eternal heaven, and lain with women, and defiled yourselves with the daughters of men and taken to yourselves wives, and done like the children (4) of earth, and begotten giants (as your) sons? And though you were holy, spiritual, living the eternal life, you have defiled

⁴⁴ HOGAN, Background, 2.

⁴⁵ HOGAN, Background, 16f.

⁴⁶ For questions of composition and historical setting see the overview e.g. of BEDENBENDER, Gott, 146–151; VANDERKAM, Introduction, 91–94; but especially NICKELSBURG, 1 Enoch, 230.

⁴⁷ COLLINS, Fall, 305.

yourselves with the blood of women, and have begotten (children) with the blood of flesh, and, as the children of men, have lusted after flesh and blood as those also do who die (5) and perish. Therefore have I given them wives also that they might impregnate them, and beget (6) children by them, that thus nothing might be wanting to them on earth. But you were formerly (7) spiritual, living the eternal life, and immortal for all generations of the world. And therefore I have not appointed wives for you; for as for the spiritual ones of the heaven, in heaven is their dwelling.”

Collins further comments: “According to this passage, women were created so that mortal men could attain a substitute for immortality by begetting children. If Adam were originally immortal, there would have been no reason to create Eve. It is unlikely, then, that death was introduced as a punishment for the sin of Adam. Rather, as we saw in Ben Sira, mortality seems to have been the divine plan for human beings from the beginning.”⁴⁸

3.4 4.Ezra and 2.Baruch

In later apocalyptic texts like 4.Ezra and 2.Baruch, stemming from the period after 70 C.E.,⁴⁹ the picture is still not radically different.

Although there are general statements like 2.Bar 23:4 linking Adam’s sin with death, it is not clear whether this refers to the loss of an original immortality. 2.Bar 54:15, for example, explicitly says that Adam’s fall brought not mortality, but “untimely death,” which points to the conviction that Adam is conceived to be created as a mortal being (see also 2.Bar 56:5). Furthermore, the clarification in 2.Bar 17:2–3 is noteworthy, explaining Adam’s “bringing of death” as “cutting of years”:

“For what did it profit Adam that he lived nine hundred and thirty years and transgressed that which he was commanded? Therefore the multitude of time that he lived did not profit him, but brought death and cut off the years of those who were born from him.”

Finally, 2.Bar 21:10 addresses God as the only “immortal.” 2.Bar 40:3; 85:5 imply that transcendence is a feature of this world. Vice versa, the promise of “life” in 2.Bar 38:1; 48:22 seems to be an innerworldly result of respecting the law.⁵⁰

In 4.Ezra the case seems to be a little different.⁵¹ 4.Ezra 3:7 seems to argue that death entered the world through Adam’s sin:

⁴⁸ 306.

⁴⁹ See STONE, *Fourth Ezra*, 9–11; KLIJN, *Baruchapokalypse*, 113f.; SCHMID, *Zerstörung*.

⁵⁰ See KLIJN, *Baruchapokalypse*, 116f.

⁵¹ See the excursus on “death,” in: STONE, *Fourth Ezra*, 65–67.

4.Ezra 3:7 And you laid upon him one commandment; but he transgressed it, and immediately you appointed death for him and for his descendants. From him there sprang nations and tribes, peoples and clans without number.

It is, however, not said what kind of death God appointed for Adam and his descendants. Physical death? Early death? Spiritual death?

4.Ezra 3:9f. compares Adam's death with the flood, so one might think of a "cutting off of days" like in 2.Bar:

4.Ezra 3:9f.: But again, in its time you brought the flood upon the inhabitants of the world and destroyed them. And the same fate befell them: as death came upon Adam, so the flood upon them.

Ezra is not complaining in 4.Ezra 4:33 that human years are not eternal, but that they are "short and evil." As in 2.Bar, "immortality" is a feature not of this world, but of the world to come (4.Ezra 7:113)

Interestingly, however, the discussion of that problem does not seem to be fully clear in the transmission of the text of 4.Ezra. 4.Ezra 7:118 provides different readings as for the "fall":

4.Ezra 7:118f.: O Adam, what have you done? For though it was you who sinned, the fall was not yours alone, but ours also who are your descendants. For what good is it to us, if an eternal age has been promised to us, but we have done deeds that bring death?

The Latin text reads "fall," the Syriac and Ethiopic text "evil," the Arabic versions have "death" or "doom."⁵²

4.Ezra might therefore need to be interpreted somewhat differently than 2.Bar. Nevertheless, it remains noteworthy that the position of 4.Ezra regarding the question of an original immortality of humankind is not expressed with full clarity.

3.5 *Josephus*

Also a late 1st century C.E. text like the *Antiquities* of Josephus still holds that the first human beings were granted a long, but nevertheless non-eternal life, as can be seen from God's punishment speech towards Adam and Eve in Ant. I, 46, where God recounts his original plans for humankind in paradise:

Josephus, Ant. I, 46: "I [sc. God] had decided ... that you would live a happy life ... and your life would have been long."⁵³

From this statement, it becomes sufficiently clear that in Josephus' view humankind did not lose an original immortality, but was created mortal from the very beginning.

⁵² See SCHREINER, Esra, 358.

⁵³ Translation according to FELDMAN, *Antiquities* 1–4, 17.

3.6 Philo

One of the most influential interpretations of the topic of mortality in Genesis 2–3 can be found in Philo’s treatment of the passage in several places. The best known passage is *De opificio mundi* 134f., where Philo relates the first and the second accounts of the creation to each another in a platonizing way. According to this view, Moses reports in Genesis 1 the creation of the immortal idea of humankind, while Genesis 2 relates to the creation of the mortal human body:

Philo, *De opificio mundi* 134f.: “After this he [sc. Moses] says that ‘God formed man by taking clay from the earth, and breathed into his face the breath of life’ (Gen. ii. 7) By this also he shows very clearly that there is a vast difference between the man thus formed and the man that came into existence earlier after the image of God: for the man so formed is an object of sense-perception, partaking already of such and such quality, consisting of body and soul, man or woman, by nature mortal; while he that was after the (Divine) image was an idea or type or seal, an object of thought (only), incorporeal, neither male nor female, by nature incorruptible. It says, however, that the formation of the individual man, the object of sense, is a composite one made up of earthly substance and of Divine breath: for it says that the body was made through the Artificer taking clay and moulding out of it a human form, but that the soul was originated from nothing created whatever, but from the Father and Ruler of all: for that which He breathed in was nothing else than a Divine breath that migrated hither from the blissful and happy existence for the benefit of our race, to the end that, even if it is mortal in respect of its visible parts, it may in respect of the part that is invisible be rendered immortal. Hence it may with propriety be said that man is the borderland between mortal and immortal nature, partaking of each so far as is needful, and that he was created at once mortal and immortal, mortal in respect of the body (θνητὸν μὲν κατὰ τὸ σῶμα), but in respect of the mind immortal (κατὰ δὲ τὴν διάνοιαν ἀθάνατον).”⁵⁴

This method of interpreting the double creation of humankind in Genesis 1 and Genesis 2–3 is probably no invention of Philo’s, but instead relies on an older tradition also found in the LXX. The LXX renders יצר “to form” in Gen 2:7 (“Yhwh Elohim formed man from the dust of the ground”) with πλάσσειν and not with ποιεῖν, which is in accordance with Plato’s *Timaios* (42d–e): Only the supreme deity is able to ποιεῖν, meanwhile the formation, expressed with the verb πλάσσειν, of the mortal human body is the task of the “younger gods.”⁵⁵

⁵⁴ Philo, *On the Account of the World’s Creation Given by Moses* (*De opificio mundi*), with an English Translation, COLSON/WHITAKER, Library, 107.

⁵⁵ See RÖSEL, *Übersetzung*, 60.

3.7 *The Letters of Paul*

In light of these findings, the traditional interpretation of Paul's understanding of Genesis 2–3 in Romans 5 might need some reconsideration.⁵⁶ Of course, death is the consequence of sin (Rom 6:23) beginning with Adam's own fate (Rom 5:12), but it is noteworthy that Paul does not mention an original immortality of Adam. Rather, the notion of "eternal life" is explicitly linked not to the first man, but to the second man, not to Adam, but to Christ.

Rom 6:23: "For the wages of sin is death, but the free gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord."

Rom 5:12: "Therefore, just as sin came into the world through one man, and death came through sin, and so death spread to all because all have sinned."

This view can be corroborated by comparing with 1 Corinthians. In 1 Cor 15:47, Paul states that Adam was made from dust, indicating his transience and mortality.

1 Cor 15:47: "The first man was from the earth, a man of dust; the second man is from heaven."

Immortality can only be achieved through the second man, through Christ:

1 Cor 15:51–54: "We will not all die, but we will all be changed [...]. For this perishable body must put on imperishability, and this mortal body must put on immortality. When this perishable body puts on imperishability, and this mortal body puts on immortality, then the saying that is written will be fulfilled: 'Death has been swallowed up in victory.'"

But this immortality does not mean just living on, instead it is a new life in a completely changed way. Paul also seems to have a double notion of death. Of course we die. But death no longer entails separation from God. Or, anachronistically, in the words of Philo: physical death no longer means spiritual death.

4 Conclusion

After trying to establish the hypothesis that the first human beings probably were considered mortals from the very beginning in the biblical Paradise story and its early receptions, it is appropriate to consider the theological significance of this interpretation.

⁵⁶ See MEISER, Adamsaussagen; BLACK, Perspectives; KERTELGE, Adam; BRANDENBURGER, Mensch; HOFIUS, Adam-Christus-Antithese; BELL, Myth.

First, the prevalent Christian interpretation which sees the primitive status of humankind as immortals is the result of an eschatologizing perspective on the paradise story which was historically alien to it. Genesis 2–3 in its biblical shape is probably one of the most non-eschatological texts of the Bible, as is evident especially from its final verse:

Gen 3:24: “[The Lord God] drove out the man; and at the east of the garden of Eden he placed the cherubim, and a sword flaming and turning to guard the way to the tree of life.”

The angels with their sword stand for the conviction that the paradise is lost forever. There is no way back, never ever. The Paradise story tries to explain how the present conditions of human life outside the paradise came about. It is not interested in painting out the protological status of humankind in order to provide a model for eschatological expectations. The common Christian interpretation has thoroughly transformed this model, as can be seen for example from a famous German tune called “Lobt Gott ihr Christen alle gleich” (Nicolaus Hermann 1500–1561), which ends with the words:

“Heut schleust er [sc. Jesus Christ] wieder auf die Tür zum schönen Paradeis; der Cherub steht nicht mehr dafür.” [“Today, he unlocks the door to the beautiful paradise, the cherub no longer stands in front of it.”]

Secondly, it is quite interesting to consider the biblical and early Jewish notion of the human beings as being created mortal from the very beginning *theologically*. The Bible obviously sees no problems in determining human life – as it was designed by the creator – as substantially limited. Genesis 2–3 seems to present the wish to become immortal as a real wish only for fallen humanity. Immortality as such does not seem to be theologically important. This is probably not a completely mistaken idea.

Thirdly and finally, there is one problem left for God: Why did he not execute the punishment he announced? Why could the first couple live on? Is God a liar? Some scholars even went so far to state that because of this inconsequence, the verses Gen 2:16–17 – where God threatens the humans by death penalty – cannot have been part of the original story.⁵⁷ However, such a solution would just be bizarre. It is not an impossible thought that God is not bound to his own will and that sometimes he can act gracefully instead of lawfully.

⁵⁷ DOHMEN, *Schöpfung*, 155.

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