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Artículo

1. Theological Knowledge Formation in the Shade of Genesis 3

La formación del conocimiento teológico a la sombra de Génesis 3

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Abstract

The formation of knowledge is foundational to epistemology. In the case of theological knowledge, identifying the epistemic assumptions embedded in Scripture is essential for articulating a canonical epistemology. This article focuses on Genesis 3—a pivotal passage for any theological-epistemological analysis—as it reveals key metaphysical and epistemological dynamics related to the formation of theological knowledge. From this passage emerge several foundational elements that outline a biblical theory of knowledge. First, a biblically based epistemology requires a theo-ontological order in which divine revelation precedes and grounds human understanding. Second, in a postlapsarian world, human reason must be guided by biblical principles as external criteria, not the other way around. Third, theistic belief arises naturally within doxastic experience and is self-warranting. Fourth, theological knowledge depends on human participation in the divinely created reality. Fifth, theological knowledge is more than justified belief; it results from a personal encounter with God. Thus, knowledge is inherently relational and participative.

Keywords

Canonical epistemology — Theological knowledge — Genesis 3

Resumen

La formación del conocimiento es fundamental para la epistemología. En el caso del conocimiento teológico, identificar los supuestos epistémicos incrustados en las Escrituras es esencial para articular una epistemología canónica. Este artículo se centra en Génesis 3 —un pasaje clave para cualquier análisis teológico-epistemológico—, ya que revela

dinámicas metafísicas y epistemológicas fundamentales relacionadas con la formación del conocimiento teológico. De este pasaje emergen varios elementos fundacionales que delinean una teoría bíblica del conocimiento. Primero, una epistemología basada en la Biblia requiere un orden teo-ontológico en el que la revelación divina precede y fundamenta la comprensión humana. Segundo, en un mundo poslapsario, la razón humana debe estar guiada por principios bíblicos como criterios externos, y no al revés. Tercero, la creencia teísta surge de manera natural dentro de la experiencia doxástica y se justifica por sí misma. Cuarto, el conocimiento teológico depende de la participación humana en la realidad creada por Dios. Quinto, el conocimiento teológico es más que una creencia justificada; resulta de un encuentro personal con Dios. Así, el conocimiento es inherentemente relacional y participativo.

Palabras claves

Epistemología canónica — Conocimiento teológico — Génesis 3

Introduction

How does theological knowledge emerge in the human subject? Is it something rationally decided, or does experience bind it? On what basis does a person decide if what is known is theological knowledge, the knowledge of God? In the emergent field called "epistemology of theology," questions like these about the knowledge of God are central.[1] Nevertheless, as Ryan O'Dowd observes, "questions of epistemology and ideology have rarely been the focus of biblical scholarship;"[2] we tend to read our epistemology in the biblical canon.[3] So why not start with the biblical canon itself to outline a canonical epistemology?[4]

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1 John Greco, "Knowledge of God," in *The Oxford handbook of the epistemology of theology*, ed. by William J. Abraham and Frederick D. Aquino (New York: Oxford University Press, 2017), 9. On the same page, Greco uses religious epistemology to describe the "theories of knowledge about God," thus conflating religious knowledge with theological knowledge. He concludes that "questions about our knowledge of God are in the domain of both religious epistemology and the epistemology of theology."

2 Ryan O'Dowd, *The wisdom of Torah: Epistemology in Deuteronomy and the wisdom literature*, ed. by Dietrich-Alex Koch et al., FRLANT 225 (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2009), 11.

3 Dru Johnson, *Epistemology and biblical theology: From the Pentateuch to Mark's Gospel*, Routledge Interdisciplinary Perspectives on Biblical Criticism (New York: Routledge, 2018), 149.

4 Echoing his book written several years before (*The Hebrew Bible and philosophy of religion*, SBLRBS 70 [Atlanta, GA: Society of Biblical Literature, 2012]), Jaco Gericke insightfully argues that the Hebrew Bible can be used as a philosophical resource ("Is there philosophy in

This article explores how reading Scripture epistemologically may hold an answer. Genesis 3 is selected as a foundational epistemological passage.[5]

Genesis 3

Two verbs dominate the word frequency of this chapter: אכל ("to eat") and אמר ("to say, speak").[6] Both indicate that the focal point is God's spoken interdiction of Genesis 2,16-17. The serpent initiates the epistemic discussion, tempting the woman to find an epistemic justification for her belief in God's words. The two main actors in the first part of the narrative are the serpent and the woman. The subject of their discussion is God.[7] For the first time in Genesis, the verb ידע ("to know") occurs (Genesis 3,5.7.22). Its four occurrences reveal a process of participatory knowledge formation. The new knowledge is evil, whose strange reality irrupts the narrative.

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the Hebrew Bible? Some recent affirmative perspectives," *Journal for Semitics* 23, no. 2 [2014]: 583-598). While not an "essay in epistemology," the Hebrew Bible "does contain assumptions about the nature of knowledge" (Gericke, "Is there philosophy in the Hebrew Bible?," 589-590). Nevertheless, the return to a philosophical perspective in biblical studies "still has to be digested by mainstream scholarship" (Gericke, "Is there philosophy in the Hebrew Bible?," 597-598). Gericke's approach is an impetus for the present research, which also has a slant on biblical philosophy, but from a canonical perspective. In the same line with Gericke's argument are Edmond La B. Cherbonnier, "Biblical metaphysic and Christian philosophy," *ThTo* 9, no. 3 (1952): 360-375; Edmond La B. Cherbonnier, "Is there a Biblical metaphysics?," *ThTo* 15, no. 4 (1959): 454-469; Claude Tresmontant, "Biblical metaphysics," *Cross Currents* 10, no. 3 (1960): 229-250, which Roger E. Olson copiously cites in *The essentials of Christian thought: Seeing reality through the Biblical story* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2017).

5 Of course, one cannot base biblical epistemology solely on Genesis 3. This chapter is selected here to illustrate its contribution to such an epistemology. For a broader approach, see Dan-Adrian Petre, *Knowing God as an evangelical: Towards a canonical-epistemological model* (Cham, Switzerland: Palgrave Macmillan, 2023).

6 The verb אכל appears seventeen times in this section (Gen 3,1-3.5-6.11-14.17-19.22), while אמר appears sixteen times (Gen 3,1-4.9-14.16-17.22).

7 The word for serpent (נחש) appears only five times (Gen 3,1-2.4.13-14), while the words for woman (אשה) occur thirteen times (Gen 3,1-2.4.6.8.12-13.15-17.20-21). The word אלהים also occurs thirteen times (Gen 3,1.3.5.8-9.13-14.21-23).

The tree of epistemic justification

In Genesis 3, the tree of the knowledge of good and evil is the locus of the first discussion about epistemic justification. Before coming to the tree, the woman already knows about God's interdiction. Whether hearing the divine command directly or mediated through her husband, the woman accepts the divine knowledge intuitively.[8] For her, as for her husband, knowledge is a relational concept formed in a participatory way. There is no rationalization of knowledge formation. Only the serpent leads the discussion to the grounds of knowledge.

The woman is alone when the serpent enters into a dialogue with her.[9] The narrative introduces נחשׁ with the ability to speak. Until this point, only God and Adam speak. In his craftiness (ערום), the serpent uses his ability to speak, animated by his hostility against God.[10] The narrative makes it plain that the serpent knows about the divine prohibition, depicting the serpent as a "representative of something or someone

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8 It is unclear from the text if the woman learned about the prohibition directly from God, or from Adam. In Genesis 2,16-17, God uses the second person masculine singular when he talks with Adam. In Genesis 3,3, in what seems to be a repetition of the divine word, Eve quotes God using the second person plural. The fact that she adds "neither shall you touch it" (which is not found in the previous passage) indicates that she misquotes God, irrespective of her source of knowledge (David M. Carr, *Genesis 1-11*, IECOT [Stuttgart: Kohlhammer, 2021], 120). K. A. Mathews suggests that the plural in Genesis 3,2 implies that Adam told her about God's prohibition (*Genesis 1-11:26*, NAC 1A [Nashville, TN: Broadman & Holman, 1996], 235).

9 Westermann agrees, although for different reasons. See Claus Westermann, *Genesis 1-11: A commentary*, trans. by John J. Scullion (Minneapolis, MN: Augsburg, 1984), 239. The later narrative clearly indicates that only the woman was deceived by the serpent (Gen 3,13). Adam was deceived by the woman's speech (Gen 3,12). The expression עמה ("with her") in Genesis 3,6 does imply that Adam was silent besides the woman. It indicates man's participation in the act of eating (Umberto Cassuto, *A commentary of the book of Genesis. Part I: From Adam to Noah. Genesis 1-6:8*, trans. by Israel Abrahams [1961; repr., Jerusalem: Magnes, 1978], 148; Gordon J. Wenham, *Genesis 1-15*, WBC 1 [Dallas, TX: Word, 1998], 75-76). Later, a synonymous expression is used by man to describe the woman's presence with him as the accompanying wife (עמדי, Gen 3,12). The use of the plural in the woman's word is not an indication that Adam heard the dialogue, as she is answering the serpents' plural. *Contra* Mathews, who makes Adam a witness to the dialogue (Mathews, *Genesis 1-11:26*, 238).

10 *Contra* Westermann. He is ambiguous when he states that "[t]he words of the serpent are certainly directed against God, but this does not become the theme of the narrative. We are not justified by the text in seeing behind these words a complete orientation of the serpent against God or a being at enmity with God" (Westermann, *Genesis 1-11*, 238).

sinisterly powerful."[11] The purpose of the malefic power is to overthrow the divine order. Moreover, this serpentiform language aims at creating a new reality. In this redefined reality, the tree of the knowledge of good and evil supplants the tree of life, becoming the new source of enlightenment, wisdom, and knowledge. As a counterfeit creator, the serpent seeks to remake humanity in the *imago serpentis* ("image of the serpent") through moral self-determination independent of God's will.

To execute his plan, the serpent works toward replacing the divinely imparted knowledge with his own. Meanwhile, it deceives the woman by its argument that her perceptive powers are the source of the new דעת. The maleficent epistemological process has several moves. First, the serpent uses its speech to make the woman doubt God's words and intentions. The particle אף ("really, truly") in Genesis 3,1 introduces an emphatic lie: "Did God really say, 'You must not eat from any tree in the garden'?" (NIV).[12] It extends God's prohibition to all the trees in the garden in an attempt "to create in the woman's mind the impression that God is spiteful, mean, obsessively jealous, and self-protective."[13] The knowledge of the woman is based upon God's authority. If the serpent can topple this authority, it can replace it with his own. Consequently, the serpent directs its attack on knowledge. To supplant

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11 Mathews, *Genesis 1-11:26*, 232. Mathews argues for Satan as the malefic power behind the serpent (see pages 233-235). From a canonical perspective, the serpent should be interpreted in the larger context of the Scriptures. So Bruce K. Waltke and Charles Yu, *An Old Testament theology: An exegetical, canonical, and thematic approach* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2007), 260-261, and Russell R. Reno, *Genesis*, Brazos Theological Commentary on the Bible (Grand Rapids, MI: Brazos, 2010), 79-86.

12 Elaine A. Phillips notes that "the serpent's utterance is syntactically allowed to be an emphatic falsehood" instead of an interrogation ("Serpent intertexts: Tantalizing twists in the tales," *Bulletin for Biblical Research* 10, no. 2 [2000]: 237). Although the present analysis focuses on the Hebrew text, it is worthy to note that the LXX-G translation "does not question *if* God said not to eat from every tree in the garden, but *why* God said it" (Susan A. Brayford, *Genesis*, Septuagint Commentary Series [Leiden: E. J. Brill, 2007], 236).

13 Victor P. Hamilton, *The book of Genesis: Chapters 1-17*, NICOT (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1990), 189. Wenham insightfully notes that "in describing God simply as God (אלהים) instead of as the LORD God, which is characteristic of the rest of Genesis 2-3, there is a suggestion of the serpent's distance from God" (Wenham, *Genesis 1-15*, 73).

divinely imparted knowledge with one grounded in rational evaluation of reality, the serpent targets the justification of the woman's knowledge.

This second epistemological move is already evident in the opening verse of chapter three. The serpent treats the woman's knowledge as a mere belief that needs justification. In the words of the serpent, the "prohibition which seemed a *given* is now scrutinized as though it were not a given but an *option*."[14] By referring to the location of the trees in the garden in a generic manner, the serpent blurs the distinction between them, effectively nullifying God's command. The forked tongue thus moves the discussion behind the divine prohibition to provide an external criterion for it.[15] The divinely imparted knowledge is an apparent justified true belief. As such, the epistemic justification is relocated into the realm of human reason.

The woman adopts the semantic shift introduced by the serpent, which devalues the tree's dangerousness. This shift from a nominal to a spatial emphasis enables her to rationalize the justification of her true belief. Furthermore, when she recalls God's commandment, the woman removes the language of certainty reflected by the infinitive absolute of Genesis 2,17 (מות תמות)[16] and focuses only on certain consequences that can be prevented (3,3),[17] thus reflecting probability rather than certainty.

After the woman is oriented toward the restrictive aspect of the divine command (Genesis 3,2-3), a third epistemological move follows.[18]

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14 Walter Brueggemann, *Genesis*, IBC (Atlanta, GA: John Knox, 1982), 47.

15 Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Creation and fall: A theological exposition of Genesis 1-3*, ed. by Martin Rüter, Ilse Tödt, and John W. De Gruchy, trans. by Douglas Stephen Bax, Dietrich Bonhoeffer Works 3 (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress, 2004), 106.

16 For the narrators' use of the infinitive absolute to "express their conviction of the verity of their statements regarding an action," see Cristo H. J. van der Merwe, Jackie A. Naudé, and Jan H. Kroeze, *A Biblical Hebrew reference grammar*, BLH 3 (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic, 1999), 158.

17 Carr, *Genesis 1-11*, 120.

18 Waltke and Fredericks note that the serpent "smoothly maneuvers Eve into what may appear as a sincere theological discussion, but he subverts obedience and distorts perspective by emphasizing God's prohibition, not his provision, reducing God's command to a question, doubting

Given that knowledge is demeaned as true belief, the serpent attacks the truth value of her belief. While God emphasizes the epistemic certainty of the warning in Genesis 2,17, the serpent mirrors and negates this construction in Genesis 3,4 (לא־מות תמתון, "you will not surely die") thereby mounting an emphatic challenge to the divine command. The negative particle (לא) transforms the true belief into a false one. In the serpent's view, God's words are not in accordance with reality. The נחשׁ "denies the *whole word* of God."[19] The opposing power implies that the woman needs to renounce her belief in favor of new knowledge.

Once the woman perceives her knowledge as unjustified and untrue, the serpent takes a fourth epistemological move. After using the justified true belief model to deceive the woman, the נחשׁ uses the participatory model to instill his knowledge. This model changes the epistemic relational ground to a new one. Under a pious guise, the serpent invites the woman to form a relationship with him. The נחשׁ "knows that it has power only where it purports to come from God and to represent God's cause."[20] The first part of verse 5 states כי ידע אלהים (lit. "for God is the one knowing").[21] The serpent predicates something about God: he knows what the serpent also knows.[22] It is implied that the serpent is right. Based on its assertions about God, the woman is induced to accept the new knowledge based upon a new relational fundament.

The serpent is ready for the fifth epistemological move, that is, to implicate the woman in eating the forbidden fruit. At this momentous juncture in the narrative, eating the tree's fruit "signifies knowledge gained

his sincerity, defaming his motives, and denying the truthfulness of his threat" (Bruce K. Waltke and Cathi J. Fredricks, *Genesis: A commentary* [Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2001], 91).

19 Harold G. Stigers, *A commentary on Genesis* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1976), 74, emphasis original.

20 Bonhoeffer, *Creation and fall*, 106.

21 The form יֹדֵעַ is a participial predicate of the verb ידע ("to know"). For details, see Bruce K. Waltke and M. O'Connor, *An introduction to Biblical Hebrew syntax* (Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 1990), 624.

22 Hamilton agrees that "[i]mplicit here is the suggestion that the serpent knows God better than the woman does, for he can penetrate his mind and claim to know what God knows" (*The book of Genesis: Chapters 1-17*, 189).

through action and commitment."[23] The last part of verse 5 in the third chapter of Genesis states: "... when you eat of it your eyes will be opened, and you will be like God, knowing good and evil." Once the woman relates to the serpent, she is invited to act accordingly. For the woman, the process of knowing "requires committed participation beyond acquaintance."[24] The act of disobedience to God's word is a participatory act in becoming *imago serpentis.* The limit placed at the center of the existence of the first human beings to protect them is about to be overstepped.

The serpent possesses a specific knowledge outside of the Edenic realm. It can question, evaluate, and restate the nature of the divine knowledge.[25] Its perceptive powers have the appearance of a noble and elevated nature. The נחשׁ cunningly inculcates his critical attitude toward the tree into the woman's mind. As a result, the woman is left to take the final epistemological move: to use her perceptive powers to re-evaluate the divinely received knowledge and decide for herself whether God is right or wrong.

The first part of Genesis 3,6 states that "the woman saw [ראה] that the tree was good for food, and that it was a delight to the eyes, and that the tree was to be desired [חמד] to make one wise [שׂכל]." Each of the three verbs in the text describes the birth of some new basic convictions in the woman's experience. She accepts as true the assertions of the serpent. These new beliefs are innately formed. She unconsciously uses her instinctive belief-forming mechanism when she is attracted by the tree. Her desire is a "completely natural, normal, and God-given reaction."[26] Confusing the epistemic source of the new beliefs, she believes that they have the same warrant as her other beliefs.

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23 Stigers, *A commentary on Genesis*, 68.

24 Dru Johnson, *Biblical knowing: A scriptural epistemology of error* (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2013), 64.

25 Brueggemann perceptively notes that "the serpent is the first in the Bible to seem knowing and critical about God and to practice *theology* in the place of *obedience*" (*Genesis*, 48; emphasis original).

26 Westermann, *Genesis 1-11*, 249.

Consequently, "she took of its fruit and ate" (Genesis 3,6). The devious epistemological process of the serpent is completed.

The ontology of knowledge

The epistemological process described above outlines several characteristics which help delineate a preliminary ontology of biblical knowledge. This epistemological layout centers on the biblical meaning of the verb ידע, with its cognates. The verb denotes a "multitude of shades of knowledge gained by the senses."[27] It thus refers to "the sensory awareness of objects and circumstances in one's environment attained through involvement with them and through the information of others."[28] The three elements of perception, participation, and personal relationship with a being constitute the core ontological traits of human knowledge in the narratives of the creation and the fall.

At the intersection of external reality with the senses, perception is the mechanism by which beliefs are formed. This applies both to the man and to his wife. When Adam sees her for the first time, his reaction "appears to derive from an embodied sense of fit... without an articulated propositional analysis."[29] The belief-producing mechanism is innate. The serpent knows this and works toward creating a new reality wherein the woman can form new beliefs. Once her perception is altered, the new beliefs can be warranted as knowledge.

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27 *HALOT*, s. v. "יָדַע".

28 W. Schottroff, "ידע", *Theological lexicon of the Old Testament*, ed. by Ernst Jenni and Claus Westermann (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1997), 511. Schottroff expands the definition of ידע: (a) The verb can be used "to describe the recognition that results from the deliberate application of the senses, from investigation and testing, from consideration and reflection;" (b) "yd' indicates the knowledge that results from realization, experience, and perception and that one can learn and transmit" (p. 512). The verb can also indicate (c) "professional acquaintance with particular skills," (d) "an intensive involvement with an obj. that exceeds a simple cognitive relationship in the sense of 'to be concerned with'" (p. 514), or (e) "sexual intercourse" (p. 515).

29 Johnson, *Biblical knowing*, 30. On the same page, Johnson adds: "The significance of such a trivial detail, the fleshiness of the man, cannot be overlooked. The knower is embodied. However, his *situatedness* is not an impediment to knowledge" (emphasis original).

The second ontological-epistemological component is participation. It plays a central role in the process of knowledge formation. Humanity reflects God's image as both a speaker and a doer.[30] The man is directly involved in naming the animals and the birds through the physical act of meeting and analyzing each creature. When Adam first meets his wife, he recognizes her as part of himself. He becomes cognizant of his manhood when he perceives her as his companion. Likewise, the denouement of the temptation narrative hinges on a participative act: eating. It is not enough for the woman to cognitively know God's word. She needs to know through lived obedience, "by inhabiting the commandments."[31] Once the woman acts by entering the serpent's world through consuming the forbidden fruit, she becomes a participant in its rebellion against God.

Alongside participation, commitment to a personal relationship is also emphasized. The reality of a personal being within the origination of knowledge is evident in the Genesis narrative. The presence of God invites humanity into a relationship that circumscribes their knowledge. Behind each human object of knowledge stands the divine presence, guiding human beings in the discovery process. Nevertheless, another person is looming in the garden. Associated with the tree of the knowledge of good and evil is the presence of a personal being, later known as Satan in the biblical narrative. "True to life in an interrelated world," this personal being invites humanity into a disparate relationship.[32]

In the postlapsarian context, the epistemic model delineated in Genesis does not change. Instead, it expands, integrating the elements of faith and the role of the Holy Spirit, rooted in the divine promise of Genesis 3,15. The first human pair needs to exercise trust in the fulfillment

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30 "God is as God does and God does as God says" (Kevin J. Vanhoozer, *Remythologizing theology: Divine action, passion, and authorship*, ed. by Daniel W. Hardy, Cambridge Studies in Christian Doctrine [New York: Cambridge University Press, 2010], 277).

31 Johnson, *Biblical knowing*, 63.

32 Terence E. Fretheim, *God and world in the Old Testament: A relational theology of creation* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon, 2005), 73.

of the divine word in due time, putting an end to the serpent's power.[33] The enmity (איבה, "hostility, enmity") is a divine internal instigation.[34] This creative act of God is attributed to the instigation of the Holy Spirit (Rom 8,5-7).[35] When humans are at peace with God, the enmity against the serpent is present in their hearts. Faith enables a relationship with God (Rom 5,1-5). In addition to the intimate vertical relationship, trusting God also implies a horizontal relationship. This is manifested through participation in the community formed by the descendants of the woman (זרע, "seed, offspring"), as opposed to the serpent's seed.

Knowledge is formed when human beings are confronted with the reality originated by one of two opposing personal beings. Given that the serpent cannot create physical reality, it perverts the one created by God. Human perception generates new beliefs that are warranted by their appearance within a participatory relationship with the being behind the epistemological object. As such, biblical knowledge is a relational concept. It is not grounded in abstract belief systems or human reason, but in a relationship with a person—namely, God. Theological knowledge presupposes this relational foundation, prioritizing the divinely revealed account of reality over philosophical attempts to construct an ontology apart from revelation. In the emerging and escalating

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33 Alvin Plantinga argues that faith was designed with a latent potential to counteract the effects of sin in the postlapsarian context (*Warranted Christian belief* [New York: Oxford University Press, 2000], 257).

34 Afolarin Olutunde Ojewole makes several observations regarding איבה: (a) The placement of the word at the beginning of the sentence indicates its crucial role in explaining the subordinate clauses; (b) the term describes the enmity between the humans and natural world, the animal world, and other humans; (c) there is a narrowing from a collective enmity to a singular one, between the seed and the serpent ("The seed in Genesis 3:15: An exegetical and intertextual study" [PhD diss., Andrews University, 2002], 120). Wenham adds that (d) a long-lasting hostility is indicated here (*Genesis 1-15*, 79). As such, "the enmity was not going to come about naturally but to be the continued action of God" (Ojewole, "The seed in Genesis 3:15," 152).

35 Romans 8,7 states: "... because the mind of the flesh is hostile against God" (literal translation). The predicate nominative translated with "hostile" (*echthra*) has as its subject the mind controlled by the sinful nature (*to phronēma tēs sarkos*). In verse 5, the sinful nature (*sarx*), which describes the unconverted mind, is contrasted with the Spirit (*pneuma*), which refers to the Holy Spirit. As such, the Holy Spirit is also the object of *echthra* in verse 7. Consequently, the Holy Spirit instils opposition against the flesh (Rom 7,15-25).

context of evil, this theo-ontological dimension of knowledge becomes increasingly essential.

The reality of evil

In the creation account, reality and its perception are one. What human beings perceive is not different from the created reality. The serpent is the first being whose appearance of reality conceals deception. In a world evaluated as טוב מאד ("very good," Gen 1,31), the נחשׁ is also expected to be good. Nevertheless, within the טוב מאד, God speaks about רע ("evil"). He knows about its existence and warns humanity against it. The demonic power that takes control of the ophidian medium also knows about evil. His knowledge is participatory and experiential. In the complex intricacy of creaturely freedom, God permits evil to manifest itself within the boundaries of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil.

In its discussion with the woman, the serpent raises ontological ("you will be like God"), epistemological ("for God knows"), and ethical ("knowing good and evil") questions. The serpent redefines the relation between time and reality ("you will not surely die"). Death, presented as the end of God's created reality, is now the beginning of a new reality. The malefic being knows the truth of the divine words. Nonetheless, it distorts perception by cloaking deception in the appearance of reality. Evil redefines reality as a mere appearance by taking the outward form of good.[36] In the serpent's words, real is not what the woman sees. It is only a perception. Real is what God knows. For the serpent, the woman can know God when she chooses moral self-determination.

In the new order advanced by the serpent, there is an attempt to forget the past. The past recalls creation and the reality of a Creator. The present is all that matters. The instant is the moment of becoming (ביום אכלכם ממנו, lit. "in the day you eat from it," Gen 3,5). Enchanted by the perspective of a new beginning, of a new creation, the woman confuses the inculcated perception with the actual reality and chooses

[36] The confusion of "the appearance of reality with its actuality" (Petre, *Knowing God*, 145) does not correspond to Greek ontology. Rather, it refers to the effects of sin on reality.

disobedience. The *imago serpentis* is formed in her, and she becomes a tempter for her husband. Adam's "eating is the last and decisive act of disobedience."[37]

Their decision results in a perceptional, participative, and relational rift. Before the fall, reality was reflected objectively within human beings. After the fall, a false perception of reality emerged. The perception of their nature, the reality surrounding them, and the Creator himself is altered. Their nakedness (ערומים, Gen 2,25), presented previously in the narrative as "a sign of a healthy relationship between the man and the woman," becomes the sign of shame and loss of innocence.[38] In addition to the perceptional change, the man and his wife join in the act of covering their nakedness (ערומים) from one another (Gen 3,7). Their relationship is adulterated by blame (Gen 3,12) and dominance (Gen 3,16).[39]

The perception of, participation in, and relationship with the reality surrounding humanity are also affected. What had once been the home of Adam and Eve now becomes their hiding place. The man and his wife found the work activity and preservation of their natural environment pleasant. After their disobedience, they lose their garden, and their relationship with the ground transmutes (Gen 3,17-19). Hard work replaces enjoyable activities. The food that was received freely is now obtained toilsomely. The human being is introduced to a distorted relationship with the ground: death. The cycle of life and death begins to identify the reality after the fall.

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37 Wenham, *Genesis 1-15*, 76.

38 Hamilton, *The book of Genesis: Chapters 1-17*, 191.

39 The last part of Genesis 3,16, ואל־אישׁך תשׁוקתך והוא ימשׁל־בך (lit. "and your desire [will be] toward your husband, but he will rule over you") finds its echo in Genesis 4,7 (ואליך תשׁוקתו ואתה תמשׁל־בו, lit. "and to you [will] its desire [be], but you should rule over it"). The imagery is that of the woman trying to control her husband, just as sin wants to control Cain. In reply, man also tries to dominate. Hamilton agrees when he states that תשׁוקה "means a desire to break the relationship of equality and turn it into a relationship of servitude and domination. The sinful husband will try to be a tyrant over his wife. Far from being a reign of co-equals over the remainder of God's creation, the relationship now becomes a fierce dispute, with each party trying to rule the other. The two who once reigned as one attempt to rule each other" (*The book of Genesis: Chapters 1-17*, 202).

The divine reality is also affected by the entrance of sin into the world.[40] After the gall, humanity perceives God differently. Once their eyes are opened, they start to fear God.[41] The same perceptual mechanism now yields beliefs that are consistent with the distorted reality, yet false in relation to the original created order. When Adam and his wife hear the voice of God who came to meet them, they run and hide "among the trees of the garden" (Gen 3,8). There is an activity that the fallen man refuses: the confrontation of his failure to obey.

However, God wants to "draw, rather than drive him out of hiding."[42] Hence, he calls the man and initiates a new dialogue with him (Gen 3,9). Unlike the venomous interchange with the serpent, this dialogue is for the real welfare of humanity. The woman and the serpent are also involved in the conversation, but only the woman participates in the discussion. The serpent is silent while divine judgment is pronounced upon it. The divine-human relationship is partially restored. For Adam and Eve, complete restoration awaits in the future when the Word of God participates in the postlapsarian reality in a human form, defeating the serpent and redeeming them (Gen 3,15).

As the New Testament reveals, the life, death, resurrection, and assumption of Jesus Christ mark the beginning of the end. The final restoration will be after his second coming when the serpent will be destroyed, and Eden will be reinstated (Rev 20,10; 22,1-5). Until then, the fall still alters reality. The epistemic effects of sin encompass the entire ontology of knowledge. Disregarding this reality leaves any epistemological discussion lingering under the shadow of the forbidden tree.

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40 God can be affected by the actions of his creatures. Therefore, his nature is passible, capable of feeling or suffering. For a strong biblical and theological argument for the passible nature of God, see John C. Peckham, *The love of God: A canonical model* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2015), 147-189.

41 Phillips notes that the newly received knowledge from the serpent "has altered perceptions and, for that matter, introduced fear" ("Serpent intertexts: Tantalizing twists in the tales," 237).

42 Derek Kidner, *Genesis: An introduction and commentary*, TOTC (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1978), 70.

Conclusions

Every Christian theory of knowledge must meet the challenge of grounding theology in the biblical canon. This study responded to that challenge by examining Genesis 3 through an epistemological lens. It brought to light several features. The Garden of Eden is created as an epistemic environment wherein the ontology of knowledge is made known. Knowledge is formed within the created reality. Human perception generates new beliefs that are warranted by their appearance within a participatory relationship with the being behind the epistemological object. From the biblical perspective, the warrant of knowledge is participative-relational. Within the Garden, the tree of the knowledge of good and evil becomes the locus of a crucial epistemic discussion.

When the first human being chose to accept the reality created by the serpent, a new context of knowing was set in motion. The reality of evil led to a perceptional, participative, and relational rift. In this postlapsarian context, the epistemic model delineated before the fall is expanded, integrating the word of God (Scripture), the need for faith, and the divine spiritual intervention in human lives.

From this analysis emerge several key features that outline, in broad strokes, a biblical theory of knowledge. However, a comprehensive model requires engagement with the entirety of Scripture. Genesis 3 does not exhaust the biblical epistemological framework; rather, it offers essential contours within a broader and more intricate theological tapestry. It reveals the initial hues of a richer epistemological canvas that continues to unfold throughout the biblical narrative.

First, a biblically based epistemology requires giving preeminence to divine revelation and its description of reality, over human attempts to rationalize its ontology—thus affirming a theo-ontological order. The biblical model affirms that theology precedes ontology; consequently, Scripture plays an essential role in the formation of knowledge.

Second, in the postlapsarian world, the human reason needs biblical principles as an external criterion, not vice versa.

Third, theistic belief arises naturally within a doxastic experience and is self-warranting—it does not require external justification. This reflects the biblical depiction of God's identity and actions.

Fourth, theological knowledge cannot be warranted without human participation in the reality created by God. The word of God mediates this participation. The Scripture functions as an epistemic criterion necessary to warrant belief.

Fifth, theological knowledge is more than a justified belief; it is formed within the personal encounter between God and human beings. In the shade of Genesis 3—where the perceptual, participatory, and relational dimensions of knowledge are first fractured—truth can be truly known only through the restoration of relationship with God.