Women in Christian Traditions

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In the Beginning . . . Eve

If we read the first three chapters of Genesis in the Bible without reading the later accumulation of interpretation into it, we find a story told by nomadic peoples undoubtedly intended to explain the origins of their world and the place of men and women in it. When we read it through two thousand years of Christian and Jewish interpretive history, however, we find that the simple etiology has acquired multiple layers of meaning that the original storytellers probably did not anticipate.

The story of the Garden of Eden is important to Christian theology for two reasons. First, it establishes the need for a soteriology by which Christians explain Jesus's mission and purpose on earth. Soteriology answers the question "How does Jesus save?" (*str* being the Greek for savior). The Eden story has been interpreted to describe a cosmic fall from original perfection into sin and death that needed supernatural help to correct. Jesus was the one who came to solve the problem. Second, Christian theologians throughout the centuries have used the story to explain, and to justify, women's subordinate status. An anthropology that privileged men over women relied upon Genesis as its rationale.

Given the prominence that men enjoy in the Hebrew Bible and the Christian New Testament, it seems almost inconceivable that the actions of a single woman, Eve, changed the destiny of humankind forever. Yet her actions necessitated the coming of Jesus to restore order out of the chaos she created, according to some theologians. "The Bible teaches that woman brought sin and death into the world," according to Elizabeth Cady Stanton (1815–1902), writing in *The Woman's Bible* (1895), one of the earliest feminist critiques of misogynistic biblical interpretation:

> [T]hat she precipitated the fall of the race, that she was arraigned before the judgment seat of Heaven, tried, condemned and sentenced. Marriage for her was to be a condition of bondage, maternity a period of suffering and anguish, and in silence and subjection, she was to play the role of a dependent on man's bounty for all her material wants.[1]

Although Stanton is not accurate in her description of "what the Bible teaches," she does faithfully reproduce the *interpretation* of the story that many, if not most, theologians have taught for centuries. Without Eve's ill-fated chat with the serpent in the Garden of Eden in Genesis 3 of the Hebrew Bible, humanity would not have been expelled from Paradise and cursed by hard work, painful pregnancy, and death.

Before focusing on the first woman, we need to take a look at the story of the first human couple. It is surprising for some to learn that Genesis contains two stories of creation. The first account presents the six days of creation, and the seventh day, the Sabbath, as a day of rest (1:1–2:4). In this narrative God creates the elements of the world—light, waters, land, vegetation, animals, humans—in a very systematic and organized fashion. Humans do not appear until the end of the process, when God says,

> "Let us make humankind in our image, according to our likeness; and let them have dominion over the fish of the sea, and over the birds of the air, and over the cattle, and over all the wild animals of the earth, and over every creeping thing that creeps upon the earth."
>
> So God created humankind in his image, in the image of God he created them; male and female he created them.
>
> God blessed them, and God said to them, "Be fruitful and multiply, and fill the earth and subdue it; and have dominion over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the air

and over every living thing that moves upon the earth." (Gen. 1:26–27)[2]

This statement of primordial equality shows that God creates men and women at the same moment, and both are in the image and likeness of the divine (Gen. 1:27). "No lesson of women's subjection can be fairly drawn from the first chapter of the Old Testament," remarks Stanton.[3]

The second creation tells a different story. In that version, a nongendered human is created out of dust and set within a garden full of good things to eat (Gen. 2:4–25). The Lord God instructs the human—some interpreters translate the word *dm* as "earthling" because the creature is made out of earth, *adamah*—that the fruit of every tree is available except from the "tree of the knowledge of good and evil . . . for in the day that you eat of it you shall die." The Lord God sees that the *dm* is alone and decides to "make him a helper as his partner." The noun translated helper "is a relational term, [designating] a beneficial relationship," according to the biblical scholar Phyllis Trible (b. 1932). Given the context, in which God is a superior helper and animals are inferior helpers, the Hebrew word here shows that "woman is the helper equal to man."[4] After creating animals and birds and presenting them to the human as possible companions, the Lord God finally forms a woman from a rib taken from the sleeping human. "This at last is bone of my bones and flesh of my flesh," says the man (*ish*, in Hebrew); "this one shall be called Woman (*ishah*) for out of Man this one was taken" (Gen. 2:23). Thus we have the creation of gender, and, one could argue, an etiology for sexual intercourse, since the Bible then says, "*Therefore* a man leaves his father and his mother and clings to his wife, and they become one flesh" (italics mine). The biblical author is careful to note that the couple "were both naked, and were not ashamed," to presage what will follow.

The question that later interpreters asked was whether this story indicates the primary and superior nature of men, being the first human created, or whether this indicates that women are the crowning achievement of creation, being the last. Saint Thomas Aquinas (1225–1274), writing in the thirteenth century, argues that it was more suitable for the woman to be made from the man, since it conferred a certain dignity upon the first man. Moreover, the man might love the woman all the more, and, finally, they are united not only for procreation but also for domestic life. In addition, Aquinas writes that it was entirely appropriate for the woman to come from the side, or rib, since if she came from the head she might exert supremacy over the man, while if she came from the feet, she might be a slave.[5] Trible agrees, asserting that "the rib means solidarity and equality."[6] She argues that the parallel literary structure of Genesis 2, which begins with God's creation of a man and ends with God's creation of a woman, demonstrates the same organic equality evident in Genesis 1.

In Genesis 3, "a wonderful tale about a trickster snake, a woman who believes it, and a rather passive, even comical man, biblical writers comment on the inevitability of reality as they perceived it, wistfully presenting an image of an easier, smoother life."[7] In the third chapter of Genesis, the first woman—not yet named Eve—has a conversation with a serpent about the fruit on the tree of knowledge of good and evil. She takes a bite and offers it to her husband. "Then the eyes of both were opened, and they knew that they were naked" (3:7). Stanton points out that the serpent did not attempt to beguile the woman with jewels, rich dresses, or worldly luxuries; rather, the woman was tempted by the acquisition of knowledge. "Compared with Adam she appears to great advantage through the entire drama."[8] Indeed, the woman is an independent agent, interpreting God's command, acting decisively, and, when confronted by God, accepting responsibility. "By contrast," writes Trible, "the man is a silent, passive, and bland recipient."[9]

The story functions etiologically, explaining why the snake will slither on its belly, why the woman will experience painful pregnancies but will nonetheless desire her husband, and why the man will have to work hard to cultivate the land. It also explains the origin of death, since the Lord God expels the first couple from Eden: he seems to express the fear that, like gods, they will live forever. Later interpreters, such as the author of the New Testament book of Revelation, see the snake as a symbol, or disguise, for Satan (Rev. 12:9, 20:2). At the end of the Genesis story, the *dm* gives the woman the name Eve, *Hawwh* (from the Hebrew word for "to live") because, as the biblical author explains, "she was the mother of all living."

The temptation narrative suggests that an original equality between women and men was lost, and that the present order of gender relations is not the way they were meant to be. Martin Luther (1483–1546), the sixteenth-century Protestant reformer, states this explicitly when he writes, "If Eve had persisted in the

truth, she would not only not have been subjected to the rule of her husband, but she herself would also have been a partner in the rule which is now entirely the concern of males."[10] God had planned for equality between the sexes, but it was lost due to the disobedience of the first humans. Some contemporary Christians would disagree with Luther, however, such as the Council on Biblical Manhood and Womanhood, which affirmed in 1987 that "Adam's headship in marriage was established by God before the Fall, and was not a result of sin."[11]

The first three chapters of Genesis establish the paradigms by which Christians will understand gender relations in the future. Genesis 1 illustrates what is called sex equality or gender equality, in which men and women exist together in a nonhierarchical affiliation. It can be, and has been, argued that Genesis 2 appears to show sex complementarity. Women and men are equal but have differing though complementary roles: the woman is a partner, but also a helper in the man's projects rather than her own. Genesis 3 demonstrates sex polarity, which seems to justify a subordinate role for women under the domination of men because of their intrinsically inferior nature. Although male theologians throughout the centuries could have argued for women's equality, and at times have advocated a complementary role, they gravitated toward the position of sex polarity largely because of social and cultural norms. Moreover, they made Eve a scapegoat.

In *Eve: A Biography*, the literary critic Pamela Norris finds that by the second century CE,[12] Jewish rabbis and Christian theologians tended to blame women in general, and Eve in particular, for a variety of ills in the world. "The myth of Adam, Eve and the serpent was a key text for the founders of the Christian church, anxious to establish a link between the redemptive powers of Christ and the origins of human bad behavior."[13] Two centuries before the birth of Jesus, the deuterocanonical book of Sirach seems to attribute the origin of sin and death to Eve: "From a woman sin had its beginning, and because of her we all die" (Sir. 25:24).[14] The apocryphal *Life of Adam and Eve* (*Vita Adae et Evae*), a Latin version of the Greek text *Apocalypse of Moses* (*Apocalypsis Mosis*), is more explicit in attributing blame to Eve.[15] After they have been ousted from the garden, Adam and Eve wander about, searching for food—which was plentiful in Eden—and discuss what penitence they should undergo. Eve asks Adam, "My lord, how much did you intend to repent, since I have brought toil and tribulation on you?" Eve appears to accept total responsibility for their situation. During her own penitence of fasting and purifying herself in a cold river, she is tricked by Satan, who has disguised himself and tricks her again.[16] The text explains that Satan had appeared as the serpent in the biblical story.

The New Testament record concerning Eve is rather mixed. Jesus refers to the first couple only in a discussion of divorce that suggests that procreation may not be the sole reason for sex (Matt. 19:4–6). Paul the apostle blames Adam, rather than Eve, for introducing death and sin into the world (1 Cor. 15:21–22; Rom. 5:12, 19). He also maintains that woman is the reflection of man, since she was made from man (1 Cor. 11:7–8). "Nevertheless," Paul adds, "in the Lord woman is not independent of man or man independent of woman. For just as woman came from man, so man comes through woman; but all things come from God" (1 Cor. 11:11–12). In contrast, the letter 1 Timothy, which has been attributed to Paul, relies on Genesis 3 to justify excluding women from church administration.[17] The writer says that "Adam was not deceived, but the woman was deceived and became a transgressor" (1 Tim. 2:14). It was Eve and not Adam who was responsible for human sin. While Paul sees salvation for women and men in Christ, the author of 1 Timothy says that women "will be saved through childbearing, provided they continue in faith and love and holiness, with modesty" (1 Tim. 2:15).

The church writers of the patristic era—which dates from the second century to the fifth or even eighth century, depending on the source—continue to blame Eve and the daughters of Eve for the problems besetting humanity. The North African theologian Tertullian (d. ca. 220)[18] stresses in the second century that each woman is an Eve:

> *You* are the devil's gateway: *you* are the unsealer of that [forbidden] tree; *you* are the first deserter of the divine law; *you* are she who persuaded him whom the devil was not valiant enough to attack. *You* destroyed so easily God's image, man. On account of *your* desert—that is, death—even the Son of God had to die.[19]

Despite Tertullian's vigorous condemnation of Eve for "unsealing" the tree, eating from the tree of knowledge could be interpreted as an act of free will, courage, and necessity. This is how members of the Church of Jesus Christ, Latter-day Saints read the story. Eve was faced with two commandments: be fruitful and multiply, and do not eat from the tree of knowledge. She chose to disobey the second mandate in order to obey the first, since it was only with knowledge that the first couple perceived their nakedness. Nevertheless, the dominant Christian view from the time of Paul to the present is that eating from the tree of knowledge was the first, and therefore the worst possible, act of disobedience. The original perfection intended by God was damaged, and because of their expulsion from the Garden of Eden, humans no longer bore the image and likeness of the divine in their persons.

While the apostle Paul believed that Adam's rebellion introduced sin and death into the world—he simply ignored Eve in his analysis—subsequent theologians elaborated a doctrine of original sin. As articulated by Saint Augustine of Hippo (354–430), this sin is transmitted from Adam through the man's sperm during sexual intercourse. This understanding of human nature asserts that humans are ontologically evil: they are born with their free will impaired and with an inclination toward immoral behavior.

From this pessimistic anthropology developed the soteriology that declared that only Jesus could restore human perfection by erasing the sin of disobedience through his perfect obedience to God, even to the point of dying. As the first transgressor, Eve opened the path to salvation, for the fall from primeval perfection necessitated the restoration of the lost image and likeness of God. Jesus's sacrificial death wiped the slate clean, and enabled humans to reconcile themselves with God.

Eve informs ensuing theology in two far-reaching ways. First, she inevitably accompanies discussions of gender in later theological discussions about the nature of women and the justification of men's power. Christian anthropology, for better and worse, hinges upon interpretations of the first humans. Second, the rebellion against God's injunction provides not only the etiology for understanding the human condition, but also the explanation for the incarnation; that is, the reason why God needed to assume human flesh in the person of Jesus. Christian soteriology looks to Genesis for its ideas about creation and how the world came to be, and for its ideas about the need for redemption, due to the actions of Adam and Eve.

Thus, Eve leads to Jesus. And though she seems not to have been important to the earthly man of Nazareth, she becomes very important to his successors.