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# The Genesis of Blame

Anne Enright

A couple of weeks ago, the pope described ‘fake news’ as being like the strategy employed by the ‘crafty serpent’ in the Book of Genesis. ‘The strategy of this skilled “Father of Lies”,’ he said in a statement aimed at both Trump and the purveyors of social media, ‘is precisely *mimicry*, that sly and dangerous form of seduction that worms its way into the heart with false and alluring arguments.’ Ideas of mimicry and seduction certainly wormed their way into the story of Adam and Eve over the centuries, but they are not in the original version. If even the pope misuses the word ‘seduction’ in this context, it is worth looking for the source.


He got it from the first letter from St Paul to Timothy as translated in the late fourth century by St Jerome, whose Latin Vulgate version survived to become the official Bible of the Catholic Church more than a thousand years later. The passage was often used to justify the bar on women priests. 'I suffer not a woman to teach, nor to use authority over the man: but to be in silence' because 'Adam *non est seductus*, was not seduced; but the woman being seduced *mulier autem seducta* was in the transgression.' Except it didn't say this. It wasn't even written by St Paul. The Letter to Timothy is not inconsistent with Paul's views on women as expressed elsewhere but secular commentators now think it was written later, and even this pseudo-Paul did not say that Eve had been seduced. This fake letter was fakely translated by fake old Saint Jerome, and corrected in later versions to the more accurate 'deceived'.

Among liberal Christians there is a sadness about St Paul; a feeling that were it not for his letters they might all be reciting the Beatitudes and fighting for justice in the Third World. St Paul's letters are the least canonical in the canon, and the most worldly. It was from his letter to the Romans that Augustine derived his concept of original sin, and it was St Paul who insisted that women take second place in church. The person writing to Timothy, however, was not even St Paul, but someone less important and more distant from the events of the life of Christ. The pope's claim to authority is corrupted by a repeatedly corrupted text – as if there were a true version, somewhere, which would make us all good. For non-believers, the

question is moot.

The history of gender relations was surely not undone by the single word 'seduced', with its implication that women cannot become priests because they are prone, not just to disobedience or theological error, but also to flirting with animals, in this case a snake. Jerome was an accomplished linguist and drew, for his translation, from older Latin and Greek versions as well as from the original Hebrew, which presented several difficulties. The absence of adverbs, and of punctuation, the ancient nature of the text – there were many opportunities for error, but he only took a few. Jerome's interventions were both catastrophic and telling. He changed Christ's brothers and sisters to 'cousins', for example, a tweak which facilitated the retroactive virginity of Mary, and this doctrine endured long after the translation was corrected.

Genesis is a beautiful piece of writing: part poem, part folk tale, it is hard not to fall victim to the idea that here is something pure, which has been dirtied by celibates and misogynists to the subsequent ruin of womankind. As though there were such a thing as an original, Edenic text, in which man and woman were equal, and no one or nothing was to blame. For the first 66 lines of the Bible, this balance seems to exist, then Adam points the finger, says, 'The woman you put here with me – she gave me some fruit from the tree,' and God curses her into loving him anyway.

The story of the Fall is one of the most enduring stories we have, and it is never fair. You could use it as a template for a certain kind of novel: put a choice in there, tip the balance, make the consequences so disproportionate we doubt our sense of cause and effect, make them suffer, make them into better human beings. Visually, the narrative is brilliantly successful, for being so easy to hold within a single frame. There is nothing static about the way the viewer sees an image of the first couple considering apples. It is a moment of great tension, and they are wearing no clothes. So, to the rules for writing a successful fiction, we might add, pretend that it is not about sex, make the world symbolic, expand the small asymmetries. Here are two human beings who are slightly, but perhaps disastrously, anatomically different. She likes something long, he likes something round – what could possibly go wrong?

The story is a riddle about authority and predestination that has survived the theological palaver of generations because, simple to the point of transparency, it is also impenetrably self-enclosed. It is held in a brilliant web of balance and contradiction by a few hundred words; so it is worth looking at those words and what they actually mean.

Just to be clear: there was no seduction. There was no devil, nor any mention of Satan, who was, at this stage, an unimportant figure. Although he played a sporadic role in the torment of Job, or in the temptation of Christ in the desert, Satan was not a mythical force before the bestiary of Revelations, and the rebellious Lucifer was some other angel until Milton came along. The idea of a great battle between light and the forces of darkness did not get going until early Christian times, possibly because this small, persecuted sect needed to find a great spiritual enemy against which to pit themselves. The creature in Genesis was just a snake, and though he was crafty, he didn't seduce, nor did he 'tempt' Eve – this last term means 'to test' and is used only once in Genesis, when God tests Abraham, requiring the sacrifice of his son Isaac. So Eve did not tempt Adam, either, nor was he seduced by her nakedness. There is, in fact, very little sex in the story. Our readings of it are all subtext, all interpretation, all error.

The churches of my Irish Catholic childhood had no images of Eden. The idea that man was once born without sin had shrunk to the pinpoint of the Virgin Mary's conception and there was no nakedness on display, with or without fig leaves, apart from the stripped and bloodied figure of the crucified Christ. 'Why is Jesus wearing a nappy?' a child asked once, quite loudly. This was not a question you would get away with after the age of four, nor were you encouraged to wonder if the figure depicted on the Cross was dead, or still alive. I was in my thirties before I realised the answer to a question I had found impossible, perhaps even blasphemous, to construct. Yes, he was dead, and we were truly, abjectly fallen; there was no imagining any other state.

The story of Adam and Eve, by contrast, is an invitation to childhood curiosity. The question of whether they had belly buttons has occupied both great minds and small. They are not just naked: their story is about nakedness and the idea, puzzling to an infant, that we should hide our bodies from view. Whether they had sex in the garden and, if so, what was it like – these were proper theological concerns. In fact their story is also about curiosity, and it does not end well. Almost before we know what the question is, we have received a catastrophic sequence of answers: shame, exile, suffering, death itself. When, 'Because I say so' fails to work, God must, like an Irish mother, resort to the fully tragic: 'Because all men must die.' So now you know. No wonder we try to get back to the moment before the question started to form. We try to imagine what it might be like to live without the knowledge that we are naked, and what that nakedness implies.

'Adam and his wife were both naked, and they felt no shame.' The word 'naked' is a translation of the Hebrew *erom*, which is used to describe a state of being stripped or vulnerable, and is without sexual connotation. As for 'no shame', Jerome in his translation

into the Vulgate Latin uses 'et non erubescebant' implying that Adam and Eve did not blush – and this is sweet, for Jerome. It suggests a moment of virginal self-consciousness, full of possibility. It also, perhaps, reflects Jerome's skill as a linguist. The original word in Hebrew, *bosh*, comes from a primitive root 'to pale', and is here used reflexively – 'and they were not ashamed before one another.' In the rest of the Old Testament, *bosh* is used in contexts that involve feeling confounded or disgraced, but it is rarely linked to ideas of impurity and abomination (when it comes to sex, the Old Testament is mostly worried about marrying out). Other Latin translations settled on the stronger *pudere*, a term for shame which conveys bashfulness, as well as a sense of decency. *Pudor* contains the idea of being caught out, but it also had social and ethical implications. It was, for the Romans, a manly difficulty and not something a slave could experience. A woman's honour was usually limited to sexual respectability, and this was referred to by the more limited form *pudicitia*. The concept conveyed by the word *pudor* suffered a narrowing of meaning over time, becoming more sexualised and specific. By the 17th century the root had yielded 'pudenda', meaning 'genitals', usually female. This is where the shame of nakedness landed and got stuck.

The castrated horror that is the female form may provoke man's impulse to point, jeer or debase but, as a psychoanalytical parable, it feels reductive here. In English, 'shame' indicates a kind of feeling bad: ostensibly about what you have done, but possibly about what you are. 'Toxic shame' is a term in popular psychology for the unbearable feelings of worthlessness that flood the infant when abandoned or alone. Called out by God, Adam says: 'I heard you in the garden, and I was afraid because I was naked; so I hid.' His nakedness, *erom*, merely implies vulnerability. Perhaps Adam and Eve hid from God not because they were suddenly prudish, nor because their disobedience had been found out, but because they realised their fragility and insignificance. They were exposed, not as sexual beings but as mortal ones.

Jerome, quite rightly, uses a double translation for the line 'in what day soever thou shalt eat of it, thou shalt die the death'. This is what they bring into the world and the knowledge they gain. Early Christian iconography showed Adam as already rotting, or the tree of knowledge as a tree of bones. Later depictions gave their figures weight, volume and personality, and their drama feels, as a result, more human and engaging, but it was not until the Renaissance discovered a nostalgia for Classical Greece that they were depicted as idealised, or majestic nudes.

Impossible to keep lust out of Eden, even though it had not been invented yet. In it comes, like a snake into the garden, because the reader is one of the fallen, and cannot imagine what it is to love without transgression, or taboo. And this makes the story both clear and

unimaginable, open and inaccessible. We cannot know what it was like not to know. (But know what? Know what?) Excluded from their state of innocence, we are all turned voyeur.

Milton was blind when he wrote the devil's envious lines in *Paradise Lost*.

> Sight hateful, sight tormenting! Thus these two,
> Imparadised in one another's arms,
> The happier Eden, shall enjoy their fill
> Of bliss on bliss.

Milton gave the pair a bower. Augustine of Hippo, writing in the late fourth century, said that Adam and Eve coupled in the open, being unashamed – though who, you might ask, was there to see? The serpent promises Eve that when she eats the apple, her eyes will be opened. She will be like God, knowing good and evil. It seems, however, as though they are open enough already. Eve looks at the tree, sees that the apple is not just good to eat but also 'desirable to make one wise'. The Hebrew for 'desire' is here the same as that for 'covet', to see is already to want; to want is also to know that you want. Knowledge of the tree enters Eve through her eyes, before the knowledge of good and evil – whatever that is – enters through her mouth. The poetry of Genesis is always getting ahead of itself. The odd phrasing 'desirable to make one wise' is an example of the text creating something from nothing, pulling itself up by its own bootstraps.

Augustine's attempt to get behind this, to imagine what it might be like to have prelapsarian sex, is like trying to take hunger out of our experience of food. According to him, sex in the garden was entirely voluntary and Adam's erection was an action deliberate as lifting a hand. This was an odd theory and nice in its way. The presence of a baculum or penis bone makes it a reality in some animal species, and the *Daily Mail* got a bit shouty a few years ago when a rabbi suggested it was this bone that was taken out of Adam, and not an extra rib. (Old fake news!)

Augustine's ideal of voluntary desire is contradictory in a way that is hard to describe. It begs the question of where desire, or more properly arousal, comes from, and how it begins. What would sex be like with no sense of taboo? One answer is that sex without shame sounds a lot like sex, another is that sex without shame would be pretty dull stuff. A third might be that sex moves us through a series of hugely interesting, transgressive propositions to a less shame-bound place; the happier Eden of conjugal bliss.

According to Augustine, our pure affections become disobedient because wounded by the Fall. The uncontrolled or spontaneous nature of desire was both proof of, and the penalty for, Adam and Eve's sin. The fact that mankind was subject to its vagaries was a sign that this sin did not die with them, but ran through us still, like three big letters through a stick of rock. The problem of concupiscence was also spiritual, but it lapsed repeatedly into the libidinal, partly because of the method of transmission – babies were made bad by the pleasure that made babies. This highly contagious idea became so central to Christian thought that it is worth noting the anxiety about performance and arousal that underlies it. This was not just a Catholic position, or a Catholic problem. Luther and Calvin were both proponents of original sin, and in 1563, the founding articles of the Church of England stated that it was 'the fault and corruption of the Nature of every man', and the resulting lust is 'an infection of nature'.

It is a long way from talk of infection to the benign modern Anglican view that the story of Adam and Eve is about free will and the choices that face us all in our daily lives. There is a long humanist tradition in which Adam and Eve were made better by the Fall, not worse; that this was God's plan all along. Without Adam there can be no redemption in Christ. For fundamentalist churches, this is not just a metaphor, the story of the Fall has to be as true as that of the Resurrection, and as historical. In 2017 a Gallup poll found that 38 per cent of Americans believe that humans were created, by God, in their present form, within the last ten thousand years. The Catholic Church agrees, a little surprisingly, not because salvation is real, or transubstantiation is by definition real, but because of the doctrine of original sin. According to the Catechism, Genesis 3 'uses figurative language, but affirms a primeval event, a deed that took place at the beginning of the history of man'.

Augustine and Jerome wrote at a time when Christianity was shifting from a small sect to the official faith of the Roman Empire, and it may be that their sexual pessimism was useful to the new authorities; a penitential population is also a compliant one. Their asceticism was not new: Jerome's can be traced back to the pagan Stoics. According to Seneca, 'nothing is more depraved than to love one's spouse as if she were an adulteress.' This line is reassigned to Sextus, then requoted by Jerome as 'Anyone who is too passionate a lover of his wife is an adulterer.' These views were opposed by contemporaries, and no wonder: they dealt in such impossibilities. There is more, here, than the impulse to shout 'Whore' at some nice women, mid-coitus. There is more than projection and splitting, idealisation and demonisation, more than anxiety about soiling. There is an anguished call for an end to wanting, and a yearning for a love that will stay still. Among Early Christians, celibacy was seen as a kind of freedom, especially for women, and the fact that it is not valued in modern Western society does not

mean that the puzzle of arousal has been solved. Needing something when it is not there; needing something when it is there; the way the body gets ahead of itself, sometimes, and has to find, or create, what it wants. There are so many ways in which this can go wrong. Male arousal, in particular, is now courted and encouraged on a massive scale, and yet we are still no closer to an answer about what men get, when they get turned on. Perhaps because it is already an external event, for men, the tendency is to externalise further, to turn the world into a living mirror where 'I want' means 'she is desirable,' and 'I am needy' means 'she is to blame.' Or perhaps that is not the reason. There is no way for me to know.

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The writings of Jerome were suppurating with misogyny, but his gloss on Genesis can be quite beautiful. In *Jerome's Hebrew Questions on Genesis*, translated by C.T.R. Hayward, he wonders what is the best word for the quality of the wind in Eden when God walked there in the afternoon, and decides on Theodotion's Greek, which conveys 'the coolness of the breeze that blows when the noonday heat is past'. So it must have been deliberate when he moved Adam from Eve's side as she ate the apple. Jerome takes the phrase 'with her' out of the line, 'She also gave some to her husband, who was with her, and he ate it.' Though his sleight of hand was corrected by the time Milton came to read the Bible, the idea had taken hold. In *Paradise Lost* Eve was alone when she met the serpent. Her decision to leave Adam and go off by herself for a while is not dissimilar to the moment in a horror film when a character says: 'You stay here, I'll go see what's outside.' In fact, Milton separates the pair from the beginning. The first face Eve sees is not Adam's, but her own. Newly created, she wanders off to find her reflection in a clear smooth lake, 'that to me seemed another sky'.

In the question and response we call 'the temptation of Eve', the snake repeats God's and then Eve's sentences, then distorts them with a question mark, 'Did God really say, "You must not eat from any tree in the garden" or a negative: "You will not certainly die"?' Eve becomes enclosed in a circular exchange with her own words. In many medieval images, the serpent bears the face of Eve, acting as an enthralling, ghastly reflection. This phallic Eve reminds us of the less spooky but equally phallic rib, which has caused generations of children and philosophers to run a counting hand down their sides. The choice of bone is most likely a remnant from an earlier myth, that played on the double meaning of *ti* in Sumerian – the noun 'rib' and the verb 'to make live'. The fact that we find the choice of bone both odd and satisfying could be used as another rule for writing enduring fiction: your story must contain the remnants of former drafts, whose original meaning is lost, but which now make an odd kind of sense.

Themes of separation and similarity run through Genesis. The poetry repeatedly splits and rejoins, in a kind of meiosis. In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth, and this is already a double thing, a pair of opposites. Biblical poetry makes great use of merisms, which are compound terms like 'high and low' or 'black and white'. They are not always contradictions ('to have and to hold' is an example of a legal merism), but they form, between them, a single idea. When, on the first day, God created 'the heavens and the earth' the words are separate and combined. 'Good and evil' is also a merism, you might translate it as 'morality', or the moral difference between one action and another. So too, 'evening' and 'morning' are a merism for 'one day'. On the first day, God made a day. Then he called the work of making a day a day's work. It is a pun that opens from the centre of itself. The job of Genesis is to pull something out of nothing, to turn the sentence inside out.

On the second day God divided the waters from the waters, turning sameness into symmetry, giving us the waters above and the waters below – and this is already a little unbalanced, because the rain, as we know, is not the same as the sea. With the separation of dry land from the waters, the symmetry turns to an opposition, after which we have the big light of the sun and the small light of the moon, the creatures of the air and those under the sea. Finally, 'Let us make man, in our image,' he says – another doubling, resulting in something that is the same but crucially different. 'God created man in his own image, in the image of God he created him, male and female he created them.' This is the last piece of doubling in a long week, after which God rests. Then we hear the story of mankind's creation all over again. This time he is made out of dust.

The first, highly poetic account of Creation in Genesis, with its beautiful, failing symmetries is considered the more recent. The second – the one with the apple and the snake – is much older. The gap between the two allowed in the potentially heretical views of the pre-Adamites, who suggested that Creation took place in two phases: mankind in general was created first, followed by our own special forebears, Adam and Eve. This became an excuse for slavery and fuel for Voltaire, who was only racist and anti-Semitic for sardonic effect. It did not, however, spawn the still thriving tradition of misogynistic commentary. 'Male and female he created them' at this stage of the story remains hopeful and unbroken.

The second telling of the Creation happens on a more human scale, but the splitting and mirroring are also there, sometimes within a single word. The word for 'dust' and that for Adam, or 'man', are a near pun. Like God, Adam becomes a master of distinctions; separating domesticated animals from the beasts of the field. This categorisation is also an exclusion –

one for which the serpent, who is the most subtle of the beasts, will have his revenge. Perhaps this is what was happening all along: God and then Adam push everything else away, until it is clear Adam is alone, and none fit to help him. This is a problem: the answer to it cannot come from outside, the place of everything else, but only from inside. Out of Adam comes Eve, the same as him but different, and when he sees her Adam sings an ecstatic poem of separation and reunion. 'This is now bone of my bones and flesh of my flesh, she will be called woman because she is taken out of man.' This is why, as the King James Bible has it, 'a man shall cleave to his wife: and they shall be one flesh' – surely the best use of the word 'cleave', which means both to join together and to split apart.

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Neither fusion nor repetition can hold together this expanding sequence of separations. It ends in estrangement, of God from mankind, man from woman; of flesh from flesh and bone from bone. And so it comes, the final act of distinction which happens when he turns and blames. Not me. Her.

It might have been seen as a story about human betrayal. Instead it was, for centuries, taken literally. It was her fault. Woman was to blame for the fact that mankind must toil, suffer and die. Of course she was. Misogyny was also a moral position, it was seen as natural instead of a disordered point of view. Woman, according to Thomas Aquinas, is a *vir occasionatus*, a defective or mutilated man – this he got from Aristotle, but he used it to explain why Eve was created second, from a crooked bone: she was made to fall.

To be fair, Adam also blames God a little: 'The woman you put here with me – she gave me some fruit from the tree, and I ate it.' Adam acts like a child: a toddler who blames his sister, or his shoe, or his own foot, perhaps, because to be less than perfect is unbearable. And, besides, God is very big now.

The whole thing was a trap, a plot, a conundrum about free will. It seems people only believe the story in order to point out how unfair it is. This is the way Adam and Eve played out on Twitter today: 'God may have wanted to keep Adam and Eve innocent,' says a woman called Jamie, a Trump-hating conservative from Tennessee. 'But he still gave them free will which is why Eve ate the shit outta that apple, and her nakedness got Adam to agree.' Meanwhile in Johannesburg a young man asks, 'Is it ever considered that it wasn't the woman's fault, that it was the serpent, the devil, who coerced them?' and his online friend Victoria weighs in with: 'Didn't he already know they'd eat the fruit anyway?'

The questions raised are familiar for being so ancient, but because they come from random believers, it is easier to see how entangled people become in their own riddles about authority. They don't have to believe in this God, who is so unfair, but they do anyway. The wound of his omniscience is deeply felt. Adam and Eve were stooges, the story was over before it began, it swallows its own tail. There is some finger-wagging about disobedience, but also a fretfulness about the authority of the text: 'If God said to Adam and Eve, "for in the day that you eat of it you shall surely die" why didn't they die that day?' Meanwhile, Nathan, Trump supporter and Mormon, moves towards Milton's humanism when he says: 'Has anyone ever had the thought that Adam and Eve would never have had children in the Garden of Eden and Eve figured this out first by her conversation with the "serpent". And that all of this was part of God's plan for us. Eve was one of the most brave people ever to have lived.'

It is easy to see why the idea of paradise would linger in America, a country once considered a kind of Eden, populated by 'naked' human beings. A good proportion of these online opinions come from Africa where similar myths obtain. These commentators use the story to make big statements about the natural order, about a woman's proper place, or the wrongness of homosexuality ('It was Adam and Eve, not Adam and Steve'). But there is also a preoccupation, from both Muslims and Christians, with the colour of Adam's skin. Many come online to say that Adam was black, the colour of the dust from which he was formed, and this argument feels quite modern (for creationists) because many of the authors of the posts are themselves black. It can also be placed in a discussion about equality that is the best inheritance of the story of the Fall.

Exile from Eden is the final separation. Adam and Eve become part of the 'everything else' that is beyond the circumference of the garden. According to God, 'Man has now become like one of us, knowing good and evil' and their new power must be met with a matching difficulty. Adam is condemned to work the ground from which he was first taken. As for Eve, fake old Jerome curses her with a double dose of subservience 'and thou shalt be under thy husband's power, and he shall have dominion over thee.' This is more accurately rendered as 'Your desire will be for your husband, and he will rule over you' (in the New International Version). This word 'desire', also used in the Song of Songs, may be the first sexual word in the Bible. Eve is doomed to a desire for her husband, the constantly unforeseen consequences of which are the disproportionate pains of childbirth. You could build a worldview on that, if you wanted to.

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## Letters

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I usually turn to the *LRB* for respite from the day job, but have been beguiled into correspondence by Anne Enright's take on translation and subtext in Genesis (*LRB*, 8 March). Enright is correct that the thing Eve reports the serpent doing to her has nothing to do with sex. *Hisiani* literally means 'tricked me' (see 2 Chronicles 32:15). It's actually a good onomatopoeic gag; the verse bears the translation 'the snake hissed me.' But she errs when it comes to the word *erom* – usually translated as 'naked'. She suggests the word means 'vulnerable' and conveys no sense of shame. That's wrong. Aside from this passage, the root form appears in Hosea 2:3 and Job 22:6, where it refers to adulterous sex. The key point about *erom* in Genesis 3 is that the chapter opens with the snake being identified as the most *erom* of all beasts. Whatever this state is, the snake seems responsible for its now being part of human sensitivities. This, I suspect, is the origin of those commentaries that suggest the serpent seduces Eve. We have learned our *erom*ness from the reptile, transferred, perhaps, like some form of STD.

The most relevant gendered idea in the opening of the Hebrew Bible is difficult to convey in translation, but it should have been considered. Enright records Genesis 1:26 as stating: 'God created man in his own image, in the image of God he created him.' (She's citing the King James.) But that's a terrible translation. In the Hebrew, God creates 'Adam' as a single creation possessing both male and female gender. The first human is bi-gendered, not a male – that's why almost every English translation uses the non-gender-specific term 'human'. It's not until this bi-gendered creature is split that a distinct male 'Adam' and a female 'Eve' come into being. And the notion of the spare rib (or penile bone as Enright queries)? That's also a mistranslation. In the Hebrew, God takes one of the 'sela's from the first bi-gendered creation. *Sela* means 'side' – as in the verse Exodus 26:20, 'the side of the tabernacle'. It might be that this original Hebraic intent is not captured in the artistic representations that cast such a spell over our sense of what Genesis must mean, and the King James definitely assumes women to be an afterthought and a secondary creation, but in the Hebrew, male and female are equally primary creations in the image of a Divine who is beyond gender.

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If St Jerome were to be indicted for misogyny, he would undoubtedly have to plead guilty. But Anne Enright's specific charges against him in her exposition of the Genesis story of the Fall aren't quite in focus. Jerome does indeed translate the claim in the first letter to Timothy that Eve was deceived with the word *seductus* (the Greek is *exapatetheisa*). But *seductus* in fourth-century Latin did not carry the primarily sexual overtones which it has held in English since the 16th century. The overwhelming majority of classical usages cited in the standard lexicons imply deception or leading astray in the broadest sense, and none of Jerome's few uses of the word in the Vulgate carries any overt sexual meaning: 'flirting with animals' just doesn't come into it.

Nor did Jerome as a translator 'tweak' the text to turn Jesus's 'brothers' into 'cousins'. The Vulgate consistently translates Greek *adelphoi* as *fratres*, brothers. Jerome knew that Aramaic and Biblical Hebrew had no separate word to distinguish uterine siblings from other blood relatives, but in translating the Gospels he conscientiously retained the ambiguity implicit in *fratres*, even though, like most fourth-century churchmen, he believed in the lifelong virginity of the mother of Jesus. Jerome's conviction that the 'brothers and sisters' of Jesus were in fact cousins or step-siblings may or may not be persuasive. He didn't invent it, however, nor is it to be found in his work as a translator, but in a polemical treatise against Helvidius, a Roman contemporary who maintained that Mary had had other children. Jerome was an unlovely individual, but too good a translator to allow his personal opinions to distort a text he considered sacred.

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