Paradise Lost, Growth Gained: Eve's Story Revisited—Genesis 2–4 in a Feminist Theological Perspective*

Anne-Marie Korte

Introduction

Eve's deeply ingrained reputation as a temptress, the origin of sin, evil and death, has long made the Eve figure a *pièce de résistance* for feminist theological readings of the story of Paradise. Most people immediately associate Eve with the still life of 'the Fall', the famous image from the Garden of Eden that has so often been depicted, described and commented on in the history of Christianity: a naked woman under a tree, apple already in hand, under the smug and watchful gaze of the serpent.[1] This scene is the setting of numerous classics of Christian art and is still prominent in contemporary culture, as evidenced by its recent use in the opening credits scene of the American TV series *Desperate Housewives*. The scene, a spoof on the Fall from Paradise, shows how Eve's lust and disobedience literally

* Translated by Mischa Hoyinck and Robert Chesal.

1. Recent studies into the reception of the biblical story of Paradise and its influence on Western culture and cultural history include Marion Ann Taylor and Heather E. Weir (eds.), *Let Her Speak For Herself: Nineteenth-Century Women Writing on the Women of Genesis* (Waco, TX: Baylor University Press, 2006); Ana M. Acosta, *Reading Genesis in the Long Eighteenth Century: From Milton to Mary Shelley* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2006); Mignon R. Jacobs, *Gender, Power, and Persuasion: The Genesis Narratives and Contemporary Portraits* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2007); Paul Kübel, *Metamorphosen der Paradieserzählung* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2007); Anne Lapidus Lerner, *Eternally Eve: Images of Eve in the Hebrew Bible, Midrash, and Modern Jewish Poetry* (Waltham, MA: Brandeis University Press; Hanover: University Press of New England, 2007); Konrad Schmid and Christoph Riedweg (eds.), *Beyond Eden: The Biblical Story of Paradise (Genesis 2–3) and its Reception History* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck 2008); Manfred Kern and Ludger Lieb (eds.), *Genesis—Poiesis: Der biblische Schöpfungsbericht in Literatur und Kunst* (Heidelberg: Winter, 2009); Theresa Sanders, *Approaching Eden: Adam and Eva in Popular Culture* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2009).

bring down Adam. As the background music begins, Lucas Cranach's 1526 painting *Adam and Eva* comes to life. The original couple, covered only by fig leaves, stand before the fruit tree. The appearance of the serpent prompts Eve to take the apple from its mouth. At the same time, a giant apple falls from the tree, completely crushing poor Adam.[2]

This image of Eve is only a snapshot, and one which is distorted at that, as we see when we consider the entire story that unfolds in the first chapters of Genesis. The story covers the life of the first woman, beginning with her creation from Adam's rib to the birth of Seth, her third child. The scene under the tree is merely a freeze frame in a much wider life story that spans several generations and eras, a story characterized by growth and development.

Initially, the first man and woman in the Garden of Eden are each other's equal ('bone from my bones, flesh from my flesh', Gen. 2.23).[3] Gradually, however, the woman starts to distinguish herself from the man through her energetic use of every quintessentially human character trait; she listens, speaks, thinks, desires, chooses and acts (Gen. 3.1-7), thus initiating interaction between God and human beings.

And after they have been banished from the Garden of Eden, the woman, now named Eve, 'the mother of all living', is the first biblical figure to undergo moral and religious development in their new environment outside Paradise. In this development, she goes from feeling tremendous pride in her firstborn son Cain ('I have gotten a man from the LORD', Gen. 4.2),[4] to a considerably less enthusiastic reaction to the birth of Cain's brother Abel, whose name literally suggests insignificance,[5] only to arrive—years later—at the recognition that the 'valiant' Cain she bore was a fratricidal and vindictive troublemaker (Gen. 4.3-23). This development is completed by her gratitude at being given another chance with the birth of Seth: 'And she bear a son, and called his name Seth: For God hath appointed me another seed instead of Abel, whom Cain slew' (Gen. 4.25).

2. For an analysis of this and other contemporary examples of the Garden of Eden scene in popular Western culture, see Sanders, *Approaching Eden*, pp. 31-90.

3. Biblical citations in this article are taken from the KJV.

4. In the Hebrew text, this birth is described in highly exceptional terms: the text does not state that Eve bore a son, but that she created a (hu)man with God ('I have created a man together with the Deity'). See Carol Meyers, 'Eve', in Carol Meyers *et al.* (eds.), *Women in Scripture: A Dictionary of Named and Unnamed Women in the Hebrew Bible, the Apocryphal/Deuterocanonical Books, and the New Testament* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 2000), pp. 79-84 (82); Tammi J. Schneider, *Mothers of the Promise: Women in the Book of Genesis* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 2008), pp. 169-74.

5. In Hebrew, Abel has overtones of 'vaporous' and 'breathlike'.

This 'reframing' of Eve is a theological revaluation based on gender-critical biblical interpretations of Genesis 1–4.[6] Drawing on contemporary literary and biblical research methods, this revaluation employs critical research into gender relations and constructs and into the gendering of characters and rhetorical devices. It is also based on a theological interpretation model favoured by many feminist theologians: the idea that the biblical story of Adam and Eve is actually about the opportunity for moral and religious growth. This model was already present in some of the earliest Christian interpretations of the story of Paradise, but it has always remained an undercurrent in Christian theological views on creation, sin and redemption. The model focuses on personal growth and development, and it asks how people can grow spiritually, individually and collectively when facing existential factors such as the givens of their bodily existence, dependence on their natural habitat and the fixed patterns of family life. It is precisely these universal challenges and people's response to them that are the main subject of the biblical story of Adam and Eve, according to the growth model. The growth model is an alternative to the Judeo-Christian and Islamic theological explanation of the story of Paradise. In this classic view, the central theme is the irrevocable breach of God's commandments (hubris, disobedience, the Fall and corresponding punishment), usually linked with a strictly hierarchical view of all relationships, including gender relations.

In this essay, I will explore the growth model that has gained such an important place in feminist theological interpretations of the story of Paradise and particularly in theological revaluations of the Eve figure. There are several questions I aim to answer. What are the ingredients in the growth model exactly? Why is it gaining in popularity (and not only among gender-critical exegetes)? What are its biblical and theological underpinnings? Which problems does it solve and which new problems does it pose? In order to explain the appeal of this model, I will first lay out several problems the story of Paradise presents to critics who take a feminist theological approach, as well as a number of earlier solutions to these problems.

Eve's Evil Legacies

The story of Adam, Eve and the serpent in the Garden of Eden is certainly the best known story in Genesis, possibly in the entire Bible. In this 'original

6. See Brigitte Kahl, 'And She Called His Name Seth… (Gen. 4.25): The Birth of Critical Knowledge and the Unread End of Eve's Story', *USQR* 53.1-2 (1999), pp. 19-28; Ilana Pardes, *Countertraditions in the Bible: A Feminist Approach* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1992), pp. 39-59; Lyn M. Bechtel, 'Genesis 2.4b–3.24: A Myth about Human Maturation', *JSOT* 67 (1995), pp. 3-26; Mieke Bal, *Lethal Love: Feminist Literary Readings of Biblical Love Stories* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1987), pp. 104-30.

drama', people seem destined to live a life of bliss, safe and carefree under the watchful eye of God. But by their own doing, this all goes terribly wrong. The promise of bliss is replaced by pain and toil, a hard life filled with gnawing remorse over a paradise lost.

From a feminist perspective, the story of Paradise is not only a compelling tragedy but a double drama as well. According to feminist theologian Mary Daly, it is no coincidence that the seminal tale of humanity's original downfall put the source of all evil and misery in the hands of a *woman*. This is not accidental, not a random detail, but the—malicious—essence of the story itself: that evil, sin and death were brought into the world by a woman.[7]

Whether this is actually stated in the Bible is a moot point; in the past few decades feminist biblical critics have contributed numerous analyses and interpretations that question or contradict this connection. Already in 1978, for example, Phyllis Trible compiled a long list of unsupported claims regarding the contents of the tale of Paradise. Trible mentions the commonly held notions that Eve's existence derived from Adam's, that she was subordinate because she was a woman, that she behaved like a 'temptress' and that she had an innate tendency toward evil.[8] However closely these ideas have come to be associated with the exegesis and interpretation of Genesis 1–4, none is actually present in the text.

Despite the many movements that have called for us to 'return to the text', there is a long and persistent history of interpretation surrounding the story of Paradise that emphasizes Eve's role as the origin of all evil and her derivative and subordinate position in relation to Adam, the first man. This bias is still absent from the First Testament, which hardly refers to the story of creation in Genesis 2–4. The bias is introduced in the intertestamental period, when reinterpretations and references to the story of Adam and Eve appear in apocryphal and pseudepigraphical writings such as Baruch, the Wisdom of Sirach, the *Apocalypse of Enoch*, the book of *Jubilees*, the *Testament of Ruben* and the *Life of Adam and Eve*. This literature is primarily concerned with the origin of evil; in these interpretations there is a tendency to exculpate Adam and to condemn Eve as the source or instigator of evil, while the serpent is identified with Satan.[9]

7. Mary F. Daly, *Beyond God the Father: Toward a Philosophy of Women's Liberation* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1974), Chapter 3.

8. Phyllis Trible, *God and the Rhetoric of Sexuality* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1985), p. 73.

9. See also Bernard Prusak, 'Women: Seductive Siren and Source of Sin? Pseudepigraphical Myth and Christian Origins', in Rosemary Radford Ruether (ed.), *Religion and Sexism: Images of Woman in Jewish and Christian Traditions* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1974), pp. 89-116; Helen Schüngel-Straumann, 'On the Creation of Man and Woman in Genesis 1–3: The History and the Reception of the Text Reconsidered', in Athalya Brenner (ed.), *A Feminist Companion to Genesis* (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic

This interpretative framework is also visible in New Testament epistles, where it is more emphatically linked to the matter of the hierarchy of the sexes, the subordination of women to men (2 Cor. 11.3; 1 Tim. 2.9-15; 1 Pet. 3.1-17). In these texts, the prescription for women to obey their husbands and to remain silent in Christian communities is based on the events that befell Eve. In the texts of the early Church Fathers these representations are elaborated more systematically into a theological view of the inferiority of women and their inherent relationship with evil. This theological view has heavily influenced Christian thinking on sin, evil and redemption.[10]

If we trace the reception and interpretation of the Eve figure and her actions, we notice that the religious representations and myths of various cultures and traditions are entwined and reinforce each other on the point of linking women to evil.[11] Fragments of the biblical story of Paradise itself echo old Near Eastern myths of creation that recount the triumph over a dark, primeval female force. Jewish scholars have emphasized the link between women and evil by repeatedly questioning whether Adam was at all to blame for the existence/creation of evil—a hypothesis further developed by Christian apologists and thinkers such as Justin Martyr, Irenaeus and Clement of Alexandria.[12] Early Christian communities took an approach to the story of Paradise that was informed by their burning questions about sexual relations with a view to Christian redemption. This resulted in a close connection between Eve's sin and female sexuality. Church Fathers such as Origen and Tertullian shared these views and also read the story of Paradise in the context of the Greek myth of Pandora. As we know, Pandora is unlike the woman depicted in the Bible who merely succumbs to evil. Pandora is the very origin of evil, the tempting and deceptive bearer of evil, constructed

Press, 1993), pp. 53-77; Michael D. Eldridge, *Dying Adam with his Multiethnic Family: Understanding the Greek Life of Adam and Eve* (Leiden: E.J. Brill, 2001); Thomas Knittel, *Das griechische 'Leben Adams und Evas': Studien zu einer narrativen Anthropologie im frühen Judentum* (Tübingen: Mohr, 2002).

10. Hanneke Reuling, *After Eden: Church Fathers and Rabbis on Genesis 3:16-21* (Leiden: Brill, 2006); Peter C. Bouteneff, *Beginnings: Ancient Christian Readings of the Biblical Creation Narratives* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2008). For a critical study of the representation of Eve in mainstream Christian theology, see Monica Leisch-Kiesl, *Eva als Andere: Eine exemplarische Untersuchung zu Frühchristentum und Mittelalter* (Cologne: Böhlau, 1992). For a study of alternative interpretations that have not become part of mainstream Christian thought, see Elaine Pagels, *Adam, Eve, and the* Serpent (New York: Random House, 1988); Karen L. King, 'The Book of Norea', in Elisabeth Schüsseler Fiorenza (ed.), *Searching the Scriptures* (2 vols.; New York: SCM Press, 1994), II, pp. 66-85; Elisabeth Gössmann (ed.), *Eva, Gottes Meisterwerk* (Munich: Iudicium, 1985).

11. John Phillips, *Eve: The History of an Idea* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1984).

12. Prusak, 'Women: Seductive Siren and Source of Sin?', pp. 100-103.

with and for malicious intent. Literally speaking, this Pandora analogy, or the idea that Eve—and hence all women—is fundamentally evil, is not present in the story of Paradise. However, the thought pattern has been associated with this story for generations.

Some elements of the story of Paradise are particularly suited to digressions on this issue, such as Eve's origin from the rib of Adam. This detail has given rise to many speculations about Eve's nature and abilities. Although Eve's creation from Adam's rib has also led to noteworthy interpretations stressing the closeness and connectedness between men and women, most interpretations are denigrating: the rib is associated with transitoriness, decay, mendacity and sexual lust. For example, Rabbinic commentaries have made a particularly odd comparison between the properties of pieces of rib and the wicked traits of women (Rabbi Joshua of Siknin).[13] Another example is the explanation given for women's inclination toward witchcraft by witch hunters and Dominicans Kramer and Sprenger in their treatise *Malleus Maleficarum* (1468). Their claim was that women are naturally susceptible to such evil because they are made from a 'bent rib', while the fact that God was incarnated in a member of the male sex made men relatively immune to such evil.[14] There are also Jewish legends and old Christian folk tales that turn Adam's rib into a tail, in some cases meaning the last or lowest rib, whereby the tail is an allusion to either the serpent, sexual lust or both.[15] Thus, Eve's origin has sunk to ever lower and more disreputable depths. Other elements that have been seized upon to prove women's original or natural connection to evil are Eve's link with the serpent/Satan, her curiosity and appetite for knowledge and her (sexual) appetite, of course.

Attempts at Rehabilitation

In light of the dominance of these interpretations and their status and frequent use in religious and theological debates on the nature, position and purpose of women, it is not surprising that several of the women who started reading and commenting on the first chapters of Genesis struck a tone of self-defence and defiance. Remarkably, some women supplied their *own* interpretations of these texts at an early stage in the history of Christianity, criticizing the received explanations with surprising frankness.

According to historian Gerda Lerner, research into the development of a feminist consciousness in Western intellectual traditions has shown that some women apparently assumed the authority and expertise to challenge

13. Phillips, *Eve*, p. 29.

14. Elizabeth A. Clark and Herbert Richardson, *Women and Religion: The Original Sourcebook of Women in Christian Thought* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1996), p. 123.

15. Phillips, *Eve*, p. 42.

established views through explanations of biblical texts. Without offering extensive apologies, legitimizations or references to direct revelations from God—as female mystics tended to do—these women explained what certain biblical texts said about God's intentions in creating men and women, attempting more or less directly to correct the negative reputation of Eve.[16] The fact that Genesis 2–3 is neither a tract nor a dogma, but a multi-interpretable narrative with a male and a female protagonist, apparently creates an opening for these women to air their opinions. Eve's presence as a female protagonist offers these women an exceptional opportunity to identify with the protagonist and to take a stand.

When we look at the history of women's attempts to reinterpret this text, we discover that many of the ingenious twists and strategies in current feminist exegeses of Genesis 1–4 have been used by women before. Many such readings and interpretations have appeared. Early commentaries by women, such as those by Benedictine Hildegard von Bingen (1098–1179), who regularly discussed Eve's persona in her writings, tend to favour double-voiced readings of the story of creation. These readings seem at first to go along with the accepted thinking on the hierarchy of the sexes and the 'weakness of feminine nature'. But this model then takes a surprising turn when Eve's weak, feminine nature is used as an apology for her wrongdoing. Adam is the stronger of the first two people on Earth; as a morally better-equipped individual who is in direct communication with God, he bears more responsibility and therefore more guilt for the Fall.[17] Moreover, it is less sinful to long for knowledge of good and evil than it is to disobey a divine commandment; Eve, after all, was not present when God forbade eating from the tree of knowledge (Gen. 2.16; 3.1-6).[18]

A second approach that was already present in early women's commentaries contradicts the usual interpretation of the story of Paradise by emphasizing Adam and Eve's equality; they were created as equals and are therefore equally to blame for the Fall.[19] Genesis 1, with the creation of

16. Gerda Lerner, *The Creation of Feminist Consciousness: From the Middle Ages to Eighteen-Seventy* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993), pp. 138-66.

17. This line of reasoning can be found in Hildegard von Bingen (1098–1179), Isotta Nogarola (1418–1466) and Laura Cereta (1469–1499); see Lerner, *Creation*, pp. 142-48. For Hildegard von Bingen's theology, see Barbara J. Newman, *Sister of Wisdom: St. Hildegard's Theology of the Feminine* (Aldershot: Scholars Press, 1987), pp. 89-120, and Lerner, *Creation*, pp. 52-64, 142-43.

18. This is the train of thought present in Judith Sargent Murray (US, eighteenth century). See Lerner, *Creation*, pp. 158-59, and Marla J. Selvidge, *Notorious Voices: Feminist Biblical Interpretation 1500–1920* (London: SCM Press, 1996), pp. 138-43.

19. For example, see Christine de Pizan (1365–1430) and Anna Maria van Schurman (1607–1678). Hildegard von Bingen has a unique take on this: in one of her visions, she sees Adam and Eve fall down, locked together. Eve has taken on a non-human form;

humankind in the form of man and woman in God's image and likeness, is an important reference point for such egalitarian explanations of the story of Paradise.[20] In this model, the gender aspect is characteristically underplayed or neutralized. Some female authors, such as Dutch theologian Anna Maria van Schurman (1607–1678), elegantly solve the problem by referring to the temptation of 'humans' by 'the serpent' and simply not mentioning Eve.[21] Others, such as Schurman's contemporary Antoinette Bourignon, turn Adam and Eve, before their exile from Paradise, into identical androgynous figures.[22] Bourignon foregrounds Eve as one half of the original human couple and downplays her womanhood.

A third approach, and one that is diametrically opposed to the second, is gynocentric; it consciously strives to put Eve's womanhood in the most positive light. In this interpretation, Eve's origin from Adam's rib is seen as proof of her creation from the noblest, that is to say purely human, materials.[23] Eve's emergence at the very end of God's creative efforts represents nothing less than the crown of creation. Eve's position as the mother of all human beings is accentuated and her actions are associated with those of the woman giving birth from the book of Revelation. Furthermore, this model takes a serious approach to the idea that women, as well as men, were created in God's image. Some female authors see in this a case for adjusting our very image of God.[24]

And finally, humour and irony have also been used by female readers to try and reverse the usual interpretation of Genesis 2–3. Adam's sleepy-headed aloofness and his outright childish excuses to God did not go

Hildegard perceives her as a bright starry cloud in the form of a tender green leaf, pregnant with the whole multitude of humankind (Newman, *Sister of Wisdom*, pp. 100-107).

20. For example, see Jane Spegt on Eve's origin from Adam's flank, near his heart, as his equal (Lerner, *Creation*, p. 152), and Sarah Grimké, who stresses the equality of both being created by God (Lerner, *Creation*, p. 161, and Selvidge, *Notorious Voices*, pp. 44-54).

21. Anna Maria van Schurman, *Uitbreiding over de drie eerste capittels van Genesis: Beneffens een vertoog van het geestelijk huwelijk van Christus met de gelovigen* (Groningen, 1732).

22. Lerner, *Creation*, p. 156.

23. In contrast to the persistently negative interpretation of the creation of Eve from Adam's rib, Eve's creation from 'nobler material' is stressed by several people, including Christine de Pizan ('Letter of the God of Love', in Kristen E. Kvam *et al.* [eds.], *Eve and Adam: Jewish, Christian, and Muslim Readings on Genesis and Gender* [Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1999], pp. 236-41) and Jane Anger (Lerner, *Creation*, pp. 150-51). Ester Sowernam combines this with the 'gift of fertility' that characterizes Eve (Lerner, *Creation*, p. 153).

24. Christine de Pizan, *The Book of the City of Ladies* (trans. Earl Jeffrey Richards; London: Pan Books, 1983), p. 23; Lucretia Marinella, 'La Nobiltà et Eccellenze delle Donni et i Difetti e Mancamenti de gli Huomini', in Gössmann (ed.), *Eva*, pp. 23-45.

unnoticed. In *The Woman's Bible* of 1895 Elisabeth Cady Stanton ironically inverts one of the most infamous 'logical' interpretations: if Eve is inferior to Adam because she was created after him, then what about Adam himself, who was created after the crawling animals?[25]

In the interpretative strategies described here, Eve is rehabilitated in order to break the close connection between woman, the Fall and evil, and to invalidate the biblical legitimization of the hierarchy between the sexes. Although these readings are self-defensive and defiant, they also go further, offering different interpretations of Genesis 1–4. A surprising take on the first meeting between Adam and Eve, for example, is the one in which this meeting is depicted as total ecstasy and physical bliss for both parties, as if it were a scene from the *Song of Songs* (Proba, Hildegard von Bingen).[26] It is moving to read how women—acknowledging the beauty of their own female bodies—draw conclusions about God, in whose likeness their bodies were created (Christine de Pizan, Lucretia Marinella).[27] In some cases, idiosyncratic comparisons are drawn between Eve and Mary as a means of exploring women's contribution to redemption and salvation. Certain types of women's spirituality in the Middle Ages propagated the idea that women—as incarnations of the weak, sinful and suffering Eve—are close to Jesus in his redemptive and 'life-giving' suffering. The Eve figure is thus included in theological views that enable a positive connection between women, salvation and redemption from God.[28]

Genesis 2–4 Interpreted According to the Personal Growth Model

Despite all the individual attempts at alternative interpretation, the close connection between Eve/women, sin, evil, and the biblical legitimization of gender hierarchy remained the dominant exegesis of Genesis 2–3 until the late twentieth century. None of the alternative interpretations mentioned above found a following or made much impact. This is partly due to the almost complete lack of women's theological traditions and schools. Quite the opposite is true of second-wave feminist theological interpretations of

25. Elizabeth Cady Stanton, *The Woman's Bible* (New York: Arno Press, 1974), Part 1, p. 19; Selvidge, *Notorious Voices*, pp. 101-102. A similar reversal is used by Christine de Pizan: unlike Adam, Eve was created in Paradise and is therefore created from nobler material than him. See nn. 23 and 24 above.

26. Elizabeth Ann Clark, Diane F. Hatch and Faltonia Proba, *The Golden Bough, The Oaken Cross: The Virgilian Cento of Faltonia Betitia Proba* (Chico, CA: Scholars Press, 1981); Newman, *Sister of Wisdom*, pp. 130-31.

27. See nn. 23 and 24.

28. Caroline Walker Bynum, *Fragmentation and Redemption: Essays on Gender and the Human Body in Medieval Religion* (New York: Zone Books, 1991), pp. 151-79.

Genesis 1–4 (from 1970 onwards).[29] These interpretations, by Daly, Trible, and many others, have become part of the mainstream theological debate. As a result, the egalitarian explanation of the story of Paradise is no longer a marginal interpretation, but a widely accepted one.

Egalitarian explanations—which were present from the very start, forming an undercurrent or countercurrent in the Christian explanation of creation narratives—are based on the conviction that the creation of the human race did not involve any hierarchy or dominance of one sex over the other. It sees hierarchical explanations as patriarchalizing theological constructs. In support of egalitarian explanations, many exegetes have quoted Gen. 1.26, on the creation of humankind in the image of God and simultaneously as 'male and female'.[30] But the second story of creation also provides support for an egalitarian explanation. In this narrative, it is pointed out that God initially created an undifferentiated 'earth creature' (*ha-adam*) and only later made separate male and female people when creating Eve from the rib or side of this earth creature.[31] Likewise, the fact that Adam and Eve are each exiled from Paradise with their own 'sorrow' to bear is seen to underscore this equality.

Parallel to the growing popularity and acceptance of this egalitarian explanation, we see increasing reference to the growth model as an alternative to the classical theological explanation of the story of Paradise that emphasizes the breaking of God's commandment (hubris, disobedience, fall and punishment) and links women with sin and death. As Erich Fromm pointed out as early as 1966, the story of Paradise—unlike the story of Cain and Abel—does not contain a vocabulary of 'sin' and 'punishment'.[32] This discrepancy between the text and its traditional exegesis has been central to critiques of the dominant explanation and has spurred many critics to seek new interpretative models.

In the early twentieth century, biblical critics such as Hermann Gunkel and S.R. Driver suggested that the story of Paradise (Gen. 2–3) was actually a myth depicting a fundamental stage in human existence, namely, the loss

29. For an overview of various approaches, see Kvam *et al.* (eds.), *Eve and Adam*, pp. 419-81. For discussions of this development, see Reuven Kimelman, 'The Seduction of Eve and the Exegetical Politics of Gender', *BibInt* 4 (1996), pp. 1-39. For recent feminist Biblical comments, see Carol A. Newsom and Sharon H. Ringe (eds.), *Women's Bible Commentary* (exp. edn with Apocrypha; Louisville, KY: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1998), and Meyers *et al.* (eds.), *Women in Scripture*.

30. Kvam *et al.* (eds.), *Eve and Adam*, pp. 340-55, 419-81.

31. Trible, *God and the Rhetoric of Sexuality*, pp. 72-143; Bal, *Lethal Love*, pp. 104-30.

32. Erich Fromm, *You Shall Be as Gods* (New York: Holt, Reinhart & Winston, 1966), p. 23.

of childish ignorance and innocence.[33] In this view, the story sketches the transition to a more developed and independent state that is a precondition for living as mature beings. The growth model interprets Eve and Adam's experience—differentiating, longing for the forbidden, making independent choices and feeling ashamed of the consequences—as a sign of personal, social growth that differentiates and elevates the relationship between humans and God, not as a sign of 'sin' or 'apostasy'. Seen in this light, breaking God's commandments is a necessary step towards spiritual growth, human (co)existence, and a mature relationship with God.

Well-known psychologists of religion such as Erich Fromm, Erik Eriksson and Eugen Drewermann[34] have supported this approach and exegetes of various backgrounds have developed it over the course of the twentieth century. Based on textual, literary and cultural history analyses, they identify several 'rites of passage' in the story of Paradise: Adam and Eve's sexual awakening ('and they knew that they were naked', Gen. 3.7),[35] the development of moral awareness ('knowing good and evil'), and the transition of the human habitat from nature to culture ('in the sweat of thy face shalt thou eat bread', Gen. 3.19).[36] This model received support from cultural anthropologists,[37] historians of theology[38] and psychoanalysts.[39] Today, many exegetes and theologians treat it as a valid interpretation.[40]

33. Hermann Gunkel, *Genesis* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1910), pp. 11, 25, and S.R. Driver, *The Book of Genesis* (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1930), p. 96.

34. Fromm, *You Shall Be as Gods*; Erik H. Erikson, *Identity and the Life Cycle: Selected Papers* (New York: Basic Books, 1959); Eugen Drewermann, *Strukturen des Bösen* (3 vols.; Munich: Ferdinand Schönung, 1977–78).

35. See Sam Dragga, 'Genesis 2–3: A Story of Liberation', *JSOT* 55 (1992), pp. 3-13.

36. See Ellen van Wolde, 'Facing the Earth: Primeval History in a New Perspective', in Philip R. Davies and David J.A. Clines (eds.), *The World of Genesis: Persons, Places, Perspectives* (JSOTSup, 257; Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1998), pp. 22-47.

37. Carol L. Meyers, 'Gender Roles and Genesis 3.16 Revisited', in Brenner (ed.), *Feminist Companion to Genesis*, pp. 118-45.

38. Eliane Pagels argues that there has always been a theological explanation along these lines, opposing St Augustine's dominant exegesis. See Pagels, *Adam, Eve, and the Serpent*, pp. 100-105.

39. See Anna Piskorowski, 'In Search of her Father: A Lacanian Approach to Gen. 2–3', in Paul Morris and Deborah F. Sawyer (eds.), *A Walk in the Garden: Biblical, Iconographical and Literary Images of Eden* (JSOTSup, 136; Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1992), pp. 310-18; Kim Ian Parker, 'Mirror, Mirror on the Wall, Must We Leave Eden, Once and for All? A Lacanian Pleasure Trip through the Garden', *JSOT* 83 (1999), pp. 19-29.

40. For example, see Mark G. Brett, *Genesis: Procreation and the Politics of Identity* (New York: Routledge, 2000); André LaCocque, *The Trial of Innocence: Adam, Eve and the Yahwist* (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2006); Thomas Krüger, 'Sündenfall? Überlegungen zur theologischen Bedeutung der Paradiesgeschichte', in Schmid and Riedweg (eds.), *Beyond Eden*, pp. 94-109.

Feminist theologians have always recognized the potential this growth model held to break with the exclusive connection between women and evil and to offer a different view of Eve and the story of Paradise. Mary Daly introduced this approach with her call to 'exorcise evil from Eve' in *Beyond God the Father*. Daly confirms the mythical nature of the story of Paradise and agrees that its central message lies in the need to awaken from the state of innocence and ignorance. However, she disagrees that this leads women and men to true maturity. The mainstream explanation allows men to place the origin of evil outside of themselves, to put it on 'the other', with women serving as the original scapegoat. This explanation keeps women in a permanent state of dependence, self-hatred and self-imposed ignorance.

Daly sees indications in the text of Genesis itself to break with this pattern. 'The projection of guilt upon women *is* patriarchy's Fall', Daly notes, and challenges and subverts the view of woman causing the Fall of man.[41] Daly proposes a different reading of the story of Paradise, beyond patriarchal assumptions about good and evil: one in which a 'liberating fall' takes place. According to this 'prophetic' explanation, women consciously reach out for the tree of knowledge of good and evil and bring themselves and men to eat the forbidden fruit. In so doing, they acquire knowledge of something patriarchal society does not want to know, namely, how to deal with good and evil without blaming sin and guilt on 'the other' (in this case women). 'This will be a Fall from false innocence into a new kind of adulthood. Unlike the old adulthood that required the arresting of growth, this demands a growing that is ever continuing, never completed.'[42]

The idea of seeing Eve as the instigator of growth and development and of assigning a positive value to her role in the story of Paradise has found favour with feminist biblical critics who base their work on detailed text analysis.[43] After rereading Genesis 2–3 from this perspective, Susan Niditch concludes that Eve's openness and curiosity are crucial to the transition to a new, challenging life outside the secluded Garden of Eden:

> And yet the woman initiates the act. It is she who first dares to eat of God's tree, to consume the fruit of the divine, thereby becoming, as the rabbis say of human beings, like the angels in having the capacity to discriminate and like the animals who eat, fornicate, defecate, and die. The woman herself comes to have the most earthy and the most divine of roles, conceiving, containing and nurturing new life. She is an especially appropriate link between life in God's garden and life in the thornier world to which all of us are consigned.[44]

41. Daly, *Beyond God the Father*, p. 47.
42. Daly, *Beyond God the Father*, p. 67.
43. See, for example, Carol Meyers, 'Gender Roles', *passim*; Susan Niditch, 'Genesis', in Newsom and Ringe (eds.), *The Women's Bible Commentary*, pp. 13-29.
44. Niditch, 'Genesis', p. 14.

The interpretation of the story of Paradise in terms of growth and maturation also sheds a different light on God. Biblical critic Lyn Bechtel strongly backs the mythical interpretation of the story of Paradise; reading it as a myth about human development clarifies many aspects of the story, such as structure, style, language use and symbolism, all of which are disregarded in interpretations of the 'temptation–fall–crime–punishment' variety. Bechtel argues that the story is about confronting the potential and limits of adult human existence in an agrarian culture in which humans, animals and vegetation are directly interdependent for their mutual survival. The first humans, man and woman, both have to face this confrontation and this leads each of them to develop in their own way. In Bechtel's view, God acts as a parent, in both a paternal (judgmental) role and in a maternal (caring) role. Both are needed to guide a child to adulthood.[45]

The growth model not only profiles Eve and God more clearly, but also Adam and the Earth, both as individuals and in their relationships with one another. Literary theorist Mieke Bal rejects, on literary grounds, a dogmatic reading of the story of Paradise and calls for a deconstructionist approach that respects the complexity and the polysemy of the literary text. Based on semiotic and narrative analyses, Ball points to the gradual and mutual differentiation or depiction of all the 'characters' (Earth, man, woman and God) in the story of creation. As a result of this differentiation, Bal argues, the link between Earth and Adam (*ha-adama* and *ha-adam*), on the one hand, and between God and Eve (*YHWH* and *Hawwah*), on the other, becomes increasingly explicit. Made of earth and designed to work the Earth ('to till the ground from whence he was taken', Gen. 3.23), Adam will ultimately return to the Earth and be united with it ('for dust thou art, and unto dust shalt thou return', Gen. 3.19). Woman's development is totally different and much more complex. She starts out as part of the 'earth creature' and in her origin from this creature her consort calls her 'bone of my bones, flesh of my flesh'. But her hunger for knowledge and enterprising spirit set her apart from her consort, to such an extent that he can no longer recognize her as 'his own' and complains to God about her, calling her 'the woman whom thou gavest to be with me'. This distance is ultimately expressed in the name the man gives her, one which clearly points to that which he himself is not: Eve, 'the mother of all living' (Gen. 3.20). With such creative power, Eve comes very close to God, as indicated by her wish to eat from the tree of knowledge. God also notices the change in relationship and feels the need to re-emphasize the difference between God and human: 'Behold, the man is

45. Bechtel also bases her work on the research carried out by Carol Meyers and Ellen van Wolde. See Lyn M. Bechtel, 'Rethinking the Interpretation of Genesis 2.4b–3.24', in Brenner (ed.), *Feminist Companion to Genesis*, pp. 77-117 (114-15).

become as one of us, to know good and evil: and now, lest he put forth his hand, and take also of the tree of life, and eat, and live for ever' (Gen. 3.22). By banishing Adam and Eve from the Garden of Eden, the difference is restored and all 'characters' have attained their own distinguishing characteristics.[46]

The growth model offers a new perspective on the roles of Eve and Adam, the actions of God and the interaction between God and humans in the story of Paradise. The model also provides an angle for continued exploration and theological evaluation of the Eve figure. The growth model sheds light not only on Eve's undeniable pioneering role, but also on her personal, inner growth—an element for which we find many pegs in Genesis 2–4, while this is ironically enough not the case for Adam's growth. As we have seen, Mieke Bal points to Eve's development, her growth from earth creature to mother of all living, as the main plot in the narrative. Based on Bal's approach, biblical critic Ilana Pardes focuses on Eve's further development, described in Genesis 4. In this chapter, we encounter Eve as the namegiver at the birth of her children Cain and Seth. In the First Testament, one of the few situations in which women have speaking roles is the naming of newborn babies. The mothers (Leah, Rachel, Hannah and Samson's mother, for instance) are normally the ones who give their children names. In their explanations of these names they refer to their own life story and their relationship with God. Eve explains the names she bestows as follows: for Cain, 'I have gotten a man from the LORD' (Gen. 4.2)[47] and for Seth, 'For God hath appointed me another seed instead of Abel, whom Cain slew' (Gen. 4.25). According to Pardes, these namings show a great shift in Eve's self-awareness: from pride and an overestimation of her own importance as a mother, almost God's equal, to a far more modest appraisal of herself and a recognition that God is the giver of life.[48]

The reading of the story of Paradise I referred to at the beginning of this essay belongs to this group of contemporary interpretations that not only rehabilitate Eve but also empower her and give her her own voice. Theological interpretations of the story that take personal growth as their starting point identify Eve as the first person in the Bible to go through a development process with God and testify to this in her own voice.

46. Bal, *Lethal Love*, pp. 104-30. For a critical discussion of this interpretation, see Pardes, *Countertraditions*, pp. 28-33.

47. See also n. 4.

48. Pardes, *Countertraditions*, pp. 39-59. For a similar explanation, see Umberto Cassuto, *Commentary on Genesis*. I. *From Adam to Noah* (Jerusalem: Magnes Press, Hebrew University, 1961), pp. 201-202.

Evaluation: The Potential and Limitations of the Growth Model

In the preceding section I discussed the advantages of the growth model from a feminist theological perspective. An explanation of Genesis 2–4 in this vein does not naively and unambiguously attribute the origin of sin, evil and death to Eve, nor does it link evil to women's supposedly innate moral weakness or their sexuality. Such an approach is not based on a hierarchy of sexes; instead, Adam and Eve are equals and partners, equally burdened by a need to develop (sexually, culturally, morally and religiously), each with their own responsibility for choices and their consequences. The growth model also points to an inclusive image of God. God appears in the story of Paradise as both a father and a mother simultaneously. S/He creates, cares and sets limits. The growth model also enables us to see Eve's wilful actions in a positive light: she takes the initiative for human growth and development. And finally, Eve's own moral and religious development offers a universal identification model and a theological message; her confrontation with the evil inside and around her, and her own complicity in this, ultimately changes her notion of, and relationship with, God.[49]

As positive as these aspects may be, there are also objections to using the growth model as the key to interpreting the story of Paradise. I will deal with these objections in terms of consistency, persuasiveness and theological significance, to the extent that they are relevant to feminist theological interpretations of Genesis 2–4.

The first objection is that the growth model—not surprisingly, considering the complexity of Genesis 2–4 as text—does not do justice to *every* element in the story of Paradise. For example, the role of the serpent is disregarded altogether. The text also contains elements that contradict the growth model. After all, it is only after God's commandments have been broken that Adam starts to act childishly.[50] Similarly, the supposed equality of men and women is difficult to maintain when we take growth and development to be the central premise; while Eve is steadily developing, Adam remains static. All we learn about him is that, after his exile from Paradise, he has intercourse with his wife several times and fathers several sons.[51]

49. See also Kahl's interpretation (discussed above, n. 6).

50. E.A. Speiser, *Genesis* (AB, 1; Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1964), p. 25; Niditch, 'Genesis', p. 14.

51. Or could we see Cain as a continuation of the Adam character? Some arguments in favour of this reading are the similarity of their speech and actions (cf. Gen. 3.9-11 and Gen. 4.9-11): hiding the crime, being called to account by God ('Where art thou/Where is thy brother?') and the similarity of the punishments God metes out. See also Kimelman, 'The Seduction of Eve', pp. 28-29.

In addition, the different 'sorrows' that Adam and Eve have to live with (the sorrow of tilling the soil vs. the sorrow of bringing forth children and the announcement that the man shall rule over the woman and that the woman's desire shall be to her husband) are not easily reconciled with the egalitarian growth model, unless these are placed in a much wider context. This is what feminist critics such as Bechtel and Meyers do. They argue that this story should be read against a backdrop of constantly life-threatening situations, in conditions completely different from our overpopulated, individualistic culture. In early agrarian cultures, bearing children and working the land were the most important and interdependent tasks required for survival; the contributions of both men and women were crucial. When this context is invoked, the sorrows that Adam and Eve suffer can be regarded as equal and as an integral part of their growth process.[52]

The latter aspect points to a second objection to the growth model: readers have to identify with an archaic or archetypical view of the world in order to understand and appreciate the story of Paradise in terms of moral and religious growth. We need to let go of our currently differentiated views of gender relations and gender identities in favour of 'human existence before God' in terms of exclusively heterosexual and sex-specific role models: working the land and bearing children are the only viable ways for men and women, respectively, to make a living. Their relationship to each other is characterized by their primary roles: men ruling over women and women longing for men. Does this reading of the story of Paradise weigh up against the problematic anthropological premises that it is based on? Can form and content be thus separated? Is the growth model even half as 'gender sensitive' as many feminist theologians would like to believe?[53]

Another objection is that the growth model is too harmonious and too 'nice' an interpretation model: it is too exclusively focused on human growth and blossoming. This does not do justice to the unyielding nature of the text in Genesis 2–4. It disregards the complex interdependency and power relations between man and woman, humans and God, woman and serpent, God and Cain, and God and Abel. And just like its counterpart, the Fall model, it is based in a certain bias toward the text. Both models construct a monolithic coherence in the text and lose sight of the tensions and contradictions that are present and ought to be incorporated into its interpretation.

52. Bechtel, 'Rethinking'; Meyers, 'Gender Roles'.

53. Beverly J. Stratton, *Out of Eden: Reading, Rhetoric, and Ideology in Genesis 2–3* (JSOTSup, 208; Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1995), pp. 185-213. We can also invert this question and ask whether the Fall model by definition presupposes or implies a misogynist anthropology and theology. See, for instance, Mignon R. Jacobs, *Gender, Power and Persuasion: The Genesis Narratives and Contemporary Portraits* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2007), pp. 21-70.

It might be better to exchange the notion of growth with all its optimistic connotations for the notion of differentiation—a more neutral term that is *a priori* neither positive nor negative and that emphasizes the undecided and unstable nature of difference. The story of Paradise is full of boundaries that are set, questioned and transgressed—boundaries that refer to very meaningful and exciting differences: God/creation, human/divine, human/nature, human/animal, nature/culture, and male/female, masculine/feminine. None of these are self-evident; all need to be questioned, explained and redrawn. Moreover, they are all interrelated and clarify each other. We would probably do more justice to the story of Paradise by reading it in light of multiple differences than by reading it as a model of Fall or growth. We would leave more room for the text to surprise us. We would also be better equipped to resist any ideologized use of the male/female difference because we would see this difference as one of many, that is, not as an *a priori* continuously meaningful difference. There would be a greater stimulus to debate the interpretation of this text and we might be able to free ourselves from a number of stock questions about this story that do not go to its core, such as the issue of who (male/female) is responsible for bringing evil into the world.[54]

I do believe, however, that the current debate on the interpretation of the story of Paradise would benefit most from explicitly incorporating the growth model into the explanation. Historically speaking, it has had an important innovative and corrective influence on the Fall model, with the added advantage that it is a tangible model that unifies all the differences enumerated above. And because it fits in so neatly with the narrative form of the text, it draws us as readers into the story: we find ourselves striving—stumbling, falling and rising—reaching for the fruits of the tree of knowledge.

54. For an attempt at such an interpretation, see Stratton, *Out of Eden*, pp. 169-250; J'annine Jobling, *Feminist Biblical Interpretation in Theological Context* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2002), pp. 73-86.

OUT OF PARADISE

EVE AND ADAM AND THEIR INTERPRETERS

edited by

Bob Becking
and
Susanne Hennecke

SHEFFIELD PHOENIX PRESS

2011

Published by Sheffield Phoenix Press
Department of Biblical Studies, University of Sheffield
45 Victoria Street, Sheffield S3 7QB

www.sheffieldphoenix.com

A CIP catalogue record for this book
is available from the British Library

Typeset by Forthcoming Publications
Printed by Lightning Source

Hardback ISBN 978-1-907534-00-3