

The Character of Eve and Interpretive Misconceptions

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The creation story in Genesis was foundational for the Christian worldview; it depicted the inception of the world and the creation of the first humans, Adam and Eve. Their subsequent banishment from the Garden of Eden was used to explain humanity's faults and shortcomings. However, since it was Eve who caused their punishment, unfortunately Genesis has often been used to justify the subjugation of women. She has been typecast as the ruiner of men, and biblical interpreters like Tertullian have contributed to the idea that this was Eve's sole purpose. However, any speculation on Eve's character must fit within the framework provided in Genesis without assigning her qualities absent in the original text. Eve is a multifaceted, intelligent individual who exists outside of her relationship to Adam. God created them as two equivalent parts of the same whole—humanity—and this cannot be ignored to support a particular perspective. The partnership between Adam and Eve also introduces a different possibility: it is equally likely that Adam could have committed the first act of disobedience, not Eve.

In Genesis 2 and 3, Eve's motivation for eating from the Forbidden Tree offers clues about her personality. Eve eats the fruit initially because "the tree was to be desired to make one wise" and in doing so displays an ambition to become wiser and increase her faculties (Genesis 3:6). While Adam is present as she eats, he has no influence on her decision. She eats the fruit for her own betterment, not to become more equal to Adam as later interpreters like John Milton claim. In Book IX of his epic poem *Paradise Lost*, Milton writes Eve as thinking "but keep the odds of Knowledge in my power / Without Copartner? so to add what wants / in Femal Sex, the more to draw his Love, / And render me more equal" (Milton 9.820-825). In claiming that Eve hopes to become more equal to Adam, Milton deviates from Genesis and projects the zeitgeist of his time onto a text written centuries prior. So, Eve eats from the tree of her own volition and then gives fruit to her husband who also eats (Genesis 3:6). Oddly, Adam does not argue with

Eve in an attempt to dissuade her. He gives no refusal, question, or consideration but instead passively accepts the fruit Eve offers to him. Adam is not an active player in this narrative. This characteristic is strange in the traditional male figure that Adam assumes, and even stranger when compared to the force of Eve's personality. Phyllis Tribble, in her essay "Eve and Adam: Genesis 2-3 Reread," states that "these character portrayals are truly extraordinary in a culture dominated by men" (Tribble 3). Even in Genesis, which was written by male figures and lacking in narrative description, Eve displays a personality that has more in common with that of the typical man than the supposed submissive persona of the typical woman.

Surprisingly, Milton portrays Eve in a manner that is generally true to the original text, despite the fact that he occasionally transposes his societal norms onto Genesis—such as when he says "for nothing lovelier can be found / In Woman, then to studie household good, / And good workes in her Husband to promote" (Milton 9.232-234). Eve showcases her logical capacity early in the book when she regards the work needed to maintain the Garden of Eden. She wishes to separate from Adam to divide the labor and cover more ground, but Adam is afraid due a rumored enemy in the Garden. Eve does not yield in the argument, asking Adam "if this be our condition, thus to dwell / In narrow circuit strait'nd by a Foe ... how are we happie, still in fear of harm" (9.323-326)? She does not fear an enemy, and when Adam suggests that she in particular had reason to be wary, she becomes greatly insulted: "that thou shouldst my firmness therefore doubt / To God or thee, because we have a foe / May tempt it, I expected not to hear" (9.279-281). She is a woman who is confident in her faculties, who has a job to do, and who is not content to settle when there is a more efficient way to complete her work. Adam is absorbed with Eve and pleads with her to remain by his side, but she is undeterred. As in Genesis, so too in Book IX of *Paradise Lost* does Eve demonstrate an independence from Adam.

However, Eve's complexity becomes fully evident not in her argument with Adam but in her discourse with Satan. He possesses a snake and is passing unseen through the Garden when he first happens upon Eve. Approaching her, Satan initially attempts to gain Eve's favor by showering her with compliments, declaring that she is one "who shouldst be seen / A Goddess among Gods, ador'd and serv'd / by Angels numberless" (9.546-548). While flattered, she is also immediately suspicious—she knows that no animal in Eden has the ability to reason or speak (9.551-554). She demands to know how he alone came to produce human speech and is not distracted by his unctuous behavior. Satan changes his tactics; he abandons flattery and instead attempts to convince her that eating of one of the trees in the Garden incurred this change in him. Eve is curious—she knows she has not come across such a tree and she is skeptical of his story. She tells Satan, "Serpent, thy overpraising leaves in doubt / The vertue of that Fruit, in thee first prov'd" (9.614-616). Eve is not taken with Satan's fawning behavior nor does she trust his explanations. When Satan leads her to the tree, she recognizes it as the one God forbade and informs him. Ever the beguiler, here Satan launches his final argument. He appeals to her ambition and her desire for knowledge, and he imparts to her that "ye shall be as Gods/ Knowing both Good and Evil as they know" (9.709-710). In the end Eve convinces herself that she should eat the fruit. She considers Satan's points, thinks of the benefits in her own terms, and arrives at her own conclusion. She rationalizes to herself, "For us alone / Was death invented? or to us deni'd / This intellectual food, for beasts reserv'd" (9.767-768)? Eve shows an ambition to a higher state of being. She does not blindly do as Satan commanded; in the end the decision is hers alone.

Throughout Book IX of *Paradise Lost*, Milton expands on the story of the first sin while keeping Eve's character mostly intact. Through examining both Genesis and *Paradise Lost* concurrently, Eve's identity becomes more than the wife of Adam and the beguiler of men. She is intelligent and rational, ambitious and brave. Though her act of disobedience has dire consequences, she displays independent motives, showing that her existence does not revolve around Adam.

Though Eve's dynamic personality is certainly present in Genesis 2 and 3, interpreters have still used these chapters to rationalize the superiority of men. Specifically, they point to the method of Eve's creation and her relationship to Adam. God first creates the animals, and then he creates Adam to lord over and name them. However, among all of the animals that lived in Eden alongside Adam, "there was not found a helper as his partner" (Genesis 2:20). None are fit to assist Adam in his work, so God creates a being that would be a suitable partner; he fashions Eve from Adam's rib. It would appear that since Eve originated from Adam, her position would be inherently inferior to that of the original man. However, Tribble explains the meaning of the original Hebrew, and in doing so reveals contradictory information that is lost in the English translation. Before Eve was created, Tribble says, Adam did not yet exist as 'man' and was referred to in only the generic Hebrew term for humankind, '*adham*.' This changed when God made Eve from Adam's rib, and "only with the specific creation of woman (*'ishshah*) occurs the first specific term for man as male (*'ish*) ... Man as male does not precede woman as female but happens concurrently with her" (Tribble 2). Thus, the differentiation between 'man' and 'woman' happened at the same time. In light of this information, it is inaccurate to state that Eve is inferior to Adam based on her origin. Man has no right to the woman, as Tribble asserts, since he did

not take an active role in her conception: “to claim that the rib means inferiority or subordination is to assign the man qualities over the woman which are not in the narrative itself” (2). Stating that the rib leads to power over the woman implies the man possesses the same power over woman as God, who is solely responsible for her creation. This important characteristic of their relationship, as two *equal* parts of humanity, becomes hazy through different translations and leads to misinterpretation.

Once Eve is created, Adam has a helper in the Garden. Modern connotation of ‘helper’ implies that Eve is Adam’s inferior, meant to perform as directed and follow his will. According to Tribble, this connotation is incongruent with the original Hebrew, yet another instance in which the English translation suggests a different association between Adam and Eve than what is accurate. Tribble explains that the word “‘ezer’ [hebrew, “helper”] designates a beneficial relationship; and it retains to God, people, and animals. By itself the word does not specify positions within relationships; more particularly, it does not imply inferiority” (4). Tribble’s clarification is important because it refutes the common conception that Eve’s role as Adam’s helper automatically puts her in a subservient position. Even in the modern English translation, there is evidence in Genesis that contradicts an unequal relationship. It is stated that “God created humankind in His image ... male and female He created them” (Genesis 1:27). This statement does not say that God created man in His image with woman as his assistant. Instead, it says that God created *humankind* in His image, male *and female*. If God intended for Eve to be secondary to Adam from the moment of her conception, then surely this detail would have been mentioned in Genesis, just as it explicitly states that God created humankind in his image. The early Christian author Tertullian, in his *On the Apparel of Women*, seems to disregard this; he claims that “*You* [women] destroyed so easily God’s image, man” (Tertullian 1.1). He ignores

the fact that *both* man and woman were created in God's image; woman was not created alongside man just to facilitate his downfall. He creates a separation between man and woman, vilifying Eve and every woman after her. Yet, only as a result of the first sin does Adam and Eve's partnership become something other than equal. Once Eve commits the first act of disobedience, God subordinates Eve to Adam as *punishment*. This new, unequal relationship is not the natural state God intended; it instead "signifies their shared sin ... whereas in creation man and woman know harmony and equality, in sin they know alienation and discord" (Trible 4). In this sin, Adam is now 'superior.' While Eve's sin may seem like justification for treating women as man's inferior, it is important to remember how this state originated. It is representative of the consequence. Humanity began in absolute equality between the man and the woman, and in punishment fell from that perfection. Remaining on this path of inequality is not carrying out God's command; it is simply the perpetuation of sin and a reminder of human shortcomings.

The context of the original Hebrew provides a slew of information and leads to a compelling argument—since Adam and Eve were created as equals, each one half of humanity, then the serpent does not speak to Eve due to some inherent inferiority. It could not have approached her because she was the weaker sex, despite what St. Augustine proposes in his *City of God*. In this book, he states that Satan "first tried his deceit upon the woman, making his assault upon the weaker part of that human alliance" (Augustine 1.11). Milton makes the same assumption that Satan spoke to Eve because she was perceived to be inferior: "behold alone, / The Woman, opportune to all attempts, / Her Husband, for I view far round, not nigh, / Whose higher intellectual more I shun" (Milton 9.480-483). Both of these statements represent a prevalent opinion among biblical scholars and commentators, and both of these statements are inaccurate. Nowhere in Genesis 2-3, not even in the English translation, is it stated that Adam is superior to

Eve prior to their disobedience. Eve is subjugated following their transgression, but these writers are transplanting this inequality to parts of Genesis where it does not exist. Adam and Eve initially existed equally together before the serpent addressed Eve. Therefore, the serpent would not have showed a preference for speaking to either one. As a result, it easily could have been *Adam* whom the serpent convinced to eat of the Forbidden Tree, and it could have been *Adam* who first transgressed God's command.

Adam and Eve are two of the most well known figures in the Christian canon. They were the exemplars of human perfection and the cause of humanity's downfall. Historically, the blame for this ruination has fallen squarely on Eve as she was the one who first ate of the Forbidden Tree. This accusation arises from the idea that Eve must have possessed some inherent weakness or inferiority to Adam that allowed the serpent to dupe her and therefore she is often assigned qualities that are not present in the Genesis creation story. To claim that Eve had always been weaker, that she existed solely to perpetrate the destruction of man, is erroneous and representative of the patriarchal worldview held by interpreters like St. Augustine and John Milton. She and Adam were created equally; both were made in God's image and together they comprised the beginning of humanity. In reading the text with a view clear of patriarchal fog, the relationship between Adam and Eve is understood as that of equals. It becomes apparent that not only did Eve possess a dynamic, intelligent personality, but also that *Adam*, not Eve, could have committed the first transgression against God.

Works Cited

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