

Woman in the Creation Narratives of the Hebrew Bible: Genesis 1-2

Handout prepared by Catrin Williams

1. Introduction

There are very few biblical references to Eve (Gen. 2:4b-4:2a, 25; cf. 2 Cor. 11:3; 1 Tim. 2:13). Traditional (mis)interpretations are often based on gaps or ambiguities in the text, used as scriptural proof for the inferiority of women.

Post-Christian feminists reject the story of Eden as a personification of patriarchy (see, e.g., Mary Daly, *Beyond God the Father*, 44-49; and D.J. Clines, *What does Eve do to Help?* 37).

Several (second wave) feminist biblical critics are, however, reluctant to abandon Eve's story completely. Phyllis Trible, *God and the Rhetoric of Sexuality* (1978), attempts to 'depatriarchalize' the creation stories (i.e. uncover layers of patriarchal and misogynist readings) with the tools of rhetorical criticism (that is, the message of the text is not to be separated from its form).

- 'The woman' does not receive the name Eve until Genesis 3:20. Similarly the word '*adam*' is not used as a proper name until 4:25.
- Account 1 (Gen. 1:1-2:4a) is usually attributed to the P source (6th cent BCE), while Account 2 (2:4b-3:24) is ascribed to J (possibly as early as 10th or 9th cent BCE).

2. First Creation Account (Genesis 1:1-2:4a)

Was the first woman created in the image of God (cf. Diodore of Tarsus, *Fragments on Genesis 1:26*)?

So God created **humankind** in his image,
in the image of God he created **them**;

male and female he created **them** (Gen. 1:27 NRSV [New Revised Standard Version]).

The focus is upon humanity as consisting of male and female. Trible notes the parallel construction of Gen. 1:27bc. It does not refer to the creation of humanity solely in masculine terms; no suggestion of sexual hierarchy.

3. Second Creation Account (Genesis 2:4b-25)

On the basis of this account, it has been argued that women are subordinate to men because: a) God created the female after the male; b) she was created from the rib of the male; c) her role was to help and support her husband; d) he was responsible for naming her.

3.1 The Creation of Woman after '*Adam*'

Then the Lord God formed man (*ha-'adam*) from the dust of the ground (Gen. 2:7).

'*Adam*' relates closely to '*adamah*' ('soil' or 'dust'), leading to the rendering 'earth-creature' (Trible, 76) or 'earthling' (Meyers, 81). Is this a neuter or sexually undifferentiated (rather than masculine) creature (*ha-'adam* = 'the Man' or 'the Human Being')? Is it only after the creation of the woman that one can speak of the original '*adam*' in masculine terms?

i) Gen. 2:7 refers to an individual who is able to converse with God.

ii) The expression 'the man (*ha-'adam*) and his wife' occurs in Genesis 2:25 and 3:8.

iii) Even after the creation of the female, '*adam*' continues to be used to denote her partner, as well as the term for 'male/husband' ('*ish*').

Argument for subordination is rejected on the grounds that temporal priority is not equivalent to male superiority (by analogy with the creation of the animals in Gen. 1).

3.2 The Creation of the Woman from '*Adam*'

And the rib that the Lord God had taken from the man he made into a woman and brought her to the man' (Gen. 2:22 NRSV).

Bible translations use 'rib' to render the Hebrew noun *śela'*. This is the only HB text where the term is used for a part of the human body; elsewhere it means 'side' of the tabernacle (Exod. 26:26), the Temple (Ezek. 41:11), the ark (Exod. 25:12) or the slope of a mountain (2 Sam. 16:13). Gen. 2:21-22 may express the notion that God took one of the *sides* of the man to create the woman (cf. Gen. 2:21 LXX).

3.3 The Role of the Woman as 'Helper'

Then the Lord God said, 'It is not good that the man should be alone; I will make him a helper as his partner' (Gen. 2:18, 20 NRSV).

Much speculation about the role of the woman as 'helper' (cf. Augustine, *A Literal Commentary on Genesis* 9:5:9).

The NRSV uses the phrase 'a helper as his partner' for the Hebrew '*ezer k^enegdô*'. Several feminist critics note that '*ezer*' is elsewhere used of God when he offers

support to those who are in need (e.g. Exod. 18:4; Deut. 33:7; Psalm 121:2). Inferiority and subordination are thus not necessarily implied. Nothing is disclosed about the status of the woman, and no details are given about her duties and responsibilities.

3.4 The Naming of the Woman

‘This one shall be called Woman (‘ishshah) for out of Man (‘ish) this one was taken’ (Gen. 2:23).

Is the act of naming the woman an indication of her husband’s authority over her? The formula ‘calling [someone] by a name’ is used when the man gives names to the animals (Gen. 2:19). Tribble differentiates between this phrase and the act of ‘calling’ (as in the case of the woman). Is this a valid distinction, and what about the preceding context? Note also the man’s joyful cry at the discovery of his true partner.

Bibliography

Bellis, Alice Ogden, ‘Eve in the Apocryphal/Deuterocanonical Books’, *Women in Scripture: A Dictionary of Named and Unnamed Women in the Hebrew Bible, the Apocryphal /Deuterocanonical Books, and the New Testament*, eds. C. Meyers, T. Craven, R.S. Kraemer (Grand Rapids: W.B. Eerdmans, 2000), 82-83.

Bird, Phyllis A., “‘Male and Female He Created Them’: Gen. 1:27b in the Context of the Priestly Account of Creation”, *Missing Persons and Mistaken Identities: Women and Gender in Ancient Israel* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1998), 123-54.

Clines, David J., *What Does Eve Do to Help? And Other Readerly Questions to the Old Testament* (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1990), chapter 1.

Kvam, K.E., Schearing, L.S. & Ziegler, V.H., *Eve and Adam: Jewish, Christian and Muslim Readings on Genesis and Gender* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1999).

Meyers, Carol, ‘Eve in the Hebrew Bible’, *Women in Scripture: A Dictionary of Named and Unnamed Women in the Hebrew Bible, the Apocryphal/ Deuterocanonical Books, and the New Testament*, eds. C. Meyers, T. Craven, R.S. Kraemer (Grand Rapids: W.B. Eerdmans, 2000), 79-82.

Tribble, Phyllis, *God and the Rhetoric of Sexuality* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1978), chapter 4.