Exegetical analysis of Genesis 1, 2 and 3

The Hebrew Bible commences with Genesis 1-3 which acts as a foundational narrative emphasising the theological, anthropological and literary elements of biblical legends. The chapters are part of the 'primeval history' section of Genesis. This section highlights the nature of God, humans and the universe instead of focusing on historical events. Genesis 1 reflects a very ordered story in which God forges the universe by uttering a few words. On the other hand, Genesis 2 shows a contrasting and intimate presentation of creation by focusing on human identity, vocation and relationship. Genesis 3 highlights the first sin committed by humans, Original Sin, and also its impact on humanity. It triggers the transition from harmony to alienation.

Through the utilisation of a literary critical methodology; this analysis will emphasize how narrative form, structure, character development and symbolism in Genesis 1-3 communicate to the reader. This essay demonstrates how Genesis 1-3 crafts a complex, theological and anthropological vision through the use of its literary devices.

Followed by this: a critical evaluation of modern feminist interpretation will reflect both strengths and weaknesses of applying contemporary gender focused theories to an ancient religious text.

Exploring the literary context

Genesis 1-3 forms a self contained narrative unit that shows the core concerns of scripture: the nature of the divine, the identity of man, the purpose of universe' existence and ultimately the truth behind mankind's failure. Genesis 1:1–2:4a and Genesis 2:4b–25 are widely recognised as very different accounts that contrast with each other in terms of tone, vocabulary, structure, and theological emphasis. The initial account highlights God as a transcendent sovereign who crafts the universe through declarative speech. The second reflects God as immanent… someone who creates humanity from the ground and forms a heavenly garden for human flourishing. Genesis 3, also known as "the Fall", presents the shift from innocence to alienation, though the text itself avoids doctrinal labels.

Literarily speaking, Genesis 1–3 contains patterns that reoccur throughout the biblical canon: blessing and cursing, obedience and disobedience, exile and return. The stories echo in later texts such as Psalm 8's reflection on human dignity, Hosea's portrayal of Israel's unfaithfulness, and the wisdom tradition's discourse on knowledge and desire. Recognising these resonances situates Genesis 1–3 not as isolated mythology but as the seedbed of biblical theology.

The ordered creation

Genesis 1 is flooded with remarkable structural symmetry. The six days of creation follow a pattern in which God speaks, creation responds, and God declares the result "good". This iterative formula creates a rhythmic and liturgical quality. Multiple biblical scholars have noted

the careful similarities between days 1–3 (forming realms) and days 4–6 (filling those realms).[1] This structure communicates the religious claim that creation is not chaotic but ordered and purposeful under divine sovereignty.

The presentation of God is heavily transcendent. God only creates through speech, no physical labour or struggle appears in the narrative. Divine speech functions as both command and creative force, framing the world as responsive to God's will. The repeated refrain "And God said" emphasises the power and reliability of the divine command. This method of creation contrasts with ancient Near Eastern creation myths, which often depict the gods creating through conflict or violence.[2] The literary effect is to present monotheistic God as unrivalled in authority, omnipotent, capable of ordering the cosmos without facing any hardship.

A key moment occurs in verses 26–27 with the creation of man "in the image of God". The Hebrew parallelism—"in the image of God he created them; male and female he created them"—invites the reader to identify male and female together as bearers of the divine image.[3] Literary critics observe that the gender pairing at creation underscores equality and shared vocation rather than hierarchy. The narrative moves immediately from the declaration of human identity to human purpose: to "have dominion" and to "be fruitful". Dominion here is not tyranny but stewardship, as implied by the peaceful provision of vegetation for food (1:29–30). The portrayal situates humanity within creation rather than above it.

The narrative culminates in the seventh-day rest. The consecration of the Sabbath forms the literary and theological climax of the chapter. Rather than depicting the humans as the centre of creation, Genesis 1 places the Sabbath as the final act of ordering.[4] This literary choice indicates that both humanity and creation exist within a divine rhythm of work and rest. Thus, the first creation account reveals a world structured by order, blessing, and divine sovereignty, all communicated through literary pattern and repetition.

Human Identity and Relationship

The shift to Genesis 2 triggers a new literary mode. The text now presents a more intimate narrative, focusing on relationality, embodiment, and vocation. God, referred to as *YHWH Elohim*, forms the human (*haʾadam*) from the dust of the ground (*haʾadamah*) and breathes life into him.[5] The wordplay between "human" and "ground" underscores human earthiness and dependence. The divine breath communicates the intimacy between God and humanity; God is portrayed not as distant but as personally involved in human formation.

The garden setting is described with rich detail. Trees are "pleasant to the sight and good for food", and a river waters the garden before dividing into four branches. The aesthetic and geographical imagery creates an atmosphere of abundance. Within this setting the human receives a vocation: "to till it and keep it". The verbs imply agricultural care and protective

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[1] Claus Westermann, *Genesis 1–11: A Commentary* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 1984)
[2] Ronald Hendel, *The Book of Genesis: A Biography* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2013)
[3] David J. A. Clines, 'The Image of God in Man', *Tyndale Bulletin*, 19 (1968)
[4] Walter Brueggemann, *Genesis* (Interpretation; Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1982)
[5] Robert Alter, *Genesis: Translation and Commentary* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1996)

responsibility.[6] The literary emphasis falls on stewardship rather than exploitation, continuing the theme introduced in Genesis 1.

A central narrative development occurs when God observes that “it is not good that the human should be alone” (2:18). This is the first occurrence of “not good” in Scripture, heightening its narrative impact. After the animals fail to provide companionship, God forms the woman from the man’s side. Literary critics note that the narrative uses “side” (*tselaʿ*) rather than “rib”, a term used elsewhere for architectural structures.[7] The woman is presented as corresponding to and equal with the man. The man’s poetic exclamation—“bone of my bones and flesh of my flesh”—marks recognition of shared identity. The conclusion that the two “become one flesh” presents Adam and Eve’s relationship as intimate, mutual, and non-hierarchical.

The chapter ends with a declaration of innocence: both are naked and unashamed. The literary function of this line is anticipatory, preparing the reader for the contrast introduced in the next chapter. It signals that the narrative is moving from an idealised vision to one in which harmony becomes fractured.

The Original Sin, Fall of Mankind due to its first transgression

Genesis 3 incorporates tension into the narrative through the satanic serpent, described as “more crafty than any other wild animal”. The serpent’s dialogue with the woman reveals a key literary technique: subtle distortion. The serpent reframes God’s command, suggesting prohibition rather than provision: “Did God say, ‘You shall not eat from any tree in the garden’?” The woman corrects him, but the seed of doubt is planted. The conversation focuses on desire for wisdom: the tree is “to be desired to make one wise”. The literary emphasis places human motivation at the centre rather than inherent wickedness.

The act of disobedience is narrated with economy: “she took… she ate… she gave… he ate”. The simplicity and symmetry give the action narrative force. The text avoids explicit blame; the focus lies on shared agency. Immediately, the narrative registers internal change: eyes opened, awareness of nakedness, and shame. Sewing fig leaves symbolises the first attempt at self-protection.

Divine presence introduces further tension. God’s question “Where are you?” is not a request for information but a literary device inviting self-recognition and confession.[8] Instead, the humans shift responsibility: the man blames the woman; the woman blames the serpent. This breakdown of relational harmony contrasts sharply with the mutual recognition of chapter 2.

The consequences introduced in 3:14–19 correspond to the roles established earlier: the serpent’s movement and relationship with humans, the woman’s role in childbirth and partnership, and the man’s agricultural labour. Notably, the text never states that the humans themselves are cursed; only the serpent and the ground receive curses. The woman’s

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[6] Terence Fretheim, ‘The Book of Genesis’, in *The New Interpreter’s Bible*, I (Nashville: Abingdon, 1994)
[7] Phyllis Trible, *God and the Rhetoric of Sexuality* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1978)
[8] J. P. Fokkelman, *Narrative Art in Genesis* (Eugene: Wipf and Stock, 1991)

relationship with the man ("he shall rule over you") describes a disordered relational dynamic, not the divine ideal. The narrative closes with expulsion from the garden. Yet even judgment is tempered by grace: God makes garments for the humans, an act of care within exile.

Exploring the theological themes via literary critical analysis

A literary critical reading shows multiple important theological themes incorporated into Genesis 1–3 through narrative technique.

Theme 1: Order and Harmony in Creation

The symmetry of Genesis 1 and the idyllic setting of Genesis 2 portray a world created for life, abundance, and relational flourishing. The literary structure itself embodies the order it describes. It is highlighted that the universe is in order instead of chaos, hence it was crafted by an all powerful deity who faced no challenges while creating the cosmos.

Theme 2: Human Identity as Relational

The transition from loneliness to partnership emphasises mutuality as fundamental to human existence. The narrative suggests that humanity is incomplete in isolation.

Theme 3:. Freedom and Responsibility

The placement of the tree "in the middle of the garden" symbolises moral choice. Humanity's vocation is not passive but requires discernment.

Theme 4: Breakdown and Alienation

The rapid narrative shift from nakedness without shame to fear and concealment reveals the profound relational rupture caused by disobedience.

Theme 5: Exile and Divine Compassion

Even in judgment God acts with care, clothing the humans. Literary patterns of exile and provision anticipate later biblical narratives of banishment and return.

Critical Evaluation of a Contemporary Feminist Perspective

Feminist interpretation has played a key role in modern readings of Genesis 1–3, challenging patriarchal uses of the text and advocating for interpretations that promote gender equality. Feminist scholars critique traditional readings that blame the woman for sin, subordinate her to the man, or justify gender hierarchy based on Genesis 2–3.[9] This section evaluates both the strengths and limitations of this contemporary approach.

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[9] Phyllis Trible, *God and the Rhetoric of Sexuality*

Strengths of Feminist Interpretation

First, feminist readings effectively draw attention to how Genesis 1 portrays men and women as jointly bearing the divine image, a point often overlooked in Western Christian tradition. The literary parallelism in 1:27 powerfully asserts gender equality. Feminist scholars highlight that hierarchy appears only *after* the transgression, suggesting that patriarchy is a consequence of brokenness rather than divine intention.[10] This emphasises a central insight of the literary narrative: the text places relational harmony at the core of creation.

Second, feminist interpretation exposes how later traditions and translations shaped harmful readings of Eve. For centuries, Eve was interpreted as morally weaker or more susceptible to deception. Feminist scholars re-examine the narrative and point out that the text itself never calls Eve inferior. The woman engages intellectually with the serpent, demonstrates theological understanding, and acts in agency. The literary features do not assign greater guilt to the woman; both humans act and are addressed.

Third, feminist readings challenge interpretations that romanticise the “one flesh” union as implying female dependence. By emphasising the textual detail that woman is created from the man’s “side”, not his head or foot, feminist scholars argue that the narrative symbolises equality and partnership.[11] This aligns with the literary-critical reading of Genesis 2, where mutual recognition forms the emotional and narrative centre.

Limitations of Feminist Interpretation

Despite its contributions, feminist interpretation has limitations. First, some feminist readings risk anachronism: applying modern categories of gender identity, power, or autonomy to an ancient text whose concerns differ from contemporary debates. While the narrative addresses relational dynamics, it does not operate within modern egalitarian frameworks. Over reading gender into every detail can obscure other literary and theological concerns, such as vocation, obedience, and relationship between God and human.

Second, some feminist interpretations are selective in their use of evidence. For example, certain scholars argue that Genesis 3 presents the woman as uniquely culpable. Others claim the text inherently supports patriarchy. Both claims rely on narrow readings that do not fully consider the literary balance of the narrative. The literary critical method shows that the narrator apportions consequences to both humans without explicit hierarchical judgment before Genesis 3:16.

Third, some feminist approaches overemphasise silence, reading into gaps aspects that align with modern assumptions. The narrator’s brevity, however, serves literary rather than ideological purposes. The text invites the audience to interpret character motives through narrative cues, not to fill gaps with modern psychological or political frameworks.

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[10] Walter Brueggemann, *Genesis*
[11] Claus Westermann, *Genesis 1–11*

Conclusion of Evaluation

Feminist interpretation enriches the reading of Genesis 1–3 by highlighting issues of gender, power, and equality that have shaped the text's reception. It corrects patriarchal misreadings and recovers elements of the narrative that affirm mutuality and dignity. However, its insights must be held alongside careful literary critical and historical analysis to avoid imposing contemporary concerns too heavily on the ancient text. When employed critically and judiciously, feminist interpretation illuminates dimensions of Genesis 1–3 that enhance, rather than distort, the narrative's meaning.

Conclusion of Essay

A literary critical analysis of Genesis 1–3 reveals a richly woven narrative that explores creation, human identity, vocation, disobedience, and divine compassion. Genesis 1 presents an ordered cosmos shaped by divine speech and culminating in human beings who bear the divine image. Genesis 2 shifts the focus to relationality and human vocation within a world of abundance. Genesis 3 narrates humanity's turn toward autonomy and the ensuing relational fractures, leading to exile yet not without divine care. These chapters establish the foundational themes of the biblical story through carefully crafted literary devices. The interplay between harmony and disruption, blessing and consequence, intimacy and distance, demonstrates that the narrative is not merely descriptive but deeply reflective, inviting the reader to consider the complexities of human nature and the fragility of human relationships. Through its careful use of symbolism, repetition, and dramatic tension, the text conveys that the movement from creation to exile is not simply punitive but part of a larger narrative arc that highlights both divine justice and divine compassion.

Engaging with feminist interpretation demonstrates how contemporary perspectives can enrich the text's meaning by addressing issues of gender and justice. Feminist scholarship rightly critiques patriarchal uses of the narrative and uncovers the egalitarian dimensions present in the creation accounts. It also encourages readers to pay closer attention to the literary portrayal of the woman, whose agency, curiosity, and dialogue with the serpent reveal a complexity often overlooked in traditional readings. Yet its methods must be employed critically to avoid imposing modern categories onto ancient texts. A balanced reading acknowledges the value of feminist insights while recognising that the narrative operates within its own literary and cultural world. Ultimately, Genesis 1–3 presents a profound reflection on what it means to be human—created for relationship, dignity, and vocation, yet prone to choices that fracture both divine and human harmony. The literary artistry of these chapters continues to invite readers into their enduring theological depth, reminding modern interpreters that ancient texts can speak powerfully to contemporary concerns when approached with both attentiveness and care.

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