

Is the biblical Eve the ‘villain’ that she is traditionally portrayed, or the victim of a male-centred biblical narrative?

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The issue of this essay is the portrayal of Eve as the ‘villain’, and whether this is an accurate assessment. Below I shall investigate my primary source: Genesis 2:15-3:7, with particular focus on the third chapter detailing the first sin and its punishment. This will be a critical analysis of our primary source, contrasted with the views of the “Gnostics” focusing on the text centred primarily around the group known as the Sethians: the Apocryphon of John. I will briefly cover the difference in cosmology and present how it influences attitudes towards the feminine figure of Eve. This research is important as the issues it analyses can explain aspects of the social attitude towards women. After the critical analysis conducted, I shall apply the evaluations to the question of accuracy surrounding Eve’s portrayal.

I was inspired to investigate the “Gnostic” position on creation and its relationship to Eve after discussions with my peer, Kevin Goodrich. He introduced me to “Gnosticism” and explained that by considering the views of both canonised modern Christianity and the views of “Gnostic” groups, I shall increase the value of my research. If one was to solely evaluate the canonised Christian beliefs we see in modern Christianity, we would be restricting our range of study to material popularised after the influence and censorship of those such as Irenaeus, the first heresiologist (Jeffers, J.S. 2012). In studying the “Gnostic” views we allow for deeper analysis, which is why I have chosen to study the fundamental Sethian text: The Apocryphon of John; it is a later antiquity work, written in Coptic, pertaining to the “Gnostic” group known as the Sethians. It was hidden in the 4th century and discovered in 1945 in Nag Hammadi, Egypt (Rosland, 2019). The text reveals the Sethian alternative cosmology, and provides a view on the nature and role of Eve, averse to the canonised myth. Throughout this essay, when using the term “Gnostic” I shall present it in quotation marks as the word is a flawed description; the “Gnostics” were not one cohesive group, actually divided into many individual groups such as the Sethians or Valentinians (Goodrich, K, 2022). Furthermore, I shall refer to the Apocryphon of John as APJ, due to the redundancy of using the entire term throughout.

“Gnosticism” is an obscure knowledge and although understanding of certain “Gnostic” beliefs may be limited the objective of this essay is not to discuss the views of “Gnostic” groups and beliefs in detail, but rather to use a relatively more common Genesis interpretations for the purpose of analysis. I shall provide only a preliminary overview of Sethian cosmology and focus on how it fits into the specificities of my subject.

Many modern Christian approaches deem Eve to be a fundamental cause of humanity's downfall and the ‘villain’ in biblical narrative. Genesis 2:15-3:7 has a particular focus on the serpent's conversation and deception of Eve. Following the most notable canonised Christian cosmology shows Eve being created from the side of Adam, and as the first to disobey God's prohibition regarding the forbidden fruit. She is shown to be directly conversing with the serpent, who persuades her to deny the decree of God and pass the forbidden fruit to her husband. The text itself can be interpreted as portraying Eve in a negative light, this has been done throughout the centuries. The line from Genesis 3: “...she took of its fruit and ate...” led to interpretations such as that of Tertullian, who in a direct posthumous address to Eve shamed her, naming her the “...unsealer of the forbidden tree...” (Tertullian, 197), this is a clear accusation of fault. Further lines from Genesis 3 such as “...she also gave some to her husband...” invoked further negative portrayal, with Tertullian, in the same passage as the quotation above charging her with so lightly “...crushing the image of God, the man Adam.” Eve's conversation with the serpent from Genesis 3 as a whole leads Tertullian to name Eve the “...devil's gateway...”. The source: Genesis 2:15-3:7 clearly allows for Eve to be portrayed in the manner of a villain, and this has often been done.

The text of Genesis and its portrayal of the dynamic between Adam and Eve, with Eve taking the primary and active role in the deception leads Philo Judaeus, a Hellenistic Jewish philosopher, to suggest in his ‘Questions and Answers on Genesis’ that the reason the serpent does not converse with Adam is because his will is too masculine: enough to “...destroy the designs of deception.” (Marcus .R et al, 1953, p.20). Philo suggests that the will of the woman is too feminine and soft, allowing it to be susceptible to falsehoods. This view is another,

alongside those such as Tertullians' that would argue that Eve is at fault for the human fall and the idea Eve is the villain is accurate. When Philo's idea of weak feminine will is considered alongside the texts of Genesis, it is certainly plausible to take this stance: she is the one who the serpent approached and she is the one who embraced its deception. St Augustine also provides interesting discourse, suggesting that Eve's conversation with the serpent puts her at irrefutable fault, further enforcing the view that Eve is the biblical 'villain'. The source, Genesis, shows the dialogue between the two characters, with Augustine arguing her response to the serpent shows conscious participation and awareness of the law of God, she cannot plead forgetfulness as she listened to the serpent and "...saw the tree was good for food..." (The Holy Bible: NRSV, 1989), not trusting what God said pertaining death upon consumption and ate (Payer P, 1977).

As both Adam and Eve are written to be present in Genesis 3, or at least in the near vicinity, it can be suggested that Adam's sin was greater or at least equal to Eve's as the responsibility to correct Eve and to reject the fruit falls upon his shoulders. However, Thomas Aquinas suggests that Eve's sin is greater due to three reasons: She believed the Serpent whereas Adam did not, Eve not only sinned but also put it upon Adam and finally Adam's sin was reduced as it was only out of benevolence towards his wife (Aquinas, 1485). This negates a valid charge against the idea of Eve being the 'villain' of biblical narrative, giving credibility to that position.

The aforementioned positions can certainly suggest Eve is the villain she is traditional portrayed as, however it is notable that each of the approaches covered come from figures before the feminist movement and from some of those who outwardly try to negate the blame that befalls Adam. For example, although Augustine does recognise the sin of Adam, he claims he "...sinned out of friendly benevolence towards his wife, who, he feared, would be overcome by sadness if she were alienated from him." (Payer P, 1977, p7). This clear attempt to remove fault from Adam by a religious authority such as Augustine suggests clearly that Eve is the victim of a male-centred biblical narrative. The fact they come before feminist theology was considered certainly works against the 'villain' characterisation, as it negates an amount of credibility.

The APJ is drastically different from canonical creation mythology, suggesting that the God found in the Garden of Eden is actually inferior and evil, known as the Demiurge, or Yaldabaoth (Livingstone, 2013). The Godhead, also referred to as the Father, is the "Gnostic" alternative to the canonised idea of a 'good' God, of whom Yaldabaoth is envious of (Meyer et al., 2008); the Pleroma and the Aeons are the cosmological system that revolves around the Godhead, an Aeon being the "subdivision" of the Pleroma: the idea of fullness centred around this ineffable Godhead (MacDermot, V. 1981). Yaldabaoth was created through the misguided desire of the Aeon Sophia; the false God then created the realm of matter and was tricked into creating the perfect human we know as Adam. Yaldabaoth imprisoned Adam in the Garden of Eden: a prison of carnal distractions, out of jealousy over his enlightenment after receiving Epinoia (Meyer et al, 2008).

The "Gnostic" cosmology becomes of particular use in our analysis when considering the creation of Eve; the myth still follows the idea of Eve coming from Adam, however he had been imbued with Epinoia, or the Enlightened Insight, out of benevolence from the Mother-Father (Meyer et al., 2008). Yaldabaoth wished to strip Adam of Epinoia; after failing to do so, Yaldabaoth took a part of Adam and created a second human in the form of a female, placing part of Adam's power within the body. Eve is the product of the enlightened insight, a gift from the Godhead which was sent to enlighten Adam's mind and strip him of evil (Meyer et al, 2008): the power placed within the female form. The Sethian account of Adam and Eve does not demonise the feminine as the canonised account does, instead, when Adam first sees the female form besides him and witnesses the enlightened insight it is said the "...veil that covered his mind." was removed and he "...sobered up..." from his altered mental state (Meyer et al., 2008). It is arguable that Eve is the saviour of Adam, she is the embodiment of enlightened insight, the helper sent to Adam by the Mother-Father. The enlightened insight is said to have "helped the whole creature, labouring with it, restoring it to its fullness" (Meyer et al., 2008, p73), although when the quotation is taken it is not in the body of the female, it is clearly acting as the saviour rather than the 'villain', with this positive spirit then transferring into the female form. The APJ goes further, describing how the enlightened insight taught Adam about "the way of ascent" (Meyer et al., 2008, p73), potentially suggesting it was the literal key to escape and return to the Pleroma and the Godhead. When considered like this, it is hard

to view Eve as the villain or tempest of biblical cosmology. The churches attempts to destroy the idea of the “Gnostic” ‘heresies’ along with the likes of Irenaeus supports the idea that Eve is the victim of a male-centred biblical narrative as this account of cosmology was quelled and dominated with one which demonised and portrayed Eve in a negative light.

It is worth considering, however, that the roots of the Sethian text could still be used to criticise Eve and the feminine (Goodrich, K, 2022). Before the creation of Eve, Adam was the perfect human being, falling on both ends of the spectrum: male and female. The separation of Adam to create Eve, although key to the awakening of Adam’s mind, is the event that conceptualized sex; along with Yaldabaoth’s defloration of Eve this further deepened the trap of carnal desire (Goodrich, K, 2022). Although this is only one argument and does not counteract from the aforementioned interpretations, some “Gnostic” groups did take this negative view on Eve and women (Karavites, P, 1998).

With the two sources, secondary opinions and other scholarly analysis it is clear to see that the figure of Eve has fallen victim to the male-centred church rhetoric, although there are considerable accounts and interpretations throughout history which are inclined to portray Eve as the biblical ‘villain’, it is vital that one considers the context of many of those writings. Many that portray Eve in a negative light were penned at the high of patriarchal influence, when the church as at its pinnacle of power and movements such as feminism and equality were yet to be considered. Furthermore, the common church narrative that is the most well versed is popular as a result of hereticologists such as Irenaeus, without their influence, the “Gnostic” beliefs of those such as the Sethians covered in this essay would be more well known. These allow for a greater positive portrayal of Eve, with some even allowing for a saviour-like interpretation as seen in the Apocryphon of John covered above. When considering a combination of the lack of female centred interpretations and “Gnostic” texts which precure many canonised interpretations that show a far more positive portrayal of Eve it is clear to see Eve has been the victim of male-centred biblical narrative and the historic patriarchy.

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