

Hebrew Bible Textual Analysis: Genesis 3:14-20 and 12:10-20

The following textual analysis looks at two passages in the book of Genesis that can be greatly illuminated through the lens of feminist and literary analysis. Genesis 3:14-20 details the punishment given to the serpent, Adam, and Eve; Genesis 12:10-20 recounts the story of Abram and Sarai escaping the famine and travelling to Egypt where Sarai is coveted by the Egyptians. The analyses below will take into account the roles of Eve and Sarai as female characters as well as the choices made by the author in their representation.

Regarding the gendered approach, Karen Armstrong encapsulates the feminist interpretation of these passages and how, despite the perceived misogynistic undertones, it is the male characters can be reasonably inferred to be at fault and portrayed negatively:

In the garden of Eden, Eve may have been the first to disobey, but she is a far more adventurous and attractive figure than Adam, who comes across rather as a stooge, lagging behind his wife and feebly passing the buck when things go wrong. When Abraham treats his wife Sarah exploitatively, putting her into Pharaoh's harem to save his own skin, this provokes a destructive chain of events in his own family (Armstrong, 2001, p. viii).

We will consider the validity of such perspectives from an exegetical and hermeneutical position. We will endeavour to see if these new readings add value to these texts in modern day application. Reader-response criticism, in particular, will be given focus and analysed in light of feminist reinterpretation by authors such as Phyllis Trible and Helen Schungel-Straumann.

Genesis 3:14-20

The Punishment Given to the Serpent and (Wo)Man

The punishment of the serpent is tied to that of the woman. Adam has no affiliation with the snake as deceiver: it is Eve and her descendants that have enmity placed between them and the serpent (v. 15) following the fall. The affiliation is so close that some early rabbinic authors including Philo (On Husbandry, 24) equated the serpent with Eve herself, referring to it as “Eve’s serpent,” a surprisingly phallic symbol of pleasure. This is in keeping with early Christian and Jewish exegetes who quickly reinterpreted the serpent in “an increasingly satanic and phallic role” (Meyers, 1988, p. 75). This view found popularity in the 20th century but has since gone out of fashion (Day, 2022, pp. 54-56).

What is more, the text only ever specifies the gender of the serpent once in v. 1, using the masculine pronoun. As the character of the serpent developed into the figure of Satan (Day, pp. 42-44), it became a case of Eve being deceived by the male arch-antagonist, leading to the stumbling of the male arch-protagonist and becoming an affront to the ultimate male figure in God. On all accounts, Eve is a female victim in an already male-dominated world.

However, the text also specifies that the serpent was cursed “above all livestock and beast of the field (v. 14). The Hebrew suggests that the serpent was brought lower than the beasts of the field as his punishment (Day, p. 45). The serpent, the divine *nachash* (see Heiser, 2015, 62-63), was previously a being that was above even Eve in the created order, evidenced by his ability to comprehend good and evil on a level that humanity had not acquired yet. By placing the serpent lower than the beasts following the fall, the natural hierarchy of creation is ordained with the woman, despite her implied susceptibility to deception, remaining above the serpent and the beasts. Eve is not demoted in the fundamental order of creation. This has the curious effect of nullifying Eve’s participation in the events that contributed to the fall.

The Punishment of Eve in Contemporary Literature

This verse presents a major interpretive conundrum for feminist commentators, with Carol Meyers opining that “no single verse of scripture is more troublesome” (Meyers, 1985, p. 95). Traditionally, this passage has been seen as presenting female inferiority as the punishment

for Eve's sin. As Frymer Kensky states, "the subordination of women after the expulsion from the Garden is part of the consequences of sin" (Frymer-Kensky, 2006, p. 168).

It should be noted, prior to our discussion of Eve's punishment, that Eve has a far more active role in Genesis 3 than Adam does (Schungel-Straumann, 2012, p. 3). The conversation between her and the serpent curiously omits any input from Adam; there is no consultation of Adam by Eve, allowing the woman total freedom to interact with the third-party character. It is here where Eve engages in independent thought for the purpose of moral contemplation. It is also implied by the abrupt initiation of the serpent's conversation in the very first verse that the dialogue between him and Eve had proceeded for some time prior to the temptation. Furthermore, Eve engages in theological interpretation (vv. 2-3), showing that she understood the commands of God to the same degree as Adam (Stratton, 1995, 87-91). As one reviewer of Tribble's work puts it, Genesis 3 "offers an astonishing portrait of a thoughtful woman and a thoughtless man" (Eskanazi, 1995, p. 19).

Nevertheless, as Stratton pointed out, this active role in the garden narrative is fairly brief (Stratton, p. 86). The entirety of Eve's dialogue extends from the start of chapter 3 to one line at the start of chapter 4. This demonstrates that, although the much-maligned character of Eve is more prominent in the narrative than usually suspected, she remains a secondary character to the man in the grander narrative. Meyer's observation, that "Eve does not resurface at all in Hebrew scripture" (Meyers, p. 74) is testament to the nature of this character.

But what does it mean for Eve's pain in childbearing to be multiplied? Various solutions have been proposed. David Clines, for example, uses the verse to reinforce his interpretation of Eve's role as the "helper" in the Garden of Eden (Clines, 1990, pp. 27-37). Eve's designation as a "helper" is multifaceted: not only does the word for helper in this verse (*ezer*) carry priestly connotations, thus demonstrating the covenantal role that Adam and Eve were endowed with (cf. Ex. 3:12; Num. 3:7-10, 8:15), but it was also to assist Adam in fulfilling the divine prerogative laid out in creation week to be fruitful and fill the earth (Gen. 1:28). Adam could not do this alone and so Eve was created to assist with this. Notice moreover how the presence

and participation of Eve in this imperative is essential for its completion – Adam cannot properly obey God without Eve’s involvement.

Additionally, Eve’s role as a helper should also be understood in light of the other command in the same verse for them both to “subdue and rule” the earth. Clines (albeit in apparent tension with the earlier conclusions about Eve not being inferior) is not alone in bringing this understanding into perspective (Clines, pp. 30-31). Comparisons to the use of *ezer* elsewhere in the Hebrew Bible (e.g., Josh 10:33, 2 Sam. 8:5, 1 Kgs. 20:16, Isa 30:7) reveal militaristic connotations, one of a helping general. Thus, Eve is Adam’s “helper” in his task to subdue and rule the earth in a divine conquest, thus subordinating her to the role of an assistant. Therefore, as we mentioned earlier, God does not punish Eve by demoting her position in the hierarchy of creation, but instead “by promising to make the one thing she has been created to do difficult for her” (Clines, p. 36). Thus, Eve remains in an “inferior” position to Adam but remains a human being and fellow image-bearer. There is no fundamental shift of power following the fall, but merely the establishment of constraints upon the two humans based upon their ordained gender roles and the absence of divine protection.

The “Voice” of Adam’s Wife

Adam is berated for listening “to the voice of your wife,” with the natural reading placing the blame on Adam. Eve is portrayed as the source of Adam’s rebellion. Protestant perspectives affirm that, though Eve was the one to have sinned first and presented Adam with the avenue towards transgression, it is Adam’s status of “federal headship” (Kidner, 2008, 32-33) that plunges humanity into sin after his own sin. Though this specific view is central to Reformed thinking, it has much influence in evangelical circles in regard to corporate personality and guilt (Witherington, 2005, p. 11).

That being said, we must observe that there is actually no dialogue from Eve in this portion of the narrative. Eve is not recorded as having said anything to Adam to coerce him into eating the apple. Cynthia Chapman suggests two possible solutions to this conundrum

(Chapman, 2019, p. 242): either the dialogue between Adam and Eve before the former's bite was simply of little consequence to the original author, or Adam's crime of "listening" is related to his silence during her conversation with the serpent. It is impossible to choose which option is more likely, but the latter would undoubtedly have profound implications for Eve as an active character in the Eden narrative: Adam's role is subordinated and the female takes the reins of the narrative entirely.

Note, also, how Eve's punishment is less in quantity when compared to the punishments meted out to the male characters. Eve's punishment is contained within a single verse whilst the serpent's lasts for two and Adam's is drawn out for three. This raises further questions regarding Eve's culpability and supposed responsibility for "causing" the fall.

The Naming of Eve Denoting Male Authority

The naming of the woman by the man just prior to the expulsion from Eden has traditionally been seen in the same vein as the man naming the animals: just as the beasts were bestowed their titles by Adam, so was the woman. Man is thus exercising authority through this command to the woman.

Recent reinterpretations of this passage suggest that the traditional understanding is not consistent with the text and that the naming of Eve by Adam carries no authoritative connotations. Frymer-Kensky notes that this view, which has its origins with Tribble (Tribble, 1973, pp. 30-48), has gained "widespread acceptance" (Frymer-Kensky, p. 168; see also Chapman, p. 247, n. 22). Tribble argued that the aforementioned noun *ezer* "is frequently used for God when men are not able to help themselves" (Schungel-Straunmann, 2014, p. 138). Thus, if God is referred to as a helper (see Deut. 32:26-29; Ps. 33:20, 70:5, 115:9-11; Hos 13:9) the connotations of subordination with Eve's designated role evaporate.

Clines, however, finds Tribble's position unconvincing. He argues that all the acts of naming in Genesis 2 and 3 have occurred without the verbal noun "naming" (Clines, p. 38). Both Genesis 2:20 and 3:20 use the same terms: *wayyiqra sem* (or the plural *semowt* in the

Genesis 2) to describe the acts of naming the animals and the naming of Eve. It seems that there is no reason to deny that “calling” is an acceptable way in Hebrew for saying “naming” or “named.” On linguistic grounds, Clines affirms that there is little argument to be made that the naming of Eve at the hands of Adam cannot be a declaration of male authority: it is a designation of function that the woman never bestows upon the man during the Eden narratives (Chapman, pp. 247-48).

Genesis 12:10-20

The Androcentrism of Abram’s Plan

Upon entering Egypt to escape the famine, Abram becomes fearful that the Egyptians will find Sarai attractive and attempt to take her. The historical background of this verse can be illuminated with some recent archaeological finds. The remains of non-Egyptian women have been uncovered at burial sites of Pharaohs, including that of Pharaoh Menohotep II was buried alongside 6 young women, two of which were of Nubian origin (Kitchen, 1994, p. 70). This perhaps provides with us an explanation as to why Abram was so fearful that the Egyptians would want to take Sarah: a hyper-awareness of the Egyptian’s male gaze and a masculine desire to protect the vulnerable female, even if it endangers both her honour and herself.

Indeed, Abram’s initial concerns portrays the Egyptians as savage, imbued with the desire to murder and (presumably) rape. Notably, however, the concerns of Abram are presented without any rejoinder from Sarai herself. Throughout this section (and, by extension, the entire narrative of chapters 12 to 15), Sarai does not speak and lacks a voice of her own. Abram’s actions are rash and are likely intended to be interpreted negatively. Whether the reader is intended to have sympathy for Sarai, however, is another matter.

The Abandonment of Sarai

It is notable in this portion of the passage that, despite Abram’s plan to deceive the Egyptians into thinking that Sarai is his sister, they are still overcome with desire for her and she is brought into the house of Pharaoh. It is likely we can interpret this passage as saying that,

through Abram's strategy was to avert any potential danger by having Sarai pretend to be his sister, it was this very strategy which elicited the response from the Egyptians (cf. v. 18).

When Abram is "dealt well with" for Sarai's sake in v. 16, Amy-Jill Levine suggests that the Hebrew expression *al d'var Sarai* does not necessarily mean "on account of" Sarai, with its connotations that Abram's trading was successful due to the Egyptians being allowed to have their way with her. Levine affirms that it can also mean "because of the word of Sarai" (Levine, 2001, 22). This suggestion leaves open a very different implications: that it was Sarai's words to the Egyptians that brought Abram success. No longer is the female character exclusively an object of desire, but the catalyst for male success.

This is a possible rendering but appears difficult to sustain given Sarai's lack of dialogue in the passage. If the author(s) intended for Sarai's good word to be the reason for Abram's success, it is bizarre that it has been omitted. Nevertheless, God's reaction to Abram's actions may provide further evidence for this interpretation.

God's Intervention and Sarai as Double Fulfilment of Covenant

Following Sarai's abandonment, it is God who objects and intervenes. Feminist authors have often seen this as an intervention on Sarai's behalf; that the treatment of her at the hands of the Egyptians and the proverbial spinelessness of Abram was an affront to the divine and worthy of punishment (Schungel-Straumann, 2012, 17).

There are also other interpretations that are not mutually exclusive to the feminist understanding. Thematically, the abandonment of Sarai has been viewed as a "double abandonment" where both Sarai and the promise of the land given to Abram in the previous chapter (Gen 11:1-3) are forsaken. The Abram's haphazard treatment of Sarai jeopardised the part of the covenant which detailed the creation of his offspring (Gen. 11:7). Should Sarai have been taken and wedded off to the Egyptians, the covenant would be nullified, thus elucidating the anger of God against Abram's behaviour. Furthermore, this suggests that the promise made to Abram was not solely made to him, but, by extension, to Sarai. Without the union

between male and female for the purpose of reproduction there could be no offspring, thus no fulfilment of the covenant. Therefore, as Schungel-Straumann puts it, "The promise is not given to the father alone but to the married couple, Abram and Sarai." (v. 17)

Thus, the feminist perspective of the Sarai narratives brings a new thematic layer to the text, even if it was unlikely to be read through such a lens. Frymer-Kensky optimises this perspective: "Just as women are relatively small and powerless in society, so is Israel small and powerless among the nations" (Frymer-Kensky, 174).

Conclusion

Even though the latter story of Abram and Sarai is far more explicitly negative for the male character than the Eden narratives, such interpretations are fraught with exegetical conundrums. The meanings of these stories are determined by the presuppositions of the individual reading them (a sentiment echoed in Frymer-Kensky, p. 168). If the original readers were "culturally conditioned" to read these texts through a patriarchal lens, there is a tension created between modern reinterpretations and the initial audience. Even Armstrong's earlier statement about Eve's adventurous and attractive nature presupposes that such characteristics ought to be viewed in a positive light.

Even such readings within presuppositions can be contradictory. For example, we mentioned when discussing Genesis 3 how the punishments meted out to the three Eden characters are different in quantity. A gendered reading could infer that Eve's limited attention in the punishments demonstrates that she was not solely responsible for the fall and that Adam and the serpents may have had more culpability. Yet the very same reading could infer that Eve's limited punishment is a way of glossing over her active role in the Eden narrative and downplaying the amount of influence she really had. Both views derive from a gendered reading yet are irreconcilable.

Gendered readings of previously designated "terror texts" for female readers can reveal exciting new ways of understanding these ancient documents. Additionally, their

modern application is given new light as well. As Witherington says, “theology needs to no longer be an almost exclusively male activity” (Witherington, p. 247). Nevertheless, these very same readings can be motivated by a desire to either overturn the perceived misogyny that the text is alleged to inherently possess or to deliberately enhance that very same misogyny. Whatever these new readings may bring, we must stay true to scholarly convictions and standards and ensure that a consistent, well-evidence exegesis is utilised.

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