

Is the narrative of Adam and Eve in Genesis a perfect example of misogyny?

By: Owen Walters

Abstract

This report examines whether the narrative of Adam and Eve in Genesis can be considered a perfect example of misogyny. It analyses the biblical text alongside its reception in Western art and theological tradition, drawing on feminist and historical scholarship. While the narrative has often been interpreted in ways that support patriarchal structures, this report argues that such readings arise largely from its interpretive history rather than the text itself.

Introduction

This report examines the question, “Is the narrative of Adam and Eve in Genesis a perfect example of misogyny?” The account in Genesis 2–3 has frequently been interpreted as placing blame on Eve and legitimising male authority, particularly through its reception in Western art and theological tradition. Feminist scholars have drawn attention to the ways in which these interpretations have reinforced patriarchal structures and shaped attitudes toward women. However, a closer reading of the biblical text, alongside consideration of its literary form and historical context, suggests a more complex and contested picture. By examining both the Genesis account and its subsequent interpretation, this report will argue that misogynistic understandings of the narrative arise as much from its reception and interpretation as from ambiguities within the text itself.

Reception History

Visual representations of the fall, such as those by Titian and Hugo van der Goes (see Figures 1 and 2), frequently depict Eve as the primary agent of disobedience, emphasising her interaction with the serpent while positioning Adam as more passive. These artistic choices reinforce her association with temptation and contribute to a broader cultural link between femininity and moral weakness. As Peter Harrison argues, the doctrine of the Fall has profoundly influenced Western intellectual and cultural frameworks, shaping how human nature, knowledge, and moral responsibility are understood.¹

¹ Peter Harrison, *The Fall of Man and the Foundations of Science* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), pp. 1–5.

Figure 1

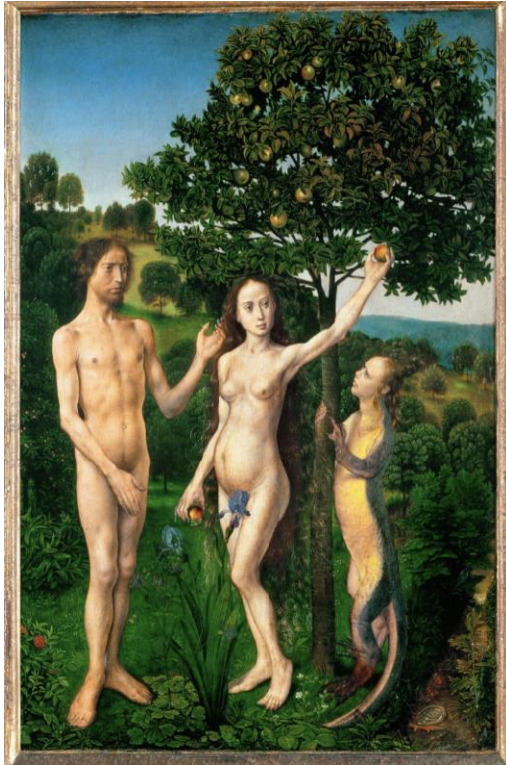


Figure 2



Figure 1. Hugo van der Goes, *The Fall*, c. 1470, oil on panel, Kunsthistorisches Museum, Vienna. (accessed 12 February 2026).

Figure 2. Titian, *The Fall of Man*, c. 1550, oil on canvas, Museo del Prado. (accessed 12 February 2026).

This interpretive tradition also extends beyond art into broader theological and cultural discourse, where Eve has often been singled out as the cause of humanity's downfall. However, such portrayals reflect not only the biblical narrative but also the assumptions and social contexts of those interpreting it. Harrison's analysis suggests that the meaning of the Fall has been continually reshaped in ways that reflect wider cultural concerns, including attitudes toward gender. This process is also reflected in the work of Carol Meyers, who highlights how interpretations of Genesis have been shaped by their wider social and cultural contexts.² Consequently, the prominence of misogynistic themes in the reception of Genesis 2–3 may be better

² Carol Meyers, *Rediscovering Eve: Ancient Israelite Women in Context* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013).

understood as a product of historical interpretation rather than a direct expression of the text itself. This supports the argument that the perception of Genesis as misogynistic is shaped as much by its reception history as by the narrative itself.

The Genesis Narrative

The narrative of Genesis 2–3 does not present a clear hierarchy between man and woman, but instead portrays an initial equality that becomes complicated through the events of the fall. In Genesis 2:18, the woman is created as *‘ēzer kěnegdô*, commonly translated as “a helper corresponding to him”, which Phyllis Tribble argues does not carry any implication of inferiority, but instead describes a relationship in which the woman is “neither subordinate nor superior”.³ The term *‘ēzer* is also used elsewhere in the Hebrew Bible in reference to God’s help (e.g. Exodus 18:4), indicating strength rather than inferiority, while *kěnegdô* suggests a corresponding or equal counterpart. As Gordon J. Wenham observes, Genesis 2–3 can be read as a carefully structured narrative that describes human relationships and their disruption, rather than prescribing fixed social roles.⁴

However, this initial equality is complicated in Genesis 3, where the woman engages the serpent and takes the fruit before giving it to Adam, who is described as being “with her” (Gen 3:6). While this sequence has often been interpreted as placing primary blame on Eve, the text itself presents Adam as a silent participant who shares responsibility for the act. His later response, shifting blame onto the woman (Gen 3:12), further complicates traditional readings that emphasise Eve’s culpability alone. As Wenham notes, the

³ Phyllis Tribble, *God and the Rhetoric of Sexuality* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1978), p. 90.

⁴ Gordon J. Wenham, *Genesis 1–15* (Waco, TX: Word Books, 1987), pp. 68–70.

account highlights shared human responsibility and relational tension rather than establishing a simple moral hierarchy between male and female.⁵

Therefore, while Genesis 3 introduces tension into the relationship between man and woman, the text remains ambiguous and does not explicitly establish female subordination. This supports the argument that interpretations of misogyny arise less from the biblical narrative itself and more from its later reception and application.

The Charge of Misogyny

Feminist scholars have argued that the narrative of Adam and Eve has been central in shaping and legitimising patriarchal structures. Genesis 3 places the woman at the centre of the transgression, as she engages with the serpent and eats the fruit before giving it to Adam (Gen 3:6), a sequence that has often been interpreted as assigning primary responsibility to Eve. This reading is reinforced by Adam's accusation that "the woman... gave me fruit from the tree" (Gen 3:12), which, as Phyllis Tribble notes, has frequently been used to construct narratives of female culpability within both theological and cultural traditions.⁶ Furthermore, the declaration in Genesis 3:16 that "he shall rule over you" has been widely understood as establishing male authority over women, a verse that has exercised considerable influence in the development of hierarchical gender roles.

Feminist scholars have also emphasised that such readings are shaped not only by the text itself but by the ways in which it has been interpreted. Mieke Bal argues that the Genesis narrative constructs meaning through its literary structure, in which the woman becomes the first agent of action, shaping how the sequence of events is understood by the reader.⁷ From this perspective,

⁵ Wenham, *Genesis 1–15*, pp. 72–75.

⁶ Phyllis Tribble, *God and the Rhetoric of Sexuality* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1978), pp. 90–92.

⁷ Mieke Bal, *Lethal Love: Feminist Literary Readings of Biblical Love Stories* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1987), pp. 116–121.

the association of Eve with temptation, disobedience, and moral weakness emerges through interpretive traditions that have foregrounded her role while minimising Adam's participation. The narrative therefore reflects and reinforces gender assumptions through the way it is repeatedly interpreted.

This critique is developed more forcefully by Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, who argues that biblical texts have not simply been misinterpreted, but have historically functioned within structures of power that legitimise and sustain patriarchy.⁸ From this perspective, Genesis 2–3 is not a neutral account, but is shaped by male centred ways of interpreting the text. It must therefore be read as part of a wider ideological framework that has contributed to the theological justification of women's subordination. Fiorenza argues that presenting Eve as the first to transgress, along with the statement that "he shall rule over you" (Gen 3:16), has helped reinforce gender hierarchies across religious and social traditions, showing that what seems to be a simple narrative has often been used to support patriarchal ideas.⁹

These readings have had significant influence beyond the biblical text, shaping theological traditions and social attitudes toward women. The enduring association of Eve with sin and moral weakness demonstrates how interpretive traditions have amplified gender hierarchies, even where the text itself remains open to multiple readings. However, this critique highlights the historical impact of such interpretations without fully determining the meaning of the text itself.

Reinterpreting the Fall

While feminist critiques highlight important interpretive concerns, other scholars argue that Genesis 2–3 does not prescribe gender hierarchy but

⁸ Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, *In Memory of Her: A Feminist Theological Reconstruction of Christian Origins* (New York: Crossroad, 1994), pp. 27–33.

⁹ Fiorenza, *In Memory of Her*, pp. 52–53, 80–81.

instead reflects the consequences of a disrupted human condition. Carol Meyers emphasises that the narrative should be understood within its ancient Near Eastern context, where social structures were shaped by survival, labour, and family organisation rather than abstract theological prescriptions.¹⁰ In this light, the statement in Genesis 3:16 that “he shall rule over you” has, as Meyers observes, been “used to justify gender hierarchy,” including notions of “female subservience and male dominance” that have persisted for millennia.¹¹ However, when read in context, this line can be understood as descriptive rather than prescriptive, portraying the distortion of relationships following disobedience rather than establishing a divine command for male dominance.¹² This interpretation suggests that hierarchy emerges as a result of the fall, not as part of God’s original design, a view also supported by Gordon J. Wenham, who likewise reads Genesis 3 as describing the consequences of human disobedience rather than prescribing social norms.¹³

Furthermore, the narrative itself complicates attempts to assign blame solely to the woman. Although Eve engages the serpent first, Adam is explicitly described as being “with her” when the fruit is eaten (Gen 3:6), indicating shared participation in the transgression. His subsequent response shifts responsibility onto both the woman and God (Gen 3:12), while the consequences addressed to him in Genesis 3:17 demonstrate that he too is held accountable. As Wenham observes, the narrative emphasises shared human responsibility and relational tension rather than establishing a simple hierarchy between male and female, a reading that aligns with Meyers’ broader interpretation of the text.¹⁴

¹⁰ Meyers, *Rediscovering Eve*, pp. 73-80.

¹¹ Meyers, *Rediscovering Eve*, p. 95.

¹² Meyers, *Rediscovering Eve*, pp. 82-84.

¹³ Wenham, *Genesis 1-15*, pp. 72-75.

¹⁴ Wenham, *Genesis 1-15*, pp. 72-75.

Therefore, when read within its literary and historical context, Genesis 2–3 does not inherently endorse misogyny but depicts the emergence of inequality as a feature of a fallen world.¹⁵ This supports the argument that later interpretations, rather than the text itself, have played a more significant role in shaping misogynistic understandings of the narrative.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the narrative of Adam and Eve in Genesis cannot be understood as inherently misogynistic without careful attention to both the text and its interpretive history. While feminist critiques highlight how Genesis 2–3 has been used to justify patriarchal structures, these readings reflect specific traditions rather than the full complexity of the narrative. A close reading reveals an initial portrayal of relational equality alongside shared responsibility for disobedience. Interpretations such as those offered by Meyers further suggest that hierarchy emerges as a result of the fall rather than as part of the created order. The perception of Genesis as misogynistic is therefore shaped as much by its reception in art, theology, and culture as by the text itself.

Bibliography

Bal, Mieke, *Lethal Love: Feminist Literary Readings of Biblical Love Stories* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1987)

¹⁵ Meyers, *Rediscovering Eve*, pp. 82–84.

Fiorenza, Elisabeth Schüssler, *In Memory of Her: A Feminist Theological Reconstruction of Christian Origins* (New York: Crossroad, 1994)

Harrison, Peter, *The Fall of Man and the Foundations of Science* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007)

Meyers, Carol, *Rediscovering Eve: Ancient Israelite Women in Context* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013)

Trible, Phyllis, *God and the Rhetoric of Sexuality* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1978)

Wenham, Gordon J., *Genesis 1–15* (Waco, TX: Word Books, 1987)