

Plaything or Partner, Temptress or Victim?

The Presentation of Eve in Genesis 3

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1. The Disobedience of the Pair in the Garden (Genesis 3)

Does Genesis 3 present a dangerous woman who beguiles her husband? Does she suffer the pains of childbirth and her husband's rule as punishment for her sins?

Most late Second Temple Jewish texts (2nd to 1st centuries BCE) attribute human sinfulness to Adam or to the fall of the angels (cf. Gen. 6:1-4). Note Ben Sira 25:24: 'From a woman sin had its beginning, and because of her we all die' (reference to the first woman or women in general?). See further 1 Tim. 2:14: 'Adam was not deceived, but the woman was deceived and became a transgressor'. Women should wear attire that expresses their repentance; only by being modest and bearing children can they hope to gain salvation (cf. 1 Tim. 2:15).

God's judgement on this sex lives on in our age; the guilt necessarily lives on as well. You are the Devil's gateway; you are the unsealer of that tree; you are the first forsaker of the divine law; you are the one who persuaded him whom the Devil was not brave enough to approach; you so lightly crushed the image of God, the man Adam; because of your punishment, that is death, even the Son of God had to die. And you think to adorn yourself beyond your 'tunics of skins' (Gen. 3:21)' (Tertullian, *On the Dress of Women* 1:1:2).

1.1 The Woman Converses with the Serpent

Why does the snake target the woman? It possibly reflects awareness of the close link in the ancient world between serpents (symbol of life and immortality) and women, particularly goddesses (link with fertility). The account from the J (Yahwistic) source may reflect early Israelite competition with Canaanite religions (plaques portraying a serpent winding its feet around *Asherah*).

1.2 Mutual Disobedience

The serpent uses the second person plural when addressing the woman (3:4: 'you [plural] will not die') and she speaks in the plural (3:2: 'We may eat'). The Hebrew text also implies the presence of the man throughout this scene (3:6: 'and she also gave some to her husband, *who was with her*'). There is no indication that the woman deceived her husband: 'she also gave some to her husband... and he ate'.

The image is one of human weakness, both female and male. The man is disobedient to God's command, but he blames the woman and God (3:12). The woman is entranced by the serpent's promises of sustenance, beauty, and wisdom (3:6). Phyllis Tribble proposes that their partnership continues, but the harmony has been shattered ('a love story gone awry').

2. The Divine Oracle

God announces his verdict on the serpent (3:14-15), the woman (3:16) and the man (3:17-19). NRSV renders Gen. 3:16 as follows:

I will greatly increase your pangs [in childbearing];
in pain you shall bring forth children,
yet your desire shall be for your husband,
and he shall rule over you.

Does this imply that God will multiply the childbirth pains of woman and that she will be subjected to her husband's domination? According to Carol Meyers (*Discovering Eve*, 95-121), the oracle should be read as a series of aetiological statements (i.e. an explanation of the *reality* of everyday life in ancient Israel). Carol Meyers translates Gen. 3:16 as follows:

I will greatly increase your toil and your pregnancies;
(along) with travail shall you beget children.
For to your man is your desire,
And he shall predominate over you.

Meyers proposes that line 1 does not refer to the pain experienced at childbirth, but to hard labour ('toil' is used for *'issabôn*, which also occurs in 3:17 to describe the man's punishment as physical labour) and to pregnancies.

Traditional interpretation of line 4 ('he shall rule over you) in terms of perpetual subordination to the male overlooks the parallelism between lines 3 and 4; the text speaks of ruling the woman's sexual desire, not her entire life.

Meyers' aetiological analysis proposes that the oracle is not as patriarchal as traditionally held; it contains very real images of labour, suffering and tension.

3. Concluding Remarks

Phyllis Tribble, Carol Meyers and others make a significant contribution to the interpretation of Genesis 2-3 in their attempt to bridge the gap between traditional theology and the recent debate on feminist issues. Tribble in particular is convinced that the narratives are not wholly patriarchal and male-orientated, although she may be over-optimistic in her attempt to 'depatriarchalize' Genesis 1-3. Is not her desire to stress male-female equality within these narratives at odds with the culture and attitudes of their male authors? The focus is more on

the complementarity of the pair in the garden, in terms of their creation, disobedience and punishment.

Bibliography

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